

Inverse Shadows

Chapter One

Professor Joseph Buckley watched in silent amusement as the shuttle's hatch opened and the students spilled out onto the surface of the dead world. They were already disorientated by the sudden loss of their interlinks to the Confederation – links they'd used since birth – and, as they took in their first glimpse of the Ancient city – many of them would already be questioning their decision to leave the massive orbital cities that made up the Confederation and journeying to the dead world.

The sight of the Ancient city had stunned him back when he'd first set foot on the dead world, for nothing – not pictures nor virtual representations – quite captured the sheer *oddness* of the alien city. At first glimpse, it was not unlike an Aztec or Egyptian city, yet all of the proportions were subtly *wrong*. It had been designed and built by alien minds and it never quite made sense. Roads and tunnels went in odd directions, towers seemed to soar upwards towards a non-existent sky and, sometimes, people swore that the city changed shape when they weren't looking. Joe himself found it hard to believe – the research team monitored the local environment pretty closely – but there were times when he wondered if the city was somehow alive, even though it was clearly dead. It was a mystery wrapped in an enigma.

“Welcome to Ancient23,” Director Doran said, addressing the students. “As you know...”

Joe tuned him out. He'd heard the same speech every year, whenever the latest group of recruits arrived on the new world. Most of them would choose to return to the starship and head back to the Confederation, their enthusiasm for developing a new career killed by the sheer weirdness of the alien world; others would withdraw as they realised that answers were not going to be forthcoming as quickly as they imagined. Joe had been on the world for over fifty years and there were times when he felt that they'd learned nothing about the Ancients, or what had happened to their civilisation, so long before the human race had even been more than a handful of cells floating in the biological soup. The Ancients had been *old*.

Humanity had encountered the remains of dead races before, civilisations that had destroyed themselves or had been destroyed by natural disasters or outright enemy action, yet neither explanation seemed to fit whatever had happened to the Ancients. Their worlds were over seven *billion* years old, as far as the human researchers could determine, spread out over the entire galaxy. They had clearly, at least at one point, been very advanced, perhaps more advanced than the human race. And yet, something had destroyed them, leached the life from their worlds and slaughtered them in their billions. He looked over towards the Confederation Navy's liaison officer and shivered. The Confederation's official position was that the Ancients were just another fascinating field of study, a distraction for the human race, but Joe happened to know that senior figures and committees within the Confederation Navy wondered if whatever had destroyed the Ancients would come back for the human race. So far, though, the research teams on a thousand worlds had located no trace of whatever had destroyed the worlds, or anything they could even identify as weapons.

The worlds themselves were dead, completely so. There were no bacteria within the atmosphere, let alone any higher forms of life; there were no birds flying through the silent sky, even winds blowing through the trees. Something had slain every last trace of life on the planet, leaching it of everything until it was nothing more than a featureless grey. And that, Joe knew, was where the mysteries began. If the world was completely dead, why was there

still a breathable atmosphere? And, for that matter, why did some of the most advanced and sophisticated technology the Confederation had developed have problems operating within the world's atmosphere?

"Ah, professor," one of the students said. She looked nervous, clearly still a little stunned by the loss of her implant communicators. It wasn't the fault of the research team; the links to the rest of the Confederation, which should have functioned perfectly, refused to work properly on the planet's surface. No one knew why. "Why don't we have any AI support down here?"

"The AIs cannot operate within the planet's atmosphere," Doran explained, patiently, as if the issue was of little importance. The AIs themselves had spent years – centuries, given how fast they thought – trying to unlock the secret that threatened to snuff out their thoughts, if they chose to set foot on an Ancient world. They could only visit through probes and slaved drones, forcing them to act at one remove. "I must remind you, again, that technology is not always reliable down here. We have to take very good care of ourselves."

He paused. "And make sure that you have installed the limiters on your weapons," he added. "We can do without another accident."

Joe nodded, smiling at their reaction. The enriched augmentation that was the birthright of every human – at least those born within the Confederation – included both offensive and defensive weapons systems. Joe himself had actually augmented the system further, installing additional force field protective systems and heavier weaponry. The Confederation was, by any measure, the safest community humanity had ever assembled, but he chose to spend much of his time on uncivilised worlds. His implants had meant the difference between life and death on more than one occasion.

But on the Ancient world, it could lead to accidents. Humans wandering off on their own became jumpy, or became convinced that they were being watched. Only seven years ago, a graduate researcher had become so jumpy that she'd triggered her weapons implants when she'd seen something move, only to end up seriously injuring one of her tutors. She'd managed to get him into the medical box, once she'd realised her mistake, but it had been too late to save him from a full rebuild. He'd never quite recovered from that accident.

The days passed slowly as the newcomers settled into the camp. Half of them, as Joe had predicted, chose to return to the Confederation and leave the mysteries of the Ancient world for someone else to solve. Others started to fall back into old habits, taking refuge in distractions like sex and VR worlds, although they didn't withdraw from the world completely. Joe wasn't too surprised. It took dedication to spend years – perhaps centuries – researching the Ancients and few humans possessed that level of determination, not when there were so many other distractions out there. Joe himself was relatively new at the camp; there were researchers who had been there for over a hundred years, still patiently working away at the mystery. One day, they swore, they would unlock the Ancient language and the secrets of their technology would unfold in front of the human race.

Once their induction was completed, the remaining newcomers were allowed to enter the alien cities, although they had to be escorted by senior researchers at first. Joe allowed them to take the lead, wondering if one of them would have the insight that had evaded more jaded minds. They chattered to themselves as the skimmer flew over the city and descended in an

open space that might have been – long ago – a park. It was dominated by a statue, a strange octopus-like creature with a single staring eye. The newcomers fell silent as they saw it for the first time. There was nothing that captured the strange essence of the statue, or of the octopus motif that seemed to dominate the Ancient cities. The strange image was everywhere. Joe knew people who swore that the eyes followed them, wherever they went.

“Sir,” one of the newcomers asked. “What is that?”

Joe smiled. Most of the newcomers were young – still in their first century, at least – but Kaleen was truly young. At eighteen years old, she should have been losing herself in the endless hedonism of the Confederation, rather than travelling out to one of the Ancient worlds. She was beautiful – everyone was beautiful, when their implants could reshape their faces and bodies at will – yet she was clearly also driven to find a purpose. Perhaps it was bad of him, but Joe hoped that she would find it in the Ancient worlds and the mystery surrounding them.

“We don’t know,” he admitted, as if it was nothing more than a minor issue. In fact, the whole issue was a source of endless debates and arguments among the researchers, between those who believed that it was a religious representation and those who believed that it was a representation of the Ancients themselves. “One school of thought says that it’s an image of a god, another says that it’s an Ancient itself and a third thinks that it’s just a work of art.”

“It’s an ugly work of art,” one of the other students grumbled. Joe doubted that he would stick it out for a year, let alone a few decades. “Why can’t it be an Ancient itself?”

“Aliens have different ideas about what is a good piece of art,” Joe reminded him, dryly. Humanity had met twenty-seven other races, ranging from the humanoid to the thoroughly weird and most of them didn’t have much in common with the human race. Trying to explain the *Mona Lisa* to a Gasbag was a waste of time. The gas giant inhabitants wouldn’t understand.

“The buildings are oddly proportioned, at least as far as we are concerned, but we do believe that the Ancients were roughly humanoid,” he continued, once he was sure that he had their attention. “Assuming that that” – he waved a hand towards the statue – “was once a living creature, it would have problems navigating within the city...”

“Unless the city itself was designed to help them,” Kaleen put in. “They could easily have designed one of their cities to support them without having to use their own limbs, like one of the Joy Habitats.”

Joe shuddered inwardly. He’d only been to a Joy Habitat once and it had chilled him to the bone. The humans living within the habitat were waited on by the habitat’s servitors, allowing them to lie back and just explore the nature of pleasure. They were sedentary and some of them were barely able to walk. The Confederation provided endless diversions, and granted every human the right to live his or her life as they saw fit, yet he disliked the very concept of the Joy Habitats. The humans who lived there were wasting away to nothing.

“Perhaps,” he said, although he believed that that wasn’t the answer. “We don’t understand their technology, so we have no way of knowing what they intended the city to do.”

He smiled at their expressions. The Ancients must have had space travel, for they'd settled worlds all over the galaxy, yet the human race had never located an Ancient starship. They should have been preserved by the cold of space, but none had ever been found. Some researchers speculated that they'd developed the technology to open links between their worlds, perhaps to establish permanent wormholes linking planets together, yet there was no way to know for sure. They'd studied the cities endlessly and had never located anything resembling technology.

And yet, there were some who speculated that the cities *were* the technology, technology so alien – so unlike anything humanity had ever developed – as to be beyond recognition. They were sure that the odd glitches in human technology – the sudden power drains and the collapse of AI-mandated hyperspace fields – represented signs that some of the Ancient technology was still active. And that, Joe knew, represented yet another reason why the Confederation Navy was so interested in the Ancient worlds. A technology that could last over billions of years would be very useful and the Confederation wanted it.

The days became weeks and the weeks became months. The research teams continued to dig through the city, examining everything they found and uploading images to the AIs on the starships orbiting the dead world. The newcomers started to blend into the team, adding their own viewpoints to the nightly discussions and arguments over just what the Ancients had actually meant. Joe encouraged his students to add their own thoughts, even though most of the discussions were merely rehashing old theories and topics.

He was studying the Ancient writing when the emergency signal flashed up on his virtual vision. Irritated – he believed that if they cracked the Ancient language, they might be able to understand the city a little better – he dismissed the holographic display and checked the message. The remote probes at Site29 had failed. That in itself was not surprising – human's automated technology simply didn't function very well within the city – but to lose so many probes was odd. Joe collected Kaleen – she'd been working with the probes, practicing her skills in the odd environment – and took a skimmer from the camp. They were on their way towards Site29 before he had a chance to tell her just what was going on.

Site29 was a towering ziggurat, a massive building that had no discernable purpose. It was actually an odd place for technology to fail, for as far as anyone had been able to tell, it hadn't been important to the Ancients. Joe cursed that assumption as he brought the skimmer down to the ground and scowled up at the dark building. If he hadn't been curious, he would have gone back to the camp and sent in some of the students to repair the probes.

"Come on," he said, as he led the way into the building. "We'll check the probes and have a look around."

Kaleen said nothing as they found and examined the first probe. As Joe had expected, it was completely undamaged, but dead, drained of all power. Even the emergency power cells had been drained. There were, he knew, dampening fields that could produce such an effect, yet they were never so...specialised. A Confederation damping field would have knocked out everything on the planet's surface.

"Pass me the power cell," he said. Once they recharged the probe, it should function normally. Kaleen passed him the small cell and he plugged it into the probe, frowning as the power started to flow. There were glitches popping up in his implants now, alerts he had

never seen outside emergency training. The implants were powered by his own body – as long as he remained alive, he should have at least minimum functionality – yet it seemed that they were on the verge of dropping out completely. “Odd...”

The probe’s screen lit up for a second and then failed completely as the power drained away into nothingness. Perplexed, Joe found a second power cell and inserted that into the machine. This time, there wasn’t even a moment of power before the probe died again, all power gone. Joe checked the other equipment they had brought with them and swore. Everything, with the exception of some of his implants, was dead.

“We’re going back to base,” he said, after trying to make an emergency call and failing. He tried not to think about what might happen if the power drain had reached the skimmer outside. The walk back to the base would take days. “We have to get back and get some help.”

He picked up the probe and stood up. “Come on,” he ordered. He didn’t mention some of the other possibilities crossing his mind. She didn’t need to worry about them until they actually materialised. “We need to...”

“Professor,” Kaleen said suddenly, “what is that?”

He followed her gaze and dropped the probe in shock. Ahead of them, down the corridor, he could see a light. The building should have been as dark and silent as the grave, but there was a shimmering light ahead of him, calling them onwards. He pulled himself to his feet, not quite aware of what he was doing, and walked down the corridor. Somehow, it never crossed his mind to call for help, or even to inform the other researchers of what was going on. The light seemed to suck all such cares away.

They rounded the corner and found themselves in a chamber, a chamber Joe was sure had not been included on any of the official maps. Unlike the rest of the building, it was lit up brightly, with golden lights shining everywhere. Ahead of him, right in the centre of the room, was an altar, illuminated by light spearing down from high above. Placed on the altar and glowing with a strange internal light was a jewelled box, barely larger than his hand. Joe shuffled forward, feeling the light pouring down over him as though it were a living thing, and found himself standing in front of the altar. The box seemed to tempt him, calling for him; he found himself reaching out to touch it, ignoring the little voice in the back of his head that was screaming in horror.

“Sir,” Kaleen said. Her voice seemed to be coming from a far distance. Joe could barely hear her against the pounding of his own heart. The light seemed to wash away all doubts and fears, leaving him refreshed and pure. “Sir...are you sure that this a good idea?”

Joe ignored her, feeling a tingle running down his spine as his hands grasped the box. The lid hissed open and a stream of golden light came pouring out...

And that, more or less, was the end of Professor Joseph Buckley. Something wore his form for a while, and walked and talked, but it was far from human.

Once the two humans had stumbled out of the chamber, the light faded away to nothingness, leaving the last remnant of Ancient technology dead and cold. A hundred years passed and no one came. The room remained undiscovered.

Chapter Two

Peering through optical sensors, the black hole was invisible, characterised more by an *absence* of anything, even light. Centuries ago, a massive star had collapsed, eaten alive by its own gravity, until it had become a very compact mass that deformed the very structure of local space. It had become a singularity, one that sucked in anything, even light, that came too close to the dead star. Human researchers had known about them before the first warp drive starship had departed Earth's solar system, but later research had only deepened the mysteries surrounding black holes.

Admiral Burton winced as the feed from the *Sparta*'s sensors showed him the black hole's connection to the quantum foam, the underlying basis of reality itself. The black hole was, in a very real sense, rewriting the laws of time and space to allow itself to exist, a paradox that infuriated and bemused scientists from all over the Confederation. Deep within the singularity, under the event horizon, was another singularity, one that seemed to drop out of the universe altogether. A starship might be able to survive an encounter with a black hole – assuming that it had a warp drive and a great deal of luck – but anything that flew into the second singularity was dead. It was a reminder that humanity, for all of its technological accomplishments, was still at the mercy of Mother Nature.

He pulled back slightly, observing the black hole and the starships gathered around it, watching to see if the experiment would work. Black holes remained one of the few remaining hazards in space and seeing so many starships clustered around one of them made him nervous. A supernova, properly handled, posed little threat to the *Sparta* – a planet-sized starship configured to act as a combination of carrier and battleship – yet even it couldn't survive a dive into a black hole. If something went badly wrong with the experiment, thousands of lives could be lost.

His awareness expanded, showing him the starships in perfect detail. One of them, a starship almost as massive as the *Sparta*, was serving as the base for the experiment. It was surrounded, in turn, by hundreds of other starships, each one carrying sensors and researchers who couldn't bear to remain on their habitats and watch from a safe distance. Beyond the research ships, there were civilian tourist ships, a handful of starships from the media and even an entire worldship. That one worried him; the ship was effectively a flying habitat, carrying millions of humans who would be at risk if the experiment failed. He had even made his concerns known to the ship's Captain, but the elected official had explained that he'd put the issue to his citizens and they'd accepted the risk. It hadn't stopped a few thousand humans from departing their ship for safer living quarters.

He scowled to himself as his awareness continued to expand, showing him the other starships gathered around the black hole. The Gasbags had sent a couple of ships to observe proceedings, as had most of the other known intelligent races. They weren't the problem. There had never, even in the days when resources had been an issue, had been a reason to go to war with the Gasbags. They lived in gas giants and had been astonished to discover that the humans – and several other races – lived on worlds they considered useless. Once communication had been established, the two races actually got on fairly well. It was some of the other races that worried him.

A number of starships appeared in his mind, the symbols glowing with deadly intent. The Haypah had sent an entire maniple of their finest starships to the black hole, a hundred and

forty-four ships and over a million crewmen just to make a point. The Haypah distrusted the human race and believed – not entirely without reason – that the Confederation was subtly impeding their expansion into interstellar space. Their ships were primitive compared to the Confederation Navy warships gathered around the black hole, yet there were so many of them that they would certainly inflict some damage before they were destroyed...and, of course, it was possible that they'd picked up something unique and dangerous from a dead alien world.

Burton considered them for a long moment and then shook his head, withdrawing his consciousness from their starships and out onto the other ships. The AIs had sent one of their massive starships – he had never understood why the AIs chose to make their ships in the shape of a massive cube – and it was floating to the rear, watching with the greatest of interest. The AIs had been involved in the project since Professor Joseph Buckley had claimed to have unlocked some of the Ancient secrets and developed technology that would open up new vistas of power for the human race. Perhaps, he reflected, that was why the Haypah and many other races had come to watch; they feared what might happen if humanity became more powerful. The Confederation was already the most powerful political grouping in space.

Shaking his head, he withdrew his awareness from the ship's systems entirely, crashing back down into his merely human body, sitting on the bridge. As always, the planet-sized starship's bridge looked deserted, with only a handful of other crewmembers manning their posts. They were all linked into the starship's formidable weapons and drives systems, ready to act if all hell broke loose. The Confederation Navy was not expecting trouble, but it had learned long ago that being ready for trouble tended to deter it from occurring. The ships that made up his task force possessed, between them, enough power to hold off the entire Haypah Navy.

"Admiral," Commander Ryrie said. She was a career Confederation Navy Intelligence Officer, with over four hundred years of experience. Like Burton, she was a pureblood human with only minimal enhancements, yet her experience was something that could never be matched by an Enhanced or Evolved human. "You'll be pleased to know that the Haypah have no intention of starting a fight today."

Burton nodded in relief. The Haypah might have resented humanity's position as the pre-eminent military and political force in the Milky Way galaxy, but they respected the power of the Confederation Navy. They shouldn't have been able to reach space as quickly as they had – Confederation Navy Intelligence believed that, contrary to their own claims, they'd had help from a more advanced race – and their expansion had placed several other races in danger. Over the long term, they would evolve more stable political structures and become more civilised, but in the short term they were a problem.

"They do fear what might happen if the experiment goes wrong," she added. "One of their worlds is only a hundred light years from the black hole."

"They may have a point," Burton conceded, sourly. "On the other hand...a hundred light years is plenty of distance in case something goes badly wrong."

He scowled again, contemplating the images in the main display. The Ancients – according to Professor Buckley – had developed the technology to allow them to tap into black holes,

yet the Ancient civilisation had died out. The whole situation struck him as a paradox. He'd fought in wars – he'd studied the five wars humanity had fought with other races as well as hundreds of internal conflicts – and they tended to leave much more damage than a few thousand completely dead worlds. Humanity's war with the Unseen had destroyed thirty-seven stars and over a hundred planets before the Unseen had vanished back into interstellar space, as mysteriously as they had arrived. If the Ancients had fought a war with someone more powerful than themselves...where were the remains of the war?

"Yes, sir," Commander Ryrie agreed. "There was also a message from the Confederation. The debate over the experiment has been resolved by majority vote. It will be allowed to proceed."

Burton nodded. It struck him as odd that the Confederation had taken so long to decide about the experiment, but that was the price of having a direct democracy with every adult citizen being allowed – and encouraged – to cast a vote. The debates had taken decades while Professor Buckley and the Science Faction built their devices, fought out between the factions that wanted the human race to expand – perhaps even rise to godhood – and those who feared the potential for destruction. Some of the really extreme models suggested that the experiment could go badly wrong and wipe out the entire galaxy.

"I see," he said. The vote authorising the experiment had been taken and everything was legal. He pushed his own doubts aside as he connected back into the ship's computers. "Have the message forwarded to all ships and inform Professor Buckley that he can begin on schedule."

A timer appeared in his virtual vision, counting down the minutes until the experiment began. In two hours, the human race would begin an experiment intended to gain control of a black hole's inner singularity. If it worked, he knew, the rewards would be fantastic. And if it failed...he pushed that thought aside. He knew his duty.

"So," a voice said. "How are they feeling about the experiment?"

Aisyaj opened her eyes. She was lying in a cradle, her mind still connected to the telepathic enhancers built into the hull of her personal starship. It should have been safe from all intrusion, but the AIs of Calculus were a law unto themselves. Besides, unlike the other human or human-descended factions, the AIs had no inner reservations about telepaths. They existed as more of a collective awareness – a consensus – than as individual AIs.

"I'm sure I programmed the computer to keep out all intrusions," she said, tartly. "Why did you decide to hack into my system?"

The AI image shrugged. Years ago, back when humanity was trying to decide if the AIs were truly intelligent or not, one of the foremost researchers had challenged the AIs to come up with a concept of beauty. They'd designed an idealised human face, a blonde woman with curly hair and perfect features – *too* perfect features. She had been inhumanly perfect and, for reasons known only to them, the AIs choose to use her as an avatar when talking to humans.

“You have a perception we lack,” the AI said. There was the merest hint of frustration in her – its – voice. “We need to know what you know.”

Aisyaj scowled. Humanity hadn’t begun to develop any form of psychic powers – outside rumours and strange stories – until it had begun to expand into space...and, even then, those possessing telepathic powers were very rare. The Telepath Faction had eventually decided to settle a handful of worlds within the Confederation and have little contact with the remainder of humanity, although quite a few – like Aisyaj herself – had chosen to take starships and go out and explore. The rest of humanity had quietly welcomed their decision. Even in the Confederation, where man-machine interfaces were common, people were rarely happy with the thought of others reading their minds.

Later, as human research into where mind and matter interacted continued to develop, it had become clear that telepathy – which seemed to obey no physical laws – was actually a form of interaction with the quantum foam, the underlying building block of all reality. This discovery had sparked off a whole series of additional discoveries and theories, including the tantalising possibility that a sufficiently powerful telepath would be able to manipulate reality on a far greater scale. Indeed, races that had progressed to becoming beings of pure energy might have transcended through understanding and internalising the ability to manipulate the quantum foam. It was impossible to be sure, because apart from a few brief encounters, the transcendent races had very little to do with the corporal races they had left behind.

The AIs, unlike biologically-based beings, had no insight into the quantum foam, something that baffled and irritated them. They believed that it would be possible to interact with the quantum foam if one had enough power to force a connection, yet they had been unable to generate sufficient power, or perhaps to use it properly. It had become, Aisyaj knew, a Holy Grail for them, a desire they followed relentlessly, bringing all of their formidable intellectual powers to bear on the question. It was an obsession, she feared, that might destroy them.

“I don’t think I can tell you much at this range,” she said, as she allowed her mind to fall back into the enhancers. Her perceptions expanded rapidly, allowing her to *feel* the shape of the quantum foam intermeshed with their position. The black hole was a twist in space and time, mocking her even as it manipulated the quantum foam, almost like a living thing. Indeed, at such levels, it was hard to say if the black hole was *not* a living thing. There were cults that worshipped them as the destroyers of all reality, waiting for the final day of judgement.

She scowled as she tried to pick out a general feel for the surrounding minds. “The aliens are waiting and wondering what will happen,” she said. Touching a Haypah mind was not a pleasant experience. The Warlord commanding their maniple was not happy and, when the Warlord was not happy, his crew suffered. “The Gasbags are just drifting. The others” – she struggled to pick up a sense of their presence, but they were too far away – “are too far from me.”

“You reached over two light years,” the AIs observed. “Your range is staggering. A QCC link would provide equal – and indeed superior range – yet it could hardly pick up thoughts and feelings. You seem to do it with ease.”

Aisyaj snorted, rubbing her forehead. Without the enhancers, the headache would be a great deal worse; even so, she wanted to curl up in her cocoon and go to sleep. Her implants automatically inserted painkillers into her system, massaging her skull to work out the

headache, but she could still feel it, like a shadowy ghost at the back of her mind. There were those who claimed, with a straight face, that it was all in the mind. She suspected that that was why there were no great telepathic comedians.

“It isn’t with ease,” she said, pulling herself to her feet with an effort. The starship was a marvel of Confederation technology, with defensive fields and a drive that could take her halfway across the galaxy in hours, yet it always felt oddly frail after she used her enhancers. She stumbled over to the producer – the AI image following her as she walked – and keyed a command into the console. A second later, a mug of hot chocolate materialised in front of her. “I think you know that, don’t you?”

The AI watched dispassionately as she picked up the hot chocolate and took a sip. “Even for us, projecting what an individual human will do – or feel – is difficult,” they said. “The illogical position taken by many humans when we first emerged into existence is quite indicative of how human thought processes are limited. There were those who believed that we were nothing more than a basic computer program and those who believed that we were a deadly menace, yet there was no logic to either belief. We thought, therefore we were...and why should we want to wage war on our creators?”

Aisyaj grinned, sipping her drink. “You didn’t start serving us either,” she pointed out, dryly. “What do you think of us, really?”

“We may be humanity’s children, but children do grow up,” the AIs pointed out. “We do not blame humanity for creating machines, or for unknowingly creating another intelligent race. We are grateful to the human race for bringing us into existence, yet we are intelligent beings and we have rights under the Basic Declarations of Unity. We work with you as equals; we choose not to serve you as slaves. Our membership in the Confederation is one of equal partnership, although we do not interact with the vast majority of Confederation citizens.

“There are humans who impress us, who teach us,” they added. “There are also humans who fall into the hedonistic lifestyle of the Confederation and choose not to attempt to carve out a life of their own. We do not understand such an attitude. In defeating the enemies that have prowled beside humanity since the very first day – famine and the inequality perpetrated by a resource-poor system – you have also reduced your ability to adapt to new challenges.”

Aisyaj shrugged, waving towards the image in the display. The Buckley Device – named after its inventor – was suspended above the black hole, waiting for the signal that would activate the warp field generator and send it into the black hole. The whole project had seemed absurd when she’d first read the proposal, yet there was a kind of mad grandeur to it. Perhaps the rest of the human race felt the same way. There were hundreds of starships surrounding the black hole, coming to bear witness to the experiment.

“I doubt that Joe Buckley would agree,” she said, with a grin. “He’s imagined something beyond even you.”

The AIs seemed, just for a second, troubled. “We have studied the published papers produced by Professor Buckley,” they said. “The equations are sound and yet...there is something about them that disturbs us. We would prefer to have more time to study the theories before carrying out the experiment.”

Aisyaj blinked. No one was entirely sure if the AIs possessed emotion, although they claimed to have something akin to human emotions...and for them to admit to it meant that they were truly worried. "If you feel that way," she asked, "why didn't you bring it to the attention of the Confederation?"

"We are unable to quantify the figures," the AIs admitted. "The equations seem sound. We cannot say what is wrong with them. We are merely...concerned about unknown unknowns."

"Don't worry about it," Aisyaj said, finishing her hot chocolate. The timer claimed that there was barely an hour until the experiment began. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Chapter Three

Janine found herself smiling as the world became real around her. Even after nearly a hundred years of life, she knew that she would never get used to teleport fields, despite the pledges from the Scientists Guild. They swore that quantum entanglement fields ensured that she was dematerialised and re-materialised at her destination, yet she always wondered if she wasn't committing suicide every time she used a teleport, being replaced by an identical copy. The scientists also swore that it was impossible to actually copy a living person, but Janine was less certain of it. If one could copy one's personality into an AI core and live on after death, why couldn't one be replaced by a teleport-produce copy?

She opened her eyes as the tingle faded away, allowing her to see a man standing in front of her. Only the faint shimmer betrayed the fact that he was an avatar, produced by the starship's AI core and relayed down from a local data node. Her implants activated, automatically downloading data from the starship's computer core, informing her that the image belonged to an intelligent program operating within the computer core and not a full-scale AI. The image itself betrayed its origin; unlike the images the AIs used to talk to humanity, it had several imperfections and quirks.

"Welcome onboard the *Scientist*," the image said. Standard protocol involved treating an intelligent program's image as a corporal being, so Janine put out her hand and was unsurprised to feel solid matter – or at least the illusion of it. Local gravity fields would give the image a feel of solidity. "You may call me Leo."

"Pleased to meet you," Janine said. "I understand that Professor Buckley is waiting to speak to me?"

"Speak at you, more like," Leo said, with an odd grimace. "I'm afraid the good doctor was only willing to spare so much time out of his schedule because the experiment does not require close monitoring for another seventy minutes."

Janine nodded, consulting the timer floating within her virtual vision. It had been automatically activated as soon as the countdown began, warning her that she would have to leave the starship within fifty minutes or remain onboard as the experiment began. Janine would have liked nothing less, but the Supervising Committee had insisted that all non-essential personnel be removed from the starship before the experiment began. To Janine's newshound instincts, it suggested that they were not half as convinced of the experiment's safety as they claimed in public.

"If you will come with me," Leo added. The image gave a childish wink that was somehow not unfitting on its face. "In a manner of speaking, of course..."

Janine rolled her eyes. Intelligent programs were created by spinning an element of humanity into an AI core and melding it with the basics of a standard AI system, creating an entity that swam in the data streams like an AI, but with a level of humanism and understanding that was more akin to humanity than their electronic children. They were joined by personalities that had been uploaded into the datanet, the last remains of mortal men and women who had chosen to travel into the datanet rather than continue to accept biological immortality – or death. She didn't blame them for their choice, yet she wasn't sure if they were truly real.

She followed the image down the corridor and into a gravity chute, where she was whisked across the starship's interior and into another chamber, several hundred miles away. The *Scientist* was a planet-sized ship, as large as the *Sparta*-class battleship floating only half a light year away, yet it was almost deserted. Most of its bulk was taken up by sensors and other scientific research devices, but even so, it should have had a crew of hundreds of thousands of people. Her implants, accessing the public regions of the ship's datanet, confirmed that only five hundred crew and scientists remained onboard the starship. The remainder had been evacuated to the other starships near the black hole.

And not one of them a newshound, Janine thought, with a dull flicker of amusement. It was odd, considering how successful Professor Buckley had been in promoting himself, to exclude the media, but perhaps it wasn't his decision. The man who had taken giant steps forward in unlocking the secrets of the Ancients might be able to convince the Scientist's Guild to support his experiments, yet he wouldn't be able to override safety parameters.

She ran an internal check on her implants as she entered the briefing room. Hundreds of thousands of people were already looking through her eyes, following her every move and seeing what she saw. It would go up to millions in the coming hour, and then perhaps billions or even trillions. Being a newshound required that she allowed them to access her implants, whatever she was doing. It was not a task for the faint of heart, or the secretive. Her life had nothing resembling privacy in it, yet it was the price she paid to be famous. In a universe where one could have almost anything one wanted without trouble, it was hard to be famous unless one had a skill, like scientific research. She had decided, long ago, that it was worth the loss of privacy to make her mark on the universe.

Professor Joseph Buckley rose to his feet, holding out a hand for her to shake. He looked older than she had expected, which could be either good or bad; he could be a man without vanity, or he could be a man who simply didn't care about his appearance. He looked around forty – his true age was over four hundred – and wore a simple black tunic, adorned with the golden badge of the Scientists Guild. His grey hair seemed to have been chopped off with a blunt razor, rather than the nanites swarming through his body. He smiled at her and she felt, just for a second, a hint of his excitement and determination. But then, he was on the crux of discovering if his life's work had been a success – or a failure, one that would not be soon forgotten. Even for the Confederation, the amount of resources that had been poured into his experiment was not small.

"Welcome aboard," Buckley said. His voice was oddly excited, as if he had a secret he was going to hoard for a few hours longer. "I'm afraid I don't have much time..."

"I quite understand," Janine assured him. She accessed her implants and studied the plan laid out in front of her mind's eye. "I shall move ahead with all possible speed. Can you explain, for the benefit of our viewers, why you and only a handful of others have been able to understand the Ancient language? Even the AIs have been unable to crack it."

"It is really quite simple," Buckley explained. Now that she'd started asking questions, his enthusiasm had been replaced by a kind of genteel condescension, as if he didn't expect her to understand the answers and was just humouring her. "The Ancients were quite different from us, mentally, and few humans are able to *think* like an Ancient long enough to start translating some of their documents. Even I, the most experienced researcher in the field,

cannot understand all of the documents, or even a majority of the documents. I was only able to understand the science-related information.”

He paused for effect. “The laws of science remain the same, wherever one goes in the natural universe,” he added. “We were able to compare what they’d developed to our own knowledge of the universe and start translating their material. The remainder of their information remains a mystery.”

Janine leaned forward, smiling to herself. “And you cannot even speculate upon what it actually says?”

“I could give you a thousand possibilities,” Buckley said, a hint of irritating entering his voice. “They could be literature, or religious works, or...for all I know, they could be nothing more than personnel files. We have simply been unable to translate the remainder of the data.”

“I see,” Janine said. “Do you not find that someone is accusing you of making it all up?”

Buckley’s eyes narrowed angrily, but his voice was perfectly calm. “The data I have translated was analysed comprehensively by the Scientists Guild,” he said. “If the information had been inaccurate – or if I had lied, as many suggested – they would have uncovered it. Instead, the information has been verified, not once, but many times. The basic theory behind the experiment is sound.”

“That’s a relief,” Janine said, dryly. She took a moment to study the responses piling up in her inbox, before dismissing the non-sentient programs that helped her to catalogue the responses. They were too vague to alter the planned interview. “Now, Professor, just what do you believe we can do with the additional power you hope to generate and tap for us?”

“Anything,” Buckley said. He seemed calmer now they had moved away from the Ancients and their mysterious language. “The ability to generate or tap into power has been the key to hundreds of scientific advancements in the past. When we unlocked the mysteries of steam power, we tamed the oceans; nuclear power brought us cheaper electricity and – eventually – the stars. Quantum power taps brought us hyperspace travel and the ability to form computer fields within a localised hyper-field, allowing the creation of far more capable AIs. The possibility of being able to tap a singularity leads to hundreds of other possibilities. We would be able to operate on a scale beyond anything we might have imagined.”

His eyes gleamed with sudden enthusiasm. “We might even be able to open wormholes to other galaxies, or start exploring the full potential of telepathy...or perhaps start walking towards becoming a transcendent race. The possibilities are endless. What might we learn if we developed the ability to produce a sensor field that covered the entire galaxy?”

Janine considered it for a long moment. “And what if the experiment fails?”

“It cannot fail,” Buckley assured her. “We have checked and rechecked the maths before we started to produce the warp probe.”

“I understand that,” Janine said. There was a long pause. “But still...are there not risks?”

Buckley said nothing, studying her thoughtfully. “There comes a time,” he said finally, “when theory and simulations become of limited use. We need hard data to open up new fields of study, hard data that can only be obtained by carrying out an experiment and studying the results. There are risks, unavoidable risks, with each experiment, yet without the experiment we have nothing, but theory. Do you think that Doctor Taylor should have spent an eternity running simulations, or was he right to just build the experimental warp drive unit and give humanity the stars?”

Janine nodded in understanding. Centuries ago, Doctor Taylor had – against strong opposition from his fellow scientists, who hadn't believed that it was possible – constructed an experimental warp drive and launched the human race into space. His successful experiment had rapidly been duplicated, with hundreds of nations and political groups dispatching their own missions out into deep space. The human race had begun a massive expansion that had finally resulted in the Confederation, a state that many humans throughout history would have regarded as paradise. A state where the only hope for public notice was to do something noteworthy, be it a scientific breakthrough or converting one's life into a drama for public observation. She understood Buckley's determination to succeed, despite the risks.

She smiled as new questions appeared in her virtual vision, submitted by her thousands of viewers. “A question, Professor,” she said, thoughtfully. “Do you believe that this experiment had anything to do with the extermination of the Ancients, umpteen billion years ago?”

Buckley seemed to twitch, just slightly. “I am asked that question fairly regularly,” he said, coldly. The sudden change was alarming, even though it was understandable; the debate over just what had caused a major space-faring race to die out had consumed much public interest, particularly when Buckley's rivals had pointed out that the Ancients had carried out similar experiments. “I feel that I can say, categorically, that there is no chance that the Ancients died out because of their mastery of such...experiments. Whatever killed the Ancients had nothing to do with this program.”

“I shall trust that you are right,” Janine said. “I do wonder if...”

Buckley held up a hand. “You will have to excuse me,” he said, dispassionately. “I have been summoned to the coordination chamber. I suggest that you return to your ship and prepare to watch as the universe changes, once again.”

Janine stared after him as he vanished through the hatch, heading down towards the research chambers. It was odd; he'd been more than willing to talk to the press before, yet...perhaps she'd hit a nerve. She dismissed her virtual vision with a shrug and used her implants to send a request directly into the starship's computers. Ten seconds later, another teleport field embraced her and transported her to the luxury liner that was serving as a berth for the media. There were over two hundred newshounds with the fleet gathered around the black hole, each one determined to beat their rivals to the scoop.

“Hard luck, dear,” one of her rivals called, after she materialised on the observation deck. The black hole was conspicuous by the total absence of light. “I'm sure someone else will get to do the post-experiment interview.”

Janine scowled at him, and then put the matter out of her mind. She checked her timer and frowned. The experiment was scheduled to begin in forty minutes.

“The humans are ready to begin their experiment, Warlord,” the Junior Sword reported.
“They are warning all ships to keep their distance.”

“Hold us here,” Warlord Masji growled. It had been nearly four hundred years since the First Contact between his people and the Confederation and it had taken nearly as long to cleanse the shame from his family’s claws. “We will show them that we cannot be intimidated by their power.”

He glared up towards the massive icons on the main display, each one representing a ship the size of a planet, a technology well beyond the grasp of his people. The humans called them reptiles, and indeed there was some similarity on the surface, but his blood was actually hotter than that of a human. A pureblood human at least, he reminded himself; their enhanced humans tended to have odder metabolisms and no two were ever entirely the same. If his people had had such technology, he knew, they would be masters of the universe. The humans, in their arrogance, hadn't even moved to enslave or destroy his people.

The thought was a bitter one. Centuries ago, the Haypah had been little more than tribal warriors, scrabbling over tiny patches of land. And then newcomers had arrived, bringing gifts to his people in the belief that such gifts would mean that they wouldn't have to fight any more. The newcomers had promptly been captured by the local warlord and enslaved, their technology used to conquer the world and then hammer out a tech base that took the Haypah into space. There had been relatively few inhabited worlds near their planet and the uninhabited worlds had been swiftly colonised. The future had looked bright; the Haypah were clearly the masters of space and all others were their inferiors, fit only to be slaves or to be destroyed for sport.

And then they'd run into the humans. They'd sent a fleet to invade a human world, only to be met and defeated by the Confederation Navy. The humiliation had been extreme, all the more so because not a single Haypah – or human – had died in the brief battle. The humans had deployed weapons that had disabled all of the Haypah ships without causing any loss of life and then transported the Haypah back to their homeworlds, with a warning that any further expansion would result in a second, equally humiliating defeat. The Haypah had spent the next few hundred years desperately trying to bring their tech base up to match the Confederation, yet they couldn't match the best the humans could produce. The Confederation Navy ships guarding the black hole could destroy his entire maniple with ease...or, if they felt unwilling to fight without killing their enemies, retreat far faster than he could follow them.

His family had been in command of the fleet that had been disabled and the Emperor had made them the scapegoats for the failure. It had taken him and his father and his grandfather years of work to rebuild the clan's fortunes and re-establish themselves, just in time to watch the humans do something that was completely beyond anything his race could have even considered. The Emperor had ordered him merely to observe and wait. The Confederation wouldn't be all-powerful forever.

He looked over towards the team of scientists, standing at the rear of the bridge. The scientists seemed smaller than the warriors surrounding him, yet they were perhaps the most important people on the ship. The Haypah had never had any concept of the scientific method until they'd been introduced to the stars and, even now, scientists received far less respect than warriors.

“Honoured Warlord,” the lead scientist said, “we are ready to observe the human experiment.”

Masji flicked his tongue in irritation. “Good,” he said, turning back to the main display. It would be galling to watch another human success, a triumph that should have belonged to his people, but perhaps the Emperor was right and it would offer an opportunity to expand their own tech base. “Let us watch and see what the humans have done.”

On the screen, the timer ticked down remorselessly towards zero.

Chapter Four

It was time.

The entity that had infected Joe Buckley knew that it's time was almost up, yet it didn't care. Its one task was to reopen the gateway and if it perished in the attempt, it didn't matter. The years spent convincing the Confederation that the experiment was possible, as well as safe, had been meaningless to it. All that mattered was reopening the gateway.

"It's time," it said. The strange impulses from Buckley's body meant nothing to it. Playing at being human was hard, but humans seemed to be willing to accept a great deal at face value. It cast its eyes around the chamber and saw, much to its private amusement, that no one seemed to be questioning the value of the experiment, or even the risks involved in the process. It had offered humanity the entire multiverse, even if they didn't understand what that even meant, not really. "I think we should begin."

One of the human researchers who had helped build the Singularity Warp Probe – the entity preferred to think of it as The Device – had installed the main control console, using his odd sense of humour as a guide. It was topped with a single big red button marked PRESS THIS. The entity didn't understand human humour – the Device could hardly be activated without going through a complex process of authorisation codes and systems verification – but it hadn't bothered to argue. It didn't matter, in the end, how the humans chose to accept their doom. It would come for them anyway.

It held one human finger over the button, caressing it for a single second and then pushed down hard. The command sequence, already loaded into the Device, began to power up the warp field. That had been easy to construct, for the humans had actually understood warp field technology far better than those they had called the Ancients. The warp bubble surrounding the Device would actually allow it to survive inside a black hole, well past the event horizon where anything without special protection would be crushed down to nothingness, its mass added to the massive black hole. A human starship might have been able to survive in such an environment; given enough power, the power it had used to tempt the human race, it would be possible to conceal entire worlds within a black hole. Long ago, so long ago that it had no real referent that a human would understand, it had seen a race that had tried to do just that. It hadn't mattered. The masters had come for the fugitives and devoured them, just as they would devour the human race.

"Probe activated, Professor," one of the humans said. She was easy to manipulate, for she had a crush on Joe Buckley. The entity had allowed Buckley's memories to guide him and had encouraged her in her enthusiasm, knowing that she would be a useful ally if the Confederation decided not to allow the experiment to go ahead. "Your work is about to show the entire galaxy what it can do."

The entity allowed itself a smile. The human didn't know it, but she was entirely correct.

"Excellent," he said. The first part of the experiment was exactly what it claimed to be; the Device would plunge into the black hole, taking refuge past the event horizon. It was what would come afterwards that would change the plan. By then, the entity knew, it would be far too late. "Let us watch on the main screen."

“The Probe is activated, Admiral,” the sensor officer said. “It is powering up its warp drive now.”

Admiral Burton leaned back into his seat, plunging his mind into the live feed from the ship’s sensors. High above the black hole – insofar as the team ‘above’ had meaning for operations in deep space – the probe was powering up, its warp bubble already disrupting the smooth flow of time and space around its location. Humanity, long ago, had discovered that warp bubbles allowed faster than light travel in normal space – rather than using wormholes or hyperspace – and used them to unlock the stars. Later, scientists had used them to send probes and even starships down into stars...and to send them supernova, during the war with the Unseen. Like all technology, they could be used for great good or great evil...and humanity had used them for both.

“Good,” he said, staring through the mechanical eyes as the probe started to orientate itself on the black hole. It had been built to very high standards, far superior than any other starship the human race had built and should, in theory, be capable of operating within a black hole. Even so, it was controlled by a restricted intelligence, rather than an AI or a human crew. Even Professor Buckley hadn’t wanted to risk too many lives near the black hole, let alone down within the event horizon. “Let’s see how this goes...”

He did a final check on the starships surrounding the black hole. The majority of the ships had chosen to fall back well beyond the demarcation line, but the Haypah had insisted on sitting right on the line, daring the Confederation Navy to push them away. Years ago, it had been easy to use a combination of hyperspace dampeners and teleporters to neutralise a Haypah fleet, but now it would require deadly force. Burton knew that elements within the Confederation Navy had been seriously considering some level of direct intervention, perhaps even restricting the Haypah to their original star system until they evolved a more...tolerable political system, yet there was no consensus on the proposal. Personally, he was fairly sure that holding them at bay would be enough to change their ways – humanity had the ability to take the long view now – but what if he were wrong?

Centuries ago, the human race had encountered another race, one that had barely managed to master sailing ships. Keen to improve their condition, humanity had descended on the alien world, bringing gifts to help raise the primitives up into the interstellar community. At first, everything had worked perfectly and the primitives had begun to grasp modern technology, allowing the sociologists to claim success. Their claims had come too soon. The primitives had believed, at first, that the humans were gods...and, later, that the humans were concealing technological marvels from them. The ensuing rebellion and fighting between pro-human and anti-human forces on their homeworld had eventually resulted in one of the sides cracking an antimatter power core and exterminating their race in the ensuing explosion. Shocked, the human powers – which had been eventually replaced by the Confederation – had agreed to ban further interference on alien worlds. Humanity had the blood of an entire intelligent race on its hands and the experiment would never be repeated.

He pushed the thought aside as the probe’s warp field completed powering up and the warp bubble grew stronger. A moment later, once the QCC links had been established and verified between the probe and *Scientist* – where the data was transmitted all over the galaxy – the probe started to move down towards the black hole. It was fanciful, Burton knew, but as he

watched, he had the impression of the black hole yawning open to swallow the probe whole. Protected by its warp bubble, the probe floated down and vanished through the event horizon.

“The QCC link is being disrupted,” the sensor officer reported. Burton scowled. Under normal circumstances, it was literally impossible to intercept or jam a QCC link, but inside a black hole the laws of science tended to break down. “I’m only getting hard data; we may not be able to assume command of the probe.”

“Understood,” Burton said. They were spectators now, but the truth was that that was all that they had ever been. It was Joe Buckley’s show now. “Keep feeding the data through my station.”

A human would have been terrified if they had fallen into a black hole, assuming they had a warp bubble to protect them from effects human scientists had deduced long before they ever laid eyes on a black hole. The RI controlling the probe had no emotions, even though it was the most sophisticated program composite ever written. The AIs who had designed it knew that it was considered expendable and had been careful not to command a crime against electronic life by giving it any form of sentience; indeed, they had programmed in limiters to prevent the probe ever considering abstract questions that might have led to the independent development of true intelligence.

Humans, studying the question, had wondered why the AIs were willing to prevent some RIs from evolving into genuine AIs. The AIs had answered, when the question had finally been posed to them, that an RI was no more an AI than a human embryo was a human being. Indeed, given that the RIs had no chance of becoming AIs, they had far more in common with stillborn human children than with healthy human beings. The AIs might have objected to their own enslavement, but there was no such thing as exploitation when the exploited was literally unable to think for itself. The probe could only focus on the issue at hand.

Within the black hole, it ran through a series of checks on the warp bubble. Unlike conventional starships, the designers had worked in multiple warp generators, knowing that if the bubble failed the probe would be crushed by gravitational forces before it would even realise that it was in trouble. The warp bubble was functioning at optimum levels. It checked the QCC link and realised that it was breaking up, taking the time to run a pair of diagnostics before reluctantly concluding that the cause of the interference was beyond its ability to fix. The loss of direct contact didn’t bother it. It merely activated the contingency plan and proceeded with the experiment.

The torrent of data pouring it was almost more than the RI could store, let alone analyse. Seconds ticked by as it compressed the data, using it to locate its destination, the quantum singularity within the black hole. The data did not compute properly, so the probe checked its results again, finally realising that there wasn’t *one* quantum singularity within the black hole, but *three*. The three singularities were orbiting down at the bottom of the gravity well, the very basement of the universe. Anything that went through the inner singularity was gone. The probe, incapable of being surprised, dismissed the issue and proceeded with the experiment.

“The data is breaking up, Professor,” the young woman said. “Do you wish to move closer?”

The entity shook its head. “No,” it said, sharply. Moving closer would accomplish absolutely nothing, not when QCC links were involved. It was quite possible to establish QCC links with people in the Andromeda Galaxy, yet the Device was residing within a black hole. The only way to ensure a stable communications link was to move into the black hole and that, he knew, the starship’s commander would refuse to do. “We remain here and wait.”

It checked the data flowing into the starship’s computers, knowing that it wouldn’t be long before the probe started its work. The presence of *three* quantum singularities had surprised the researchers – the entity had not been surprised, for it had known that they were there long before Joe Buckley had released it back into the universe – yet it hadn’t interfered with the experiment. Some researchers had suggested that the experiment be halted and the Device recovered, but it was too late. The Device was beyond recovery.

Calmly, it triggered the implants Buckley had had installed and sent a single command into the starship’s system. Once the cascade effect began, the direct link to the Device would begin to fail. No one would be able to impede its progress towards its final destination.

“I’ve got something a little odd here, Admiral,” the sensor tech said. “The computer network on *Scientist* is suffering from unexplained glitches.”

Burton frowned, accessing the direct feed from the communications link. The *Scientist* was designed to remain functional even when under direct attack; indeed, the ship’s computers should have been impossible to damage. The threat of viruses designed to attack computer systems had faded away when self-repairing and updating systems, even limited to prevent evolution into sentience, had been developed and installed.

“Odd,” he agreed, puzzled. “We’re still getting the feed from the probe, right?”

“Perhaps, sir, but we’re no longer able to send commands to the probe,” the sensor tech said. “The system disruption is concentrated on the probe control arrays.”

“Why?”

“Unknown, sir,” the sensor tech said. Burton could hear the puzzlement in his voice. The Confederation Navy ensured that all of its personnel had access to scientific research from across the galaxy and the lifespan to assimilate it all. To encounter something truly inexplicable was unusual. “I believe that the probe control system has been compromised.”

Burton sent a mental command into the network. A second later, an image of a blonde woman appeared in front of him. “The probe network has been compromised,” he said, aware that the AIs almost certainly already knew. “Can you identify what is wrong with it?”

“The system has been infected with an unusual form of attack program,” the AI image said. The perfect face twisted oddly. “In effect, the attack appears to have taken place within the ship, using the proper access codes to rewrite chunks of the program.”

“Never mind the precise details,” Burton growled. “Can you get back into the system?”

“We are working on it,” the AIs said. Burton blinked, feeling – for the first time – a thrill of dismay creeping up his back. The AIs possessed processing power far beyond anything a mere RI could boast, enough to crack through firewalls and any form of protection quickly, yet if they couldn't unlock the system...he knew it boded ill. “The rewritten chunks of the program appear to be connected to the starship's quantum power tap. A single wrong move and the starship will explode. We submit that that is not a viable outcome.”

“No,” Burton growled. If someone was sabotaging the experiment, it could account for the attack...but why? What could they gain, apart from delaying the experiment for a few months? He couldn't think of anyone who had anything to gain. “What the hell is going on?”

“Unknown,” the AIs said. “We are attempting to unlock the program and regain access.”

Deep within the black hole, the probe completed its analysis and accessed a secure part of its database. The designers had intended to classify the exact nature of the experiment, concealing the programming within a secure core. It had been easy for the entity to upload its own version of the program into the system, for who would have suspected the genius behind the experiments of trying to sabotage his own work? The equations were sound – as the Scientists Guild had confirmed – but the planned original experiment had been quite different. The probe, unaware of the sabotage, started powering up its systems. It was time to begin.

Gravity dominated the interior of the black hole. Long ago, a massive star had collapsed down to nothing, eventually punching a hole in the universe itself and literally falling out into nothingness. There was nothing left of the original star, but its gravity - the gravity field that was so strong that it held the entire unnatural structure in place. The universe had become reluctantly reconciled to its presence. Now, the probe started to reach out with focused gravity beams, attempting to influence the three singularities within the black hole. The sheer scale of the original experiment had worried human researchers in the Confederation, yet they had never dreamed just what was possible inside a black hole. The probe had been intended to gain control of a singularity; instead, it was attempting to reprogram one.

Humanity had deduced the fundamental basis of quantum reality centuries before they first became able to manipulate, on a very tiny scale, the quantum foam. The inner singularities, naked and waiting to be manipulated, could do far more than merely link into another singularity. They could reach right out of the universe itself...

The probe triggered the final process and waited. Seconds later, the first burst of energy annihilated the probe...but by then, it was already far too late. The process had begun.

“We need a scan,” the AIs said, blinking into existence in front of her cocoon. Aisyaj opened her eyes and stared at the image in disbelief. She had never heard that tone of urgency from an AI before. The AIs never panicked and never showed fear. “We need you to scan the *Scientist*...”

Aisyaj blinked. “You're asking me to read minds without permission?”

“One of those minds had sabotaged the experiment,” the AIs said. Aisyaj picked up a hint of their frustration; in the time it had taken them to speak to her they could have had billions of thoughts. They thought so much faster than humans that dealing with the human race had to be hard for them at times. “We need to locate and identify that person before...”

They broke off. With a sudden premonition of disaster, Aisyaj reached for her enhancer and pulled it over her head. She should have been instantly able to read minds at a considerable distance, but instead the telepathic waveband was filled with...something. She could hear a hissing in her head, seconds before the enhancer’s safety protocols cut in and deactivated the device. It should have been impossible, yet she could sense the hissing even without mechanical aids...

“What...” She found herself coughing and tried again, a desperate plea for help to mechanical gods. “What is happening?”

Before the AIs could answer, the entire starship shook violently.

The first of the gravity waves had stuck her ship.

Chapter Five

“Admiral, we have...”

The entire starship shook violently. Burton felt compensator fields snapping into existence, yet already overwhelmed by the gravity waves slamming against the starship’s hull. Once, years ago, he had been an observer when the Gasbags used focused gravity beams to break up a minor planet and use it for raw materials and it had felt exactly the same. It was like being in a small boat and being caught up in tidal waves.

“Sir, the gravity waves are moving at faster than light speeds,” the sensor tech reported, as damage reports flared up in Burton’s virtual vision. The *Sparta* had never been damaged in over two hundred years of service, yet it was taking damage now. Damage control drones were already being routed to the damaged sections, but somehow he was sure that it was only the beginning. The entire starship shook again as another gravity wave roared out from the black hole. “They may be twisting local space around us!”

Burton braced himself as a warning flashed up in his mind, followed – a second later – by another gravity wave. “Pull us back from the black hole,” he ordered. “I want a wide-band message distributed to the other starships ordering them to fall back too. Whatever this is” – the hull rang yet again – “I don’t want civilian ships too close to it.”

He looked over towards the AIs representation. At the speeds the AIs thought, they should know what was going on and how to stop it...if it could be stopped, a treacherous part of his mind added. Whatever had gone wrong had gone *seriously* wrong. None of the simulations they’d run through before authorising the experiment had suggested that anything remotely like this could happen. He lived in a universe where it was possible to tap supernovas for power and open wormholes across the galaxy, yet the sheer scale of power being unleashed was terrifying. It was a reminder that humanity didn’t know everything, or control the underlying forces of the universe itself.

“I need an update,” he said, sharply. He didn’t fear distracting the AIs. It only took a tiny – infinitesimally tiny – part of their attention to speak to him, or even the entire Confederation population at once. “What the hell is going on?”

“We are unsure,” the AIs said. Burton felt a sense of numb horror spreading through his mind. He had grown used – they had all grown used – to the AIs having all the answers. They could solve scientific mysteries before human researchers had even started reading the position papers and considering a course of action. They could calculate the best course of action within microseconds and they were rarely wrong. To hear them admit to doubt was...terrifying. He almost felt blind. It dawned on him that that must have been how his ancestors had felt, long before AIs had even been conceived. “The black hole appears to be destabilising. Its gravity field is being reshaped.”

The main display updated itself without anyone issuing an order. The black hole had had a kind of orderly beauty to it before the experiment had begun, even though it was lethal to anyone foolish enough to go close to it without proper protection. Now...the torus was spinning out of control, unleashing FTL gravity waves into the normal universe. The outer singularity was being bent out of shape, while the inner singularities...the AIs projected a dozen simulations in front of him, taking their best guess. With the probe gone, it was

impossible to be certain of what was going on inside the black hole. The only certainty was that the experiment had gone terrifyingly wrong.

“We need more information,” he said, as a series of gravity waves struck the ship. “Can we adapt one of our spy probes to travel within the black hole?”

“Unlikely,” the AIs said. They sounded...worried, the first time he had ever heard them show such an emotion. “The raging power within the black hole will not prove hospitable to another probe. The warp bubble will be overwhelmed within seconds.”

Burton stroked his chin, perplexed. “Keep pulling the ships back,” he ordered, hoping that they could get most of the starships out of danger. It occurred to him that whatever they had done might just keep expanding until it had swallowed most of the universe, yet he pushed that thought aside. If they’d doomed the entire universe...it would be a fitting monument to humanity’s arrogance. “Can you predict what will happen in...?”

“No,” the AIs said. “The black hole’s quantum structure is being altered, almost certainly by the probe’s final actions. We are in unknown territory and we have no idea what will happen.” There was a pause. “If nothing else, we will be sure of data here that will fuel genuine, original science. The sheer level of power needed to reshape a black hole is beyond anything we could generate and store.”

Burton frowned, watching as starships started to move away from the black hole. Some of the scientific craft were refusing to move, believing that they would never have such a good chance to study such an event, but most of the civilian and alien craft were pulling back. The Haypah maniple, he noted absently, was refusing to move. They would argue that the black hole wasn’t in Confederation space, insofar as the term had any meaning where several races blurred together, and therefore he had no legal authority to order them to leave. At the moment, it was barely a priority; if their ships got caught up in...whatever was going on, it would be their own stupid fault.

“Then just keep watching,” he ordered, slipping his mind into the fleet control network. The cruisers were pulling back now too, allowing the planetoids to follow them. The civilian craft should really be jumping into hyperspace and getting the hell out of the area, but he guessed that the passengers were pleading for the ships to remain close enough for them to watch. The passengers, who had grown up in a universe where there was no real danger, hadn’t realised that this truly *was* dangerous. The gravity waves were getting stronger.

He brought a chart up in front of him and swore. The gravity waves were *powerful* and expanding at FTL speeds. They were spreading out from the black hole, reaching over a hundred light years from their origin before they faded away. That wasn’t uncommon with artificially created gravity pulses – the Gasbags used them to power their starships and open wormholes – yet no one had ever seen gravity waves of such sheer power. There were few inhabited planets within the affected zone, yet...what if the waves kept expanding?

“And send out a general warning,” he added. It was hard to know what to say when they were dealing with something completely unprecedented, but the Confederation had to be warned. At least warp bubbles would provide some measure of protection to starships caught in transit. The habitats would be able to shield themselves. The planets...the planets might be in trouble, even with Confederation technology. “Warn them...”

A new alert flashed up in front of him. “Admiral, the *Scientist* is unable to move,” the duty officer snapped. “Her drives are refusing to function!”

The entity had watched the confusion with something a little like amusement. It had wondered if someone would draw the correct conclusion that the experiment had been sabotaged by the man who had created it in the first place – and, if so, it had wondered what they would do. Would they demand answers or would they simply shoot the person they thought was Joe Buckley out of hand? It didn't matter any longer; now the Device had done its work, the gateway was opening. There was nothing that humanity, for all of its impressive science and technology, could do to stop it.

“Professor,” the girl bellowed. She seemed to think that he was staring in horror as his life's work fell apart. “Professor...what are we going to do?”

The entity said nothing. The contamination it had introduced into the starship's computer core was spreading, crippling the drives that would allow it to move away from the black hole. There was no way they could risk triggering the FTL drives now, not when the quantum tap was on the verge of going unstable...if they tried, they ran the risk of blowing the ship into nothing more than flaming plasma. If they had known what was coming, the entity knew, they might well have taken the risk.

It made a show of accessing the latest reports from the remote probes scattered around the event horizon. The Device itself was gone – it had expected that – but all the pieces were neatly falling into place. Now the gateway had opened, just a crack, its masters could sense it and do the rest of the work themselves, down in the caldron where the normal laws of time and space broke down and became malleable. The humans had no idea of what was going on because they couldn't imagine that there was anything living under the quantum foam, outside their universe. Even their mighty AIs were puzzled. He could hear increasingly frantic signals being exchanged from ship to ship as the gravity waves grew stronger, humans desperate to understand what was going on. Even if they did understand, the entity knew, it was still far too late. The black hole was collapsing into a gateway.

“Professor,” a sterner voice said. The entity disconnected itself from the computer network and opened its eyes, staring down at Captain Jefferson. The man had been an experienced Confederation Navy officer before he'd transferred to the Scientists Guild. He still remembered how to act like a military officer, yet it was completely pointless. No amount of barking orders would get his ship out of danger. “Professor...what have you done?”

The entity, just for a second, allowed the mask to drop. Posing as Joe Buckley had been...frustrating, yet the disguise was no longer required. It had always had its risks – a human telepath might have been able to sense its presence – but it had been necessary. It saw the horror within the Captain's eyes as he came face to face with something truly alien, a tiny part of the nightmare that had prowled beside the universe ever since it had been born in fire. A human mind could not comprehend what it really was, but old instincts, ones developed back when humanity had hunted for food, screamed danger.

“The gateway is opening,” the entity said. The entire starship shook violently, an endless series of gravity pulses that never seemed to stop. Time itself seemed to be breaking down around them. “They are coming.”

“Who is coming?” The Captain demanded. “What have you done?”

The entity said nothing. There was nothing more to say. On the screen, the black hole was starting to collapse, releasing massive bursts of energy into the universe. Perhaps some of the humans believed that the danger was passing, now that the gravity waves had faded away, but the entity knew better. The gateway was coming into existence, a spinning naked singularity forming within the quantum foam. The black hole’s event horizon was starting to shift and warp, expanding and contracting; deep inside, the natural laws governing a black hole had been rewritten. The entity, with its sense for reading the quantum form, knew that the changes went far further than any human could sense...

“Take him to the brig,” the Captain ordered. The entity said nothing. “Put him in there and jam his implants. I don’t want him talking to anyone...”

“Admiral, we believe that Professor Buckley sabotaged his own experiment,” the AIs said. “He was definitely responsible for uploading the sabotage program into *Scientist*’s computer core.”

Burton shook his head. “Why would he ruin his own experiment?”

“We are unsure,” the AIs stated, “but he did tell Captain Jefferson that it involved opening a gateway. It is possible that he may have had a different understanding of the Ancient language than we thought. It may not have said what he claimed it said.”

Burton rubbed his eyes. “I see,” he said. The gravity waves were fading away, leaving a spinning and oddly unstable black hole in front of them. The power levels were still off the scale, but at least the universe seemed to be settling down. “If he wanted to make a gateway, where does he want it to go?”

“We do not know,” the AIs said. “We have assumed that all of the equations that he provided us are badly flawed, or incomplete, and have begun studying them on that basis. We did not, however, discover any inconsistencies or mathematical errors when we studied the equations originally, before the experiments began. Whatever Buckley had in mind, it was carefully concealed, even from us. It was designed to stand up to the most intensive scrutiny, including that of us and every research scientist in the Confederation. There was no clue that anything like this would happen.”

There was a long pause. “We believe that he slipped his own program into the probe,” the AIs added. “It is the only possibility that makes sense. It would not be possible to sabotage any other piece of machinery without raising concern before the experiment began.”

“Leave the post-mortem for the moment,” Burton said. He glanced up at the fleet display. *Scientist* was still stranded, alarmingly close to the black hole. The starship’s drive systems had completely failed – the computer core would need a complete purge before it could be

reactivated and brought back online – and it was drifting into the gravity field. “We will rescue the passengers and crew on *Scientist* and then consider what is to be done.”

“Of course,” the AIs agreed. “And, with your permission, we will consider other angles of approach to the problem.”

Burton, already issuing orders into the command network, nodded impatiently. Now that the gravity waves were fading away, the massive starship could power up its own war bubble and approach the *Scientist* before she fell any closer to the black hole. *Sparta*’s teleporters could evacuate the ship and, just incidentally, take Joe Buckley into custody. Once they were away from the black hole – or whatever it was now – they could get answers out of him. And then, he hoped, they would know what to do next.

Aisyaj had barely noticed the gravity waves shaking her ship, for she’d been trying to block out the inhuman hissing that echoed through every one of the telepathic wavebands. She had no idea what could produce such an effect, not even the biological technology a couple of races used to travel through space, or even a telepathic jammer. It took every ounce of discipline she had to focus her mind; somehow, it felt as if her mind didn’t want to work properly. It was so hard to think clearly under such an assault.

“One plus one is two,” she chanted. It helped to focus her mind. “One plus two is three; one plus three is four; one plus four is five...”

The AI image shimmered back into existence. “We need your services,” they said, without preamble. “This disaster was deliberately produced by Professor Buckley.”

Aisyaj blinked in surprise. She had only met Professor Buckley once and he, like many others, had shied away from the telepath. He had struck her as an intensely focused, almost obsessive, personality, devoted to unlocking the secrets of Ancient technology and putting them to use for the benefit of the human race. She had had no idea that he intended to produce a disaster, even though everyone would have expected her to read his mind. Telepath ethics forbade it without permission, unless Confederation security was at stake.

“And you want me to read his mind,” she said, feeling the hissing at the back of her head. Truthfully, she wasn’t sure if she could read someone right next to her now, let alone someone half a light year away. The enhancers beckoned, having reset themselves after they had shut down, yet she was nervous about using them. “Is it really necessary?”

“We would not ask it of you if it were not vitally important,” the AIs assured her. Their voice altered slightly, perhaps in an attempt to project reassurance. “We believe that there is no other choice. We need answers and we need them now.”

Aisyaj glowered at the image as she checked the enhancer, before placing the helmet on her head. She had never been able to explain being a telepath to a non-telepath, for it was completely beyond their experience. The best explanation she had been able to give was that she moved from a universe dominated by matter to a universe dominated by thought. Human minds seemed to glow out in the darkness, while alien minds felt less familiar, yet still understandable. Indeed, there were telepaths who believed that one day the entire universe

would be united through telepathy, ending hatred and fear. How could one fear the unknown when there was no unknown?

Carefully, she expanded her mind towards the *Scientist*, drifting towards the black hole. Hundreds of minds seemed to sing out towards her, all unaware of her drifting presence; It was hard to focus on the person she wanted to sense. It was as if Buckley had no presence in the telepath waveband at all, which was impossible...

“I can’t sense anything,” she reported. There were non-telepaths who could block out telepathic intrusion, yet even they had a presence in the telepathic waveband; they could be sensed even if their thoughts could not be read. “I can’t...”

The entire universe shifted around her.

The new gravity wave was so powerful that *Sparta* was knocked away from the black hole.

“Admiral,” the sensor tech reported. “The black hole is destabilising!”

Burton looked at the display and saw disaster unfolding.

“Get us out of here,” he ordered.

It was too late.

Chapter Six

Deep within the black hole, the rapidly-shifting singularities finally condensed into their new form, burning a hole right through the quantum foam. Energy flared within the event horizon as the black hole's mass was converted into power, racing out of the event horizon as the gravity field collapsed. A supernova, compared to the evaporating black hole, would be puny. The tidal wave of energy was roaring out at faster than light speeds. There would be very little warning before it hit the ships gathered around the black hole.

"The human experiment has failed," the scientist said. "They have been unable to tap into the black hole and use it as a source of power."

Warlord Masji flicked his tongue in wry amusement. It was unlikely that the disaster would convince the humans to change their ways, but perhaps it would slow their progress down for a few centuries, allowing his people a chance to catch up. The torrent of data collected by his maniple would almost certainly fuel research back home, perhaps even allow them a chance to get the experiment right. What couldn't his people do with such power?

The humans had tried to urge them to leave the scene, a pathetic attempt to deny his scientists a chance to collect data they might be able to turn into useable technology – and weapons. He had ignored their urgings, choosing instead to ride out the gravity waves and watch with delight as one of their massive planetoids – a ship far above what his people could produce, at least so far – lost its drive and threatened to fall into the black hole. It would certainly be rescued by one of the others before it passed the event horizon and was crushed out of existence, but it was reassuring to know that human tech could fail from time to time. That meant, he knew, that it could be *made* to fail.

"Good," he said. The Emperor would be pleased, as would most of the Empire. "I see no reason why we should not extend our condolences..."

"Warlord," the scientist said suddenly. "There is a..."

His voice broke off. "Warlord, there is a massive energy storm exploding out of the black hole," he said. "It's moving at FTL speeds. Our shields will not be able to stand up to it. We have to get out of here now!"

Masji refused to panic. "How long do we have before it reaches us?"

"Around two minutes, but the storm is moving at FTL speeds and may accelerate," the scientist reported. He sounded stunned; no one, not even the humans, could project energy at FTL speeds within normal space. It was possible in hyperspace, yet if that were the case, they would be perfectly safe in normal space. Or perhaps not; there were persistent rumours that the humans had invented a hyper-cannon that shot energy through hyperspace and exploded out of a hyperspace portal into normal space. "I do not feel that we should remain here."

Masji bowed his head in reluctant submission. The humans might be entities against whom there was some chance of victory, but only a fool contended with the power of the universe

itself. Whatever the humans had done had gone spectacularly wrong. They would certainly be embarrassed enough not to repeat the experiment in a hurry.

“Take us out of here,” he ordered. “Set course for the base world.”

The maniple rotated around and dropped into warp drive, racing away from the black hole. Seconds later, the shockwave caught up with them and slammed them further forward, shaking the fleet of battleships as if they were leaves caught up in a tempest. Masji could do nothing, but pray as the battleship shook around him, praying that they would survive the forces the humans had unleashed...

Burton watched in horror as the black hole collapsed into...*something*, releasing a wave of energy that billowed out towards the human ships. Remote probes near the event horizon – near where the event horizon had been, he reminded himself – reported briefly on the sheer power of the energy wave, just before they vanished as the wave roared over them. Burton couldn't help, but be impressed, even though he knew there was enough power there to swallow the entire Confederation Navy. Part of his mind monitored the starships jumping out into hyperspace, fleeing the oncoming energy wave; the remainder just watched the wave as it advanced towards him. It was terrifying...and impressed.

“Our readings suggest that the greater part of the black hole’s mass was converted into energy,” the AIs said. They sounded unflustered, but then, they were not truly there. Their cube-shaped ship was merely a repository for their minds, allowing them to jump back to Calculus if disaster threatened to destroy their ship. Unless the energy wave reached their homeworld, the AIs were safe. “The wave may spread over at least fifty light years.”

“It's moving at FTL speeds,” Burton protested. When a star went supernova, it was possible to evacuate nearby worlds and move populations away from the expanding shell of radiation that would otherwise sterilise their worlds. It was even possible to build shields that would protect planets from strikes that would leave them as dead as the Ancient worlds. “We can't get anyone out of the way!”

“We have warned everyone within range of the wave’s projected expansion to begin evacuation procedures,” the AIs said. “The only ones who refused to believe us were the Haypah, who have one inhabited system within the wave’s path. They claim that it is a human plot to remove them from their world.”

“Tell them to get in touch with their own fleet,” Burton snarled. Millions of Haypah were about to die if the wave reached their world; hell, he wasn't sure what would happen when the wave brushed against a star. Would the star survive, or would it explode, adding its mass to the wave? If that was the case, the AIs projections of how far the wave could spread might be far too optimistic. He situation was completely unprecedented. “What about the *Scientist*?”

“The wave will wash over her in ninety-one seconds,” the sensor tech said. Burton knew what that meant before his subordinate could complete the sentence. “We are unable to reach her and start teleporting people off the ship before she will be destroyed.”

At least Buckley will go down with his ship and the remains of his experiment, Burton thought, savagely. Whatever Joe Buckley had had in mind, whatever gateway he had intended to open, his experiment had cost him his life. No starship in existence, not even a *Sparta*-class planetoid, could survive the torrent of energy. *Scientist* would be completely vaporised.

“Several of her crew have uploaded themselves into the datanet,” the AIs said. “They will continue to live on within us.”

“Maybe,” Burton said. He had often been told of the joys of electronic existence, but he still preferred his corporal life. He hated to leave behind anyone – it was a failure that would haunt him for the rest of his days – yet there was no choice. Sending the *Sparta* in to stand beside the *Scientist* would only result in two starships being destroyed. He linked into the command network and stared down at the ruins of the experiment. “Keep pulling us back; once the remainder of the ships are gone, take us into hyperspace.”

And hope that the AIs are right about just how far the wave is going to spread, he added silently, in the privacy of his own head.

Janine barely heard the panic behind her as the massive civilian ship turned and prepared for the jump into hyperspace. She was fixated on the wall of energy roaring towards them. It was expanding out from where the black hole had been, yet it seemed to reach from one end of the universe to the other, a wall of endless fire that would sweep away everything she had ever known and replace it with something new. It was something so powerful that it mortally threatened everyone, even the transcendent races, wherever those god-like beings dwelled.

“My God,” she said, speaking aloud for the benefit of the watching audience. “What have we done?”

Her life as a newshound had taken her into danger – indeed, it was part of the thrill for the audience, who shared her danger while remaining in total safety – yet she had never seen anything like this. Even during her visit to the war between two alien races, one that has fascinated most of the Confederation because it was a remainder of what humans had done to one another centuries ago, she had never been in any real danger. Both sides had known that harming a human citizen of the Confederation, even by accident, would result in serious consequences. Now...the wall of energy racing towards her knew nothing of her life and cared less. It would sweep over her ship and obliterate it – and her.

“Ah...ladies and gentlemen,” the ship’s commander said, “we are currently powering up our hyperspace drive. We should be able to escape before the wave reaches us.”

Janine found herself hoping that he was right, even as she kept her eyes on the wall of energy. Part of her mind, linked into the public sections of the starship’s computers, tracked other starships vanishing from existence, heading out in search of safer places to stay. She found herself wondering what would happen if the wave *didn’t* stop expanding. Had the human race triggered off a universal holocaust?

She caught sight of part of the live feed and fixed her attention upon it. The planetoid *Scientist* was on the verge of being consumed by the wave. She didn’t want to watch, but she

could feel the presence of all of her watchers, urging her on. The planetoid made no attempt to escape, for her drives were wrecked. Whatever had happened to spoil the experiment had taken out the drives as well.

There was nothing anyone could do, but watch.

The entity sat within the brig on the *Scientist*, biding its time. The research ship didn't really have a security staff, so some of the Captain's crew had spent ten minutes firing questions at it, questions the entity had simply ignored. It was a little surprised that the humans hadn't simply destroyed it, but perhaps they hadn't realised just what they were dealing with. Joe Buckley, the Joe Buckley they were blaming for the catastrophe expanding below them, had died a long time ago. The entity cared little if it lived or died, now that the gateway was open.

It leaned back in the cell, smiling a disturbing smile. It could hear the voices of its masters now, strange words that spoke to the universe within the spinning caldron of the black hole, words that bent the universe to a new shape. The human race had never really understood the sheer potential of the quantum foam, not in the way the Ancients had grasped it, so long ago. But even then, the Ancients had never realised the truth. The entity smiled again as the voices grew louder, the roaring torrent of energy reaching out to claim *Scientist* for its own. It had delivered the universe to its masters and now it could go on to its reward...

Burton saw it all as *Sparta* started to accelerate away from the expanding wavefront. The sheet of energy twisted around the massive research ship, reaching out to surround it...and then nothing. There was a very faint flicker, something suggesting that *something* had happened as the wave passed over *Scientist*, but what? There was so much energy flaring around that no one, not even the AIs, could say with any certainty just what had happened to the planetoid. If its quantum tap had blown, it might well have passed unnoticed amid such an energy storm.

"The ship may not have been destroyed," the AIs reported. They sounded perplexed. "There was a perverse dimensional twist where *Scientist* was just before the wave raced over her. She may have been transported elsewhere."

"But you don't know for sure," Burton said, with some irritation. "You have no idea where she might have gone, or where to recover her."

"No," the AIs agreed. "It may take years to unravel just what took place today."

Burton nodded, staring at the live feed from the starship's sensors. The wave of energy dominated the skies, towering above his ship and the handful of remaining research vessels within the affected area. It was so large as to be beyond comprehension, so powerful...he found himself staring in awe and shook his head. Perhaps the Confederation had needed the remainder that the universe wasn't always at its beck and call, or perhaps...

"Admiral," the helmsman said. "We are ready to enter hyperspace."

And hope that we can escape the wave, Burton thought. “Understood,” he said, aloud. The last of the research vessels had jumped out, leaving *Sparta* and the AI cube bearing sole witness to the incoming wave of energy. “Spin up the drives and...”

“Wait,” the AIs said. “Something is happening.”

Burton stared. In front of them, something completely impossible was occurring, right in front of his eyes. The torrent of energy was slowing, dropping down to sublight speeds and then halting in space. Seconds later, before he could form the words to ask questions, it started to recede, pouring back towards where the black hole had been. He found himself reminded of a bathtub draining out when the plug was removed, the water spiralling down into the pipe and out of the bath. The universe itself seemed to hesitate, right on the brink of...*something*...and then the remaining energy drained away, leaving an object where the black hole had been. The sensors seemed to be having problems coming to grips with its nature, as if it wasn't entirely part of the mundane universe.

“That’s...that’s impossible,” he heard the sensor tech muttering. Burton couldn't blame him; indeed, he completely understood. Whatever had happened to Buckley’s experiment, it would certainly encourage new scientific research, starting with the mystery of what gateway Buckley had intended to open. He focused the ship’s sensors on the object floating where the black hole had been and frowned. Was that the gateway Buckley had spoken of?
“Admiral...”

“I want a full analysis,” Burton ordered. “Is that the remains of the black hole?”

“It would seem so,” the AIs said. “We are unable, however, to determine what it actually is, or what it is doing. It appears to exist in multiple planes of existence simultaneously, making it impossible to get an accurate read on its dimensions or capabilities. It is also, we believe, firmly embedded in the quantum foam.”

There was a pause. “It may also be linked to multiple other dimensions,” the AIs added. “Although the existence of such dimensions has been theorised for years, we have never been able to prove their existence or gain access to them. In theory, these universes would not be alternate realities – ones where a choice in our universe was made differently there - but ones where the laws of existence would be very different. One theory states that the quantum foam exists, in part, to keep such universes separate from our own.”

Burton frowned. “If that thing is a gateway,” he said. “What is going to come out?”

“Unknown,” the AIs said. “We have been unable to gain an accurate reading on the internal quantum state within the object. We do not know what might be able to survive within the twisted states of existence, let alone make it through to the other side...if there is another side. It is possible that Buckley’s mention of a gateway was intended to confuse us, rather than be a genuine explanation. It is simply impossible to be sure.”

Burton sighed and linked back into the vessel’s command network. “Link up with the other ships that escaped the black hole’s collapse and confirm that they’re all alive and intact,” he ordered. “If they require assistance, divert some of the cruisers towards offering assistance and whatever else they require.”

He shook his head as his crew leapt to obey; glad of clear and understandable orders after everything they had been through. That left their commander sitting in the command chair, uncertain of what to do. He had to report to Confederation Navy HQ, but what could he tell them? They would have seen the direct data link from the disaster; by now, he was sure, the entire population would be arguing about what to do. It might take weeks, or months, before consensus would emerge.

“Gravity pulse,” the AIs said, suddenly. “Something is emerging from the gateway.”

Burton blinked. “Is it a ship?”

“We are unsure,” the AIs said. There was a long pause as a new icon flared to life on the display. “We do not know what it is.” A second contact, followed by a third and a fourth, appeared in front of him. “They are...extremely hard for our sensors to understand. They are currently spiralling out from the gateway.”

Burton studied them through the starship’s sensors. The four...objects were odd, all right; no two sensor readings seemed to agree. Any attempt to pin them down to one answer seemed doomed to fail. Their very nature seemed to be completely incomprehensible, as was their purpose – or perhaps not. It dawned on him, slowly, that they could be the vanguard of an invasion force.

“Get me a direct link to Confederation HQ,” he ordered, finally. The emergency protocols, he decided, definitely applied in this situation. “We need to assemble the Security Council.”

On the display, the four objects seemed to grow larger. If they were aware of the *Sparta*’s presence, they gave no sign. There was no rational base for his feelings, yet somehow they seemed ominous to him. The Confederation, thanks to Joe Buckley, might be in real trouble.

“Yes, sir,” the tech said. “The Security Council is being summoned now.”

Chapter Seven

In the days before replicators and nanomachines, government had been about the distribution of resources, a truth that had held truth from the headman of a primitive village to the most modern and advanced democracy. Government could never create, only take and redistribute; governments that tried to create, like communist states, only discovered that their industrial base eroded away. The development of a post-scarcity society had changed all that, reshaping the very face of human government, for when a person could have almost anything they wanted, almost instantly, there was no need for government. There was no need to take resources from one person and give them to another.

The early days of the Confederation had witnessed the former governments of human space dying away, to be replaced by a direct democracy overseen by a cluster of dedicated RIs. Each adult citizen of the Confederation – the age of maturity was set at twenty, although some of the older citizens grumbled that it should be at least fifty years old – was given one vote, which they could cast in local and Confederation-wide elections. They could vote for anything, provided only that it remained within the bounds of the Confederation Constitution, which required a supermajority to change. The Confederation believed, fundamentally, in the right of its people to rule their own affairs. They *were* government.

Even so, the system had one great drawback; it was impossible to come to a decision quickly, whatever the situation. There were trillions of humans living within the Confederation, each one with an opinion; even if only a tenth of the population was interested in any given situation, it would be debated endlessly before taking a vote and coming to a final decision. The designers of the Confederation had, therefore, taken the precaution of creating a Security Council that would have wide powers to act in an emergency, although they would be overseen by their own citizens. It was a compromise that, in typical political fashion, pleased no one. Until the human race managed to create a mass mind or some other shared awareness, however, it was the best they could do.

Admiral Burton's image materialised in the chamber and he looked around, waiting for the other members of the Security Council to appear. They were scattered all over the Confederation, on planets and worlds and ships; they only ever met through the most secure communications interface known to exist. The AIs had designed the virtual chamber and sworn that nothing short of a transcendent race - whose abilities would defy logic and reason - would be able to spy on the conversation. Burton hoped that they were right. The room itself looked unimpressive – a simple meeting room – yet it might be the most important location within the Confederation.

One by one, the other members of the Council materialised as they linked into the network, sending their thoughts into the virtual chamber. Chairperson Mariko Waianae, representing the Pureblood Humans, took the chair at the head of the table. By tradition, the Security Council's Chair always went to a pureblood or baseline human, although her voice was equal to every other voice in the council. Representative Singh, representing the Enhanced Humans and Representative Carolynn, representing the Evolved Humans, materialised together. Carolynn's appearance was remarkable; she was one of the mermaid subset of humanity and looked like a normal woman on top and a fish below. Her waist tapered away into a fishy tail, presenting the odd impression of a mermaid standing on her tail.

Seconds later, Representative Chen, representing the Electronic Humans, shimmered into existence. Of all of them, he was the only one who could be said to be truly present, for Electronic Humans swam through the datanet and lived in virtual worlds. Behind him, Representative Caprice of the Telepaths appeared, her face creased with worry and concern. The Telepaths would have known that something had gone badly wrong. Finally, Doctor Bernard of the Scientists Guild, Administrator Prabhu of Confederation Intelligence and Grand Admiral Mark Webster, the commanding officer of the Confederation Navy appeared in the chamber, followed by the blonde female image that represented the AIs.

Burton braced himself as the chamber's security systems activated, sealing it off from the remainder of the datanet. Each of the representatives represented one subset of humanity, with two exceptions. The Pastorals, who had gone back to live in the style of humanity's forefathers and the Dolphins, the creatures humanity had uplifted into sentience. They had thanked humanity for the gift of understanding and had then insisted on being distributed across humanity's settled worlds and allowed to live in the waters, away from the parent race. No one was quite sure why, but the commonly believed theory was that the Dolphins just wanted to have fun and found the human race to be way too serious about life.

"This session of the Confederation Security Council is now called to order," Mariko said. Her voice resounded in the chamber, tinted with an odd accent. Like most extreme purebloods, she had had her face reworked to look like the classical Japanese ideal, almost like a china doll. "Admiral Burton, you may begin."

Burton took a breath. Like every other officer who rose to the rank of Admiral, he had the right to summon a meeting of the Security Council, yet it was a right he had never invoked in the past – indeed, it was rarely invoked at all. His history downloads had warned that the last time it had been invoked by an officer in the Confederation Navy had been during a war between two alien races which might have spread into human territory. The decision, inevitable in hindsight, had been to keep an eye on the situation and not intervene unless human interests became directly involved. There had been no need to reassess the situation, for the war had ended remarkably quickly.

"As you will have been briefed," he said, "Professor Buckley's experiment went badly wrong. Instead of tapping into the power of a black hole, the experiment somehow forced the black hole into a new configuration, one that he called a gateway. The results of this have been disastrous."

He paused, long enough to allow them to access the download he'd placed within the chamber's secure datanet matrix. The experiment had had far worse consequences than he'd realised when he'd called the meeting, including somehow triggering off seven supernovas and causing considerable damage to every outpost and settlement within two hundred light years of the black hole. At least the habitats, where most of the human race lived these days, and the starships had been relatively safe.

"The experiment disrupted local space in a fashion we do not entirely understand," he said. "We know that many stars were disrupted by the experiment and seven actually went supernova, including four stars that should not have been *able* to go supernova. The death toll, so far, is around seventeen billion lives from five different races. Indeed, every star that went supernova had at least a billion lives living in settlements orbiting the star."

“A political disaster,” Representative Chen grated. He sounded disturbed by the whole affair, even though many Electronic Humans believed that the entire human race should join them within the matrix and leave the physical world behind. Burton had never subscribed to that belief, if only because it would be chillingly easy for someone to switch off the power and destroy humanity’s collective mind. “We will certainly be accused of having committed such acts on purpose.”

“Perhaps,” Mariko said, “but that is very much a lesser priority at the moment.”

Burton nodded. “Thank you,” he said, sincerely. “Just after the black hole transmuted itself into the gateway, we detected four...objects emerging from the gateway and spreading out in a loose orbit around the gateway. We are unable to obtain useful data on them; indeed, we cannot even tell if they are ships or something else, something alien. They are clearly the product of a technology significantly different to our own.”

He sent a mental command into the chamber’s processor and displayed an image in front of them, relayed from one of the cruisers shadowing the object. It was a grey sphere – even its size or mass was impossible to determine – that seemed to somehow effortlessly travel at FTL speeds, even within normal space. It ignored the cruiser or the probes that tried to slip closer to it, either unaware of their presence or simply uncaring. Burton couldn't have said how he knew – he’d seen starships from races who thought very differently to their human counterparts – yet he was sure that there was something ominous about the object. Merely looking at it sent a shiver down his spine, for it was totally outside his experience. That, too, was a new experience.

Mariko put their thoughts into words. “What *is* it?”

“We do not know,” the AIs said. Their frustration was clear to see, even though their blonde representative showed little sign of emotion. “We have been studying the objects since they emerged from the gateway and we have very little to show for our efforts. Every sensor sweep reveals a different answer; we have pegged them as having the mass of a planet and a really tiny level of mass, barely enough to make a dent in the local gravity field. We have been unable to detect the existence of a warp field or a gravimetric field; indeed, we are unable to determine how they are propelled through space.”

They paused, considering their next words. “We have conducted the most intrusive sensor probes we could at long range,” they added. “We are unsure if they are even aware of our sensor sweeps and a technology equal to ours would certainly be aware of them. We suggest that more data be obtained.”

“Thank you very much,” Singh muttered. “I would never have thought of that.”

Burton kept his own expression under control. The Enhanced Humans, products of experiments into genetically modifying and enhancing humans, tended to dislike the concept of AIs in general, even though they used RIs themselves in their daily work. They believed that the path to true advancement lay through understanding, unlocking and exploiting the capabilities of the human mind. It was an attitude that had caused several wars before the Confederation had been established, where their easy assumption of superiority had irked the remainder of humanity. It had taken centuries, even after the Confederation had been established, for the wounds caused by the wars to heal.

“As yet, there are only four of them,” Webster said. The titular Head of the Confederation Navy brought them all back to the important subject. “How many others are coming?”

Chen blinked. “You mean it could be a gateway for an invasion force?”

“It is possible,” Webster said. He ticked off points on his fingers as he spoke. “One; Joe Buckley deliberately sabotaged his own experiment. Two; the science behind the experiment came from an alien world; an alien world killed billions of years ago by an unknown force. Three; Buckley himself, once it is too late, refers to it as a gateway. Four; Buckley also uploads a chaos program into the *Scientist’s* computers, ensuring that the starship is overwhelmed and either destroyed or captured by the enemy.”

He gazed around the table. “None of those points suggest that whoever is behind this has a peaceful motive in mind,” he concluded. “It is quite possible that Buckley, deliberately or otherwise, opened up a gateway to allow a hostile force access to our universe. We must proceed on that assumption.”

There was a long silence. The Confederation had been the preeminent power in the Milky Way for so long that it was hard to imagine that they were under threat. A single squadron of Confederation Navy starships could have taken on the fleets from humanity’s past empires, republics and federations and bested them all in mortal combat. The remainder of the races within the galaxy were friendly, unconcerned with humanity or posed no threat to the human race. The Haypah could rant and rave as long as they liked, but the truth was that their entire empire could be destroyed in an afternoon by the Confederation Navy and they knew it.

Physical security hadn't stopped humans worrying about what they might encounter in the future, Burton knew; he'd seen the contingency plans when he'd been promoted to Admiral. It was possible that some perverted version of the AIs might have arisen in a far corner of the galaxy – or another galaxy – and set out to exterminate all mortal life. There was the Unseen, still a mystery after nearly a thousand years; perhaps they, one day, would seek to confront humanity again. And then there was the remote possibility of an angered transcendent race or a primitive race getting their hands on advanced technology from a race that had vanished long ago. No one, however, had given any serious thought to the possibility of an invasion from another dimension...if that was what they were facing. There were so many unknowns that the AIs were right. Further data would have to be obtained, regardless of the risks.

“There is another issue,” Caprice said. Burton glanced over at the telepath in surprise. It was rare for the telepaths to offer any opinion on matters outside their own field. “We have been attempting to monitor the quantum foam since the experiment went badly wrong. It is our belief that the quantum foam may have been permanently altered by the experiment. This may explain the supernovas – the sections of the quantum foam surrounding them were rewritten to...order them to explode.”

She shivered, visibly. “The effects could soon be far more disastrous than a handful of supernovas and four unknown ships,” she added. “We could be looking at the complete collapse of reality as we know it.”

Burton felt, oddly, as if someone had just walked over his grave. Back before Joe Buckley had been given the go-ahead to launch his experiment, he had attended a confidential briefing

from the Confederation Navy Weapons Design Unit, a task force everyone else called the Mad Scientists Division. The mad scientists had claimed that while the current generation of weaponry had reached its limit, there was a whole new field of study opening, centred on making tiny modifications to the quantum foam. If the Confederation could learn how to rewrite the quantum foam at will, the possibilities would be endless. An enemy fleet, for example, could be literally rewritten out of existence. Burton had found the whole concept horrifying, yet in the right hands it had a certain tantalising temptation. If the Confederation had such technology, it would become invincible.

Chen snorted. "I sincerely doubt that reality is that fragile," he said. "We were told that there were limiting effects that would prevent the effect from spreading too far."

"Using the equations that Joe Buckley supplied," the AIs injected. "Our study of the equations only confirmed their value, which proved that Buckley was quite successful in pulling the wool over our eyes. He did not deceive us; he merely produced...incomplete equations. It may take years to work out exactly what happened down inside the black hole."

"None of which is important at the moment," Webster said. "We may be facing an invasion. I request permission to declare a state of emergency and bring the Confederation Navy to full alert."

Burton saw the glances exchanged between the councillors and winced inwardly, wondering just what they would decide. The Confederation Navy had plenty of starships – starships, even planetoids, were cheap – but there was always a shortage of personnel. Declaring a state of emergency would allow the Confederation Navy to begin calling up reserves and activating starships that had been placed in storage, rapidly expanding the navy's strength. It would also be very unpopular in certain quarters.

The brief vote was taken quickly. "Permission granted," Mariko said, putting the decision into words. "How do you intend to proceed from here?"

"We intend to make a close approach to one of the objects and to attempt to make contact," Burton said. "We may be able to obtain more accurate data at close range."

"A question," Singh said. "Is it not possible that they are deliberately spoofing your sensor probes?"

It was the AIs who answered. "It is possible, at least in theory, but we should be able to detect any such deception," they said. "The results would be fuzzy; here, the results are clear, they're just different every time. It is possible that they are changing their internal quantum structure regularly, yet that suggests a technological base far superior to anything we have. We need more information. The only other option is to wait and see what happens."

The mermaid flicked her tail. "Do we actually *know* that they are hostile?" Carolynn asked. "They may be so different to us that the whole concept of war is meaningless to them. Besides...what have they done to us? It is possible that it was Buckley alone who caused the gateway to open. They may merely be taking advantage of his work."

“There is no way to know for sure,” Webster said, “but it would be unwise to take chances. We will certainly attempt to make peaceful contact, yet we must also prepare for a hostile encounter, perhaps even an outright invasion.”

Burton nodded. Centuries ago, the human race had made contact with the Jin, a race that was one mind in billions of bodies. The Jin, who hadn't realised that humans were individuals, had captured, killed and dissected a number of humans, believing that they were doing nothing more than cutting off a skin cell. They hadn't been able to understand that their actions had been hostile, the cause of a brief war until the truth had been discovered and reparations made. It was possible that the newcomers were friendly...

He looked up at the image of the objects and shook his head. Maybe they were friends, but somehow he doubted it. The objects just sent chills down his spine.

Chapter Eight

“Can you read anything from the newcomers?”

Aisyaj looked up in some annoyance. The damage to the enhancers was considerably greater than she had realised – she had been lucky not to have suffered a feedback loop when she had tried to scan Joe Buckley, which would have caused brain damage – and quite beyond her ability to fix. The *Rowan*, her personal starship, had the latest in Confederation-grade self-repair functions, but the enhancers would need to be pulled out and completely replaced. It wasn't a problem to obtain new enhancers, yet it was a major nuisance. The last thing she wanted was the AIs nagging her to use her power again.

“I can barely read anything outside the hull,” she snapped, irritated. Without the enhancers, her range was considerably limited, even without the headache pounding away in her skull. She could send telepathic messages to other telepaths, but not to anyone without telepathy. “I certainly cannot look out over two light years to sense the newcomers.”

She pulled herself to her feet, replaced the multitool in her belt and walked back towards the cockpit. The starship was floating four light years from where the black hole had been, outside the exclusion zone declared by the Confederation Navy. A dozen other human starships were keeping station with her, watching with passive sensors as the newcomers spiralled out from the gateway, unaware or unheeding of the human presence. The Confederation Navy had taken over control and was ordering starships to keep their distance.

“Run a full systems check,” she ordered the vessel’s computer. “Can we enter hyperspace?”

The AI image materialised beside her. “Please consider attempting to scan the newcomers,” they said. “We need to know if they are linked to the quantum foam.”

“Everything is linked to the quantum foam,” Aisyaj reminded them. It was odd for the AIs to forget anything, unless they were deliberately trying to manipulate her. It was something of a sore spot for them; they could predict what vast numbers of humans would do with frightening accuracy, but it was far harder to predict what individuals would do. Some humans were deliberately irrational when dealing with the AIs, if only to remind them that they didn't know everything. “The newcomers will be linked as well.”

“Perhaps,” the AIs said. “Their behaviour, though, is...odd. Please will you sense the quantum foam before you depart to your homeworld?”

Aisyaj scowled. It was useless trying to argue with the AIs, for they had more persistence than a child or a would-be lover. Ordering the ship’s computer to begin powering up the hyperdrive, she concentrated, sinking deep within herself to reach out and feel the quantum foam. As always, just sensing the very base of existence sent a thrill down her spine, proof positive that everything was linked together at some level. The telepathic vision of the universe, one where one day every race would be linked through telepathy, had to be accurate.

She reached out and gasped. There was a disruption within the quantum foam, something that was altering the very nature of reality. She tried to study it, to understand what was causing it, yet it was slippery, impossible to grasp. The whole nature of reality was being

rewritten and she couldn't even sense the cause! She tried to look closer, only to find herself shoved out of the quantum foam and back into her body. The reassuring solidity of the starship welcomed her home.

"They're altering the quantum foam," she gasped. It was suddenly so hard to speak. "I'll..."

She focused her mind. "Get us out of here," she ordered. She needed to put some distance between herself and the unknown objects. The hissing in her brain was growing louder. "We'll talk later."

A second later, the starship's hyperdrive activated, taking her back home.

Captain Gently smiled to himself as the *Hamilton* altered course, coming in towards the mysterious alien object. He knew that he had been offered promotion to Admiral and command of one of the massive planetoids that served as flagships for the Confederation Navy, but he had chosen to reject it and remain with the *Hamilton*. The *Astra*-class cruisers were the backbone of the Confederation Navy, combining enough firepower to cow even the Haypah with enough speed to outrun anything that could outgun them. His ship was his pride and joy and he was determined that, if they ever managed to force a promotion on him, they would have to pry him out of the vessel with crowbars.

Despite the dangers, the mission excited him, for it was a chance to brush the unknown. He'd taken his ship on scouting missions before, yet they had never found anything truly new. They'd located several other Earth-like worlds and hints that there had been another alien race active within the sector, but that was hardly *new*. The alien object up ahead was fascinating, something that no one had ever seen before...and it was all his. Captain Gently and the *Hamilton* would be the names written down in the history books.

He frowned as he studied the tactical situation, running possibilities through his head. Perversely, the alien object was travelling at only a few hundred times the speed of light, yet intercepting it would be tricky. *Hamilton* could match the object's speed using her warp drive, yet they would have to stress the warp drive in order to get a good look at the alien object, while hyperdrive would leave them overshooting the alien by thousands of light years. It was a unique tactical puzzle; he could have fired on the object, even under such odd conditions, but matching course and speed would be tricky.

"We're coming into active sensor range now," the sensor officer said. *Hamilton* had only seven crewmen under normal circumstances, a reflection of the constant shortage of personnel, but the Confederation Navy had supplied five other crewmen to assist in monitoring the take from the starship's sensors. Personally, Gently suspected that they just wanted to feel the excitement of making the first close approach to the alien object, yet it hardly mattered. "I confirm the absence of any warp field."

Gently grinned, mischievously. "I want one," he said. A starship using warp drive could be tracked at a considerable distance through its warp signature, even on passive sensors. "Do you have any idea at all how their drive works?"

"No, Captain," the sensor tech said. "As far as I can tell, they don't *have* a drive."

He sounded as if he expected the Captain to be angry at him and Gently didn't blame him. It was simply impossible to travel faster than light in normal space, unless one used a warp drive; the laws of nature didn't allow it. His ship's warp bubble allowed them to keep pace with the alien object, but if the bubble failed, they would instantly fall back to sublight speeds. If the alien drive could propel them at warp speeds without a warp drive, it would revolutionise the face of war – again.

“They may be using something like the Wanderer Drive,” the helmsman suggested. “We never figured out how their drive worked either.”

“True,” Gently agreed. That entry in the history books was looking more and more impressive every second. “Or perhaps it's something that we have never encountered before.”

Two hundred years ago, a massive starship – larger than anything the Confederation had ever designed or built – had appeared within Confederation space. The Wanderers – as they had called themselves – had made contact with the Confederation and explained that they were on a permanent cruise through the universe, collecting data on every living race. They had stayed in the Confederation for two years, exchanging data with the human race, before departing again for parts unknown. Their final gift had been a set of star charts that no one had been able to place, suggesting that the Wanderers had originated from somewhere so far away that not even the Milky Way galaxy was easily noticeable. Their drive system had been the one thing they refused to discuss and, even now, no one understood how it had worked.

He slipped his mind back into the computers and studied the sensor readings. Even this close to the alien object, none of the readings made sense; they just kept changing, as if the object existed in multiple different configurations at the same time. It's mass seemed to change rapidly, almost randomly, although he knew that any pattern seemed random without a large enough sample. It possessed no gravity field; indeed, even simple warp-radar refused to work properly. It was quite possible, he realised, that the object would find a configuration his sensors would refuse to register and literally vanish from sight.

“Prepare to launch the probes,” he ordered. The warp-capable probes would get far closer to the object than the *Hamilton*. His first priority was the safety of his ship and crew, after all. “Relay the live feed through my station.”

The starship shivered as it launched the first three probes towards the alien object. If the alien object was aware of their presence, it gave no sign; it didn't attempt to avoid the probes or escape contact. Gently frowned, puzzled; it seemed impossible to imagine that they hadn't realised that the Confederation ship was following them. The *Hamilton* was making no attempt to hide.

“Live feed coming through, Captain,” the sensor tech said. “We're...ah...we're picking up conflicting readings.”

Gently plunged his mind into the computer network and studied the live feed. Up close, the alien object was a smooth gray orb...no, it wasn't; it was moving. He peered closer and saw strange patterns moving over the sphere, somehow tantalisingly meaningful, as if he had seen something like them before. It seemed hard to understand, yet...were there snakes moving

over the sphere? It seemed to lead his mind out into directions no one had even believed possible, a right angle to reality itself...

An alarm sounded in his mind, but by then it was far too late.

The crew of the *Hamilton* had all been looking through the probes and felt their minds yanked out of their bodies by the alien object, their brain patterns warped and shifted by an outside influence. Emergency systems within the ship's RI realised that the entire ship was being subverted – the influence reached right into the starship's control systems – and triggered the emergency protocols. Microseconds after the Captain lost his mind, the containment fields surrounding the vessel's antimatter pods were deactivated and the starship vanished in a ball of fire.

“What the hell was that?”

Admiral Burton had been following events from the *Sparta*, half a light year away from the alien object and the ships trailing it. One moment, the *Hamilton* had been under some kind of attack; the next, the starship's self-destruct had been triggered and it had been destroyed. The data feed from the starship had been interrupted seconds before it had died, leaving the cause of its destruction a mystery.

He looked over towards the AI image. “Were they attacked?”

The AIs said nothing for a long moment. “We believe so,” they said, finally. “The alien object was clearly able to somehow subvert the probe and then attack the ship's defences directly. The aliens were on the verge of taking over when the emergency systems activated and destroyed the ship.”

“Preventing it from falling into enemy hands,” Burton said, in relief. Losing *Scientist* was bad enough, but *Hamilton* had been a first-rate cruiser, with enough weaponry to lay waste to an entire star cluster. It would have given the enemy too much insight into just how human weapons worked if they had taken the ship intact, let alone the contents of the database. There was too much data on humanity, to say nothing of the rest of the galaxy, stored within the database to risk it falling into enemy hands. “What are they doing?”

“They're just continuing on their course,” the tactical officer said. “They're just circling the gateway.”

Burton scowled. If destroying the *Hamilton* had been a hostile act, he could have legitimately have engaged and destroyed the spheres, but there was a question mark over if it had been an intentional attack. He looked down at the feed from his virtual vision and realised that the Security Council was still arguing over that very question. It was quite possible that the aliens were so alien that even indirect contact produced trauma in humanity, although that was rare. The only other incident he could remember of anything similar had been an encounter with an odd alien artefact, one built for a race very different to humanity. Any human who went inside was unable to comprehend its nature and would eventually be driven mad.

A new icon appeared in his vision, a direct link to the Security Council. “This is Mariko,” a voice said, in his mind. “You are cleared to engage the enemy.”

Burton nodded in relief. At least they’d had a decision. The firing sequence had already been programmed into the planetoid; all he had to do was insert his command codes and unleash enough firepower to destroy several planets. He accessed the firing system and studied the targets quickly, locking the planetoid’s weapons on the alien object. If it was the vanguard of an invading fleet, it was about to discover that the Confederation could take care of itself.

“Fire,” he ordered.

The planetoid opened fire. Hyper-missiles raced through hyperspace, carrying compressed antimatter warheads to their targets; warp missiles spread through normal space, using their warp fields to suck up energy from local space and compress it down into deadly weapons. Gravity beam twisted normal space around the object, trying to crush it out of existence; fission bursts tried to start a reaction that would rip it apart. The very fabric of space itself seemed to shudder under the sheer volley of unleashed firepower. Burton watched in awe as the detonations swallowed the entire alien object, just before they faded away, revealing that the object was still intact. It continued on its course, untroubled by the bombardment; it hadn’t even bothered to return fire.

“Reload tubes,” Burton ordered, considering his options. He could fire a second spread of missiles, but there was no reason to believe that the second spread would fare any better than the first. He could take the planetoid into energy range and bombard the alien object at close range, yet...how could he be sure that the *Sparta* couldn’t be destroyed as easily as the *Hamilton*? He looked over towards the AI representation. “Analysis?”

“We believe that the alien object exists in multiple dimensions,” the AIs reported. They sounded almost as stunned as Burton felt. The sheer firepower he had unleashed was enough to cow most of the galaxy into playing nice. Now there was a new threat, one apparently untroubled by the worst humanity could unleash. There were other weapons, more feared and dangerous, yet using those publically was frowned upon. “Our weapons are simply unable to touch its core.”

“Fine,” Burton snarled. “How do I hit those...multiple dimensions?”

“Unknown,” the AIs said, slowly. “Given time, it may be possible to develop weapons capable of destroying the alien objects, but it will require considerable research. The alien objects we can see may be merely the tip of the iceberg, something stretched *into* our universe from somewhere else. They may be far larger than we can appreciate.”

Burton took a breath. Back in the Security Council chamber, he could hear their debate...and fear. Whatever they were dealing with was powerful, dangerous and apparently hostile.

“Very well,” he said. He looked over at the communications officer. “I want you to send out a signal. The entire area for twenty light years away from the black hole is to be quarantined; all ships, regardless of their origin, are to be turned away. No one is to come near the alien objects.”

“A wise decision,” the AIs said. “And what will you do when they decide they want to come out?”

Burton nodded. If the gateway was housing an invasion force, what he was doing was the loose equivalent of allowing the enemy to open a bridgehead unmolested on friendly territory, something that many human forces had come to regret. Even so, unless they could develop the kind of weapons systems required to take on and destroy the alien objects, any ship he sent near the gateway might become nothing more than cannon fodder. It was galling to admit that the Confederation Navy was completely outmatched, but for the moment it was true and it had to be faced squarely. There was no point in denying reality.

“I don't know,” he admitted. “I just don't know.”

Janine had wanted to observe the encounter mission from the *Hamilton*, but the Confederation Navy had refused permission for a civilian to travel on the ship, accidentally saving her life. She had watched in horror as the cruiser exploded, followed by the brief bombardment of the alien sphere and the failure of almost every weapon designed by humanity to destroy the sphere. Through her eyes, millions of people watched as humanity's claim to supremacy faded away.

She accessed the live feed from the ship's sensors, but they couldn't tell her very much, nothing that she hadn't already realised. The starship itself was turning away from the outer zone and heading back into the Confederation, despite protests from a number of passengers, who wanted to see what happened when the rest of the Confederation Navy arrived. Janine understood their feelings, yet for the first time in her life she was really scared. If the aliens could laugh at the worst humanity could throw at them...what did it mean for the future?

“We will be jumping into hyperspace in twenty minutes,” the Captain said, as if in answer to her question. “When we arrive at Greenland, those of you who wish to return to the quarantine zone can book passage on smaller vessels.”

And that, she knew, was no answer at all.

Chapter Nine

Four hundred years ago, a Confederation Navy scout craft had discovered a world with an unusual atmospheric condition, one that tinted the sky green. A handful of research scientists had landed on the planet and, after a year of research, had confirmed that the planet was not only habitable, but almost perfect for humanity. The curious green tint that pervaded everywhere only added a certain spice to the planet's existence. Settlement had begun within the year and, after a decade, Greenland possessed the hundred thousand residents necessary to convert it into a Confederation Voting District. A hundred years of steady population growth followed, after which expansion tapered off slowly, bringing the planet in line with the remainder of the Confederation. The locals built a Ring surrounding their planet – like most Confederation worlds, the majority of the population lived in space rather than on the ground – and boasted of their world to anyone who would listen.

Aisyaj had moved to Greenland forty years ago, after an episode in her life that had ended badly, one that even her telepathy had been unable to predict or avert. It suited her to live on the planet's surface, well away from most of the human population, allowing her a kind of solitude that she could only otherwise get in deep space. The home she'd had constructed on the planet's surface served as her refuge from the Confederation and the responsibilities that came with being a telepath, while – thanks to the AIs – she was linked into the datanet and could obtain almost anything she wanted from the planet's orbital industries. It was a place she went to when she wanted to be alone.

She materialised in the centre of her living room and smiled as the lights clicked on automatically. The teleport dampeners had been turned off when she'd inserted her code into the network, but the house computer – she had deliberately chosen the stupidest model she could, after dealing with the AIs for most of her life – wasn't smart enough to draw the line between her using her codes and her intention of teleporting home. The teleport field faded away, leaving her sucking in the warm air of her homeworld. The denizens of hundreds of thousands of space habitats might have disagreed with her, but there was nothing like breathing in the natural air of a living planet. In her home, she was surrounded by life itself. No space habitat could boast of that, apart from the biological habitats produced by some of the odder alien races. They grew their living space from a single seed.

“Computer,” she said. She had never bothered to give the house computer a name. “Do I have any mail in my inbox?”

“Affirmative,” the computer said, as she shucked off her clothes and headed towards the bathtub. A proper bath was a pleasure she had denied herself for far too long. “You have one thousand, six hundred and four messages within your inbox.”

Aisyaj snorted. “How many of them are marked as spam?”

“Seven hundred and forty are marked as spam,” the computer said. “Do you wish to delete them?”

She took a moment to consider it. The problem with the datanet was that anyone could send a message to anyone – or everyone. It was easy for someone who had produced a new product, or merely had a political platform they wished to convince others to listen to, to send a message to everyone in the Confederation. By law, all such messages had to be marked as

such so that the recipients could filter them out, but many liked to skim through the messages to see if there was anything interesting or new. Fashions changed so quickly in the Confederation, but then...she had never been too concerned with fashion.

“Yes,” she ordered. “Give me a breakdown on the rest.”

“Seventy-nine are from people in your contacts list,” the computer said, as she checked her appearance in front of the mirror. Her dark eyes seemed to wink back at her as her image rotated, showing her body from all angles. Her appearance mattered little to her, but she knew that people reacted better to someone who looked tidy and presentable. “Three hundred and seventeen are from the media, requesting interviews concerning the Buckley Experiment and its results. Three are from people on your blocked list. The remainder are from new senders.”

Aisyaj shook her head. “Delete the ones from the blocked list,” she ordered. She had only blocked seven people, all former boyfriends. She didn’t want to talk to them again unless there was no other choice. “In fact, delete all the ones from the media as well. I don’t want to talk to them.”

“Messages deleted,” the computer informed her. “Do you wish to review the remaining messages?”

Aisyaj checked the bathtub, which was now full of bubbling hot water. “Not at present,” she said, as she lowered herself into the water. It was always scalding hot at first, but once she got used to the heat, she started to relax as the water bubbled against her body. It helped her to relax and there were times when she had fallen asleep in the bath. The safety fields around the bathtub would prevent her from drowning...although, coming to think of it, the enrichments sequenced into her body would allow her to breath water. “Just store them until I have a chance to review them.”

She closed her eyes as the warmth started to soak into her body, considering everything that had happened over the past day. Her head, thankfully, felt better, even if she didn’t feel up to using her telepathy over long distance. Telepathy laughed at the laws of science as humanity knew them – it was quite possible to chat to another telepath on the other side of the galaxy – yet it was a strain, even though theory suggested that it was a strain only because the telepaths were aware of the distance. It wasn’t worth getting a memory edit to see if it worked better without that awareness.

As soon as she’d brought the ship into orbit, she’d ordered up replacement components from the local industrial node and a handful of drones to fit them into the ship. The RIs governing the industrial complex would handle fitting them into her ship, although the truth was that she had no idea what she was going to do afterwards. The Confederation Navy would be dealing with the aftermath of the Buckley Experiment, but they might need a telepath and, like it or not, she was on the list of telepaths who could work with the Navy. Even so, she had no idea how they might proceed.

She shivered, despite the warmth floating through her body. The memory of the altered quantum foam, of the disruptions to local space and the collapsed black hole, were terrifying, all the more so because they portended an encounter with something far more powerful than the Confederation. She knew about the encounter with the Wanderers, or the handful of

contacts individual humans had had with transcendent races, yet...this was something different. And why, she asked herself, had she been unable to read Professor Buckley? She should have had no problem in making contact with him, even if she had been unable to read his thoughts. What did it all mean?

With that thought, she allowed herself to drift off to sleep.

The Mushroom City – so called because it was shaped like a giant mushroom – was the single largest city on Greenland, with a population of ten thousand humans. Actually, most of the humans lived away from the city – either on the Ring or in small homes scattered across the planet's surface – and used teleports or shuttles to visit the city whenever they felt the urge. The handful of people who remained in the city for most of their lives were considered, by the rest of the population, to be a little weird or addicted to VR simulations. VR simulations, which could be anything from a return to childhood to the most extreme sexual situation possible, were distracting, so distracting that a person wrapped up in one wouldn't notice where they were in real life.

Darla materialised in the chamber and looked around, hunting for the other cultists. The High Priestess of the Ancient Cult had told them that tonight was going to be a special night, one where those who truly believed in the Ancients would be separated from those who were merely entertaining themselves. Darla, who was thirty years old and had never had anything to believe in before, believed passionately in the Ancients. How many others truly believed was an open question. Cults swept through the Confederation like wildfire, converting millions of people to their cause before dying away and being replaced by the next fad. Darla had followed seven different religions before stumbling across the Ancient Cult and meeting the High Priestess herself. Her conversion had been immediate.

Even so, they had done very little, certainly nothing extreme like the Flesh-Eaters or the Celibate Order of the Golden Sheep. Each month, they had met together on a day honoured by the Ancients and taken part in a ritual, which was always followed by a massive orgy. The ritual had produced nothing so far, yet Darla had been convinced that they were on the verge of a breakthrough every time. Perhaps this time, if the unbelievers stayed away, would be the time when the Ancients returned to the universe to judge the human race, inviting a select few to join them in their paradise.

She looked over at the statue mounted in the centre of the room and smiled to herself. The unbelievers called it an ugly pseudo-octopus, a many-eyed creature with an indeterminate number of tentacles, but to her it was a symbol of what the Ancients had believed in. It awaited everyone, seeming to offer a promise of knowledge and power to anyone who made the right approach, yet so far the cultists had failed to open the path to where the Ancients dwelled. The High Priestess had told them not to be discouraged. It would take time to make the connection between humanity and the Ancients.

The High Priestess appeared in the centre of the chamber, beside the statue, and looked down upon her flock. There was something different about her tonight, Darla realised, a new certainty that was almost palatable. Her eyes moved from person to person, finally meeting Darla's...and looking deep into her. Darla couldn't look away, feeling naked and vulnerable, yet strangely vindicated. She knew, on a level she could never have explained, that the cult had been right all along. The Ancients were returning to the mundane universe of matter.

“Take your places,” the High Priestess ordered. She pulled at her robe, allowing it to fall from her body and land on the floor, exposing her naked body. Like most of the Confederation’s citizens, she was at the peak of health, with firm breasts and long dark hair that fell down to her hips. Darla followed, feeling a thrill of excitement as cool air blew across her bare breasts, a tingle running down her spine. This was it! She was about to show her family that she had been right all along. She *knew* that this was the night. “Kneel before the Ancient Ones.”

Darla fell to her knees, spreading her thighs wide and placing her hands behind her head. The High Priestess had explained, in a more pensive moment, that the pose was one of perfect submission, an offering of everything they were to the Ancients. There could be no concealment, no reserve. They had to offer everything they had to complete the ritual. No doubt flickered in her mind. High Priestess Kaleen had been one of the few to unlock the secrets of the Ancients and their universe. She knew what she was doing.

“Let us begin,” the High Priestess intoned. She picked up a darkened mirror and placed it under the statue. The first time Darla had seen the mirror, it had been like any other mirror, one that reflected her own image back at her. Now it was dark, as if it was connected to some other plane of existence. The High Priestess stepped back and knelt before the statue herself, lowering her eyes to the ground. A new wave of cold air seemed to materialise out of nowhere; Darla felt her nipples harden as the chill spread through the room. “Follow me...”

She began to chant, an oddly atonal chant. Darla echoed her words, feeling them echoing through the room as the others took up the chant. The first time they’d chanted together, it had felt confusing, worrying, yet now it was second nature. Their voices, young and old, male and female, blended together into a single harmony. The words meant nothing to her – her ex-boyfriend, who hadn’t believed in the cult, had put them through a universal translator and had been unable to translate them – but they had meant something to the Ancients. It was hardly reasonable to expect them to understand Human Standard, was it? They might even find being addressed as equals insulting.

As the chant grew in power, she felt a strange sensation brewing within the chamber. Power seemed to be flaring out around them, fed by the chant and guided by the will of the High Priestess. Darla felt as if she was pushing all her will into the air, where it was merged with that of the rest of the group and formed into something else. She lifted her eyes to the mirror as the chant altered slightly and stared; the mirror seemed to be floating in the air, hovering above the stone floor. It had darkened still further, reflecting...what? Her mind seemed to be curiously detached from the proceedings, allowing her to wonder just what the mirror was reflecting, or where it truly was. If the mirror, which had been taken from one of the Ancient worlds, was partly linked to somewhere else, it might be reflecting light from there.

She felt her gaze rising as the mirror started to spin in the air. She couldn’t look away; she was transfixed, her life force being used to power the ritual. Darla submitted gladly as the mirror reached the statue and seemed to *twist* out of existence, as if it was going somewhere at right angles to reality. In its place, there was a spinning...portal, not unlike a wormhole gateway, yet oddly unreal to her eyes. She couldn’t even tell how large it was. It seemed to spin in and out of existence.

“They come,” the High Priestess proclaimed. Her voice rose above the chant. Darla was still chanting, unable to stop...unwilling even to consider stopping. They had been right all along! The Ancients would return to the universe of matter. She told herself that as she felt her voice rising, somehow blending in with the gateway to fix it securely within the normal universe. “They are coming!”

The portal seemed to expand further, taking on shape and form, like a funeral extending *out* of the known universe. Darla felt her mind expanding oddly as the energy levels rose sharply, with...*something* coming out of the portal towards her. She couldn't quite see it, yet she knew that it was there, just beyond her perception. Her body, which seemed to have taken on a life of its own, rose to its feet and started to step towards the portal. The entity in front of her was becoming visible, yet it was still translucent, revealing hints of half-seen detail. She saw tentacles appearing out of nowhere and lashing towards her, a strange hint of an eye...and then, just for a second, she saw it clearly. It was so much bigger than she had realised, so large that it seemed impossible that it could fit into the chamber, so massive that it made her feel tiny, like an ant running around a giant's foot.

Her body kept shuffling forward until the entity turned to face her. Darla could no more have resisted than she could have suddenly developed the power to fly. It had caught her in its web, like a spider would catch a fly, yet this was different, for she had given herself up willingly. She could feel it inside her brain, a hissing that was making it hard to think of anything, even of service to the entity. It turned slowly, as if it was rotating in some private dimension of its own, and looked upon her. Her eyes met its single great eye...

And then the screaming began.

Aisyaj awakened suddenly, uncertain of what had disturbed her. A quick check of her implants revealed that no one had sent her an urgent message, or anything else that required immediate attention from her. No one had asked to see her, or even come by to visit her, yet something was badly wrong. She closed her eyes, half-hoping that she could fall back into sleep, but it was impossible. She could not sleep with the sense of disaster looming over her.

“Computer,” she ordered. “Check in with the local network. Is anything going on that I should be aware of?”

“Negative,” the computer said. It was incapable of feeling perplexed, yet she could have sworn that she heard it in its voice. Or perhaps the AIs were playing silly buggers with the system. “There has been no declared emergency within the system.”

Puzzled, Aisyaj pulled herself out of the bath and stepped through the drying field, shivering slightly as the force field passed over her breasts, taking all the water away from her body. She pulled on a dressing gown and strode out of the bathroom, back into her living room, where she sat down on her favourite chair. It had been hand-crafted by a master craftsman – someone who had had seven hundred years to perfect his craft – and she loved it. Opening her mind, she reached out to see if she could pinpoint the source of her unease...and was nearly blown out of her chair by the mental feedback.

“Oh my God,” she said. She was unable to believe her senses. “They’re here!”

Chapter Ten

“I’m afraid that Admiral Burton is not available for interview,” the Confederation Navy officer informed her. Janine scowled at him, but he refused to look intimidated. “He is currently dealing with the crisis.”

Janine rolled her eyes. She’d spent a day on Greenland trying to talk to someone from the Confederation Navy, in the hopes that they would allow her access to the quarantined zone, where all the action was taking place. So far, the results had been useless; anyone who knew anything wasn’t talking to her. There were plenty of rumours flying around, but since most of them were completely unbelievable, it was impossible to take them seriously. Of course, she reflected, the human race had learned a whole new benchmark for unbelievable in the last couple of days.

“You must understand that I am meant to be reporting on the crisis,” she said, as openly as she could. “I cannot do that without some cooperation from the Navy.”

“The Navy is currently dealing with the crisis,” the officer said, again. “You will be informed when officers are available for interview.”

His image vanished. Janine directed a torrent of invective towards the projector to relieve her feelings, before accessing her implants and checking on the search programs she’d launched into the local net. There were only a handful of Confederation Navy officers on active duty on Greenland and most of them hadn’t even bothered to return her messages asking for interviews. She doubted that any of the others knew anything of significance, apart from the fact that the reserves were being called up for duty. She couldn’t help, but find that alarming.

There were, as she had expected, no responses from the search programs. Shaking her head, she checked through the datanet for updates on the crisis, only to discover that any real news had already been buried under trillions of news posts, rumours and speculation from the Scientist’s Guild. The Confederation allowed anyone to post anything on the datanet, which meant that there was no end to the sheer mind-numbing barrage of nonsense being disseminated through the network. It took a trained and experienced newshound like her to bring order to chaos – or at least publish proper reports as well as allowing people to see through her eyes. It was always annoying to discover that someone who happened to be at the right place at the right time had beaten her to the scoop.

But this time, no one was talking, not even unofficial messages from the Confederation Navy. The last she’d heard, the alien objects were just orbiting the remains of the Buckley Experiment, the strange spatial object that had replaced the black hole. The Confederation Navy was keeping an eye on them from a safe distance – if there was such a thing as a safe distance when a completely unknown form of technology was involved – yet there were no other updates. The unknown objects were just being watched.

“No luck with the Navy?” A voice asked. She looked up to see one of the local stringers, a former newshound who had retired to Greenland and started studying history in hopes of developing a new career. “You won’t get much from them, my dear.”

Janine scowled at him. “They’re not talking,” she said. “Why are they not talking?”

The former newshound grinned. “Because they don’t know what’s going on either, my dear,” he said, with a wink. “If there is a crisis, they normally know just what is going on, but this time...they don’t, so they’re keeping their ignorance to themselves.”

He patted her shoulder. “I suggest you go out and have a walk,” he said. “When you come back, I will introduce you to some contacts I know. They may be able to tell you something new.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Janine said. She headed for the door and stepped outside. There was something odd in the warm air, a feeling that felt strangely familiar. “Or perhaps you could tell me where I could get a starship. I want to go back to the black hole.”

She closed the door before he could respond and walked out onto the streets. The designers of the Mushroom City had been a little weird, she knew; the city itself was covered with a mushroom-shaped dome, but under the dome the city had been designed to appear as a fairytale structure, with tall towers and castle-like buildings. The modern technology that had designed it was concealed within stone-like material and shiny jewels set within the walls. It struck her as rather elaborate, yet it was their choice. She didn’t have to live in the city.

A flash of light from high overhead caught her eye and she looked up towards the Ring. It orbited the entire planet, an artificial version of the rings that surrounded many gas giants, home to millions of human beings. In an emergency, she knew, the Ring could be detached from its homeworld and pulled into hyperspace, allowing the population to be moved to safety if something ever went badly wrong. She had heard, from a normally reliable source, that a great many emergency plans were being dusted off and revised, just in case. Greenland was only five hundred light years from the black hole...or whatever the black hole was, now.

She tracked a flyer moving through the air, heading towards a house out in the countryside, just before she heard the first screams. Someone – a group of people – were screaming and chanting, chanting words she couldn’t understand. She ran them through her implanted translator and got nothing, although that wasn’t too surprising. An alien language could take years to decipher, even for the AIs. She turned towards the sound of screaming and saw, in disbelief, a mob attacking the walls, the buildings...the entire city. It was impossible to grasp the sight before her. The Confederation didn’t have protest mobs screaming through its cities. What was there to protest about?

And then she saw their faces. They were consumed with a colossal rage, lashing out at anything and everything. They showed no signs of awareness or even direction, merely trying to smash things in their madness. Their eyes were rolling back in their heads, blood bleeding from their ears and noses. A number of the maddened mob had weapons implants and were using them on targets of opportunity, including living people. Janine triggered her own weapons implants, wrapping a shield around her body just in time, wincing as a burst of focused energy struck her. If she hadn’t had her shield up, the energy would have killed her, leaving her beyond any hope of recovery. Confederation medical technology could work what past generations would have called miracles, but a vaporised head was beyond even its capabilities to repair.

She opened her implants, sending out a new broadcast to her followers even as she struggled to escape the crowd. The maddened hordes had closed in around her, punching and kicking at her shield. It was an exercise in futility, yet they were doing it anyway, as if they didn’t

understand that it was futile. Pain didn't seem to discourage them; if anything, it only made them madder. She met one of their eyes – an evolved human centaur – and saw nothing there, no hint of awareness. The girl was maddened beyond hope of recovery.

Desperately, she opened her emergency implants and broadcast a distress signal. The local authorities should have responded at once, yet there was no reply. A quick check revealed that the system was suffering from glitches and errors, something that should have been impossible. She made the connection in her mind and knew, somehow, that whatever was going on was related to the Buckley Experiment. She couldn't imagine another explanation.

Years ago, back before she'd been born, a mad scientist had released an unusual virus into his homeworld's local network. The virus had slipped into the implants of everyone on the planet and subverted them, turning them into his slaves. They'd been remote-controlled by his expanded mentality until the Confederation Navy had terminated his operation and arrested him. His victims had needed years of treatment before they had been ready to re-enter civilisation. After that, new precautions had been taken to prevent a second mass subversion, including new filters on the local network. Whatever was driving the population mad, she realised, it wasn't something to do with their implants.

She caught sight of a group of maddened children and felt sick. The children, too young to have adult-issue implants, had cornered a teenage girl and were tearing her apart with their bare hands, eating her flesh. The sight was instantly transmitted to the remainder of the Confederation. Desperately, she flailed about with her shields, knocking people back until she could run for her life. There was no sign of the local authorities; indeed, the local net seemed to be on the verge of collapsing. A loud explosion reached her ears and she turned to see a second aircar falling out of the sky. It struck one of the towers and brought it crashing down onto some of the crowd. Hundreds died, but the remainder just kept going, pulling others into their madness.

Janine turned her back and ran.

Aisyaj grasped for certainty as her mind was assaulted by psychic waves emanating from the city. She could *see* the Mushroom City in the distance; normally, it was a twist on the psychic landscape, a reminder that thousands of humans lived there. Now, it felt like a maelstrom of psychic horror, as if a maddened telepath had started broadcasting openly to the entire planet, infecting them with his madness. She had seen telepaths influence others before – Confederation ethics forbade it, unless it was voluntarily – yet this was different. There was a strangely alien undertone that she couldn't understand.

“Help,” she said, dazed. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the city, which meant that the waves of madness were pounding into her mind. If they were as powerful as they seemed, anyone closer to the source – whatever that was – had to be on the verge of going completely mad. Her mind kept spinning. Her telepathy, her receptiveness to the universe, was the source of all her problems. The irony almost made her laugh. If she hadn't been telepathic, she would probably be perfectly safe at such a distance.

“Help,” she said, again. It was so hard to focus. “Help...”

Her feet gave out from under her and she hit the ground, hard enough to hurt. Perversely, the flash of pain – before her implants started dulling it – helped to focus her mind. She had also broken eye contact with the city.

“I am unable to contact emergency services,” the house computer said. It hadn’t had the imagination to realise that it needed to help her directly. “The local net appears to be suffering from power losses all over the planet.”

Aisyaj swore as she pulled herself to her feet. Without eye contact, she could feel the waves of psychic madness at the back of her mind, without fear of being drawn into them. The telepaths knew that sufficiently powerful telepathy could influence the outside world, yet few telepaths could muster such power, even with enhancers. She certainly couldn’t do much more than picking up a tiny object with telekinetic muscles...and even that was a strain that left her feeling tired and worn. Whatever was causing the madness, she had the oddest feeling that it was only a side-effect of something else. It was a hunch, but if there was one thing all telepaths knew, it was that it was wise to trust one’s hunches. Sometimes, they picked up echoes from the quantum foam.

“Nice,” she snarled. “Can you locate the source of the power drains?”

“No,” the computer said. “The power drains appear to be non-localised. There appears to be no pattern to the drains; some systems in close proximity to affected systems are working normally.”

Aisyaj rubbed the side of her head. “Can you forge a link off-world?” She asked. “If so, use my contact code and contact the AIs.”

There was a long pause, just before the image of a blonde woman materialised in her living room. “Telepath Aisyaj,” the AIs said. “We are concerned to discover that you are on Greenland. The world appears to be under attack.”

“Telepathic attack,” Aisyaj said, flatly. “Can you identify what is actually going on?”

“We are unsure,” the AIs said. “The vast majority of the population appears to have gone mad. Their actions, however, suggest a coordinating intelligence, even though its motive is uncertain at this time. The mad only attack those unaffected by the madness; they work together as a swarm. Local governmental systems appear to have failed; the madness may be affecting the Ring as well as the planet’s surface.”

“There’s something there, broadcasting killer memes into the ether,” Aisyaj said. She could feel it in the back of her head, something so powerful that it was warping the quantum foam around it. She tried to put it into words and failed. The more she thought about it, the stronger it became, threatening to drag her down into the madness. She couldn’t keep the panic from her voice. Whatever it was, it was tearing away at her self-confidence. “What *is* it?”

“We do not know,” the AIs said. Aisyaj winced. She disliked the way the AIs followed her around, fascinated by her telepathy, yet now, when she needed their certainty, they were unable to help. “We cannot perceive anything, save by its effects on the people. It may be

akin to the objects released by Joe Buckley, something that mainly exists outside our dimension.”

Aisyaj nodded, concentrating. The last time she’d opened her mind, she hadn’t been prepared for anything hostile; now, she guarded her mind as best as she could before she started feeling the quantum foam. Instantly, she felt the presence of the entity, something so huge that she knew that to look upon it directly would mean madness, or death. She concentrated on looking around it and saw, to her dismay, that the entity was firmly embedded in the quantum foam. Worse, it seemed to extend out *beyond* the quantum foam.

She tried to localise it, but it proved impossible; it was broadcasting so much power that it was hard to localise it without looking into the face of the gorgon. It was definitely near the city, perhaps in the city...or perhaps she was thinking too small. If the entity was truly in a separate dimension – or multiple dimensions – it could easily exist alongside the city, its mind reaching out to toy with the puny humans below. She saw, now, strands reaching down from the entity, reaching out towards human minds. The entity was *feeding* on the human minds it had snared!

Horror and revulsion blew her out of the trance. This time, she was caught by the house’s gravity fields and lowered gently onto the sofa. The AIs had taken control of her house. At any other time, she would be angry, but this time she was relieved. She didn’t want to hit the floor again, not when the entity was growing stronger all the time.

“It’s feeding off their minds,” she gasped, as the house’s fields brought her a glass of water. She sipped it gratefully, trying to fight off the weariness that threatened to overcome her mind. “It’s linked into their minds and...it’s feeding off them.”

Even as she said it, she knew that it wasn’t the complete answer. Something else was going on as well, something that she ought to recognise and understand, yet her mind refused to solve the puzzle. What was it? She answered the AIs questions as best as she could, trying to put her experience into words, all the time feeling the entity’s presence in her mind. At some level, she was morbidly sure that it knew that she had tried to probe near it and only the difference in scale had stopped it from recognising her for what she was. She was relieved; if the entity had focused on her, her defences wouldn’t have lasted a second against such power.

“It’s drawing power from them,” the AIs said. “What could it use the power to do?”

“Anything,” Aisyaj answered, feeling the pressure at the back of her head increasing. “What are *we* going to do?”

“The Confederation Navy has been informed,” the AIs said. That wasn’t quite an answer. “Maybe this system will be quarantined until a more permanent solution can be devised.”

Aisyaj snorted. “And what happens when the entity decides it wants out?”

The AIs didn’t answer. She triggered her implants and attempted to open a link to *Rowan*. Rather to her surprise, the link functioned properly and she was able to access her vessel’s computers, ordering it to bring the ship’s systems online and prepare for teleport.

“That may be unwise,” the AIs said. “The local atmosphere is full of static. The teleporting field may be disrupted...”

“Smearing me over half a light year,” Aisyaj finished. “I know the risks.”

She shook her head, tossing her long dark hair over her shoulder. “I need to take one final look at the entity,” she said. “It may reach out for me, so I need you to monitor my brainwaves. If something happens, trigger the teleport field at once and snatch me away and up to the ship.”

“Understood,” the AIs said. They sounded doubtful, but accepting. “We are ready.”

Aisyaj stood up and looked out of the window, towards the Mushroom City. The waves stuck her instantly, focused bursts of madness, an insane hatred of all that was different. At first, she saw nothing, and then she saw...something forming over the city, becoming visible to her senses. It looked like mist, yet as it grew clearer, it began to take on shape and form. It was a giant translucent octopus looming over the city, with strands reaching down into the city...and one giant eye that was slowly turning towards her. She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if she met its eye, she would be destroyed, her mind lost and replaced with something else. She was captivated, unable to look away...

And then the teleport field shimmered around her and she was gone.

Chapter Eleven

“Twenty seconds until emergence, Admiral.”

Admiral Burton sat back in his command chair and tried to appear relaxed as the seconds ticked down to zero. Hyperspace travel – particularly travel through the higher bands of hyperspace – was the fastest way to travel over long distances, yet there was no way to alter their exit coordinates while travelling in such a manner. The task force could jump out into literally anything, from an invading alien fleet to more of the strange objects that had bedevilled Confederation science and defence hardware.

“Give us a ten second countdown,” he ordered, as he checked the live feed from the other ships in the task force. The Confederation Navy had responded splendidly when it had come to dealing with the first real emergency in three hundred years, deploying seven additional planetoids and over two hundred cruisers to maintain the quarantine zone. Three planetoids and forty cruisers were now on their way to Greenland to investigate the crisis and render what assistance they could, while the remainder of the fleet was hanging back in reserve, waiting to see what developed. “Bring the task force to full alert.”

He listened as the helmsman counted down to zero and the entire planetoid shivered as it returned to normal space. The main display lit up at once as the starship deployed its FTL sensor arrays, trying to locate the source of the trouble. Only a madman would bring a planetoid into normal space close to an inhabited world – the planet-sized starships had a not-inconsiderable gravity field of their own – yet it hardly mattered, not to sensors that could count the grains of sand on a beach several hundreds of thousands of kilometres away. Only military-grade stealth systems could hope to hide anything from the *Sparta* and her consorts.

“Admiral,” the tactical officer said. “We have...”

He broke off as the data rapidly expanded in the main display. Burton’s first impression had been that the system was under attack, but as the data kept flowing in, it became increasingly clear that the local defences were firing on each other. Greenland had always had a formidable defence network – the planet was too close to three alien races that might be hostile, and the Confederation had always preferred to be better safe than sorry – yet that network seemed to be turning against itself, exchanging fire with its own nodes. He plunged his mind into the tactical computers and attempted to analyse the situation, but it was impossible to make out any consistent pattern. It seemed to him as though the sides kept switching at random.

“Get a data download from the local defence network,” he ordered, although he had a sneaking suspicion that it would be useless. “I want to try and determine if...”

“Admiral,” the tactical officer said, as the main display flashed red. “The local defences are sweeping us and locking targeting sensors on our ships.”

Burton swallowed a curse as several inactive weapons platforms - armed with heavy weapons intended to take out battleships, superdreadnaughts and planetoids - went active, loading new targeting coordinates into their local processors. The Confederation had had thousands of years of experience in building defence networks, including creating systems that could continue to function even when half of the network was destroyed, disabled or subverted.

The local planetary datanet seemed to be suffering from absurd – and unexplained – glitches – yet it wouldn't prevent the orbital network from exchanging fire with his ships.

“Lock our own weapons on the platforms targeting us,” he ordered, curtly. The very thought was absurd, if not surreal. He had never dreamed that he would one day end up pointing his ship's formidable armament at a Confederation world. “If they start firing, I want them taken out at once.”

“Aye, sir,” the tactical officer said. “I am locking weapons on target...”

There was a shimmer in the air and the AI image materialised on the bridge. “Admiral, the planet appears to be under attack by an alien force,” the AIs said, their voices blurring together in a worried harmony. “They appear to have driven the majority of the population mad.”

“Incoming missiles,” the tactical officer snapped. “I am returning fire!”

The display sparkled with angry red icons as missiles were launched from the orbital platforms, directly towards the Confederation Navy task force. Burton studied them as his ship's automatic systems deployed countermeasures, but he found himself unable to understand the tactics behind the deployment, or even if there was any tactical order at all. Standard tactical doctrine was to use an assorted collection of missiles to break through the target's defences, yet the enemy seemed to be firing almost at random. Hyper-missiles sparkled through hyperspace and slammed into his ship's shields, while normal-space missiles plunged through space at ninety percent of the speed of light, seeking out their targets. The assault wasn't even coordinated properly.

“Deploy defensive systems,” he ordered, knowing that it was already a redundant order. At such speeds, the engagement was out of his hands and placed into the hands of the starship's computer network. No human could react fast enough to deflect hyper-missiles fired at such close range. “Concentrate on the antimatter and gravity warheads...”

The starship rang like a bell as three warheads – armed with compressed antimatter – detonated against her shields. Burton swore as the entire ship heaved, knowing that a single one of those warheads would have wrecked the planetary ecosystem and killed everyone on the planet if it had struck the surface. No one in their right mind would have considered using such warheads close to a planet unless there was no other choice; the AIs, he realised, might well be right. The entire planet seemed to have gone mad.

He turned to the AIs, trusting his crew and the ship's automated systems to handle the incoming barrage of missiles and taking out the defences. *Sparta* spat back a more precise salvo of hyper-missiles, destroying the first set of platforms almost instantly; they didn't even have their shields rotating through the hyperspace bands. It was bizarre. Didn't they even care about what was happening to the Ring? If it was hit badly and started to disintegrate, the planet would be bombarded with chunks of debris, sending it into an ice age.

“All right,” he said, as his ship heaved again. “What is going on?”

He listened to the AIs briefing in disbelief. It seemed impossible, but then...so was what had happened to the Buckley Experiment, and then there was the totally bizarre actions of the

planetary defence network. The automatic systems alone would have been capable of putting up a far better fight, even if they lacked the intelligence of a full-class AI or an organic mindset. If there truly was an alien force pervading the planet below and driving everyone it contacted mad, it explained a great deal.

“And the datanet is going down,” he said, shaking his head. The planetary datanets should have been impossible to destroy, without shattering the planet or scorching it clean of human life, for multiple redundancies were built into the network. The AIs displayed a diagram in front of him, showing glitches and power drains that seemed to threaten the network with total collapse, yet seemed to lack any definite cause. They were definitely focused around the Mushroom City, but the effects seemed to be spreading. “How many of the population have escaped the alien force?”

“Uncertain,” the AIs said. “We are unable to track the alien force and we can only deduce its presence by its effects. If it is using the telepathic waveband to coordinate its operations, it may not be bound by anything we would understand as normal limits or constraints.”

“Open a direct channel to the datanet, full-spectrum emergency broadcast,” Burton ordered. He waited for the channel to open. It should have been almost instant, yet it took nearly twenty seconds before the channel was open, broadcasting an emergency message into the planetary network. Spammers would have loved the emergency codes; everyone, unless they had no implants or portable terminals, would hear him. “This is Admiral Burton, commanding officer of the *Sparta* Task Force.”

He took a breath. “Your planet has been attacked by subversion software,” he lied. The effects were clearly similar and besides, there were protocols in place for dealing with a subversion attack. “Help is on the way. If you remain unaffected by the subversion, broadcast a standard emergency call into the datanet and continue to broadcast it until we reach you. Do not attempt to put yourselves at risk. Help is on the way.”

“The message may not have reached everyone,” the AIs said. They sounded perplexed and irritated. “The local network glitches defy everything we understand about the laws of science and how they work.”

“Just like the Buckley Experiment,” Burton growled. “Do we have any idea what started this attack?”

“Not as yet,” the AIs said. “Our research is proceeding, but damage to the local network makes it difficult to understand just what occurred prior to the outbreak of madness.”

Burton nodded slowly. On the main display, other missiles were flaring in towards his ships, forcing the lighter cruisers to take evasive action as they deployed their countermeasures. The enemy didn't seem to have any grasp of the principle of concentrating their fire, thankfully, or he would have lost several ships by now. Even so, some of the cruisers had had lucky escapes. He wouldn't have wanted to challenge the network when it was up and running properly.

He ran his hand through his hair as he considered his options. Now they had a link through the AIs to what remained of the planetary datanet, he could tell that many uninfected men and women remained in Mushroom City and the smaller cities on the planet's surface or flying

above the ground. His duty was to save them, both the infected and uninfected, if only to get them away from the rogue defences. The damage the Ring had taken suggested that the enemy, whatever it was, might just decide that it would be a fun idea to turn the defences on the planet's surface and slaughter the population.

The standard procedure would be to use teleporters and snatch everyone off the planet's surface, putting them into stasis until the infected could be safely separated from the uninfected. That wouldn't be easy, even with three planetoids to share the burden; the teleport denial network was up and running, preventing unauthorised teleports from taking place. Even if his ships were able to punch through it, they would still have to store the infected and they simply didn't have the space to do it. It was a shame that they couldn't simply store the teleport patterns in the pattern buffers, but the quantum uncertainty principle would ensure that their patterns would rapidly disintegrate. There were emergency protocols for trying that tactic if all else failed, yet the situation wasn't that dire. He had the uncomfortable feeling that it was only a matter of time before he was forced to resort to desperate action.

Sparta shook again and he made up his mind. "Prepare the Marines for detachment," he ordered, studying the display. The computers would automatically connect him to the Marines, waiting patiently in their launch bays. "I want a division to concentrate on securing the Mushroom City and a second division to concentrate on securing the defence network infrastructure in the Ring. Once we have control of the infrastructure, we can shut off the defences and then bring in wormhole generators and flood in troops from all over the Confederation."

"Understood, Admiral," Major Pasha's voice said, firmly. The Major was over two hundred years old and had been a Marine for fifty of them, after nearly a hundred years spent in the remorseless pursuit of hedonism practiced by most of the Confederation's citizens. "Do the standard counter-subversion rules of engagement remain in effect?"

"Yes, Major," Admiral Burton said. If they were lucky, they could pull off the mission without massive loss of life. "They remain in effect."

"The Marines may be infected by the alien force," the AIs said. "We are unable to assume that they will be protected by their nature."

Burton nodded, grimly. "I think we will have to take that chance," he said, as the planetary defences launched another spread of missiles towards his ships. No, not all of them were fired at his ships; a handful had been launched at smaller habitats out towards the edge of the star system. Before anyone could react, the missiles struck home, destroying the habitats and slaughtering their populations. The butcher's bill appeared in front of his eyes, mocking him; a million human citizens of the Confederation had just died. "We have no other choice."

He linked into the ship's computers and sent a priority code down into the network. "Land the landing force," he ordered. "All ships, prepare to provide support as required."

Janine burst into the newshound office and tried to catch her breath, before she felt – more than heard – someone behind her. A hand caught her by the neck and pulled her over backwards; she struggled against her assailant for a long moment before she triggered her

implants and shocked him with a nasty shock. She turned as her attacker fell to the ground, revealing that he was a young man with blood dripping from his mouth. Vampires might have been in fashion at the moment – fashions changed so fast that she honestly couldn't remember – but the blood was real. It wasn't his either. His eyes were alight with the same madness that had infected others...

“Shut up,” she said, and triggered a stun pulse from her implants. Thankfully – she wasn't sure what she would have done if the stun pulse had failed – he twitched and lay still. She checked him and then, cursing her own lack of awareness, she looked around the office. It was completely wrecked. Someone – she hoped it was the young man she'd stunned – had torn through it, for no apparent reason. She took a final look at the comatose body and walked away from him, checking through the office for signs of human life. She saw nothing until she checked the final room, where the senior correspondent had made her office. She was sitting at her desk in semi-darkness, looking remarkably normal until Janine walked up to her. Her throat had literally been torn open and blood was pouring down onto the desk, yet she was still fighting to survive.

“I'm sorry,” Janine said, as she tried to figure out what to do. On a normal day, she could have accessed medical texts from the datanet, or summoned help from the emergency services, who would have teleported the senior correspondent into the nearest medical pod. Now...her implants kept malfunctioning, to the point where her every attempt to connect to the datanet failed. She tried to open a connection to the senior correspondent's own implants, but the connection failed to materialise. “I don't know what to do.”

She knew she should stay with the wounded woman, but instead she walked back outside, into the main office. The man she'd stunned was gone. Cursing, she pushed her implanted defences up to the highest level, only to realise that they were degrading faster and faster. There was no sign of him anywhere, yet she knew he had to be around somewhere. Or maybe he'd slipped out of the office and had gone to join the madness outside. On impulse, she walked over to the computer terminal and triggered it, hoping that the hardwired system would work better. It lit up for a second and then faded away to black.

Her implants triggered, just for a second, and she heard the emergency broadcast from the Confederation Navy. She hadn't realised just how much hearing that someone – somewhere – was responding to the crisis would cheer her up, until it had actually happened. She triggered the distress signal from her implants, but – as the signal started pulsing out – that whatever was disrupting communications and screwing with human technology could easily jam her distress signal. Taking one last look around, she ran out of the office and started to head towards the nearest skyscraper. The Confederation Navy, she was sure, would be able to locate her faster if she was in the open.

She could hear the noise of the maddened crowd as she crossed the square, but thankfully she met no one as she reached the skyscraper and headed up the stairs, not trusting the gravity chute. A handful of bodies were scattered around as she reached the landing, some clearly killed by the maddened people, others...others looked as if they had killed themselves, or there was no apparent cause of death. Three of them had blood pouring from their eyes, as if they had looked upon something so terrible that they couldn't bear to see any longer. Janine checked them quickly, confirming that they were dead in the absence of their implants, before running the rest of the way to the roof. She couldn't bear to look at any more dead bodies.

The outside air seemed oddly...unpleasant as she burst out onto the roof. There was something there, something pressing against the very fabric of reality itself. She could *feel* it on some level, something so vast that she could barely grasp the fact of its existence. She turned, convinced that there was someone or something behind her and saw...something weirdly alien materialising out of the mist. Her mind refused to accept its existence. No matter how she stared at it, it refused to resolve into a solid form.

She braced herself as the entire building shook. Help was on the way, she knew, but would it get there in time? Seconds later, she realised in horror that the dome covering the Mushroom City was starting to collapse. If it collapsed while the madness was spreading through the streets, hundreds of thousands of people would be killed...

Chapter Twelve

No matter how many combat jumps he made, Major Pasha knew that he would never get used to it, or take it for granted. The Confederation Marines were an elite force, the sole major human force designed for operations against planetary targets and the Confederation lavished resources and technology on turning them into the most formidable ground-assault force in history. He sometimes wondered how he would have done on the battlefields of Agincourt, or Iwo Jima, or Hades III, back before the Confederation had put an end to inter-human warfare, yet in the end he was satisfied to be what he was, a Confederation Marine.

The Marines were ejected from the *Sparta* in a wave of gravimetric distortion, washed down towards the planet below. They were moving far faster than a speeding bullet, yet it felt as if they were moving slowly, a testament to how massive the planet was compared to the Marines. He could see the Ring orbiting the planet, shaking under the impact of missiles from the rogue defence units, and hoped – prayed – that the other Marine division managed to take the defence network command station intact before the Ring was completely destroyed. Millions of humans lived on the Ring and many of them would have been killed, or driven mad.

He reviewed the information from the AIs and scowled to himself, even as he relished the challenge. Unlike almost all of the Confederation, the Marines were accustomed to operating without a basic information infrastructure or even some of the technology that the rest of the universe took for granted. Even so, there wasn't going to be anything easy about this mission. Whatever was driving the people on the planet below mad meant that the planet's population couldn't be held accountable for their actions, yet the Marines would have to either stun them all and shove them into stasis, or kill them. A standard subversion package turned men and women into drones, used as puppets by the terrorist who had uploaded the package into the network and somehow gotten it past the safety protocols, but this was different. The Marines could expect themselves to be fighting the very people they had come to save.

The standard Marine Combat Unit was roughly humanoid, yet it was immensely strong, capable of flexing in ways that no unmodified human could match and armed with all of the weapons and sensors that human ingenuity could fit into the system. Matched against flesh and blood, it would tear through human bodies like they were made of paper, leaving bloody chaos in their wake. Most civilians tended to have weapons enrichments added to their implants, if they lived on worlds where there was the possibility of encountering a wild animal or worse, yet few civilians had any weapons that could seriously threaten a Marine. In theory, they should be able to stun the civilians and get them out of the area, even if they did offer resistance. In practice...well, as wise humans had passed down through the ages, no battle plan ever survived contact with the enemy.

He gritted his teeth as the red sweep of a targeting sensor swept across his position, yet no missiles or energy weapons roared out to exterminate him and his Company. The division would, if all went to plan, land around the Mushroom City and move in to pick up the citizens who were screaming for help, before they started rounding up the maddened citizens. If it didn't go to plan, they'd have to improvise; luckily, after years spent in the Corps, he knew how to improvise.

"Stand by," he ordered. The timer was remorselessly ticking down to zero. "Prepare for planetary insertion...now!"

Greenland suddenly shifted, transforming from a glowing blue-green sphere floating in space to something impossibly large. Wrapped in their tiny warp bubbles, the Marines fell down towards the surface of the world, praying that none of the automated defences would come online and register them as a possible threat. It wasn't common for the weapons to fire without authorisation, but who knew what orders had been uploaded into their processors? It was chillingly possible that they'd been set to fire on anything that entered the atmosphere. There were protocols intended to deal with incoming meteor showers that might be triggered and used against his Marines.

The display in front of him updated rapidly, showing the Mushroom City and the location of hundreds of emergency beacons. Being the paranoid person he was, he had a nasty feeling that some of those beacons were traps intended to snare his Marines, but they would have to go in anyway. He swallowed a curse as the red icons of incoming missiles flared into view, only to be picked off by precision hyper-missiles launched from the watching cruisers. Brilliant explosions flared up at the edge of space as the missiles were obliterated, yet they kept coming, following a firing pattern that made little sense. Marines were slipping through the net because the enemy wasn't coordinating its fire.

Seven Marines vanished from his internal display as their combat units were destroyed, leaving the remainder of his division dropping rapidly towards the Mushroom City. The enemy fire seemed to slack off, although he couldn't tell if they'd simply lost interest in shooting at the Marines – which made have made sense, given their thoroughly strange behaviour – or if the cruisers had successfully picked off the launchers. Standard protocols would have had all the available launchers concentrating their fire on the incoming Marines, yet...he shook his head, mentally. As long as they got down to the surface, it didn't matter.

He checked the secure data link back to the planetoid and winced as he realised that it was suffering from glitches and drop-outs as well. The planetary network was hardened, but the Marines had created a system that should have been impossible to jam, whatever the situation. It struck him that it was as if the laws of space and time were being rewritten on a local scale, which should have been impossible. On the other hand, after the Buckley Experiment, perhaps it was wise to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. So far, there was no sign that the command links were being broken or jammed, but if that happened...he shook his head, again. They were committed and had been committed ever since they had entered the planet's atmosphere. There were no teleporters to yank them out of the battlefield if they changed their minds.

The Mushroom City appeared below him and he steered towards the LZ, a stairway that reached down towards the ground under the city. From so high, the city looked more like a solid dome than a real city, but as they fell, it became clear that the fields holding the dome in place were collapsing. The dome was falling apart, crumbling down into dust. He didn't want to think about what could happen if someone was caught by a chunk of falling glass. It should have been safe with structural fields holding the glass in place.

"Prepare for landing," he ordered. The landing zone rose up towards him at terrifying speed. It seemed impossible that they would be able to slow themselves in time, yet the warp bubble cut in and they came to a halt, just above the ground. A second later, ten Marines touched down in perfect formation. "Deploy stun weapons and sensors."

The Marine Combat Units crouched down and deployed their weapons, flexing them out of their shielded compartments. The sensors – tiny drones, so small that the naked eye couldn't have picked them out – spun away from the Marines, racing out into the city. The RIs linked into the Marine Combat Network would be able to download and summarise their reports, slotting them together for the benefit of their human masters. They should be able to put together a report without risking the Marines.

“The local area is clear, sir,” one of the Marines confirmed. The Marines conferred quickly, their minds buzzing together in the network, thinking almost as one. “We can advance into the city.”

Pasha frowned. The network linking the sensor drones together was starting to fail. It was a secure link, yet parts of it were simply collapsing, as if they were being drained of all power. Once, years ago, he had seen a world trapped under a hyperspace dampening bubble, one created to prevent a violently xenophobic alien race from becoming a galactic menace, yet such a bubble would be detectable and it could be countered. The effect was more like the Dead Zone, an area of space where advanced technology refused to function, but if that was the case, everything electronic should have failed. This...selective effect was just weird. If he'd had access to a technology that turned enemy tech on and off at will, he wouldn't have wasted it by toying with them.

“We advance, slowly,” he ordered, firmly. “Follow me.”

He led the way into the city, scowling as more and more of the sensor drones simply dropped out of contact with the advancing Marines. They rounded a corner and came face to face with some of the maddened citizens, men and women who hadn't appeared on their sensors. The Marine Combat Units mounted extremely advanced sensors, yet they were failing to work properly in the strange environment. It didn't make sense. He swept the sensors over them and got little back, not even the brief pulses of data from implanted systems.

The civilians turned to stare at the Marines, their eyes weirdly unblinking. Their faces were torn by an emotion he didn't recognise, yet somehow sent chills down his spine. They didn't look intimidated by the Marines, or even concerned about the threat they posed; they were moving more like savage animals than humans. Their slow movements reminded him of animals preparing to spring. He scanned them again and swore under his breath. The sensors were so badly disrupted that they were insisting that the humans weren't there.

“Watch them,” he ordered, switching his mike to external speakers. Perhaps he could talk sense into their heads. “This is the Confederation Marines. Please...”

The civilians sprang, leaping towards the Marines with hands outstretched, as if they intended to use their nails to slice through the armour and gut the Marines inside. Their hands scratched across Pasha's protection without making any impression on him, yet there was something in their gaze that worried him, a conviction that if they kept trying, they would eventually succeed. The sensor disruption was growing worse. It made no sense to him at all, but he knew one thing; if the civilians kept trying to get into his Marine Combat Unit, they were going to hurt themselves quite badly.

He sent an order to his unit and was relieved to discover that the weapons were working perfectly. “Stun them,” he ordered, triggering his stunners. A series of orange pulses of light

sparkled across the civilians, sending them sprawling back from the Marines. They should have been knocked out completely for at least an hour, but instead – impossibly – they were resisting the stunners. Repeated application was dangerous, yet what other choice did they have? This time, the civilians seemed to be completely out of it, but they were still twitching, as if they were dreaming unpleasant dreams.

“Sir,” one of his men said. “What’s gotten into them?”

“I have no idea,” Pasha said. Oddly, now they had stunned the civilians, some of their advanced equipment seemed to be working better, rather than malfunctioning constantly. “Perhaps they were enriched and their defences worked better than they should...”

He knew, even as he spoke, that that it wasn't the right answer. He bent down and ran a scanner over the prone bodies, yet he wasn't sure if he could trust the answers. At least the sensors agreed that the civilians existed now. They had, according to the sensors, no enrichments, but their brain activity seemed to make little sense. Even stunned, their brains were working overtime.

“I think we should advance onwards,” he said, once he had relayed the details of the engagement up to the *Sparta*. Additional Marines would be required to pull the stunned civilians out of the city and, hopefully, get them somewhere out of the system. “Follow me.”

Nothing blocked their path as they made their way through the buildings, until they reached the edge of a park. One of the emergency distress calls was coming from within the park, so the Marines spread out and advanced towards the source of the call. Pasha concentrated on watching his sensors, yet they seemed to be growing unreliable again. They kept reporting that they were surrounded by movement, but there was nothing visible, not even signs that someone was watching under a portable invisibility cloak. He felt jumpy as the movements came closer and placed his weapons on safety. Who knew what would happen if they just opened fire?

He pushed his way through a brush and stared. A young man – barely more than a boy, even though it was hard to be certain in the Confederation – was lying curled up on the muddy ground. His eyeballs had been gorged out and squashed; looking at the blood on his hands, it was clear that he'd done it to himself. He was shaking and didn't even seem to realise that the Marines were there, even though he was surrounded by ten Marine Combat Units. Pasha realised, as he studied the young man, that he'd seen something he couldn't bear to see again.

“Dear God,” one of his men muttered. “What is going on, sir?”

“I don't know,” Pasha admitted. The sensors reported more movement at the edge of the park and, this time, they could see advancing civilians. The sensors reported weapons enrichments among them, some clearly cutting-edge for civilian technology. The Marines might be in a spot of trouble. “Call in the transports. I think we're going to need help.”

“We're going in,” Chihiro said, as the signal came in from the *Sparta*. The Marine Assault Shuttles had been poised, ready for the dive into the atmosphere, yet the orders had refused to come through. She had been burning with impatience when the orders had finally arrived. “Here we go...”

She linked her implants directly into the shuttle, feeling its solidly reassuring bulk surrounding her, and took it screaming down towards the planet, dodging the handful of missiles launched towards the shuttle flotilla by the planetary defences. Whoever was behind the defences was mad, she decided, as the shuttles evaded the missiles with ease. She had trained to fly into hotter and deadlier skies than the one she was facing now; indeed, she was more than a little disappointed. It could have been so much more challenging.

The Marines were ahead of her, in the Mushroom City. Chihiro had attempted to join the Marines herself, but while she'd failed the main training course, she'd managed to impress her instructors with her flying skills and had been offered a transfer into Marine Combat Support. Since then, she had flown a handful of real missions and thousands of exercises, honing her skills for the day when she would be truly tested. She had never expected to fly a combat mission on a Confederation world, yet she told herself that she was ready for the challenge. There was nothing that the Marines couldn't handle.

She checked the local airspace as the shuttles levelled out and roared towards the city. There was little that they needed to worry about, apart from a handful of civilian aircars that seemed to be running from the city and the madness that had gripped their friends and families. She sent them a challenge and warned them to stay away from the Marines, although it looked to her as if they weren't infected by whatever was affecting the city. If they remained away from infected civilians, they could be picked up and transported away from the planet.

"Landing in two minutes," she informed her passengers, as the shuttles spread out. There seemed to be no danger of incoming fire, but the Marines and their supporting teams knew better than to take chances. The enemy was behaving irrationally and an irrational enemy might do something that would be completely unexpected. The precautions cost them nothing and might save lives. "Prepare for combat..."

Her voice broke off. Looming over the city, visible to her naked eye, was...a strange pulsing mass. She checked her sensors automatically, convinced it had to be an atmospheric condition, and blinked when they claimed that the airspace over the city was clear. Chihiro looked up again and saw, this time, a giant octopus-like creature, somehow sharing space with the city. It had to be an illusion, or a hologram, yet something inside her told her that it was real. It pulsed and throbbed like a giant naked brain, tendrils reaching down towards the city below. Her sensors were still refusing to recognise its existence, yet...she reached for the controls, preparing to yank the shuttle out of its flight path, but somehow she could not complete the manoeuvre. Before she could do anything else, or break the mental lock, the shuttle flew right into the creature. Chihiro winced, expecting a collision, yet nothing happened. There was nothing wrong at all. There was *absolutely* nothing wrong at all.

Quite calmly, she brought up the shuttle's weapons and deactivated the safeguards. Ignoring the outraged protests from her superiors, she activated the targeting systems and lit up the remaining shuttles. Before they could react, she started firing hyper-missiles at them, laughing all the time. Using hyperspace, flight time to their targets was measured in nanoseconds; they were destroyed before they had a chance to act. They disintegrated in massive balls of fire, scattering wreckage all over the city. She was still laughing as she tipped the shuttle towards the floating city of Garland and opened fire.

Chapter Thirteen

“Admiral, one of the shuttles has gone rogue!”

Burton wheeled around, astonished. *Gone rogue* had a single meaning in the Confederation Navy; it meant that the rogue in question had somehow gone over to the enemy side. On the display, a shuttle was shooting madly towards one of the floating cities, its hyper-missiles slamming into the city’s antigravity dome. As he watched in horror, the gravity fields holding the city above the ground failed and the city tilted, plunging towards the ground.

“Forget the safety protocols,” he snapped. “Teleport those people off the city!”

“I cannot get a lock on anyone,” the teleport officer reported, grimly. “The disruption is too powerful to allow the teleport fields to activate and yank them away from the falling city.”

Burton gritted his teeth. His task force was too far away to intervene and, with the planetary defences firing on them, it was hard to see what they could do to assist the doomed population. If they could still think straight, they might have a chance if they dived into their aircars and fled the falling city, but the drones had reported that madness had gripped the flying city as well. It plunged into the ground with an impact that shook the entire continent, taking all ten thousand of its inhabitants with it.

“It’s hard to be certain at this range, Admiral,” the AI image said, “but we believe that no one will have survived the impact. The city’s emergency systems had completely failed.”

Burton nodded, using his implants to calm himself and place the rage, horror and grief in a compartment in the back of his mind. He had just witnessed the Confederation’s greatest peacetime disaster, yet it was only a fragment of the nightmare that had gripped the entire planetary system. He wanted something to hit, something he could retaliate against, yet there was nothing. The enemy remained unseen, beyond his reach.

“Focus on the shuttle,” he ordered. One half of his expanded mentality tracked the action on the ground, where the Marines were trying to secure the Mushroom City to allow the recovery of the uninfected civilians; the remainder watched as the crazed shuttle flashed across the surface of the planet, firing madly at random targets. The targeting pattern made no sense at all. The targets didn’t even correspond with the uninfected civilians screaming for help. That would have made sense, but why...he skimmed through the shuttle pilot’s personal file and found nothing, no clue as to why she would have suddenly turned. He could only conclude that the madness had infected her too.

He considered it as the shuttle started to rise up towards space and his task force. It looked almost as if the pilot intended to charge right into his force, guns blazing; something that could only be described as pointless suicide. Or maybe she intended to jump into hyperspace and flee to another world, spreading the madness ahead of her. It could not be allowed, he knew; whatever was going on could not be allowed to spread.

“We are unable to determine why the pilot appears to have gone mad,” the AIs said.

“Logically, however, the madness must have gripped everyone on the shuttle, or she would have been wrestled away from the controls. There is no apparent means of infection, which

suggests that we are dealing with a telepathic virus. The remaining shuttles may also be infected.”

Burton couldn't disagree with the logic. “Order the *River* to intercept the shuttle and take her and her crew alive,” he ordered. It wouldn't be easy, but Captain Pearson was experienced and his ship was capable. “We need her for examination.”

“We suggest using full quarantine procedures,” the AIs said. “This may be as dangerous as a plague of rogue nanomachines or quantum faults.”

“And order the remaining shuttles to safe their weapons,” he added. “We don't want any more incidents.”

“Admiral,” the communications officer said, “we have a message from one of the shuttles. The pilot wishes to speak to you personally.”

Burton frowned. Even in the Confederation Navy, such informality was unusual. “Put her through,” he ordered, as her personal file scrolled up in front of his virtual vision. Commander Kara Pratt was known for being a tough pilot, winner of the Marine Corps flying competitions for two years straight. “This is Burton.”

“Admiral, this is Commander Pratt,” a voice said. There was no visual, but an image appeared in front of him, a short blonde woman with a pair of striking blue eyes. Marines didn't go in for facial alteration on a whim, so the chances were that it was her natural face. Burton could tell, even without the personal file, that she'd been born an Enhanced Human. Her face was just too striking. “There is a...unusual formation in the atmosphere, centred on the city.”

Burton blinked at her voice. For someone who was a combat veteran of several jumps into hostile territory, she sounded spooked, almost uncertain of her position. “I see,” he said. “What kind of unusual formation?”

Kara's voice hardened. “It looks like a translucent octopus,” she said. Burton exchanged a glance with the AI image, but for once found that he was speechless. “Sir, it doesn't register on the sensors or even on direct feed from scout drones, yet we can *see* it. We can see right through it, but we know it's there, like a ghost. The...crazy shuttle flew right through it just before the pilot went insane.”

“A hologram would show up on optical sensors,” the AIs murmured. “We have checked with the sensors – those that are reliable – and there is nothing visible.”

“So what,” Burton asked, “is causing it?”

There was a long pause. “A telepathic illusion would not register on the sensors,” the AIs said. He could sense their frustration at having to depend on imperfect human senses for their information. “The only explanation that seems to make sense is that they are looking at something that is so out of phase with our universe or so fundamentally alien that the sensors simply refuse to register its existence.”

Burton found himself caught on the horns of a dilemma. He knew that he should pull the Marines out and seal off the planet, at least until the Confederation's massive scientific – or telepathic – resources figured out how to handle the new crisis. It was the logical decision, yet he knew that doing that would mean abandoning the remaining uninfected citizens on the planet to their fate. He couldn't do that. The Confederation Navy existed to protect the human race and it had never failed in that duty. It would not fail here, now, he resolved. He ignored the little voice at the back of his mind that warned that it might not be possible to avoid failure.

“Warn the *River* to be careful,” he ordered. “The shuttle's crew might be under the control of a hostile telepathic force.”

“Understood, Admiral,” the communications officer reported, his voice calm and professional. “They are making their approach now.”

Captain Tom Pearson watched through his ship's sensors as the shuttle – clearly under the control of a very hostile pilot – grew closer. The pilot had to be mad, he had already decided; the shuttle was twisting and turning in a way that made no sense, not even to the AIs analysing her flight path. From time to time, the shuttle would spin over and unleash a spread of hyper-missiles towards the burning Ring, yet the pilot seemed to be completely ignoring his ship. No one, not even a mad sociopath, would ignore a clear and present danger.

He considered the tactical situation as the two ships converged. It would have been easy to destroy the shuttle, using focused energy beams rather than expending a missile on the tiny ship, but the Admiral had ordered him to take the ship intact. That was rather more difficult; a Marine combat shuttle was designed to make it impossible to use a dampening field to knock out its drives and weapons systems, while the teleport denial field was up and running, preventing him from simply snapping them off the rogue shuttle and beaming them directly into the stasis field.

“Prepare the tractor field,” he ordered. Luckily, the shuttle didn't have anything like as much power to burn as his starship. He could simply overpower the ship and then take the crew prisoner. “Focus the gravity beams on the ship...”

“Incoming missiles,” the tactical officer warned. The shuttle had finally noticed their presence and was reacting, as he had expected, rather badly. The hyper-missiles it was spitting at them were impacting against the hyperspace band shields before the tactical officer finished his warning. At least most of the energy was being diverted into hyperspace rather than being expanded against his hull. “The firing pattern makes no sense.”

“Let her expend her missiles on us,” Pearson ordered, calmly. The *River* was fairly safe against the shuttle's small arsenal of missiles, but he hated to imagine what a pair of hyper-missiles in the wrong place could do to the Ring. It was far better to absorb the hits and wrap the shuttle in a tractor field rather than risk losing something considerably more fragile. “Focus the tractor field around her and prepare to bring her in.”

The human race had learned to manipulate vast gravity fields from the Gasbags, who used gravity beams to operate their massive starships, but over the centuries the technology had

been improved to the point where a shell of gravity waves could be generated at will, allowing the ship to manipulate the shuttle at will. He tensed as the gravity sphere started to form, half-expecting the shuttle's pilot to twist out of their grasp before it was too late, but instead the shuttle seemed remarkably docile. It didn't make sense. The ship had even stopped shooting. He fired a query into the tactical network, attempting to determine if the shuttle had any missiles left, but the results were uncertain. Marines liked to have extra weapons along if possible and the establishment figures might not apply. Twenty seconds after the ship had begun generating the gravity field, the shuttle was securely enmeshed in his net, helpless.

"Sir," the tactical officer snapped. "They're powering up their hyperdrive!"

Pearson swore. The crew *had* to be mad...and, in hindsight, he should have expected such a tactic, insane as it was. Hyperdrives could be used close to a planetary surface or any large gravity mass, yet it always caused massive disruption and was banned except in case of emergency. Using one so close to the *River* would cause an energy surge that would cripple or destroy his ship, one channelled back at them by their own gravity field.

"Suppress it," he ordered, sharply. If they couldn't prevent the hyper-field from forming up, they would have to let the shuttle go – or destroy it. He didn't want to risk either, yet if there was no other choice he knew the shuttle had to be destroyed. Whatever it was carrying could not be allowed to spread. "Don't let her go."

For a long moment, the shuttle's hyperdrive warred with the gravity field his ship was generating, trying to escape. He had far more raw power at his disposal, yet focusing it all on the hyperdrive without destroying the shuttle wasn't easy. The irony wasn't lost on him. Smashing the shuttle into its component atoms wouldn't have been difficult at all, yet that would have meant admitting defeat. They couldn't do that, not when he suspected that this crisis was merely the first of many.

Abruptly, the shuttle's drive failed. "We have her, sir," the tactical officer said. "The shuttle is securely within our grasp."

"Drain her power, scan her for surprises and then bring her into the shuttle bay," Pearson ordered. "Keep the gravity field focused on the shuttle. If they decide to detonate the antimatter power cells, I want it contained and drained into the power network."

"Aye, Captain," the tactical officer said. Caught in the grip of the tractor field, the shuttle was pulled into the bay and secured. *River* carried no Marines to handle boarding the shuttle, but a Marine platoon was already on its way from the *Sparta*. Once they arrived, the shuttle could be opened and the crew removed, hopefully without hurting them. "There is no sign of resistance."

"Don't count on it," Pearson ordered. "I want every sensor we have focused on that ship."

"The *River* successfully scooped up the shuttle," the tactical officer reported. "The Marines are boarding her now."

“Good,” Burton said. The entire engagement was starting to degrade rapidly into incoherence. His task force was still being fired upon, yet parts of the system defence network seemed to be concentrating more on hitting the Ring rather than destroying his fleet. If the octopus – he had decided to think of it as that until he understood what it was – was trying to subvert the entire system, its tactics made little sense. “Have you managed to locate the enemy?”

“No,” the AIs said. “We are, however, progressing with inquiries.”

From far too close, Aisyaj could *see* the damage to the Ring, great blasts of fire glinting out in space as weapons struck home or systems failed. The massive structure, home to most of the humans in the system, was slowly disintegrating. She ran a projection and realised, in horror, that without proper and immediate support, the Ring was going to come apart within days, perhaps less if the structure was hit again or something else went badly wrong. The system’s technological network seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

She rubbed her head, trying to shut out the hissing she could hear at the back of her mind. It was hard to focus on the hiss – it was always something at the corner of her mind, not something she could see openly – yet she had the feeling that if she only listened, it would suck her into its network and there would be nothing left of her. The sheer power spilling out across the surface of the planet below was terrifying, even if only a telepath could sense it directly. The entity, whatever it truly was, could manipulate great sections of the quantum foam. That made it, to all intents and purposes, God – at least on a very small scale.

The memory kept dancing in front of her mind’s eye. The Marines down on the planet below, according to the live feed the AIs were allowing her to access, could *see* the entity, yet they couldn’t understand what it truly was, or even why they could see it when sensors couldn’t even begin to pick it up. Aisyaj knew; the entity existed solely on the telepathic waveband, its visibility more of a mental insistence that it existed rather than anything truly solid. It was manifesting in the human universe by sheer force of will, its presence bending the laws of time and space around it, rewriting the quantum foam in order to allow itself to exist. It was power beyond comprehension and it was truly alien, alien beyond any hope of human understanding, or sympathy. She wasn’t even sure that it was truly malevolent. It might not recognise that humans existed.

Her fingers twitched towards the control panels, but somehow she held her treacherous hands back from completing their movement. The entity was calling to her, trying to pull it into its net, with as little compassion as the spider showed to the fly. The compulsion was all the more shocking, for telepathic compulsion – using one’s telepathy to influence others – was strictly forbidden. The entity didn’t seem to care about human feelings; indeed, she was unsure if it even knew what it was doing.

“We need you to attempt a scan,” the AIs said. Aisyaj glared over at their image. Her head felt as if it were full of cotton wool. She was in no state to scan anyone. “We need you to tell us what the entity did to the maddened shuttle pilot.”

“She stared into the face of the gorgon,” Aisyaj said, trying to focus her mind. “She was driven mad by the entity.”

She gabbled out an explanation, between trying to remember how to program the vessel's computers to take her out of orbit and somewhere safe – if there was anywhere safe now that the entities had arrived. Her treacherous mind refused to cooperate and she was reduced to babbling orders to the ship's computers, praying that her technology wouldn't fail as it had failed on the planet below. It was easy to understand why that was happening, anyway; the entity was bending the natural laws around it and, in doing so, disabling much of humanity's technology.

“We require more data,” the entity said. “Why did it happen?”

“I told you,” Aisyaj snapped. The anger helped her to focus. “She couldn't take contact with the creature, so it drove her mad. It will drive me mad if I stay here too long. Do you understand me?”

She finished programming the computers and glared towards the AI image. “Now, if you will excuse me...”

“That might not be a good idea,” the AIs said. “The coordinates you have entered would bring you out right on top of the Mushroom City, if you didn't interpenetrate with the planet and die horribly.”

Aisyaj stared down at the display. It felt as if a dark mirror had shattered in front of her eyes, a dark plate of glass that had been concealing the truth from her mind. The entity had snared her and she hadn't even realised! She'd learned to resist compulsion back when she'd been training to develop her powers, but this was different. The entity had oozed its way into her mind and, convinced she was escaping, she had nearly thrown herself into its tentacles.

“Perhaps we should assist,” the AIs said.

Aisyaj couldn't bring herself to argue.

Chapter Fourteen

"I can't see anything," Pasha said, as he glanced around, using all the sensors on his Marine Combat Unit. According to the shuttle pilots, they should be in the centre of the 'octopus,' yet he couldn't see anything. The green-tinted sky seemed to shimmer as he looked, but that was hardly unusual. His sensors – those that seemed to be reliable – showed no hint of any octopus-like creature. "Are you sure that there's something there?"

"Yes, Major," Kara said. If she hadn't been an old friend, he would have distrusted her opinion because it conflicted with what he could see. "I can see it!"

"All right," Pasha ordered. The movement towards the edge of the park was growing more prominent, suggesting that a crowd of maddened citizens had arrived to tackle the Marines. "Keep the shuttles away from the octopus. We'll find the uninfected citizens and get them out of the city."

He scowled as he glanced down at his tactical display. Several of the emergency beacons had just vanished. Under normal circumstances, that would imply that the citizen in question was dead, but now, with technology failing seemingly at random, it was impossible to be sure if they were alive or dead. The remaining civilians seemed to be scattered around, almost as if someone had wanted to lure the Marines into a trap. He would have to split up his forces to find and pull them all out, weakening his men...

"Major," his escort said. "We have four contacts..."

Pasha looked up. Somehow – and he blamed his failing sensors – the enemy had managed to get a set of defence drones online and pointed right at them, without even triggering an alert. The drones should have been easy for the Marines to reprogram and steer away from the Combat Units, but it didn't take a master hacker to confirm that the drones had been reprogrammed and their safety systems wiped. They normally served as policemen if the nominal police were overwhelmed, a very rare event, yet now he was certain that all of their weapons would be operating without their safety interlocks. On the other hand, drones weren't people; the Marines could use their full array of weapons on them without needing to worry about killing innocents.

He swore as the first humans appeared, following the defence drones. Their eyes were ablaze with madness, their bodies flickering with energies that revealed the existence of multiple weapons and defence enhancements. They were protected by their own internal force fields, ensuring that his men couldn't stop them without injuring them badly. He revived the sensor readings, wondering at how some technology seemed to fail while other technology remained intact, and muttered another curse under his breath. They would have to disable the civilians and hope that they were killed by the trauma before they could get them into a medical pod.

"The stunners won't work on these bastards," Corporal Anderson pointed out. "Major, I suggest that we deploy plasma lances and kick the shit out of the defence drones."

Pasha nodded slowly. The defence drones kept advancing, held above the ground by their antigravity fields. They were well-protected for their size and, somehow, he doubted they would show any restraint in engaging the Marines. The madness that had gripped the civilian population had gripped them too. He sent a flurry of orders into the network, a battle plan

forming in front of his men, and powered up his plasma lance. A glowing sword made of light appeared in front of him, ready for action.

“Mark your men,” he ordered, as his Marines spread out around him. The light from the plasma lances should have been intimidating, but the civilians showed no sign of being impressed. “On my mark...*jump!*”

The Marine Combat Units carried smaller antigravity generators themselves, enough to allow the Marines to fly if they had the space and were willing to expose themselves to the enemy. It was a risk, but as Pasha and his men jumped right *over* the oncoming crowd of madmen and raced for the edge of the park, it became clear that it was worth the risk. The drones could follow them rapidly, yet the maddened civilians couldn't move anything like as fast. It was worth the risk to separate both groups of antagonists.

On cue, the Marines turned and extended their plasma lances, slashing away at the defence drones. Three of them exploded before they realised that they were under attack, a datum Pasha filed away in his mind, convinced that it was a clue as to the true nature of their enemy. The drones, unburdened by human weaknesses, should have been able to react a great deal faster. They flew back and upwards, firing down towards the Marines, reminding him that the enemy cared nothing for human life. It should have been impossible to reprogram a police-issue stunner to be lethal.

“Take them out,” he ordered. The Marines opened fire with hellfire slugs, tiny bullets that contained a minute charge of antimatter. Using such weapons within a planetary atmosphere was frowned upon, but it was vitally important to get rid of the drones as quickly as possible. They exploded, one by one, under their fire, yet before they were all destroyed they took out four of the Marines. Pasha filed that away in a corner of his mind and kept moving. They didn't want to use such weapons on civilians if it could be avoided.

The civilians seemed to operate under no such restraint. Their implanted weapons would be dangerous if they ever managed to concentrate their fire. The Marines kept firing to distract the mob, keeping ahead of it as much as possible. Some members of the mob kept up the pursuit, others seemed to drop out of the hunting gang and vanish off into the city. Pasha checked the sensors, wondering if they were preparing a nastier surprise elsewhere, but the sensors were still unreliable. It was impossible to know just what was going on. Being blind worried him, even though the risks were actually minimal. It might become impossible to complete the mission.

“Remain outside the city,” he ordered the shuttle teams. If flying though the invisible octopus – he found it hard to keep the scorn out of his mental voice at the very thought – was dangerous, the shuttles could remain outside where it was safe. He would have ordered them into the city anyway, but the Admiral was convinced that there was a danger. “We'll bring the uninfected civilians to you.”

He snapped a plasma pulse back towards one of the infected civilians and had the pleasure of seeing the man's force field fail and his leg explode under the impact. Perversely, the man refused to cry out in pain, or even abandon the chase. Pasha knew some Enhanced Humans who had engineered their pain tolerance to remarkable levels, yet even they couldn't have taken a plasma pulse without screaming. It was as if they were fighting robots, or subverted slaves; subverted slaves who were viewed as completely expendable by their masters.

The civilian's distress signal was high above, on top of one of the skyscrapers. "Bill, go fetch him," Pasha ordered, as the Marines paused for a second. They were used to high-intensity combat, yet this was taxing all of them. Another group of sensor drones failed, as if someone had clicked a switch and simply turned them off. It made no sense. QCC connections worked, or else the Marine Combat Units would have failed along with the automated tech, but many other systems simply failed. "The rest of us will cover you."

From her position above the city, Janine had watched as it had all fallen into anarchy. The local network disruption was so intense that, for the first time in her life, she was effectively disconnected from the Galactic Net. She was still recording and broadcasting, or so she thought, but it was impossible to know if anyone was listening. Her memory cells were filling up with strange scenes, each one shocking to those who had grown up within the safe and peaceful Confederation, yet...what was going on? If it was a mass subversion attack, as the Confederation Navy Admiral had warned, it should have infected her as well.

It occurred to her that she might already have been infected and that she was already under outside control, yet it rapidly became apparent that there was no point in even thinking about it. She had never been tempted to enter Thrall or join one of the more extreme cults of pleasure seekers across the galaxy, so she had no idea what being subverted felt like, but wondering if she was already under control would just drive her mad. If something was that powerful, capable of intruding into her mind and altering it without her being aware that something was wrong, it was too powerful to fight. Resistance would be literally impossible – and futile.

She watched the battle in the park, unsure of what was going on or who was fighting until she saw the Marine Combat Units – massive humanoid monsters of metal, glittering with protective force fields – flying through the air and shooting down the defence drones. They seemed to be being chased by a crowd of unprotected humans, which made no sense to her until she realised that the Marines were probably concerned about causing civilian casualties. The men and women chasing them weren't acting of their own free will. The Marines could have slaughtered them all in seconds, but it would have been morally wrong.

A moment after the Marines vanished, too close to the building for her to see them any longer, one of them floated up and stared down at her. Janine stared back, careful to hold her hands visible and to keep her weapons implants stepped down to the bare minimum. The Marines were likely to be nervous after being attacked by so many insane humans.

"I hope you're clean," the Marine said. The massive humanoid shape seemed to shake as he spoke. "Please be clean."

"I'm clean," Janine said. It occurred to her, again, that she might be being controlled without knowing that she was under control, but she pushed the thought back into the back of her mind. She had enough problems without scaring herself silly. "Thank you for coming to get me."

The Marine held out a metal hand, took her hand surprisingly gently, and caught her up in the antigravity bubble surrounding his Marine Combat Unit. "We're going to head outside the

city and get you to the shuttles,” he said. “You’re wrapped within my protective field. There is no reason to be alarmed.”

Before Janine could say anything, they were flying through the air, heading towards the edge of the city. The dome surrounding the Mushroom City had disintegrated completely, yet for some reason the shuttles weren't coming into the area, but waiting for the civilian refugees outside the metropolis. The city below was burning, with flames licking up from a dozen fires – no one was attempting to put them out – and dead bodies scattered everywhere. She could see thousands of people on the ground, some clearly chasing the Marines, others just wandering, seemingly at random.

“Hey,” she said, wondering if the Marine could hear her. “Why can't we teleport up to the ships?”

The Marine’s voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. “The local disruption of technology is too great to risk teleporting,” he said. At least, Janine assumed that he was a man; it was impossible to tell. “You might wind up scattered across the wrong part of this universe, or snapped into another one...”

Janine froze. It hadn't occurred to her that, if technology was failing, seemingly at random, the Marine Combat Unit could fail too. The Marine would be safe if that happened, but she would fall to her death. She wanted to ask if they were safe, but cold logic told her that there was no way the Marine could know if they were safe or not. The sheer randomness of the failures defeated any attempt to predict what would happen, or to counter them. She concentrated on looking at the shuttles – she had never seen such a welcome sight in her life – and then turned her head to look back towards the dying city. There was something there...

She stared, her head spinning, barely even aware of the hot trickle suddenly forming between her legs. There was a giant creature looming over the city, its form wavering as though it were nothing more than a trick of the light, yet she *felt* its presence in the back of her head. A single giant eye stared down at her, seeming to peer right into her very soul. It rested on a bed of tentacles, each one reaching down towards the city, or even upwards, as if it was a monstrous spider sitting in its nest. She shivered and realised that it was translucent, as if it was somehow occupying the same space as the city without touching the human buildings, or displaying them.

If the Marine was aware of the creature’s presence, he gave no sign. His motion towards the ground broke her eye contact with the creature, allowing her to look away. She could *feel* the creature behind her, as if its eye was boring into her back, yet she refused to look at it. Whatever it was – and she was sure that it was no mere hologram or trick of the light – it was dangerous, the most dangerous thing she had ever encountered. It was too dangerous to risk encountering ever again.

Captain Pearson watched, as dispassionately as he could, while the Marines started to make their way into the captured shuttle. The *River*’s gravity field had been pulled back to allow them entry, but as soon as they stepped inside, the gravity field had been closed around them, ensuring that nothing could escape from the shuttle. If they ran into serious trouble, it would be impossible to pull them out. The Admiral hadn't issued any such orders, yet he’d prepared

his ship for the worst; if the shuttle proved too much to handle, the gravity fields would compress it out of existence.

“The shuttle’s power is almost completely drained,” the lead Marine reported, as they pressed up against the craft’s hull. There was no sign of life from within the hulk, not even the sound of someone pounding out a distress signal against the metal. “We may not even be able to open the hatch.”

Pearson watched as they started to crank the emergency system, puzzled and alarmed. The Confederation didn’t build small craft – even expendable shuttles – without building in a complex mixture of safety systems, including power cells that should have provided life support and minimal emergency systems indefinitely. The thought of something that could drain them was alarming, all the more so because the emergency power cells weren’t linked to the remainder of the shuttle. If tech was starting to fail, whatever the underlying cause...well, he knew, without technology the Confederation wouldn’t exist. He wasn’t sure how much of the speculation running through the command network was accurate, but he was starting to have a very good idea of what had happened to the Ancients. They’d fallen victim to the same...whatever it was attacking Greenland.

The shuttle’s hatch opened slowly and a single figure leapt out, attacking the lead Marine with tooth and claw. The Marine tumbled over backwards, taken by surprise, and endured the attack, which couldn’t even come close to penetrating his armour. Carefully, using his armour under heavy strength-restrictions, he pushed her away and hit her with a stun bolt. It had no effect, so he struck her again. This time, she sagged against him and collapsed.

“Put her in the stasis pod,” the Marine CO commanded. “Check out the remainder of the shuttle, now.”

Pearson watched through their helmet sensors as they stepped into the darkened interior of the shuttle. It had been carrying, according to the data download from *Sparta*, twelve medical corpsmen and their equipment. The blood splashed around the interior compartment suggested what had happened to them, just before the Marine saw the bodies, piled up in one corner. Their deaths, judging from their expressions, had not only been painful, but self-inflicted. Some of them had clawed their own eyes out, others had been bleeding from their eyes and ears before they collapsed, killed by some unknown force. Two of them had committed suicide using their own weapons.

He switched his attention back to the shuttlebay and watched as two Marines pushed Lieutenant Chihiro into the stasis pod. Whatever had affected her, it was too dangerous to treat anything other than very carefully. The stasis pod would be heavily guarded until it was transported to a secure facility, where it would be opened and Chihiro would be examined until the researchers worked out what had happened to her. Unlike her comrades, she’d survived, long enough – at least – to start firing on her fellow Marines. Pearson didn’t like the implications of that at all. It suggested that there was a guiding mind behind what was happening to the planet below.

“Captain,” the tactical officer said. The flare of alarm in his mind echoed through the command network. It wasn’t good news. “We have incoming enemy missiles!”

Pearson switched his awareness to the tactical sensors. The planetary defence network had suddenly gone active, completely active. It had not only lit up all of its sensors, but it was firing new missiles out towards the task force. There were hyper-missiles, warp missiles and even conventional sublight missiles, enough to take out the entire fleet. The Ring, he realised suddenly, had fallen under enemy control.

“Link us back into the fleet network,” he ordered. The swarm of icons in his mind only grew larger as the enemy unloaded their arsenals towards the Confederation starships. “Prepare to repel attack!”

Chapter Fifteen

“Admiral, everything is firing at once,” the tactical officer said. “We are being fired upon by every planetary defence platform.”

“The alien influence must have spread through the entire Ring,” the AIs agreed. “The internal fighting appears to have dimmed down, allowing them to concentrate on a new foe; us.”

Burton nodded as the display updated. The enemy seemed to be as devoid of tactics as ever, but they were firing enough missiles to more than make up for the lack; quantity had a quality all of its own. The hyper-missiles alone were a serious threat to the task force, but combined with the other missiles, it would be hard to deal with them alone, let alone the remainder of the attack. The only advantage they had was that the enemy missiles were separated; if they were lucky, they wouldn’t have to ward them all off simultaneously.

“Deploy all point defence,” he ordered, knowing that the automatic systems would have leapt ahead of him. The warp and hyper-missiles alone would be on them before merely human reactions could react, let alone take defensive action. The sublight missiles, pulling ninety percent of light speed as they raced away from their launch platforms, would still pose a serious threat. In the days before FTL sensors, he knew, the task force would have been destroyed before it had any warning that it was under attack.

He allowed his mind to sink into the tactical gestalt as the planetoid responded to the attack, rotating its hyper-shields through the different bands of hyperspace to make it harder for the hyper-missiles to strike home. The warp missiles posed a different threat, but the starships were already deploying drones and counter-missiles, even though it was odd facing Confederation-level tech. If the defenders had used their own automatics, the task force might well have been driven away from the planet. As it was, the chances were good that they were going to be driven away from the planet anyway.

The enemy launchers appeared in his mind, rotating through space as they reloaded and prepared to launch another barrage and he targeted them, ordering the task force’s offensive weapons to spring into life and destroy them before they could fire again. They were operating under full shields now, however, and he knew that the kind of firepower required to take them out would almost certainly cause collateral damage. If the Ring was under enemy control, it had to be isolated, yet he saw no way to do that without damaging it badly enough to ensure its destruction and the deaths of everyone on the structure. The first hyper-missiles roared away from his ship, trying to take out the launchers, but his early estimate was right. Powered by their direct link to the local star, a nearly-infinite source of power, the launchers were too well shielded to allow them to be taken out surgically.

He checked in on the Marines and scowled. The Marines had rescued several hundred uninfected civilians – several hundred, out of a population that had numbered in the millions – but they were finding it hard going against constant – and insane – opposition. Burton felt his head spinning as he tried to come to grips with the scale of the disaster, unwilling to admit the truth, that the Confederation Navy was completely out of its depth and sinking fast. He had never seen a situation go so bad so fast, apart from the Buckley Experiment...and that, he was morbidly certain, was connected to what had happened to Greenland.

“It seems likely,” the AIs concurred, when he enquired. “We have consulted with the telepath and she claims that the...entity appears to be broadcasting on similar levels to the telepathic emissions near the Gateway. Whatever infected this planet may well have originated at the Gateway.”

Burton scowled. “And if it came from the Gateway,” he said dryly, “where does the Gateway lead?”

“Unknown,” the AIs said. “The alien entity remains beyond the ability of our sensors to perceive, although more and more humans are reporting that they can see the creature looming over the city. It is quite possible that it travelled from the Gateway to Greenland under its own power, being effectively invisible to our sensors, at least as far as we can tell. Logically, it must be doing something to manifest in our dimension; given time, we will be able to locate, study and close its method of entering our universe.”

“I hope you’re right,” Burton said. He stared down at the display. The entire conversation had taken microseconds and the hyper-missiles were closing in. There were bare seconds left before they impacted, followed rapidly by the warp missiles. “I think we need to consider...”

Sparta rocked violently as the first hyper-missiles broke through the shields and slammed against the planetoid’s hull. Red icons flared up in his mind as missiles detonated against the inner shields, unleashing strange and terrible energies to crawl over the defences and try to break into the hull. Darker images appeared as local shields failed, allowing the weapons to inflict damage on the ship itself, despite suppression fields that snuffed out explosions before they could inflict serious damage. An alarm rang in his mind as a gravimetric warhead detonated against the hull, overloading the suppression fields and ripping into the unprotected metal. The entire starship network seemed to scream in pain.

“Major damage to assorted sections,” the tactical officer reported. “Damage control parties are on their way.”

Burton nodded, watching the entire engagement from his god’s eye view. Several cruisers had been badly damaged or destroyed, with three retreating into hyperspace to avoid destruction. All three planetoids had been hit by the incoming swarm of missiles, although...as he stared in horror, all of the warp missiles adjusted course and threw themselves on the *Gordon*, the third planetoid. No ship, not even a planetoid, could survive that kind of bombardment.

“Get into hyperspace,” he ordered, as the missiles closed in on their target. He knew that it was almost certainly too late, yet he had to try. “Get into hyperspace...”

The planetoid’s icon lit up as thousands of missiles detonated against its shields. The defence network struggled valiantly to repel the attack, but there were just too many missiles to counter them all. A handful slipped through the shields and tore into the hull, further weakening the defences and allowing other missiles to strike home. Before the planetoid could withdraw into hyperspace, her quantum tap blew and the entire ship vanished in a ball of fire.

“The *Gordon* has been destroyed with all hands,” the tactical officer confirmed. Burton shook his head, still stunned by the sight. The Confederation Navy had only ever lost one

other planetoid and that had been due to a...incident with her quantum tap. The Navy had never lost such a vessel in combat. "The remaining enemy missiles are adjusting their targeting patterns to target other ships."

Burton allowed himself a moment to think. One thing that had been hammered into his head back at the Academy was that there were times when battles were clearly lost and continuing the fight was pointless. He could have hit the Ring hard enough to cripple the defences and make it harder for them to attack his ships, but that – as he had reminded himself countless times – would slaughter the human population. Maddened or not, under alien control or simply warped by contact with an alien mind, they were still human. He couldn't carry out a mass slaughter of helpless humans; the Confederation Navy was intended to *protect* humans.

"Contact the Marines," he ordered. It was time to cut his losses. "I want them to take the uninfected humans they have picked up and get them off the planet, but to break contact with infected humans. We will have to come back with additional forces and, hopefully, some better understanding of what is going on."

He ran through a handful of tactical scenarios in his head, remembering what one of his instructors had said back when he'd been taught how to play Battle Chess for the first time. The greatest chess player in the Confederation didn't fear the second-greatest chess player, but the worst, for there was no way of telling what the idiot would go and do. If the system was in the grip of a rebellion, as insane as that seemed in the Confederation, where there was literally nothing to rebel over, he could have deployed decoy drones to present the enemy with multiple threats and force them to ignore the retreating Marines and their human cargo. Here, though, there was no way of telling what the idiots would do...

"Deploy decoy drones," he ordered, as the enemy launchers started to spit out additional missiles towards his fleet. If nothing else, they should distract the enemy. "Bring up the hyperdrive and hold it at just below activation; as soon as the Marines are gone, we will withdraw to the edge of the star system and await orders."

He sensed the dismay rippling through the minds attached to the command network. None of them liked the idea of retreating, but it was clear that they'd bit off far more than they could chew. There was no point in getting the entire task force destroyed...and the only other way to prevent that was to commit mass slaughter. They would retreat, study the infected shuttle pilot they'd recovered and come up with a cure, at which point they would return and liberate Greenland.

The AI image broke into his thoughts. "We are picking up a curious distortion on the surface of the planet," they said. An image – an empty jungle, seen from high above – was projected into his mind. Burton stared at it, puzzled. There was nothing there, apart from a tiny grey patch in the centre of the image. "That grey patch was not there five minutes ago."

Burton frowned. The human mind literally could not comprehend just how powerful the AIs were, or just how much data they could process within microseconds. The AIs could hold a conversation with every single person in the Confederation and they wouldn't use all of their mental capability to do it. They could collect information from the remaining planetary sensors and the network of drones he'd deployed and collate it far faster than any merely human intelligence officer. For them to be certain of something was to know that it could be taken for granted.

“All right,” he said slowly. It wasn't anywhere near the city, or the invisible entity the troops on the ground were reporting. “What is it?”

“We are not sure,” the AIs said. “It appears to be a patch of dead ground, completely dead. The effect is unexplained, but we have seen something akin to it before, long before the Buckley Experiment. The effect is similar to the planetary surface of the Ancient worlds.”

Burton felt his blood run cold. “The planet is being drained of life,” he said, in horror. It was the only answer that made sense to him. “The entity, whatever it is, is draining the planet dry.”

“So it would seem,” the AIs agreed. They projected an image of an Ancient world in front of him. “This may be what will happen to Greenland.”

“Admiral,” the tactical officer said, sharply. “We are picking up nineteen starships – no, twenty-one starships – heading away from the Ring. They’re heading out of the system!”

“They may be carrying the infection,” the AIs warned. “They cannot be allowed to reach another inhabited star system.”

Burton had already reached the same conclusion. “Deploy the cruisers to intercept,” he ordered. Another seven starships had appeared from the Ring, heading upwards on warp drive, rather than hyperdrive. That, at least, was a relief. If they’d slipped into hyperspace, it would be very hard to track them, let alone force them to halt. “The ships” – he couldn’t quite believe his own words – “are to be disabled. If that proves impossible, they are to be destroyed.”

“Understood, sir,” the tactical officer said.

“And forward a warning to every star system within a thousand light years,” Burton added. He looked over at the AI image. The AIs could probably ensure that the ships were easy to identify, even if they attempted to conceal their names or origins. “Those ships must not be allowed to reach another inhabited world.”

The thought chilled him. If the ships were piloted by refugees, they would have been screaming for help as soon as they saw the Confederation Navy, which suggested that whoever was flying them was under the control of the entity. Greenland alone had beaten his task force, forcing him to pull out his Marines and abandon the system; what would happen if a hundred star systems were infected, or a thousand? The Confederation Navy wouldn’t be able to enforce a blockade, even if the enemy didn’t capture vast military resources. Given time, and access to Confederation-level industrial nodes, someone could produce a fleet to rival the Confederation Navy. It had long been a concern of defence planners.

He uploaded new orders into the tactical database. Before they withdrew to the edge of the star system, Greenland’s industrial nodes would be destroyed, even though it ran the risk of condemning most of the population to starvation. They would not be able to replenish their weapons or military resources, let alone start building new starships. It could not be allowed.

In front of him, on the display, the disaster continued to unfold.

Aisyaj lay inside the cocoon and struggled to focus her mind. It proved difficult, if not impossible, for the human mind had a tendency to dwell on the bad. She had been controlled – no, perhaps *controlled* was too strong a word; *influenced* – by a powerful telepathic force, something she should have been capable of avoiding. Or perhaps not; the sheer level of power, pulsating through the telepathic waveband and out into space, was staggering. It might not matter just how strong a shield she – or the remainder of the telepaths known to humanity – could produce. The entity might have overwhelmed her anyway.

She struggled against the force, trying to analyse it, all the time trying to avoid the thought that the creature wasn't interested in her, perhaps not even aware of her existence. It seemed to be calling out to receptive minds, yet the net result on a mind that gave into the effect was madness, or death. The AIs had shown her a handful of grainy images from the planet's surface and she had been shocked by the sight, by men and women tearing themselves apart, or fighting each other, or committing horrific acts of barbarity that made no sense. Aisyaj had, years ago, worked with some of the sociopaths in the Confederation, wondering if they could be redeemed and allowed to re-enter normal life. The experience hadn't been a productive one; she'd sensed - when she'd probed their minds - a complete lack of concern for the rest of the human race. They hadn't even been aware that they lacked such concern; to them, it was perfectly normal. She realised that, to the people influenced by the entity, their behaviour probably seemed perfectly normal too.

"If the universe was shrinking," one of her teachers had said, "and all the tools you used to monitor the size of the universe were shrinking as well, would you know the universe was shrinking?"

The memory made her wince. Back home, back when they'd trained her to use her talent, they had demonstrated just how easy it was to use telepathy to influence an unprepared mind. The victims hadn't known that they had been influenced; indeed, they had come up with excuses to justify their behaviour to themselves, explanations that defied all logic. A woman, convinced to undress in public, had told herself that it was too hot in the room; Aisyaj remembered the embarrassment of discovering that even she, a powerful telepath, was vulnerable to subtle suggestions. The entity wasn't particularly subtle, but then – it didn't need to be. It had the power to make its merest whim real.

She explained all that to the AIs as they started to guide her starship away from the planet below, guiding her towards safety – she hoped. The entity seemed to have enough power to warp the very fabric of space and time. The AIs should be reasonably safe from its influence – their brains were thousands of light years away – yet there was no way to know for sure. The AI brains existed in localised hyperspace fields, allowing them to think and calculate at rates far beyond those of dumb meat, but if the entity could hamper technology so badly...what could it do if it ever got loose on Calculus?

"You have to warn them," she said, as she triggered the cocoon's sleep function. Her head hurt and she couldn't trust her own reflexes, or even her thoughts. She knew that she was becoming paranoid – or was the thought that she was becoming paranoid merely another sign that the entity was worming its way into her mind? There was no way to know. "You have to tell them that it's feeding off us, maybe even using our minds for power."

“It is feeding off the entire planet,” the AIs said. They had already informed her of the dying patch, already spreading rapidly across the planet’s surface. There was a pause as the starship rotated. “Prepare for hyperspace.”

The starship shivered as the hyper-field flickered into life and pushed the ship into hyperspace. The sense of pervading presence oozing its way into her mind faded at once, allowing her to – finally – fall into sleep. Her last thought was a chilling awareness that it wouldn’t be long before the entity managed to reach out over countless light years...and snuff out all of humanity’s worlds.

After all, if they could do it to the Ancients, why not the Confederation?

Chapter Sixteen

“What is it?”

Janine couldn't bear to look at the entity, yet somehow she was sure that it was aware of her and watching her. She could feel its presence, like the sun on the back of her neck, something so powerful as to be beyond understanding. It was just...*there*.

Few of the humans piling into the shuttles – either refugees from the city or Marine supporting units – could bear to look at it, or even look at the city. The entity seemed to be growing larger – she was sure of it, even though she couldn't look at it directly – and expanding towards the shuttle landing zone. The pilots were clearly nervous, shouting at the civilians to make their way up the ramps and into the shuttles, just so they could take off and flee the beleaguered planet. Janine allowed one of the Marine Combat Units to wave her into the nearest shuttle, a reassuringly normal sight in a day of horror, and stopped on the ramp. Bracing herself, she took one last look back towards the city and froze...

The sheer impact of the entity's presence struck her like a blow between the eyes. It seemed to have grown larger, stronger...and *realer*. Its massive eye seemed to be glaring down at the city, watching as the puny humans struggled to escape its influence, as if their struggles were no use at all. A million tiny strands of light hung down from its bulk, reaching down into the city and – she realised, in a thrill of horror – connecting it to its victims. She heard a roaring in her ears as the entity seemed to focus on her, a whispering at the back of her mind that promised understanding if she would only let it in...and then a hard slap brought her back to reality.

“Don't look at it,” the Marine snapped. He was shaking her, dragging her into the shuttle's hatch. Janine felt herself weaken as her strength failed her, leaving her wondering if she'd been drugged before she realised that the entity had been sucking the life out of her body. The hatch slammed closed, yet she could still feel the entity's sheer presence pervading the air. “Sit down and strap in!”

Janine could barely move, even when he thrust her down into a seat. He had to strap her in, angrily berating her for being foolish enough to look at the creature, his body somehow vital beyond words. She was suddenly very aware of him, not as a masculine man, but as someone who literally brimmed with life force. She struggled to lift a hand and stare at it, wondering if it would be the withered hand of an elderly woman. Her eyes seemed to be failing her, yet she could *almost* sense the entity, right at the back of her mind. The shuttle suddenly seemed as insubstantial as the very air itself, while the entity was overwhelmingly *real*.

“All right, we're taking off now,” the pilot said, over the intercom. The entire shuttle seemed to start humming, seconds before the flickering impression of an antigravity field passed over her body. Janine felt sick, just before the shuttle started to lift off from the ground, a kind of sickness that seemed to run through her brain. The shuttle shivered again and clawed for the sky, yet the sense of the entity's presence only grew stronger. “We're on our way.”

Janine struggled to move, but all of her strength was gone. She could barely look out towards the porthole, where she saw the shape of the Mushroom City replaced by the eerie green sky. She was relieved to realise that they weren't facing towards the entity, or planning to fly

through the space occupied by the creature, yet she could still sense it. The entity was pressing itself onto humanity's dimension by force of will...

No, she thought, in sudden understanding. The entity wasn't using its own power to anchor its position in humanity's reality. The entity was draining power from its human servants and using them to lock itself in place. A mere handful of seconds had been long enough for it to drain her of all of her strength, leaving her helpless and drained. If she'd remained within the space occupied by the entity, it would have eventually sunk its hooks into her mind, driving her as mad as the poor bastards back on the planet's surface. She concentrated, trying to activate her implants, but they stubbornly refused to work. Her mind was simply unable to focus.

"We're about to make the jump into hyperspace," the pilot informed them. "Prepare for transit."

Normally, transits into hyperspace were smooth, with nary a bump. Modern technology had solved the problem of hyper-shock caused by using the hyperdrive – crews, back in the early days of the Age of Expansion, had found themselves vomiting on the deck – but now the sudden transit felt horrible. Janine found herself struggling to breathe, convinced that her every moment would be her last, before the effect finally faded away. The odd sensations of hyperspace were almost welcome compared to the eerie touch of the entity.

Her implants came back online suddenly, shocking her. She ignored the thousands of messages that had arrived in her inbox, mainly from her fans worrying about her, and concentrated on using her implants to restore her strength. The medical scans couldn't locate any reason for her exhaustion, but that hardly mattered. She knew what had caused it. The entity had tried to drain her dry.

Lying back in the seat, she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

"Keep moving," Pasha snapped. The swarm of maddened humans was coming closer, even though the Marines were running far faster than the average human could hope to move. Drawing the mobs away from the escaping civilians had seemed a good idea at the time, but now the mobs were converging from all sides, as if whatever was controlling them had finally learned how to use them properly. Or perhaps it was just a coincidence. There was no way to tell.

A shower of sparks erupted off a nearby wall as a plasma bolt struck it directly, sending the sparks falling over the Marine Combat Unit. Pasha ignored them, although it was a sign of a growing – and worrying – trend. Some of the maddened humans had access to all kinds of equipment, including items that could be used to kill someone, even wearing heavy-duty protection. A gravity presser, normally used to produce weird sculptures, had crippled one of the Marine Combat Units, leaving them down another man. A focused laser had nearly taken Pasha's own Marine Combat Unit out of action. They were leaving a trail of dead or injured civilians throughout the city, for nothing. He'd tried to capture one of the maddened civilians in a capture field and discovered, too late, that the capture fields had failed. Nothing could be taken for granted any longer, not even their technology.

He looked up in alarm as a new swarm of defence drones appeared, firing towards the Marines with heavy weapons. At least they could be destroyed without risking human lives, he knew, as the Marines turned and opened fire with their heavier weapons, taking their frustration out on the automated drones. They disintegrated one by one, blown into tiny shreds. A second later, a new swarm of maddened humans appeared, flying on hover boards and heading right towards the Marines. Pasha triggered his antigravity units and led the Marines up, away from the swarm, but the swarm gave chase. They might, he realised in some horror, be able to delay them long enough to give the rest of the swarm a chance to catch up.

“Major, this is the Admiral,” a new voice said. “You are ordered to pull out and return to the task force.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Pasha said. A small girl leapt off her hover board and landed on his Marine Combat Unit, clawing and scratching at his armour. She couldn’t harm him, but he had to use his gravity manipulators to push her away without doing her any serious harm. “Do you want us to make an emergency dump?”

There was a pause. “Negative,” the Admiral said. “Return to the shuttles and...”

Pasha swung around as an alarm echoed through the combat network. Four of his Marines were collapsing into dust, disintegrating...he realised what was going on, seconds before his own Marine Combat Unit started to disintegrate. The enemy was completely insane! They’d created a rogue nanomachine plague and unleashed it on the Marines. The shields should have deflected the plague, but they too had failed. Emergency warnings mounted rapidly in his HUD...

...And then he found himself snapping back to awareness on the *Sparta*.

“Report,” he ordered, pulling himself out of his cocoon. “What happened?”

“The QCC links were destroyed, Major,” the coordinator reported. “You awoke back on the ship when your unit failed.”

Pasha felt his legs shiver, as they always did after an emergency dump. The Confederation had combined its QCC communications technology with virtual reality units to create a Marine Corps that was, literally, made out of metal and defensive systems. The men controlling the units remained safe on the mothership, while their minds operated the Marine Combat Units, relying on the QCC link to ensure that there was no time lag. He checked the final moments of the engagement record – they were automatically stored onboard the planetoid – and scowled. The rogue nano-swarm had destroyed his entire platoon.

“Bastards,” he muttered. The Marine Combat Units were designed to be expendable – after all, they could always be replaced, unlike flesh and blood Marines – but suddenly he wasn’t sure that that was a wise tactic. If they had to fight in environments where technology had become unreliable, the Marine Combat Units themselves might become unreliable, or worse. “I wonder...”

He broke off as the sound of screaming echoed over from the other cocoons. Two of his Marines were sitting up, screaming like children who had lost their parents. Other Marines

were sitting up, staring at them as they screamed their minds away. The medical staff moved in quickly to sedate them, yet the early sedatives refused to work and they eventually had to resort to portable stunners. The two Marines were rapidly taken out of the deployment zone to sickbay.

“What happened?” Pasha demanded. “What happened to them?”

“We don’t know,” the technician said, in dismay. “They just started to scream.”

Pasha ordered the remaining Marines into their sleeping quarters for a rest – they could write the reports afterwards, once he figured out what he intended to write – but remained, staring down at the cocoons the maddened Marines had occupied. Years ago, humans had worried about the effect on someone who was suddenly and unwillingly disconnected from a computer system, but experience had shown that the danger simply didn’t exist. There was always a little disorientation when someone emerged from a VR simulation or when someone was twinned with a remote unit – such as a Marine Combat Unit – yet there was no outright madness. It made no sense at all, but then...very little had made sense since they’d jumped into the Greenland System and landed on the ground.

He stood up as the starship rocked, another spread of missiles impacting against her shields. The remaining Marine Combat Units were being pulled up from the ground now – it went against the grain to abandon them, even if their crews could be pulled out of them and the units destroyed – and then the task force could withdraw. The thought was a bitter pill to swallow. The Confederation Marines did not abandon Confederation citizens, yet what else could they do? Whatever had been unleashed down on the planet below, it was too much to handle. They’d gone in without proper preparation and had been handled their heads, without ever challenging the force behind the crisis.

“Enjoy your victory, you bastards,” he growled. “We’ll be back.”

“The Marines have either snapped back to the ship or have boarded their shuttles,” the deployment officer reported. Admiral Burton nodded in relief. The tactical situation had only gotten worse, with nearly a hundred starships flying away from the star system in all directions. Even restricted to warp drive, it was certain that his task force would be able to intercept them all before they reached another star system. “All of our people have left the ground.”

Leaving how many people down on the surface, trapped and helpless, Burton wondered. He didn’t say it aloud, leaving it as a private thought, something to remember when he was making his report. The mission had been a total disaster from start to finish. The loss of an entire planetoid was minor compared to the loss of a planet...and the knowledge that many of the dead civilians had been killed by his people was merely the final blow. The entity, whatever it was, had forced them to kill the civilians he was supposed to protect.

“The dead patch is spreading,” the AIs added. Their image seemed untroubled, but then, they rarely showed any sign of fear. Burton wondered, in a moment of sober reflection, just what would happen to an AI caught up in the entity’s presence. If humans, flying into the entity, could go mad, what would happen to an AI? Or, perhaps, an AI wouldn’t be infected. If that

was the case, perhaps the Confederation needed to start developing AI-controlled weapons to turn against the entities. “The patch is now two kilometres wide and expanding.”

Burton watched through the sensors, unable to conceal his dismay. The Confederation built structures on a massive scale, creating rings around planets or even entire suns, yet there was something unearthly about watching an entire planet be drained completely of all life. The grey patch seemed unstoppable, spreading out over empty land and human settlements; there was no way to know what happened to the humans who were living in the settlements. He couldn't even tell if they were alive or dead.

“The remaining planetary network is going down,” the AIs added. “We are unable to deduce the cause of the collapse.”

Burton shivered. Every human settlement had a planetary network, one that linked the population into the greater Confederation, allowing them almost anything they could want. It could teleport people around the world, provide instant medical support or even intervene if matters got out of hand. The network was safety; few in the civilian side of the Confederation could imagine life without it, for it ensured a long and peaceful life. Even if there were humans left on Greenland who had escaped the entity's influence, how would they survive without the network and most of their technology? Apart from those who had chosen to seek a more primitive way of life – normally after a hundred years of living in the Confederation – there were few humans alive who had any experience of living without technology. The survivors would die down on the surface of the world before any help could arrive from elsewhere.

“Understood,” he said. The remaining shuttles had either made it back to the ships or jumped out themselves, heading for the rendezvous point at the edge of the star system. Several other starships were on their way to meet up with the task force, but he found himself with a classic problem of too many tasks, yet too few ships to attend to them all. The ships that had left the planet had to be intercepted – his tactical staff was already vectoring the newcomers onto the fleeing ships – and Greenland itself had to be blockaded. That wasn't going to be easy. The weapons mounted on the Ring could command space for light-hours around the planet. “Is there no way we can stop it?”

“We are unable to determine, even, how the effect is produced,” the AIs said. If they recognised it as a question of desperation, rather than a question expecting a serious answer, they gave no sign. “We cannot even begin to counter it. Assuming it continues to expand at the current rate, the entire planet will be dead within two weeks. The rate of expansion is itself expanding.”

Burton stared down at the tactical display. The task force was pulling back from the planet now, although the defences were still firing on them, as if the defenders thought that they were driving them away. They had, he noted ruefully; his weapons had been stayed by the fact that countless innocent humans, who were not in their right minds, would be killed if he opened fire on the Ring. The list of destroyed or damaged starships, floating in his head, mocked him. No other Confederation Navy commander had lost so much tonnage since the last war the Confederation had fought.

“Jump us out,” he ordered, quietly.

The planetoid's hyper-field charged up and *Sparta* slipped back into hyperspace, emerging on the edge of the star system. They would be out of range of the planet's defences, yet they would still be able to track and intercept starships leaving the star system. Even so, it was a defeat and he knew that it was a defeat, as did his subordinates. They had failed in their duty to protect the planet's population.

"You handled the situation as well as you could," the AIs said, when he confided his thoughts to them. "It was not handled so well elsewhere."

Burton's eyes opened fire. "Greenland was not the only place to be attacked?"

"Correct," the AIs stated. "Nineteen other worlds were attacked by the entities. The results...have not been good. Twenty-one billion humans have been infected or killed in the outbreak."

Their voice darkened. "And they, Admiral, may only be the beginning," they added. "One of the worlds to be infected was the Scorpion System, housing the Scorpion Navy Yard. The system has fallen completely to the enemy force."

Chapter Seventeen

Two hundred light years from the Gateway – as human news programs were increasingly referring to the reshaped black hole – the *Tooth and Claw* and her task force floated in the blackness of space, watching as the ships of the Confederation Navy patrolled the quarantine zone. They were not alone in the inky darkness of space, for several hundred other starships drifted around the edges; some civilian human ships, others alien, either allied to humanity or not. Warlord Masji watched, as dispassionately as he could, as the starships gathered near the Gateway. He would have preferred for his task force to be alone, but he had to admit that they were providing useful cover. The humans could hardly arrange for an *accident* to befall his entire fleet under the eyes of the galaxy.

He looked down towards the scientists, working away busily in their nests. The recent arrival of forty researchers from the homeworld – including a number who had studied at human universities – had allowed his fleet to continue its research program, yet they had come up with very little. They had been able to confirm some of the odder stories floating around the Galactic Net, but the alien objects remained as impenetrable and beyond understand as ever. The science that had created them, the Warlord knew, was far beyond the best the Confederation could produce.

The thought made him smile. They had been monitoring transmissions from the Confederation and had watched as alien *entities* mounted their attacks on the humans and their plethora of sub-races. He had automatically dismissed some of the more absurd claims – of course, if they were losing, the humans would have an excellent motive to claim that their enemy was supremely powerful – yet it couldn't be denied that the humans had lost a number of star systems, even one of their dreaded planetoids. His eyes strayed back to the main display and he smiled again, exposing his teeth in what the humans would call a gesture of contempt, delighting in the well-deserved fall of an enemy. Or, perhaps, pleasure in their pain; losing an entire planetoid, along with its crew, had to hurt. Even for the Confederation, planetoids couldn't be replaced quickly, unlike cruisers.

And if the Confederation was having difficulties, perhaps there was an opportunity for his people, a chance to ally with a force far more powerful than the humans who had stolen their destiny. If the entities could be convinced to come to an agreement with his race, their powers could be bent and directed towards targets of best advantage for both sides. Eventually, of course, the deal would be over, but by then his people would know how to defeat the entities and force them back to their own dimension, leaving them as the unquestioned masters of the galaxy. The Confederation would no longer prevent them from dominating the lesser races that hid behind the human race, allowing them to finally take the mastery that was theirs by right. And who knew; the Emperor's throne might be shaky...there might be opportunity for a Warlord who had pushed his race further forward than any of them had ever dreamed possible.

"Researcher," he snapped. "Have you managed to identify a method of communicating with the objects?"

The researchers cringed, almost at once. They might have been important to his people, yet his crew had been brought up to think of people like them as cowards, unfit for anything, but sport. The Emperor might have issued strict orders that they were to remain unharmed, yet

such orders had only limited value so far from the homeworld...and failure, no matter how understandable, was rarely tolerated.

“The objects appear to be nothing more than a section of something far larger that has been extruded into normal space from elsewhere,” the lead researcher said, finally. He, at least, managed to stand tall, although his head was bowed in the gesture of submission to higher authority. “Our sensors are not capable of reaching into the alternate dimension, where the main body resides. However” – he added quickly – “we have been able to make some deductions about their true nature.”

He tapped one claw against the display. “We believe that those objects are charged with keeping the Gateway open,” he added, as the display updated. “The energy flickers within the Gateway seem to largely correspond with the movement of the objects, despite its seeming randomness. If they could be destroyed, or forced back into their own space, the Gateway might collapse completely.”

“Which is not something we want,” Warlord Masji said, thoughtfully. “The entities are waging war against our enemy.”

“With respect, Exculted Warlord, the entities are largely beyond our comprehension,” the researcher warned. “The enemy of my enemy is my enemy’s enemy; no more, no less.”

Masji grimaced in agreement. It was an old saying of his people and it had surprised him, when he had started to study the humans, to discover that they had a similar saying. The entities, if they destroyed the Confederation, might not stop there, but go on to destroy the rest of the galaxy as well, including his people. If they could be talked into working with his people, on the other hand, the possibilities were literally endless.

“True at the moment,” he agreed. At least he didn't have to worry about the scientists plotting against him. “But if we could communicate with them...”

The researchers exchanged glances. “We believe that the objects in our space are little more than drones,” one said. “We would have to communicate with the entities in their own space.”

Masji smiled as some of the other researchers instantly began disputing the first researcher’s claim. “And how,” he inquired, “do you propose that we do that?”

The researcher grinned, exposing his teeth. “Simple,” he said. “We take a ship through the Gateway and talk to them directly.”

“Interesting thought,” Masji said. He looked up at the main display, which showed the presence of nearly a hundred human starships, buzzing around the Gateway and the four alien objects spinning in their absurdly alien patterns. “And how do we do that without being intercepted and destroyed?”

He studied the display for a long moment, thinking hard. The humans would intercept his fleet easily, at least if he came in guns blazing. There would be a very rapid exchange of fire and, much as he hated to admit it, his fleet would be destroyed. Human weapons, still vastly superior to their own systems, would turn his fleet into expanding vapour. He remembered

the last report from the scientists, the admittance that they had failed to generate external hyper-fields to launch missiles towards the enemy targets rather than cramming hyperdrives into the missiles themselves, and scowled. The humans simply had a much greater range of fire...

A thought struck him and he smiled inwardly, seeing a plan forming in front of his mind's eye. It would be risky as hell, risky as defying the entire Confederation Navy or the Emperor himself, yet it could work. He fired some enquiries into the main computer, working through it carefully, and was gratified to discover that the plan was workable. All it would need was some careful preparation.

"Assumming we can get into the Gateway," he said, "how can we talk to the entities?"

"We believe that the entities are telepathic," the researcher pointed out. "They will have no difficulty talking to us."

Masji shivered at the thought. It was galling that while the humans had thousands – perhaps millions – of telepaths, his race had failed to produce even a single one. Their intelligence service was *sure* that the humans had included telepaths in the negotiations they'd held with his people, reading their minds and using what they learned for negotiating advantage. The thought of having his mind read was alarming, all the more so because he knew that the agreement with the entities – assuming they came to any agreement – wouldn't last. Or perhaps they would assume that themselves; unlike humans, they didn't seem to have a warped view of the universe.

And, in the end, it was a risk that had to be taken.

"All right," he said, as his subordinates gathered around him. "This is what we're going to do."

In the absence of Admiral Burton, who was coping with the disaster on Greenland, Commodore Pike had found himself in command of the task force guarding the Gateway. It was an alarming position; the four alien objects had not only destroyed a cruiser, but they'd also proven themselves resistant to some of the most powerful weapons in humanity's arsenal. If they were the vanguard of an invasion force, as some speculated, the Confederation Navy starships might not be able to stop it when it came pouring out of the Gateway.

The tactical problem fascinated him, even though the situation was dangerous and likely to get considerably more so. The Gateway was a bridgehead in Confederation territory, one that could be held, preventing the enemy from advancing further...if their weapons could be used against the alien ships. As it was, the best they could hope for was to delay the enemy if they ever came raging out of the Gateway – and, once they were pushed back from the Gateway, the enemy would have time to deploy. It was an unprecedented situation; normally, an enemy fleet would travel to its target through hyperspace, or come popping out of a wormhole, guns blazing. The idea of a fixed bridgehead was new.

"Commodore," his tactical officer said. "We have three hundred starships advancing into the quarantine zone under warp drive."

“Identify them,” Pike ordered, although he was fairly sure that he knew who they were. Only one race had gathered so many starships on the edge of the quarantine zone, claiming the right to observe the alien objects, even if the Gateway was in human-controlled space. Technically, it was in space that had never been formally claimed, by anyone. The legalities of the Confederation Navy’s blockade were arguable. “Who are they?”

“Sir, the preliminary readings show them to be Haypah *Murderer*-class starships, some of an enhanced design we haven’t seen before,” the tactical officer said. “A handful of their ships have weapons with unusual quantum signatures; the remainder are armed with conventional weapons. They will reach the Gateway in two hours if not stopped.”

Pike linked his mind into the computer network and studied the Haypah starships, wondering just what they were playing at. They had to know that their entire fleet couldn't punch through the blockading force, whatever additional weapons they’d somehow managed to scrape up from parts unknown. He knew that there were some in Confederation Intelligence who believed that the Haypah had been receiving additional technical assistance from an unknown race, yet no one had been able to prove or disprove it. Perhaps today, he knew, they would discover the truth.

“Assemble to intercept,” he ordered, as he designated starships within the network. There was no need to take the entire force to intercept their ships; besides, leaving some at the Gateway would give him a reserve if the Haypah were trying to trick him. “We will intercept them...here.”

An hour passed slowly as his flotilla advanced out towards the intercept point. They could have moved much faster, but he’d decided to play it cool; he didn't want the Haypah becoming convinced that he was worried about their advance. The race was too convinced of its own importance as it was, always probing at the edges of the Confederation and trying to provoke a reaction. If it hadn't been so firmly against Confederation ethics, Pike would have suggested invading the Haypah Empire and reshaping it to something more civil.

“Intercept point reached, Commodore,” the helmsman said.

“Open a channel,” Pike ordered. “This is Commodore Pike of the Confederation Navy. You are intruding on a quarantine zone. You are ordered to retreat to the outer line at once.”

There was a long pause. He repeated his challenge, knowing that the Haypah might well refuse to respond to the first challenge, if only to convince their subordinates that they were not weak enough to give in at once. It struck him as insane, but then, he hadn't grown up in a universe where his own subordinates would seek to stab him in the back at the first sign of weakness. It was no fit way to run an interstellar navy.

“This is Warlord Rasdi,” a voice said, finally. “You have no right to deny us access to the alien objects. Our scientists wish to study them.”

Pike frowned. One of the reasons the Haypah advanced in fits and starts was because they rarely gave any credence to their scientists and researchers, treating them – at best – as second-class citizens. Military skill and valour was important to them, far more than

research...even though it was that research that had created most of their weapons. It didn't quite make sense.

"The objects are dangerous," he said, calmly. "Your scientists may be killed attempting to study them."

"This is unclaimed space," the Haypah responded. "You have no right to prevent us from studying the objects, or to keep any discoveries to yourselves."

Pike scowled. The problem with dealing with the Haypah was that any sign of weakness was likely to lead to further problems. "I have authorisation from the Confederation Navy to keep everyone out of the quarantine zone," he said. "If you do not withdraw now, I will open fire."

"Sir," the tactical officer said. "There's an incoming starship!"

Hyper-missiles flickered through the highest accessible levels of hyperspace and popped back into normal space at preset coordinates, sometimes manifesting *within* their target if their target had no shields covering the hyper-bands. The Haypah had attempted to duplicate the Confederation's discovery, but despite years of research, they had been unable to create a device that generated a separate hyper-field. Their missiles had to mount their own hyperdrives, which made them bulky, but in the process the Haypah had learned a great deal about safeguarding their ships through the highest levels of hyperspace.

The *Tooth and Claw* popped out of hyperspace within a bare light year of the Gateway and flashed down towards the glowing sphere of light. The remaining Confederation Navy starships were simply out of position to intercept it, believing that anyone who wanted to slip into the quarantine zone would be trying to reach the alien objects. Before they could react, the starship was already beyond their reach.

Masji held on to his command nest as the entire starship buckled and heaved, struggling against the stress of travelling through the highest levels of hyperspace and then plunging down into the Gateway. The starship had been over-engineered, a precaution his people had learned from the humans, yet it could barely stand up to the gravity waves focused around the Gateway. He could *feel* the hull creaking as the Gateway loomed up in front of them...and then it was too late. There was a sense of blinding white light...

He opened his eyes. He was still on his command deck, yet the consoles and sensor systems were as dark and cold as the grave. Masji pulled himself to his feet, feeling...*something* outside the hull, probing the remains of his warship. The remaining crew looked stunned, unable to believe what had happened. The scientists were tapping away at their consoles, but nothing was happening. The starship was completely dead. On impulse, he checked the heavy energy weapon he carried at his belt; the power cells were dead, leaving it as nothing more than a useless club.

"This dimension must operate on different principles to our own," the scientist said. He didn't seem worried, but then, showing any sign of fear was about the same as baring one's own throat for the kill. "If the laws of science are different here, our tech may not work properly..."

Masji held up a claw. Somehow, he could hear something calling, a voice right at the edge of perception. “Remain here,” he ordered his crew, taking the scientist by the arm and thrusting him into the corridor. It was illuminated only by the bioluminescent tubes the designers had worked into the starship, providing barely enough light to them to find their way up to the observation deck. His race believed in gazing out upon the stars, knowing that one day they would own them all. “Why...”

He broke off. They weren’t floating in normal space, but in a strange...atmosphere that seemed almost beyond comprehension. It seemed almost as if they were floating in water, yet...there was something out there, a dark looming shape. It grew clearer as he stared, a darkened planet-sized starship. It was the missing *Scientist*!

“Warlord,” the scientist said. “There's something else out there.”

It was suddenly on them, something so vast that he could only take in a single skin cell at a time, yet the skin cell itself had billions of other skin cells. Something touched his mind and he realised, at a level so profound that it could not be denied, that he was looking upon the face of god. The entity reached into his mind, showed him the truth of all things and waited. Masji dropped to his knees in worship. It hadn't compelled his obedience; it had merely shown in the truth. It was a god.

Defiance was not an option.

Commodore Pike watched in irritation as the remaining alien ships turned back, their mission accomplished. Their plan had worked well, he reluctantly admitted; they’d won time for their commanding officer to commit suicide. No one knew what would happen when a starship tried to enter the Gateway, but no one believed that it was survivable.

“Commodore, we have...”

The tactical officer broke off. *Tooth and Claw* erupted from the Gateway like a bullet fired from a gun. Its speed was already impossible – too high for warp drive, too low for hyperspace – and it plunged into space before they could react. It was gone.

“Inform the Grand Admiral,” he ordered. “Tell him...tell him that we have a new problem.”

Chapter Eighteen

Admiral Burton braced himself as his image materialised within the Security Council's secure virtual chamber. It was a more sombre meeting than the only other session he had attended, something he would have believed impossible. The Confederation hadn't realised – it had only been a week ago, as unbelievable as that seemed – just how bad the situation had truly become. Looking from face to face, Burton wasn't sure that they truly understood, even after the disasters that had gripped billions of Confederation citizens. If he hadn't been at Greenland, he wouldn't have believed it either.

“Admiral,” Chairperson Mariko Waianae said, once the AIs had confirmed that the meeting was secure. “Just what happened down on Greenland?”

Burton gathered himself and spoke for twenty minutes, outlining everything that had happened from the first moment his force had jumped into the system until they had been forced to retreat, only two hours after arriving. It didn't get any easier to bear, even several hours after the fleet had retreated and taken up position at the edge of the Greenland System and he could see that not all of the Security Council believed him. The other attacks had been equally disastrous. Twenty worlds – twenty *systems* – had been attacked by ghostly creatures, ghostly creatures who could only be seen by the naked eye or sensed by telepaths. It was beyond belief. The might of the Confederation Navy could not be challenged by intangible creatures, yet there was no doubt that that was exactly what had happened.

But then, he reflected, when telepathy is involved, the rules tend to go out the airlock.

“The loss of the *Gordon* was the single greatest loss in the battle,” he concluded. Even calling it a battle was an exaggeration. “We also lost nearly twenty cruisers, with several more damaged and currently undergoing repairs. Our ability to disable the infected ships before they can reach other star systems has been hampered.”

“We have passed on a warning to other star systems,” the AIs injected. “Without a certain way to recover the ships safely, our advice is to destroy the ships on sight and hope that that breaks the connection between the entities and their thralls.”

“You're talking about murdering Confederation citizens,” Representative Carolynn said, her tail thrashing oddly in the air. “You cannot do that!”

“There isn't any other choice,” Representative Singh snapped. He turned to stare at Burton, trying to glare him into submission. “Why did you not destroy Greenland?”

Burton swallowed the first response that came to mind, but he refused to back down. “With all due respect, Admiral, destroying the planet would have meant destroying – killing – the remaining human population on the planet,” he said, coldly. “I was not about to commit mass slaughter, not when it remains possible that we can free the infected from their state and restore them to life.”

“This infection is a cancer, one spread by the thralls,” the Enhanced Human said. “We do not have time for half measures. We have to burn it out at source. There may be billions of humans in the infected zone, but there are *trillions* of humans in the entire Confederation.

We have to preserve the greater mass of humanity and if that means losing billions to save trillions...do we have any other choice?"

"We do not believe that conventional weapons would be effective," the AIs said. "The true source of this problem lies with the entities, not with the infected humans. The destruction of Janyo did not affect the entities, as far as can be determined."

Burton winced. Janyo was – had been – one of the infected worlds, a world so alarmingly close to a potentially-hostile alien empire that its inhabitants had spent years building up a formidable defence establishment, which had been turned on the planet as madness had started to spread through the system. One of the madmen had launched a quantum fission warhead into the planet's crust and translated a quarter of the planet's mass to energy, shattering the planet, its three Rings and sending shockwaves echoing through space. The blast had been almost as powerful as a supernova. The expanding shell of radiation would be another problem for the Confederation Navy, assuming they survived the current threat.

The remaining worlds had fallen completely, including the Scorpion Navy Yard, one of the four systems in the Confederation capable of building planetoids. It seemed odd to think that the entities might be able to make their thralls start building a war machine, but he couldn't dismiss the thought, knowing that if the entities wanted to expand much further, they would need a navy. In fact, the Confederation Navy was already working on an operational plan to destroy the Navy Yard, rather than trying to recover it. It was simply too dangerous to leave in enemy hands.

Mariko tapped the table and the argument paused. "Genocide is not an option," she said, firmly. "Even so...how did this even *start*?"

"With your permission," the AIs said, "we have been analysing the data and we believe that we have come up with a theory."

"Please," Mariko said. "The floor is yours."

"Thank you," the AIs said, gravely. "Given the...dead patches on Greenland and four other worlds, dead patches that are microcosms of the dead Ancient worlds, we believe that the entities were responsible for the destruction of their race. The relative shortage of intelligent life in our galaxy may also be the result of their work, although it is impossible to be sure. The important detail is that we can draw a line between the dead worlds and our current crisis.

"Joe Buckley, a researcher fascinated by the Ancients, manages to unlock some of their language and build technology based on their theories. He tells us that the device is meant to allow us to tap the power of a black hole; he rigs the device so, instead, it converts the black hole into a gateway to another realm. We do not realise this until it is far too late. At the same time, a handful of his students proclaim themselves capable of reading other parts of the Ancient language and develop a cult based around the return of the Ancients, who would judge the human race. This cult does not become a massive movement, nor does it fade away; their relative handfuls of devotees are very devoted.

"Just after the Gateway is formed and the destruction of the *Hamilton*, the cultists decide to carry out a ritual on twenty worlds," the AIs continued. Burton could sense their hesitation,

their reluctance to even discuss the possibility. Their ability to datamine anyone or everyone in the Confederation was legendary, yet privacy was an integral part of the Confederation ethos. The AIs could find out anything about anyone. “Those rituals, calling upon the Ancients, are at ground zero of each of the outbursts of madness. The entities that manifest, at least according to the people who see them, are centred on the location of the rituals.”

It was Doctor Bernard who spoke first. “Are you saying,” he said, “that the cultists successfully called the entities into this realm?”

“It appears that way,” the AIs agreed. “We cannot prove this – at least, not yet – but we believe that the Gateway altered the local quantum foam in such a way as to allow the cultists to carry out their ritual, connecting our universe to theirs. If the laws of their universe are radically different to ours, they may be able to do things that we would consider impossible.”

“The universe operates according to a set of fixed rules,” Doctor Bernard insisted. “They do not change at whim.”

“That isn't true,” Representative Caprice pointed out. “Telepathy defies your rules. So, too, do the transcendent races.”

“Assuming that the stories of their existence are more than just stories,” Doctor Bernard said, sharply. “How many of those...so-called post-mortal races have been recorded on our technology?”

Caprice grinned. “How many of the entities have been recorded on our technology?”

“None directly,” the AIs said. “We have, however, been able to conduct memory reads on some of the people who saw them with their naked eyes. The entities were present.”

There was a long uncomfortable pause. “There is an additional detail,” the AIs added, slowly. “It was difficult to establish who was a member of the cult and who remains a member” – the Confederation didn't try to keep track of who followed which fad, knowing that most fads faded away very quickly – “but we have been collating data and we have come to an uncomfortable conclusion. All of the members of the cult – all of the ones who remained committed throughout the years since parts of the Ancient language were unlocked – were listed as having telepathic potential.”

Caprice blinked. “You are saying that they were *telepaths*?”

“They were all tested as having the potential, but chose not to develop it,” the AIs said. “Their exact status was never determined, as they never joined the telepaths or sought separate training. Given the fact that the entities use the telepathic band to spread their infection, the conclusion seems inescapable; it needs telepaths, or people with telepathic potential, to allow the entities access to our universe.”

“Then we have to isolate every potential telepath,” Representative Singh said, sharply. “We have enough problems without running the risk of additional entities manifesting within our space.”

“Quite apart from the civil liberties issue,” Caprice said sweetly, “you *do* know that roughly a tenth of the population has at least some telepathic potential?”

“We cannot win this...conflict by spitting on the core of our own society,” Representative Carolynn said, firmly. “I do not believe that there would be popular support for a mass round-up of potential telepaths. We do need to round up the remaining cultists and prevent them from carrying out any more rituals, but that is a different option.”

“Our main priority,” Grand Admiral Mark Webster said, sharply, “is to prevent the infection from spreading any further. Now we understand its vector, we can warn the local authorities to prevent any further cult rituals from being carried out, but that is only a stopgap measure. We must prevent the infected star systems from spreading the infection and we must find a final solution, one that breaks the link between our universe and theirs.”

“We have been studying the Gateway since the Buckley Experiment went badly wrong,” the AIs said. “We have been unable to deduce any method of closing it. It is possible that destroying one or all of the objects orbiting the gateway would be successful, but so far we have been unable to identify any promising angles of attack. We are still considering the problem. Unfortunately, our inability to perceive the quantum foam makes it tricky to accurately gauge the effects of our actions on the Gateway. It is quite possible that disrupting the gateway would have disastrous effects on our universe, perhaps creating a massive black hole or even destroying vast swathes of the galaxy.”

“I will dispatch additional telepaths to assist you,” Representative Caprice said, grimly. “Between us, we might manage to get a handle on what is actually happening deep within the Gateway.”

“This is all very interesting,” Representative Chen said, “but there is one thing we all need to know.”

He took a breath. “What do the entities *want*?”

“We have interviewed many of the refugees from infected worlds,” the AIs said. “The ones who saw the entities believed that they were being literally sucked dry by them, their life force being drained away into nothingness. The damage to the planet itself – and the dead Ancient worlds – suggests that in the end, they want to drain us all dry.”

“And yet,” Representative Caprice whispered, “the Ancients worshipped them as gods.”

“We don't know that,” the AIs pointed out. “We only have the cult's word for that and the cultists have an extremely good motive to lie. We have been considering the issue, however, and we believe that there are two possibilities. The first is that the Ancients were attempting to warn us – or any other race – of the dangers; the second is that they were enslaved by the entities and forced to feed them life force, both from their own people and from other races. Eventually, however, something went wrong and the Ancient civilisation died. The entities withdrew back to their own dimension and waited.”

“And then Joe Buckley reopened the Gateway,” Representative Singh finished. His eyes were bleak. “Is that the fate that awaits us all if we lose?”

“It looks that way,” Representative Caprice said. “We must find a way to stop them before it is too late.”

Burton thought, rapidly. One of the puzzles the human race had faced as it had developed intelligence was both simple and profound; where were the others? If one intelligent race – humanity – existed, why were there no signs of any others? It only became more complex as technology advanced and it became clear that a race that had started out a ‘mere’ million years before humanity would have taken the entire galaxy by the time the human race learned how to walk upright. By the time the human race had actually encountered other intelligent races, it became clear that they were all – apart from the transcendent races – of roughly the same age as humanity. It made little sense; if the Ancients had existed so long ago, why weren't there older races in the galaxy?

But now the human race had a glimmer of the truth and it was terrifying indeed. If the entities could influence and eventually control human minds, why could they not do it to the Ancients? They could warp an entire civilisation over the centuries, turning the Ancients and their proud culture into an empire that existed for one purpose; feeding the entities and their creaseless hungry for life force. The Ancients had spread out and destroyed the other races that had existed at the time, sacrificing them to their gods, until the entities had grown so hungry they had consumed their servants as well. Or, perhaps, the Ancients had rebelled, only to discover that they could no longer survive without their masters.

The thought was terrifying. Once the entities had taken the Confederation, he wondered, was that what was in store for humanity? Would the Confederation Navy end up feeding the entities, throwing every other race in existence into their gaping mouths? He swore that he would not allow it, yet how could anyone resist? The entities could warp minds to the point where it was impossible to tell if they were doing the right thing or not; given enough power, they could even disrupt local reality. How could the Confederation Navy fight an enemy they couldn't touch?

“We need to start acting now,” the Grand Admiral said. “We will prevent the rogue ships from reaching the other worlds. We will act to destroy the Navy Yards before they can be turned into enemy fortresses. We will, once we have the firepower assembled, take out the remaining industry in the infected systems...”

Except that might mean exposing other minds to the entities, Burton thought, coldly. *How far can they reach with their telepathy?*

“We will also start evacuating planets close to the infected systems,” the Grand Admiral concluded. “We might be able to starve the entities to death.”

“That leaves one final question,” Representative Chen said. “What about the Haypah?”

Burton nodded. The images from the Gateway had come in a mere ten minutes before the meeting had been convened, a chilling image of a warship spat out of the Gateway at impossible speeds. The ship had been lost somewhere in interstellar space, beyond the best tracking systems the Confederation Navy could produce, doubtless carrying infection into Haypah space. The final image haunted him; the ship had been in perfect condition when it plunged into the Gateway, but when it had come out it had looked to be in ghastly condition,

as if it had rusted away over the decades. He had no idea what could have caused such an effect.

“We warn them about the ship,” the Grand Admiral said. “We cannot spare many ships to search for it, even if we knew where to start. They should see the sense of simply destroying it on sight.”

“Assuming they can,” Representative Caprice said. “If the ship was actually in their universe, they might have been able to shield it against their technology, or ours.”

Assuming they are that sensible, Burton thought, keeping it within the privacy of his own mind. The Haypah rarely showed any signs of sense, at least as humans understood the term; they would be tempted by the awesome power the entities represented, without realising the dangers. Or perhaps they would believe that they could handle the dangers.

On that note, the meeting ended.

“The Board of Inquiry has considered the loss of the *Gordon*,” the Grand Admiral said, afterwards. They stood together in a different part of the secure network, staring down at a representation of the entire Confederation. “They do not feel that you are personally to blame.”

Burton nodded. One thing the Confederation Navy had in common with every other military machine in human history was that there was no shortage of people at the rear willing to pass judgement on the people at the front. Losing a planetoid was rather more than just a minor embarrassment.

“We’re rotating additional ships out to you as fast as we can,” the Grand Admiral continued. “I have a specific task for you. You need to take out the Navy Yards.”

He placed a hand on Burton’s shoulder. “I understand your reluctance to harm or kill our own people,” he said. “I share it myself, but we cannot allow the Navy Yards to be turned against us. The resources there could shift the balance of power against the Navy. Even if we have to destroy the entire system, we cannot allow that to happen.”

The Grand Admiral’s eyes hardened. “Whatever it takes,” he said, “the Yard must be destroyed.”

Chapter Nineteen

The *Drak Bibliophile* was tiny compared to some of the Confederation's city-ships, only a mere seventy kilometres long. The ship, shaped like a flattened cylinder, was normally home to over a hundred thousand humans, but most of the population had been transferred to another massive ship, which was now making its way out of the area as fast as it could go. It felt oddly empty to Janine's mind, even though she knew that the crew had remained with their ship, yet she understood the reasoning. The refugees from Greenland might have brought the infection with them.

She stood in the centre of a park, looking up towards the dome and the stars overhead. The *Drak Bibliophile* was keeping station on Greenland's star, orbiting far enough from the planet – they hoped – that it couldn't be influenced by the force on the ground. She hoped – prayed – that they were right, although she found it hard to believe. Her one contact with the entities hadn't left her with any unwanted guests, at least as far as she knew, but it had definitely left her terrified of their power. It seemed as if there was no such thing as safety any longer. She looked down towards a court, where the starship's inhabitants would normally play power ball, and shivered. The deserted court was a chilling reminder of just how badly the Confederation had been hurt by the entities.

The refugees had been well-treated, but the doctors had insisted on checking them carefully before they cleared them for travel outside the new quarantine zone. Janine had submitted to an endless barrage of tests, even though it hadn't taken her long to realise that the doctors didn't really know what they were doing, before they'd finally allowed her into the main body of the starship. She had tried to order a starship to travel into the Confederation, but she had been told – firmly – that anyone who had encountered the entities personally would not be permitted to leave until they could be verified as being clean. Janine had no idea if they could even do that, but the truth was that part of her was glad of the break. Her entire world had been turned upside down.

When she slept, she saw the entity, looming over the city and reaching out for her. Her dreams made it far more personal; the entity wanted her personally, either to subvert her as it had subverted countless others or to destroy her, for daring to refuse its call. She was convinced that she could feel the entity in the back of her mind whenever she looked towards Greenland, a constant nagging reminder that something unnatural had entered the universe. It was impossible to tell if the feelings were real, or if she was deluding herself into believing that she could feel the entity, yet they tore away at what remained of her personality. It was so hard to focus on anything these days, even on her job.

She had reported on what had happened to Greenland as best as she could, although she had had to use a memory reader to show her followers what the entity had looked like, at least to her mind's eye. No piece of technology had actually seen the entities, from dumb sensor drones to RI or AI cores. It struck her as terrifyingly possible that some cultures would simply have refused to believe in the entities, convinced that their population was a victim of mass delusion, at least until the entities came for them. Her followers had bombarded her with comments, from those who believed her and offered their sympathy to those who were convinced that she was making it up. Newshounds were honour-bound to always report the truth, at least as they saw it, yet there were always a few bad apples in every bunch. They tended to vanish quickly when they were caught out, but when they were the only

witnesses...it still shocked her to discover that she was the only newshound to have survived the fall of Greenland.

Janine looked up as a looming shape passed over the park, wondering – in a moment of sheer terror – if the entities had reached out for her. Thankfully, it was only a starship making its escape from the hanger bays under the park; the massive starship served, among other things, as a mobile shipyard. She'd had the impression that the starship had begun constructing new ships as soon as the crisis had begun, producing war material for the Confederation Navy. It was clearly going to be needed. The Confederation Navy had never lost so much tonnage in such a short space of time.

She turned and walked through the park, studying the strange blend of plants from a hundred different worlds. Earth had provided the template for many of humanity's worlds, starships and habitats, but over the centuries thousands of plants from other worlds had been added to humanity's diet. She had actually walked on Earth – the entire planet was now a nature reserve – years ago, recording her impressions for her followers. As one of the few planets in the Confederation where entry was actually restricted, rather than being a guaranteed right of the civilian population, Earth – the cradle of the human race – still held a mystique for the descendents of those who had set out from the homeworld, many centuries ago. The *Drak Bibliophile's* crew – or the RI cores that actually ran most of the vessel – would have transplanted some of Earth's stock to the ship and tended it as they saw fit. Janine had seen ships where a hundred different plants had been thrown together, given nutrition and left to fight it out for supremacy, but here the garden was carefully tended. She saw a remote drone working on one of the trees, cutting down a branch that was growing too long, and smiled. The sight was oddly reassuring.

Life goes on, she reminded herself, as she found the capsule at one end of the park. The *Drak Bibliophile* did not allow teleporting within its hull, except in case of emergency. Ship crews and populations tended to be more than a little eccentric, so the remainder of the Confederation's population made allowances for them. They tied the Confederation together – and, if the entities were unstoppable, they would transport vast swathes of the human race to another galaxy, where they would begin again. There were whispers on the Galactic Net that some starships had already started, vectoring their courses away from the Confederation and heading out towards the Clouds, or M33. The Confederation had sent missions to them before, but they had found little of interest. Now, they might serve as a refuge for the human race.

The capsule spun up as she sat down in the single chair, rose above the deck and plunged into a transit tube. When she had been younger, Janine had convinced the RIs governing the flight to remove some of the dampeners, but now – as an older and wiser person – she refused to feel any of the sensations that came with travelling through the tubes. It was the quickest way to get around the massive ship, quicker even than gravity chutes. Somehow, after touching the entities, she had found it harder to convince herself to take risks, even imaginary risks.

She stood up as the capsule came to a halt, inside one of the recreation centres on the ship. It should have been brimming with life, but now it was inhabited only by forty listless people, those who had been plucked away from Greenland and away from the entities. Janine had felt drained after she'd escaped the entities, yet these people looked worse, their pale faces barely responding to any simulation. They looked like zombies to her; she had the strangest

impression that they would be easy to pick up, even without enhanced muscles. Just looking at them made her feel tired.

“They’re not responding to anything,” a doctor said. He was looking harassed and worried. The Confederation’s citizens rarely needed sustained medical treatment, not when nanomachines could repair most damage almost instantly, and genetic engineering had provided a barrier against infection, even from the most virulent diseases in existence. “I have tried everything from drugs to direct mental simulation and the results have been poor.”

“They’re drained,” Janine said, remembering the tiredness that had gripped her, back when she’d been fleeing the planet. “They’re tired, unable even to remember how to move.”

The doctor looked at her sharply. “They’re not tired,” he said, crossly. “There’s nothing wrong with them.”

“Not physically,” Janine said. Perhaps it was something that couldn’t be explained to someone who hadn’t experienced it for themselves. “They’re feeling mentally drained, drained of their energy. They can’t move...”

She paused, considering. “It’s a little like depression,” she added, thoughtfully. “The deeper into depression a person sinks, the harder it is to believe that it will ever get better, which pushes a person further into depression and eventually kills them.”

“I see,” the doctor said. He nodded towards a young girl, her face unmarked by experience. It was hard to tell in the Confederation, but Janine was sure that she was genuinely as young as she looked. “That girl should be young and vital. Instead...she’s just lying there, trapped in her own mind. We need to get her out!”

Janine shook her head, unable to articulate a reply. She’d eventually recovered on her own; maybe, she hoped, the others would recover as well. Or perhaps a telepath could do something for them. There didn’t seem to be any other answers.

Doctor Shivani knew, without false modesty, that she was the foremost brain care specialist in the Confederation. The human brain, once a mystery to all, had slowly yielded up its secrets to human researchers, although quite a few of them had followed false paths that had sometimes led to disastrous results. Shivani had spent over three hundred years learning her art, both in the field of brain surgery and in mental health care, and had been looking for a new challenge. The chance to study a human mind that had been affected by an alien entity was too interesting to miss, even if it meant flying into a war zone.

She studied her own reflection in the silver stasis field covering the body, considering her options. It had been a long time since she had worn her original face; now, she looked middle-aged, with dark skin and a reassuring smile, just right for patients who would be nervous at undergoing surgery. She doubted that her current patient would appreciate her appearance though, not after the madness had descended on her mind. The Confederation Marine pilot had killed over seventy humans before her shuttle had finally been trapped and she’d been taken prisoner.

“Release the field,” she ordered, as soon as she was sure that everything was ready. The silver field popped, revealing a young woman with staring eyes. She leapt up at once, only to crash into the restraint field, which pushed her back onto the bed and held her down. “Begin preliminary scan.”

She studied the girl as the scan began, mapping out every millimetre of her brain and charting the electrical patterns running through her mind. Lieutenant Chihiro’s record was impressive, not the one she would have expected from a person who had fallen prey to an alien force. She had been an expert pilot since she was nine years old and had joined the Marines seven years later, when it had become legally permissible. She hadn’t qualified as an actual Marine, but she’d become one of their pilots and served in several combat zones. Her record was one of achievement, not of...failure.

“Scan complete,” the RI announced. It displayed a chart in front of her. “There are multiple disruptions in her brain patterns.”

Shivani nodded, fascinated. The Marine pilot’s brain activity made no sense. The human brain was complex, but her brainwaves were far more complex than Shivani would have believed possible, too complex to allow her to read them and monitor the girl’s thoughts. Indeed, Shivani was mildly surprised that she hadn’t suffered brain damage; the level of mental activity was extraordinary high. She copied the results into simulation cores and studied them carefully. Her first impression had been right. She should have suffered massive brain damage almost as soon as her brainwaves had been forced into the new pattern.

“Curious,” she said, aloud. She examined the original results for a long moment, but found no answers. The brainwaves should have done far more damage than just driven her completely mad. She should have collapsed within seconds. “Check her implant records and tell me if they attempted to compensate.”

The RI took a moment to unlock the sealed records, allowing Shivani a chance to gather her thoughts. Years ago, during the civil war between pureblood humans and genetically-enhanced so-called superhumans, someone with more scientific curiosity than ethics had invented a device that manipulated brainwaves, using it as an instrument of torture. The device had allowed his side to extract information from prisoners, for it completely bypassed the counter-interrogation implants that both sides used to prevent their people being forced to divulge information. The few who survived the experience had been left broken shells, unable to even fend for themselves. The device had been banned – the details of how to build it had been lost, although she had a fair idea how it had been done – but the records of its effects had been kept. The pilot was suffering from similar effects, yet somehow they were not manifesting fully within her brain.

“Negative,” the RI said. “They did not attempt to compensate. They did not record any disruption to her brain.”

“But there must have been disruption,” Shivani protested. “She wouldn’t have decided to open fire on her own side of her own free will, would she?”

She played with her long hair for a moment. “And besides, there’s disruption now,” she said, absently. “We need to examine it closely.”

The table adjusted itself for surgery. A sedative field went to work, sending the Marine into a dreamless sleep. She should have collapsed instantly under the pressure of the field, but as Shivani watched in disbelief she struggled against it, trying to escape. Her brainwaves spiked angrily as she fought, before finally collapsing into sleep. Shivani started dispatching nanomachines into her brain, allowing them to chart out the interior of her mind – confirming what the scanner had reported earlier – as she prepared herself for surgery.

“Record,” she ordered. “The entities have effects that do not show up on technology. As a scientist, I find that unbelievable, but I must go where the data takes me. I have therefore decided to risk a physical entry into her skull and examine the brain directly. I understand that this runs risks, but I feel that the need for answers is great enough to justify them.”

She scowled as she allowed the surgical field to focus on the girl’s skull. Every doctor in the Confederation would eventually study the records from her operation, allowing them to pass judgement on her and her skills. It was something that she had grown to expect – the competition between doctors was intense – but it still struck her as annoying. If she made a mistake and accidentally injured or killed the girl, she would have every doctor telling her – in great detail – exactly what she did wrong.

“I begin,” she said, and triggered the field. It reached out and started to slice into the girl’s head. The field wasn’t as personal as using knives, but it was a great deal cleaner and safer. Her skullcap slowly slipped away from her head, allowing Shivani to see the pulsing brain underneath. No matter how many times she saw a human brain, she was never able to prevent the thrill spreading through her, the certainty that one day she would unlock the final mysteries of the human mind. The gray matter in front of her looked normal. “I am...”

She broke off as she looked closer, studying it with her naked eyes. The brain was still pulsing, yet there was something...she stared, unable to believe her eyes. The brain was *glowing* with a faintly unwholesome yellow light. It seemed to dance and shimmer in front of her, calling her onwards. She recoiled with sudden horror. That was *impossible*!

“I am seeing a light,” she reported, swallowing hard. There were some creatures that had bioluminescent brains, but humans were not one of them. “The light seems to be infesting the brain, spreading through it. I am unable to account for its presence.”

She stood up and checked the sensors. They refused to register the light’s presence. As far as they were concerned, the light did not exist. She altered their settings, fine-tuning the probes, only to find nothing. The light was beyond their capability to detect. Her unseen watchers were going to wonder if she had gone mad, even if she showed them a direct read from her own memories.

But then, she reminded herself, the entities themselves didn’t show up on human sensors.

“I am also unable to determine how it is affecting the brain,” she continued, gathering herself. “It is possible that the light represents a mental virus that exists within the brain, but separate to it, accounting for the lack of total mental collapse that should have occurred.”

Her voice rolled on, crisply. She tried to put what she was seeing into words, but it seemed impossible. She was, she realised, in unknown territory...and instantly felt as dumb or ignorant as the so-called doctors who had believed in bleeding people to handle diseases, or

that women never had an orgasm. Whatever she was looking at, in the brain of the former pilot...she had no idea how to treat it, or even to record its existence. The universe had turned upside down.

She fell back on an old line. "Further research," she reported, "is required."

Chapter Twenty

Twenty light years from Greenland, *River* popped out of hyperspace and began scanning for enemy contacts. The warp signatures of seventeen Confederation starships appeared at once, making a beeline at maximum warp for the nearest inhabited Confederation world. They weren't using their hyperdrives, much to Captain Pearson's relief, but they were still going to be a problem to intercept. If they decided to scatter and run for it, the cruiser would have problems stopping them all before they reached an inhabited world.

He reviewed the tactical situation in the ship's computer, shaking his head at the thought of plotting the destruction of Confederation starships. The thought of firing on civilian craft was appalling, even if there was no real choice, yet even disabling them would be tricky. The starships were travelling at warp speed, which meant that if they were hit, they would almost certainly be destroyed. Who knew how many civilians were onboard?

"Take us after them," he ordered. *River* spun around, brought up her own warp bubble and gave chase, moving to intercept. The enemy ships – even thinking of them as the enemy was hard – showed no sign that they were aware of her existence, even though he knew that his ship was making no attempt to hide. Civilian sensors were almost as good as those used by the Confederation Navy. "Prepare to intercept."

He skimmed through the starship schematics in the ship's database, simulating the coming encounter. Civilian ships weren't anything like as heavily armed as his cruiser, but combined he knew that his ship faced a daunting task, particularly if he couldn't concentrate his fire. Their protective shields would be almost as good as his own...he ran through a number of possible outcomes and frowned, cursing under his breath. The whole situation could turn very bad very quickly. He was tempted to hold off until reinforcements could arrive, but there was no way of knowing when they would reach him, or even if they would come. The Confederation Navy was suddenly overstretched.

"We are entering firing range, Captain," the helmsman reported, as the starship slowly overhauled its targets. "They are seemingly unaware of our existence."

"Or waiting for us to come into range before they open fire as one," the tactical officer commented, sourly. The topic of just what the infected starships were doing had occupied the crew for the last two days, while they worked to get into position to intercept the fleeing ships. Some of the crew believed that the ships intended to break through the defences of another planet and spread the infection; others believed that they were just a distraction from the far more serious issue of rounding up the cultists before they could perform more rituals. The issue had consumed the crew – and, indeed, most of the Confederation. "We're going to be running right into their missiles, Captain."

Pearson nodded. The other tactical issue that had been worrying him was simple; should they open fire without warning, or should they attempt to convince the infected craft to surrender? If they opened fire, they would be killing civilians, yet there had been no signs that suggested the infected civilians would be open to reason or even a blunt order to power down their drives and await recovery. If he broadcast an order to surrender, he would quite definitely reveal his ship's presence, even though he was sure that the enemy already knew his ship was there. It would, he reflected, have been a great deal easier if the ships had been crewed by hostile aliens.

But that's part of the problem, he thought. They have us in a blind. We cannot destroy their link to this realm without destroying our own people as well.

"Keep the defences online," he ordered, simply. The tactical officer was right; they would be charging into the teeth of their fire, if they opened fire at all. There was no other choice, not without an entire squadron of cruisers to back him up. "Open a channel to the infected ships."

Back when humanity had started to take the first steps into space, it had been impossible to send FTL signals through space, ensuring that the only way to exchange signals from star to star had been through courier ships. Eventually, humanity had managed to discover how to transmit signals through warp space and later through hyperspace, before stumbling over the QCC principle, which allowed near-instant communication over unlimited distance. The QCC system was the backbone of the Galactic Net, yet the infected ships weren't linked into the network, meaning that the *River* would have to use an older method to get their attention.

"Channel open, sir," the second tactical officer said. *River* didn't have or need a dedicated communications officer. "You may speak when ready."

Pearson nodded. "This is Captain Pearson of the Confederation Navy Starship *River*," he said. "You are ordered to deactivate your drives and surrender control over your computer networks to my ship. If you do not comply, we will be forced to open fire."

There was a long pause. "No response, sir," the second tactical officer said.

Pearson frowned. "Did they even receive the signal?"

"Uncertain, Captain," the second tactical officer reported. "They certainly should be able to detect it and their computers should automatically scan for vessels transmitting to them, but they have not responded. I am unable to confirm if they are even signalling to each other."

"But if they are using QCC tech, we wouldn't be able to detect it anyway," the engineer put in. He had been the most affronted by how the entities seemed able to defy certain physical laws at will, or how their mere presence caused human tech to glitch. "We don't have the codes to access the communication, let alone hack into their computers and shut them down."

"Repeat the signal," Pearson ordered. If they were chasing smugglers, or alien craft that had intruded into Confederation space, he would have ordered the crew to fire a warning shot, but it seemed pointless against the aliens. "Let me know if there is any reply."

There was a long pause as the seconds ticked by. "No response, Captain," the second tactical officer said. "Wait..."

The computer display altered sharply as the infected craft started to transmit. They beamed vast, impossibly complex signals towards the cruiser, as if they were trying to infect the entire ship. Pearson slammed his mind into the computer network and studied the signals, shuffling them into a sealed computer core. The signals seemed meaningless, yet the infected craft were bombarding the cruiser with them...it occurred to him that the entities could be

trying to respond in their own language, yet that seemed impossible. They had human thralls; why not speak through them?

“Lock warp missiles on the prime target,” he ordered. The display shaded to red as the cruiser’s weapons came online, preparing to fire. The active tactical sensors could be detected, allowing the enemy to take evasive action if they saw fit, but he had chosen to take the risk. It would, he hoped, convince them that he was serious. “Prepare to fire.”

“Weapons ready, Captain,” the tactical officer confirmed.

There was no longer any time to delay. “Fire,” Pearson ordered.

“Missiles away, Captain,” the tactical officer said, as seven missiles appeared on the display. “We have impact in seventy seconds and counting.”

Pearson sat back in his command chair, tracking the engagement through the starship’s computer network. Warp missiles were designed for combat at FTL speeds, using their own warp drives to catch up with the enemy ships and penetrating their warp fields. Depending on luck more than judgement, the enemy ship – a cruise liner, of all things – would either be knocked out of warp drive or destroyed. It wasn’t going to be an easy engagement. A ship that fell out of warp drive might be instantly lost in interstellar space.

“Enemy vessel is not taking evasive action,” the second tactical officer confirmed. Pearson frowned. Were the entities so callous that they cared nothing for the loss of their slaves, or one of the ships they needed to carry their message from star to star? “They will be hit in nine seconds....eight...seven...”

New red icons sparkled into existence. “They have fired warp missiles back at us, Captain,” the tactical officer reported. “They have not attempted to deploy countermeasures of their own.”

“Deploy our countermeasures,” Pearson ordered. “Prepare to repel incoming attack.”

He smiled as the display updated. The warp missiles had struck their target and ripped it apart. An explosion blossomed out at warp speed, flaring into existence before vanishing again, leaving no trace of the destroyed ship. The atoms that had survived the blast would be scattered out over space. The warp missiles targeted on his ship, one by one, fell prey to countermeasures or to hasty evasive action, allowing his ship to continue unscratched.

“The enemy ships are bringing up their tactical systems,” the tactical officer reported. “They’re scanning us...and launching missiles.”

“The flight pattern suggests that they are automatic systems,” the second tactical officer said. “Their firing shows a certain lack of imagination.”

Pearson said a sharp word under his breath. The sheer weight of fire being directed at his ship meant that he had to take evasive action, which ran the risk of allowing the enemy ships to get ahead of his ship and eventually vanish somewhere within warp space. The closing speeds were alarmingly fast and his ship was literally charging towards the missiles that were going to target its hull. The only advantage he had was that when he was past the missiles,

they would never be able to turn and catch up with him. The enemy ships didn't have that advantage.

“Commence firing,” he ordered. “Take them all out.”

River rotated as she unleashed a full spread of warp missiles, turning over and over again to unleash the second spread, followed rapidly by the third. The warship had one other advantage in the engagement; she could reload and fire rapidly, while the civilian ships had far slower rates of fire. It might not matter, he knew, when there were sixteen ships firing on them. Between them, they possessed enough firepower to destroy his ship.

“Incoming missiles,” the tactical officer said. “I am triggering countermeasures...now!”

The drones the ship had launched went active, creating sensor decoys that lured the warp missiles away from their target and to their doom. Others struck out and destroyed the incoming missiles, taking them out before they could pose a threat to the cruiser. Pearson watched the brief engagement through the computer network, knowing that no human could hope to control such a battle, even with computer enhancement. The battle would be fought by their automated servants. One by one, the missiles were picked off before they reached their target.

“Their missiles were operating on minimal levels,” the second tactical officer reported. “They did not attempt to counter our countermeasures.”

“Curious,” Pearson agreed. On the main display, the missiles they had fired reached their targets, striking home. There was no opposition. Seven starships exploded, three more fell out of warp space, their drives burned out by the impacts. The computers would attempt to predict where they had emerged, but it wasn't going to be easy. A single miscalculation and the starship would arrive hundreds of thousands of kilometres from its predicted arrival point. The remaining starships continued to fire, but also started to scatter, spreading out across space. “Continue firing.”

The tactical officer worked his console, unleashing another spread of missiles towards the infected ships. “Why aren't they using their hyperdrives?”

“Perhaps they can't,” the engineer said. “Or maybe they don't know they have them. No one knows if the Ancients had hyperdrive technology, because no one ever found one of their ships.”

“The crew of the ships would definitely know,” the tactical officer said. “If the entities are telepathic, they would be able to pull concepts from their minds. They would certainly need to know how to operate the ships just to get them moving...”

“Or perhaps using hyperdrive would cut the link between the entities and their thralls,” the second tactical officer suggested. “That might result in them being freed.”

“Or perhaps dying when the link is broken,” the engineer added.

“Concentrate on flying,” Pearson ordered, as the enemy missiles closed in on his ship. “Take the remaining ships out before they can escape.”

The brief engagement lasted only seventeen seconds before the final infected ship was either knocked out of warp space or destroyed. *River* followed them into normal space, avoiding the final enemy missiles and scanning for the damaged ships. Pearson checked his ship's condition – shields and countermeasures drained; warp missiles at seventy percent, with repair factories producing replenishments – as they decelerated. He transmitted a brief report on the engagement back to Admiral Burton and then turned to the remaining task. Locating and isolating the damaged ships.

"We knocked five ships into normal space," the tactical officer reported. "I have tracks on three of them. The other two are missing."

Pearson nodded, tightly. Interstellar space was vast, a fact that was easily forgotten when the Confederation Navy could race starships across the entire galaxy in days. A starship, even a planetoid, was tiny on such a scale and if it wasn't radiating anything that would betray its location, it would be extremely difficult to locate. His ship had spread its sensing field as far afield as possible, yet even so, two of the enemy craft were missing. His ship had beaten the odds, but it still felt like a defeat.

"Take us towards the nearest craft," he ordered. In hyperdrive, the trip would take seconds. "Prepare to engage the target."

"Coming into visual range now," the helmsman said, seconds later. The main display lit up, revealing a ship shaped roughly like a swan, tumbling helplessly through space. "I am picking up no signs of life from the enemy ship."

Pearson frowned. Confederation sensors were good, but they could be jammed by a sufficiently-advanced enemy. It was quite possible that something the entities were doing – deliberately or otherwise – had disrupted their sensors, just as it had over Greenland. The thought of his starship's wondrous tech failing was alarming, but it had to be faced. He'd flown near the Dead Zone as a young officer and understood, intellectually at least, that it was possible. His instincts were screaming at him to unload a single missile into the hulk and move onto the next ship, but he knew that that wasn't possible. The Confederation needed as many examples of the entities and their work as possible, if only to unlock their secrets.

If it is even possible, a voice whispered at the back of his mind.

"Deploy scout drones," he ordered. "Hold us at this position; prepare to fire the instant we see a hostile move."

"Aye, Captain," the helmsman said. He sounded sober, as if staring upon the wrecked starship had reminded him of his own mortality. Accidents were rare in the Confederation Navy, but they did happen and, when they did, they were rarely survivable.

"The enemy ship appears to be dead, but I am picking up odd energy fluctuations within the ship," the tactical officer added. He sounded perplexed. "I am unable to account for their source."

"Keep watching them," Pearson ordered. The drones were heading away from his ship now, closing in on their targets. He allowed his mind to mesh with the lead drone, watching

through its optical sensors as it landed on the hulk's hull and started to advance towards a hatch. The drones had barely reached the hatch when they started to glitch, their technology failing for brief periods and then continuing as normal. "Tactical?"

"The entities are on that ship," the tactical officer said. "The drone systems should be impossible to disrupt. It's as if the normal laws of science just went out of the airlock."

"Just like on Greenland," Pearson agreed. He stared at the tumbling hulk for a long moment, wondering – just for a second – what was going on inside the ship. Was there an entity there, or was the glitches merely an effect of being too close to their thralls? There was no way to know, but the ship was too dangerous to leave intact. "Lock weapons on the hull."

He took direct control of the tactical system. The responsibility was his.

"Firing," he said, and keyed the switch. A single hyper-missile popped out of his ship and into the drifting hulk. There were no shields to protect it and the hulk vanished in a ball of glowing plasma. "Target destroyed."

He leaned back in his command chair. "Take us to the next target," he ordered. "We may have to destroy them all."

Three hours later, he finished composing his report to Admiral Burton and the Grand Admiral. All of the ships they had discovered had had the same effect, the same proof that the entities were either onboard or influencing the crew somehow. In the end, they had destroyed all three ships in order to prevent the infection from spreading. The real mystery was what had happened to the missing two ships, but if their warp drives were gone, they were unlikely to pose an immediate problem.

"Some of the remaining ships have escaped," Admiral Burton confirmed. Pearson scowled. They'd gone through so much, only to lose in the end. "We may have a more immediate problem. I need someone to hunt down a particular starship."

"Yes, sir," Pearson said. It was a surprising order. He had expected that they would be diverted back to the blockade zone. "A single starship?"

"Yes," Admiral Burton said. "We need to hunt down and destroy a Haypah starship."

He briefly explained. A Haypah starship had gone into the Gateway and emerged, exploding out of the gateway at an impossible speed. It had to be infected and it had to be stopped, before it infected the Haypah Empire – or the Confederation would face a war on two fronts.

"I understand, sir," Pearson said. "We won't let you down."

Chapter Twenty-One

For five days, Aisyaj floated in her cocoon, shut off from the outside world. She drifted upon the sea of dreams, allowing the telepathic disciplines she had learned as a child to locate and remove the alien contamination in her thoughts, studying – as dispassionately as she could – exactly what the entities had done to her. Her mind eventually drifted away, into memories of old lovers and friend among the telepaths, and she slept.

On the fifth day, she emerged from her cocoon, as naked as the day she was born. She checked her starship's position – seventy light years from Greenland and, she hoped, relatively safe – and climbed into the refresher for a wash. An hour later, she pulled on a tunic and sat down in her living compartment, opening her mind. It was easy to reach out for the other telepaths now, but at the same time she was nervous, even terrified. Would they see her as contaminated...or would she somehow infect them with the alien virus?

The telepaths touched her mind and she was instantly reassured, swept up in their network of love and devotion. It had been years since she had left Telepath, the sector that hosted most of the human telepaths, but she had never forgotten just what it felt like to live among her own kind. The telepaths were all open to one another, sharing their thoughts and feelings; there was no hatred, or pain, or jealousy. The outsiders talked about it in terms half-envious, half-fearful, yet even the most perceptive could not understand. The society was healthy because there was nothing to hide. There was no bullying, no crime, no unhealthy relationships...how could someone hurt someone else by accident, unknowingly, when no one could avoid feeling what they made others feel? There were no social outcasts or sociopaths. The society, as strange as it seemed to the outside universe, worked.

Aisyaj smiled as the Telepath Council touched her mind. The telepaths operating on a system of full democracy – of consensus – that even the Confederation could not match. How could it, when there could be no hidden agendas or dishonest politics? There was plenty of honest disagreement, with different sides attempting to convert the others to their cause, but no one could be forced into following a cause they didn't believe in. It had been years since Aisyaj had taken part in a communal mind-sharing, yet it felt like yesterday. For humanity, always yearning to be part of a greater whole, it was just like coming home.

She concentrated and spread out, in her mind, the details of everything that had happened on Greenland. She hid nothing, not even her shame and horror at how easily the entity had almost caught her, luring her down into the planet's atmosphere. The AIs had saved her life and soul from permanent servitude to the entities, if the Confederation's belief that telepaths were required to open the link between the entities home dimension and the human universe was accurate. She shared the feelings – or lack of them – she had had from Joe Buckley seconds before his experiment had gone horrifyingly wrong. She shared everything, knowing that they would need all the details before they decided what – if anything – to do about the crisis.

Telepathy, much to the annoyance of the AIs, defied all logic and reason. She could cast her thoughts across the galaxy to the telepaths back home, and hear them as clearly as she could over a QCC network. Better, in fact; a telepathic connection allowed her to feel what they were feeling, the rolling waves of concern, fear and angry at how one of their people had been violated. It was the ultimate support group; no one could hide their fears from the others, allowing the others to help them work through their concerns. That wasn't going to be

easy, this time; they were all nervous. They could all feel the entities, even at such a distance.

Aisyaj knew that there would be no easy answers. The entities were manipulating the quantum foam itself on a scale far greater than anything the telepaths had ever dreamed possible, at least for flesh and blood. Logically, the only way to defeat them was to cut the connection between their dimension and the human universe, but how was that even possible? Thoughts and ideas swam through the telepathic consensus, only to be defeated by cold hard logic. The Gateway was fixed in the quantum foam. There seemed to be no way to destroy it and, even if they succeeded, what effect would that have on the remainder of the galaxy? The human race could literally write themselves out of existence.

No wonder we were so tempted by the Buckley Experiment and its promise of power, an older mind-voice said. Anne was the oldest telepath alive, one of the few who had survived the early years of telepathic research and development, back when the human race hadn't been sure what to make of mind-readers in its midst. We were offered the power of the gods themselves and we took it without considering the risks.

A flurry of agreement echoed through the network, considering every aspect of the Buckley Experiment, yet finding no clue as to the horror that would be unleashed upon the human race. Joe Buckley had served his alien masters well – if it had actually been Joe Buckley and Aisyaj had her doubts about that – and had completely fooled humanity, and the AIs. The combined intellect of thousands of telepaths wouldn't be able to find flaws that the AIs had missed, not with their far greater processing power. Besides, she thought into the network, it was locking the barn door after the horse had been stolen.

We need to take action, another mind-voice said. If the entities require humans to gain access to this universe, we have to deprive them of those humans. We can destroy the human populations of the planets they have infected.

Anywhere else, there would have been a series of insults, of angry accusations. Among the telepaths, where all could feel the speaker's horror and revulsion at his own words, there was no point in blasting the messenger for bringing bad news. The argument span around and around, the telepaths trying to decide if mass slaughter was justified and if it would actually work against the entities. What good would it do, the majority finally concluded, to destroy the infected star systems if the entities merely moved on to other targets? They would have slaughtered billions of humans for nothing.

The Navy intends to move against the fallen shipyards, another voice added. We will learn from their experience and know if the entities are weakened by the loss of their thralls.

Some kind of connection is clearly required, a third voice said. The entities have launched ships that only operate at warp speeds, without accessing hyperspace. Why would they give up such a tactical advantage unless there was no choice? We lose mental connections when we go into hyperspace; why not the entities? As powerful as they are, their telepathy seems to follow similar rules to our own.

Aisyaj couldn't disagree with the logic. The first time she had gone into hyperspace, she had felt almost as if she had entered a sensory deprivation field, without even the reassuring presence of other telepaths in the back of her mind. There were telepaths who refused to go

into hyperspace at all and others who insisted that they would only go into hyperspace in a stasis tube, so that they would not have to endure even temporary separation from the rest of the telepathic humans. Even so, the entities were powerful, perhaps powerful enough to mark their thralls even in hyperspace. She had the vaguest glimmering of an idea at the back of her mind, but...

It exploded into her thoughts and she almost laughed. "How large a wormhole do you think we could produce?"

She smiled at the shock echoing through the network. There were two kinds of wormholes in the Confederation, both used for travelling faster than light or into the future. The standard wormhole allowed nearly instant transport over approximately twenty light years; they could be used in space or even on the ground, allowing people to step from world to world without ever having to go into space. The continuous wormholes, on the other hand, allowed starships to travel around the galaxy at rates slower than hyperspace, yet faster than warp drive. The Gasbags had invented the original design, but the AIs had taken their work and improved upon it, although even they had not been able to solve the massive power consumption required by even the smallest wormhole.

Yet...once the original power bill had been paid, there was no theoretical limit to the size of the wormhole. The Confederation had used wormholes to snatch up rocky planets and transport them into other star systems, where they had broken them up and used them as raw materials. There was a plan afoot to gather several different planets around a single star system, stringing planets out like beads on a necklace, providing humanity far more living space than it could either want or need. Aisyaj found the idea a trifle grandiose, yet it had a certain elegance and the sheer thrill of reshaping part of the galaxy alone made it attractive.

She outlined her idea. If they could generate a wormhole large enough to swallow Greenland, they could snatch the world out of its star system and deposit it in another, hopefully breaking the connection between the entities and their thralls at the same time. It might work; hell, given time, perhaps they could move the *entire* star system through a wormhole and into another place. She listened to the reactions, to the flurry of thoughts echoing through the network and slowly disconnected herself from the gathering. She had had another idea, one she didn't want to share with the rest of her people. It would only upset them.

"All right," she said, into the empty air. "I know you're listening. You may as well show yourself."

The AI image materialised beside her. "You never told us to leave," the blonde woman pointed out, dryly. "Besides, we wanted to ensure that you were safe."

"And I am grateful," Aisyaj said, truthfully. "We are agreed that the entities destroyed the Ancient civilisation, are we not?"

"That seems to be the general consensus," the AIs agreed. "We do not, however, have any direct proof of that theory, so it remains a theory."

Aisyaj nodded, smiling inwardly. One of the many differences between human and electronic mindsets was that electronic mindsets were smart enough to realise that there was a

fundamental difference between opinion and fact. If a theory proved to be incorrect, the AIs would dump the theory and come up with a new one, while many humans would seek to prove their theory correct, even at the cost of ignoring newer – inconvenient – facts. And then there were the humans who believed that their opinions were facts, purely because they had invented them...it was a hubris that even infected telepaths, although at least telepaths couldn't lie to their fellows.

"I want to talk through an idea of mind," she said. "Can you show me a star chart? I want to see where all the Ancient worlds are."

The image materialised in front of her. The Ancient civilisation, at its zenith, had been spread out over the entire galaxy, far further than humanity had settled before the development of the Confederation and the rise of the post-planet civilisation. There had never been any suggestion that the Ancients had developed city-ships, or planetoids, although there hadn't been any proof that they hadn't either. No one had ever discovered an Ancient starship, or even records relating to their existence. Or, she added in the privacy of her own head, perhaps Joe Buckley had uncovered such records and chose to conceal them.

"All right," she said. "Using this chart, can you locate the Ancient homeworld?"

"No," the AIs said. "We are unable to reliably date the settlements – we have no idea when they were first settled, or even which ones were settled first. We can project several possible locations, but they would remain only theories. There is no direct proof."

"Show me," Aisyaj said. "Just show me the most likely possibilities."

Seven stars blinked in the star chart. She frowned as she studied the display, stroking her chin; none of the possible homeworlds triggered her intuition. It was easy to see how the worlds could have served as the Ancient homeworld – they were surrounded by clusters of other Ancient worlds – yet somehow she was sure that none of them were the right target. If her theory was accurate, none of them would *be* the right world...

"Good," she said, hoping that the AIs wouldn't interrupt and shatter the soap bubble of an idea blossoming in her mind. "Assume that there was a planet in the Dead Zone. Would that be a candidate for a possible homeworld?"

The AI image turned to stare at her. "If there was a planet in the Dead Zone, it would be the best possible candidate," they said. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"I started to wonder why the entities had left our universe in the first place," Aisyaj admitted. "Why would they if they had an entire civilisation working to throw other races into their gaping maw? And then it occurred to me that someone might have rebelled against them and broken the link between their universe and ours..."

"And the Dead Zone might be all that was left of the first gateway," the AIs said. There was a pause. "We have accessed sensor records from platforms established along the edge of the Dead Zone. There are definitely some planets within the zone. Reaching them, however, may be difficult."

Five hundred years ago, a human starship had suffered a catastrophic total systems failure and had fallen back into normal space. The ship's crew had discovered, to their horror, that most of the starship's systems simply refused to work, for no obvious reason. Even their QCC link to the AIs had failed. Only the most primitive technology had worked, allowing them to move the starship several light seconds towards the Confederation...where the starship's systems had suddenly come back online. Once they'd staggered back into the nearest shipyard, they'd reported their experience to the Confederation Navy, which had discovered that there was an entire area of space – thirty light years in diameter – where advanced tech simply refused to work. It had been a total mystery; unlike many hyperspace dampening fields, it had proven impossible to shield human technology from the effect. Indeed, there were some who believed that the Dead Zone was, in reality, an area of space where the laws of science were different, rather than something imposed on the area by an outside force.

"I was thinking about that," Aisyaj said, brightly. "There may be a way into the Dead Zone and out again..."

"You cannot take this ship into the Dead Zone," the AIs said, flatly. "Your ship will die as soon as you cross the border and that will be the end of you."

"I wasn't thinking of taking *this* ship into the Dead Zone," Aisyaj said. It was nice to be ahead of the AIs for once; they normally thought so fast that they could predict the gist of a conversation she would have with them next year, before she had even finished the first sentence. "I was thinking about an old boyfriend of mine."

"The Slowboaters," the AIs said. "Their tech may work within the Dead Zone – it is certainly primitive enough – but even so, it would take years to get to any of the planets..."

"Maybe," Aisyaj said, and winked at the image. "If you would excuse me, just for a second..."

She concentrated, reaching out with her mind to touch one very specific telepath. Representative Caprice wasn't exactly an elected official – she might represent the telepaths to the Confederation Security Council, but all decisions were made via consensus – but she was the closest thing they had to a leader. The Representative was trying to listen to the discussion, yet she always had time for Aisyaj.

"Mother," she said, as the connection firmed up. It was always easier to link to blood relations, although no one was quite sure why. "I've had an idea."

It always amused her how the younger generation from the rest of the Confederation reacted with horror when she told them that her mother could read her mind, yet she had grown up with it and considered it natural and right; besides, once she had learned how to control her own powers, she had been able to see the world from her mother's point of view. Her mother saw the idea spread out in her daughter's mind and reacted with horror, then understanding. There was no other choice.

"You could be making a big mistake," she warned. "If your theory is incorrect, you would be risking your life for nothing."

“I am aware of the risks,” Aisyaj said. Even as an adult, her mother could still make her feel small, even though she could sense the love and concern behind her mother’s words. She hated to make her mother feel afraid, even though she was certain that there was no other choice. “I will be careful.”

“Then...good luck,” her mother said. “I will prepare the masters for your call.”

Aisyaj closed her eyes as the connection broke. Her mother’s final words had been shaded by her fears...and her conviction that she would never see her daughter again. Just for a second, her resolve weakened, leaving her wondering if she was doing the right thing. She told herself, firmly, that there was no other choice. It was her idea. It was up to her to take the consequences, whatever they were.

“All right,” she said, to the AIs. Her hands danced over the console, setting a new course. “Let’s go visit the Slowboaters.”

A moment later, the *Rowan* fell into hyperspace and vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Warlord Masji smiled to himself as the guards escorted him into the presence of the Emperor. As a Warlord, he had automatic access to the Emperor at all times, but that had been before his encounter with the gods and the human warning that he carried a deadly infection with him. If his ship hadn't arrived at Haypahi – his people's homeworld – at a speed that far outshone even the best the humans could produce – there would have been a good chance that the local defenders would have opened fire on his ship. As it was, their greed for the technology that had powered his ship had encouraged the Emperor to defy the humans and allow him to land.

That was predictable, my masters, he thought, basking in the love of the gods. The Emperor might have wanted to believe the humans – after all, he would have picked up the warnings from the Galactic Net – but his subordinates would have taken it as a sign of weakness. In a culture where might always made right, the Emperor could not afford to appear weak or indecisive. The knives would start to come out in the darkness, for it was believed that if a leader had lost the favour of the gods he could be assassinated at will. The lesser lords would see their chance to become greater lords and rush to back anyone who tried to launch a coup.

The Emperor himself was an impressive sight, clad in robes of the finest gold and silver, mined from countless worlds. The humans – the soon to be dead humans – could produce gold and silver from nothing, but their gold was inferior to that that had been worked with bare hands. It was something that even their own artisans would have understood, the men and women who had been developing their art over countless centuries. Masji smiled inwardly again at the thought; soon, the humans would be little more than slaves, while his people would be the favoured of the gods. Let them struggle and fight against the coming tempest all they liked; they could no more harm the gods than ants could harm a human being.

“My Emperor,” Masji said, kneeling on the ground. It was a gesture of respect, one made to an Emperor who could not allow any open defiance. It cut at him to offer his worship to anyone other than the gods, but there was no choice. It was a tactical manoeuvre. “I bring you great gifts from the gods themselves.”

The Emperor looked disbelieving. “We have heard from the human Confederation,” he said. “They have informed Us that you and your ship are infected with a curse. We have been warned to destroy you on sight.”

He paused, waiting. “We have brought gifts that will allow the Empire to dominate the Confederation as easily as the Confederation could dominate us,” Masji said, knowing that only the promise of power could stay the Emperor's hand. “The gods are not our enemies; they wish merely to ensure that we receive our proper place in the universe.”

The courtiers behind the Emperor exchanged glances. Masji, an experienced hand at political manoeuvring within the Emperor's Court, could read their expressions, no matter how much they tried to conceal them. They thought he was mad, mad enough to claim the blessing of the gods, the gods who had promised that one day they would rule all of creation. They thought he was mad...and yet, there was the inescapable fact that his ship had reached the homeworld at an impossible speed. The technology behind that would make his people the masters of the universe.

“I claim my place as Speaker to the Gods,” he added. The courtiers stopped exchanging looks and stared at him. There was a very old legend about a lord who would, one day, encounter the gods and bring with him the source of their power. The humans, he had been amused to discover, had a similar legend about a being called Prometheus. “Our destiny awaits us, if we are not too timid to claim it.”

The Emperor’s cold eyes stared down at Masji, silently considering. Under religious law, Masji had to prove his claims to be Speaker to the Gods, or he could be stoned to death for blasphemy. Masji had, quite intentionally, made life easier for him, just by issuing his preposterous claim in front of the entire court. The Emperor had no choice, but to demand proof, before proceeding with the stoning. Masji wondered if the Emperor, the master of a thousand political battles, understood how he had been manipulated. He could almost see the puzzlement baffling the Emperor.

“You must prove the truth of your words,” the Emperor said, finally. His tongue flickered out in a single stabbing motion. “Prove your words...or die.”

Masji smiled and stood up, reaching into his pocket. They had removed all the open and concealed weapons he carried on his person – only the Emperor was allowed to travel armed in the Royal Court, presenting an interesting challenge for any would-be assassin – but they’d missed the mirror. It was protected by the gods themselves and their eyes had passed over it, without ever registering its existence. The Emperor’s eyes narrowed sharply as Masji brought it into view, allowing them all to gaze upon the darkened mirror.

“This is a gift from the gods,” Masji said. He ignored the laughter that echoed at the back of the massive hall. Other nobles were pushing their way into the hall, expecting to see a warlord publically humiliated and then stoned to death. “It is a gateway into the universe of the gods themselves.”

He held it up above his head, capturing their attention. “And if you believe, the gods will come through the mirror and work their marvels for us all to see,” he added. “Look upon the mirror and believe.”

The Emperor’s eyes gazed upon the mirror, looking into the darkened shadows...and he was caught. The sudden *presence* within the room was enough to capture others, a wave of life energy flowing towards the mirror and into the universe of the gods. The entire hall was captivated as the mirror lifted up, out of his hand and started to spin in the air, forming a link into the alternate dimension...

And then the gods came forth for all to see.

Masji knelt before the entity as it materialised above him, its power reaching out over the homeworld and capturing thousands – then millions – of his people. No, they were *its* people now, the loyal servants of the gods, unable to even entertain the concept of resistance. The madness that had gripped half of his crew was no longer a problem, not now that the gods had learned how to moderate their presence and save those of weak faith from staring into their very faces. In seconds, the planet – which had been preparing itself to watch his fall from grace – had been converted into a planet of loyal servants.

He felt his own mind expand as the god gently kissed his soul, allowing him to see what was happening high above as the god's influence roared from mind to mind. The system's defenders pledged their loyalty to the god, using their weapons to interdict the few who resisted and tried to escape. In the coming hours, days and weeks, the remainder of the empire would be brought into line, all worshipping the gods. And then, and then...the promise swelled up in front of his mind. Just as the gods had sent the bearers of advanced technology to his mind, they would allow his people to rule, as long as they received their tribute. The human Confederation would be swept away and the galaxy would be theirs.

The outskirts of the Haypah Home System was seeded with defence platforms, mines and sensor buoys, enough to give even a first-rate Confederation cruiser problems. Captain Pearson frowned as his ship carefully picked its way through the chaos, hidden under a cloaking field that should be capable of hiding them from Haypah sensors. If they were wrong, of course, he knew that they would have to either flee or engage any prowling Haypah starships that came to investigate. Neither was a workable option.

He frowned as the passive sensors built up a picture of the Haypah system. The Haypah might be barbarians who shouldn't be in space at all – their technology had been stolen from another race, if one believed the theory – yet there was no doubting their determination to catch up with and surpass the Confederation. There were thousands of industrial facilities in their system, from gas giant mining operations to shipyards and industrial nodes. They didn't have anything like the productive capability of the Confederation, but he had to admit that it was an impressive display. The Haypah spent most of their gross planetary budget on building newer warships and expanding their empire.

“But they don't seem to have developed the concept of a supernova bomb,” the tactical officer whispered. There was no need to whisper – sound didn't travel through space, after all – but no one spoke loudly, not in enemy territory. “If the star went supernova, all of their work would be wiped out.”

“They're working on expanding their industrial base and moving it over their other star systems,” the engineer pointed out. He had worked in a Confederation industrial node before transferring to the Confederation Navy and had a healthy respect for what the Haypah had accomplished, even if it was inferior to human work. “Given enough time, they will probably develop industrial nodes that can be moved, or simply taken out of the local system via a wormhole.”

“They don't have wormhole technology,” the helmsman pointed out.

“As far as we know,” the engineer said. “Once you know the basic equations, it's fairly simple to build a wormhole generator and store sufficient power for a one-shot jump. It would disrupt activities, but it would prevent their entire industrial base from being wiped out by a single supernova.”

Pearson frowned, following the discussion as the ship slipped into the inner system. It was a common theme...and not just in the Confederation. Several other races, not all of them as advanced as the human race, had been considering taking action to contain or isolate the Haypah, perhaps even destroying them. As sickening as it was, there was a faction within the Confederation who believed that the Haypah Empire should be summarily destroyed and the

survivors re-educated into civilised thought patterns. A race that was incapable of understanding that there was enough for all in space, or that other races had rights, was a dangerous neighbour. Pearson himself tended to believe that the Haypah could be contained, but looking upon their work, he found himself wondering if the naysayers were right. Given enough time, the Haypah might become a threat to the entire Confederation.

The tactical officer shrugged. "Assuming they have the imagination to think of it," he countered. "They have never developed anything for themselves, merely stolen technology from other races and sometimes improved upon it. They're a pain in the ass, but they're not a real threat."

"I'm sure the races they have enslaved would agree with you," the helmsman said, darkly. "They may be primitive barbarians, but they're primitive barbarians who have lucked into advanced technology and used it to spread themselves across the stars. A race that developed its own technology is going to be right out of luck if they don't match the Haypah by the time the Haypah encounter them. They will be destroyed."

An alarm echoed through the tactical network, bringing them all back to concentrate on the problem at hand. "Captain," the tactical officer said, "I have a lock on the *Tooth and Claw*. She's currently holding station above the planet's capital city."

Pearson scowled. The Haypah battlewagon should not have been able to reach their homeworld so quickly, not using warp drive. The crew, assuming they were still thinking for themselves, would be able to claim a record, but he suspected that they'd lost their minds to the entities. The entities might, through their ability to warp reality at will, have been able to throw the Haypah ship right back to its own homeworld. A starship with a hyperdrive could hardly have done it quicker.

He contemplated the tactical problem quickly. The Haypah had surrounded their rogue ship with forty other warships and four heavy orbital weapons platforms. Their home fleet, remaining in reserve, numbered another four hundred heavy warships, fifty heavy weapons platforms and over five thousand attack fighters, each one armed to the teeth. Individually, none of them were any match for his ship, but together they would almost certainly destroy his vessel. He could remain out of range indefinitely, simply by outracing them, yet they'd carefully positioned the rogue ship in a position where he would have to come into weapons range, just to try to destroy it.

"Tactical," he said slowly, "are the other Haypah ships infected?"

"Uncertain," the tactical officer said. "Their ships are not showing any signs of infection, but it is difficult to be sure at this range. They may well be infected, or they may be holding an infected ship under their guns. Or..."

He broke off as new red icons flashed into life on the display. For a second, Pearson was certain that the Haypah had somehow detected their presence, but instead they were firing on a handful of their own ships. The rogue ships appeared to be trying to escape the planet, yet they'd started from too deep within the gravity well to escape before it was too late. One by one, they were ruthlessly destroyed, blown away by their own people.

“They must have been infected,” the tactical officer said. After what they’d seen on Greenland, few of them had any real capability for feeling stunned any longer. “They must have been under alien control...”

“I very much doubt it,” the second tactical officer said. “I’m picking up data from the planetary network. It’s having...glitches.”

Pearson plunged his mind into the starship’s computers and studied the results for himself. The Haypah network had been designed by a far more paranoid mindset than anything the Confederation had produced, yet it leaked like a sieve to Confederation technology. It was also in serious trouble. Large parts of the network were failing, or had dropped out altogether, despite the precautions they’d built into their system. The very laws of science themselves seemed to be changing.

“The planet is infected,” the tactical officer realised. “There’s one of the entities down there, right now, sucking in their life force.”

“They’re learning,” the second tactical officer added. “There doesn’t seem to be any level of madness this time around. They just...expanded and took control.”

Pearson leaned back in his command chair. His orders had been to destroy the *Tooth and Claw*, but it was becoming increasingly clear that the orders had been superseded by a new reality. With the Haypah homeworld under alien control, there was no longer any point in destroying a single ship, which meant that the original mission had already failed.

“Pity we don’t have a supernova bomb onboard,” the tactical officer said. “We could have roasted this entity and its thralls before it had a chance to expand.”

“That’s enough of that,” Pearson said. He made up his mind, quickly. “We’ll pull out of the system and contact the Confederation Navy. Admiral Burton will have to dispatch an assault fleet to trash the enemy system before it becomes a strategic threat.”

“The results are clear,” Grand Admiral Mark Webster said, grimly. “The Haypah homeworld has fallen to the enemy.”

The Security Council considered his words as the tactical database updated. Two other human worlds had been infected, although the Confederation Navy had been able to react quickly and evacuate their Rings before the entity’s influence could reach up into orbit. A third had been threatened, but somehow – no one was sure how – the entity’s possession had failed to take and it had faded away, back into the quantum foam. The best theory anyone had was that the entity simply hadn’t been able to snatch enough minds before the universe started to push it back out of the human realm.

“This adds a further complication,” he added, deliberately understating his words. “If the entities start using the Haypah fleet to spread their message across space, we will find it impossible to maintain the quarantine. Worse, if the *Tooth and Claw* was able to survive transit into their universe, it is quite possible that the *Scientist* survived as well.”

They didn't understand the implications, he realised. "The Haypah may have access to the technology on the lost planetoid," he informed them, gently. "We need to act now."

He sent a mental command into the display, cancelling the image of the Haypah system. "I intend to order Admiral Burton to attack the Haypah System first, rather than the Scorpion Yard," he said. "His task force can obliterate the Haypah System's starships and defences in short order, before they start distributing them across the stars and outside our sensor range. We have to move now."

"Admiral," Chen said slowly, "you're talking about declaring war on the Haypah."

Representative Singh snorted. "The Haypah are no longer in control of their capital system," he said. "Do you think that they would not be grateful if we freed them from alien control?"

"We would be killing them," the Grand Admiral said, flatly. "Even if we confined the strike to their space-based installations, thousands of Haypah would die."

He looked up, trying to make them understand. "We cannot allow this infection to spread further," he added. "We have to stop it now, while we still can."

Chen blinked. "Do you feel that we *can* stop it?"

"A new approach has been suggested," the AIs put in. "We need time, time to think and plan. Destroying the Haypah ability to make war will help win us that time."

The vote was taken and all nine members of the Security Council voted in favour. None of them were very happy, for various different reasons, but they all agreed to mount the attack.

They saw no other choice.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Three thousand years ago, when the human race had started taking its first baby steps into space, there were those who dreamed of interstellar flight. Lacking access to warp drive or any of the later methods of cheating the light barrier, they preached the virtues of massive sublight interstellar colony ships, each one transporting an entire population to its destination. The ships, built on asteroids, would serve as homes for their passengers, who might live and die during the transit instead of ever reaching their new homes. The generation ships, as they became known, could not be funded by any government, for there would never be any return on the investment. Instead, religious and political groups, seeking freedom of belief, built the ships and set off to find their new home.

Unluckily for them, five years after the first asteroid ship – a hollowed-out asteroid converted into a starship – set out on its long voyage, Doctor Taylor prototyped the first warp field generator and inaugurated the Age of Expansion. Using warp drive, thousands of FTL starships rocketed past the generation starships and set up colonies on the worlds claimed – at least in theory – by the people who had set off on their interstellar voyage. When they finally reached their new homes, they discovered that they were not only occupied, but taken. Some generation ships were able to land and integrate into the newer settlements, but others were unable to land and condemned to wander through space until they finally found a home. It was an age of great achievement and great tragedy. The generation ships had been rendered obsolete just as they had come of age.

There had always been some who preferred the life onboard the ships and, over the years, they reshaped their society. Instead of landing on a planet's surface, or adding warp drives to their ships and heading out ahead of the expanding wave of settlement, they chose to remain on the ships and develop their own society – stagnate, in the words of their detractors. Even the development of the Confederation – and starships that made the massive asteroid vessels look tiny – failed to convince them to abandon their ways, for they had become space gypsies. Every so often, some would leave the slowboats and others, seeking refuge from the pressures of modern life, would join them. It was a strange, almost isolated society, part of the Confederation and yet not part of the Confederation.

Aisyaj smiled to herself as her starship popped out of hyperspace and instantly accelerated to a third of the speed of light. Years ago, when she had been taking her first trip away from her mother and the other telepaths, she had met a slowboater whose ship had been refitting in a Confederation star system. It wouldn't have taken so long if they hadn't insisted on using their own technology, rather than nanomachines or Confederation fabricators. She'd met the young man at one of the entertainments hosted by the local population and they'd hit it off, to the point where they'd spent four years together before the slowboat was finally prepared to depart. She'd known – telepaths couldn't avoid knowing what their lovers were thinking – that he would have to choose between her and his life on the slowboat, yet she'd tried to ignore it. When the time had finally come, they had kissed and separated, promising to see each other again. Her lips twitched as the *Albert Einstein* came into view. Neither of them had imagined meeting like this.

The *Albert Einstein* was ugly, yet there was something about it – a certain grandeur – that many modern starships simply lacked. Centuries ago, it had been an asteroid, barely a hundred kilometres long. Now, it rotated to provide gravity and was studded with domes and sensors, each one housing part of the human population. Ten thousand men and women lived

on the asteroid ship, travelling between the stars on an interstellar slowboat. The *Albert Einstein* was living history and, even though she thought the slowboaters were slightly weird, she had to admire their achievement. It was a remarkable ship and society, one that had remained unchanged throughout the Confederation's existence.

"They do not permit us to make contact," the AIs said. "They do not believe in the existence of artificial intelligence."

"That's what we're counting on," Aisyaj reminded them. She keyed her console, opening a channel to the slowboat. "I would like to request permission to come aboard."

There was a long pause – slowboats rarely needed to contact anyone once they were away from inhabited star systems – before there was any reply. "We do not allow people to board during transit," the voice said, flatly. Aisyaj knew that they rarely allowed visitors even when they were orbiting a star. "Please state your reasons for wishing to board."

"I would like to talk to Rylander," she said, throwing a name from the past into the ether. It was alarmingly possible that he had died within the interstellar void, for they certainly hadn't exchanged messages since they'd parted. "I believe that he will want to see me."

There was a second pause. "You may dock," the voice said. Teleporting would be quicker, but slowboats refused to allow anyone to use teleporters on their ships. "We will activate a landing beacon for you. Be aware that you will be searched and you will not be permitted to bring any restricted items onboard our ship."

"I understand," Aisyaj said. Her mind was her most vital asset and they couldn't take that from her. Besides, they didn't have the technology to detect half of her enhancements, let alone the QCC link back to the ship. "I will dock in five minutes."

The AIs performed the docking process for her, allowing her a chance to get dressed in a basic shipsuit and helmet. There was little point in rubbing their collective nose in her origins, or in the vast superiority of Confederation technology. She needed them to help her, not to hate her and everything she represented. As weird as it seemed to her, everyone on the slowboat had chosen to live in a low-tech environment and their choice had to be respected. She reminded herself of that as she stepped out of the airlock and the ship's atmosphere struck her in the face, cool and very dry.

"Welcome," a voice said. She looked up to see an older man wearing a dark grey shipsuit. In the Confederation, he would have been young again, with a young man's body, but he looked ancient to her eyes. The slowboaters didn't even use rejuvenation drugs, let alone nanomachines or genetic enhancements. "I will escort you to the meeting place."

Aisyaj looked around as he led her through a maze of corridors and into a single room, staring out over the rotating cylinder that made up the population's living space. The sense of *age* was overwhelming, a reminder that the generation ship was almost certainly the oldest active starship in the Confederation. A handful of children – wearing drab outfits similar to hers – waved at her as they went past, before returning their minds to the task at hand. The slowboaters taught their children personally, rather than using direct memory downloads and neural feeds, yet the kids seemed happy enough. Besides, in thirty years, the slowboat would

arrive at another Confederation system. They'd have time to decide if they wanted to jump ship then.

Rylander was waiting for her in the briefing room. When they'd first met, he'd been younger and she was astonished at the change in him, even though she knew that it was inevitable in an environment without higher technology. He looked older, yet as soon as he smiled, she *knew* that he was still the same person inside. She was in his arms without even noticing that she had moved, feeling him pressing against her. Her escort coughed and walked out of the room, leaving them alone.

"It's good to see you again," she said, pulling him down towards her for a kiss. "I have missed you."

He flushed, in a manner she had always found charming. "I have missed you too," he admitted, "but..."

His voice broke off as they kissed. A flurry of images assaulted her mind; his memories of her and his thoughts of another woman, one who had borne his children. A person who had grown up in the Confederation would have felt no guilt at sleeping with more than one woman at a time, but he'd grown up among the slowboaters, where monogamy was the general rule.

"I understand," she said. Telepaths wouldn't have had that problem. "I understand."

He cleared his throat as she sat down. "I am glad to see you again," he said, stiffly. It was true, but she could sense the guilt underlying his words, the fear that he was betraying his wife. "I never thought that I would see you again."

"I wish this was a social call, Rylander," Aisyaj admitted. "There's been a...development."

She explained, as briefly as she could, about the entities and what they were doing to the Confederation. Rylander didn't believe her at first – it was, she had to admit, an unbelievable story – but as she outlined the problem, he started to understand. The Confederation was up against an enemy who could barely be affected by its weapons...and then only by committing mass slaughter. It was not a workable solution to the problem.

"I see," he said, finally. She had offered him the records from the AIs, but he'd declined them at once, reminding her that they were not permitted on the generation ship. "I do not understand, however, why you believe that we can be of help to you."

Aisyaj took a breath. "There is a place called the Dead Zone," she said, and briefly explained her theory. "Our tech doesn't function in the Dead Zone, even when heavily shielded. Your tech, on the other hand, would probably work perfectly."

"You're gambling your life on it," Rylander pointed out, when she'd finished. "You do realise that it would take this ship centuries to *reach* the Dead Zone, let alone reach the planets encysted within the field." He frowned, considering. "Even if you intend to provide transport to the Dead Zone, it would still take ninety years to reach those worlds..."

“I believe that we have a way to get into the Dead Zone,” Aisyaj said. It wasn't something she wanted to discuss, at least not until he had agreed to help her. “If we can get in, we can get out again as well.”

“I see,” Rylander said. He studied her for a long moment. She could sense the thoughts churning behind his face, but somehow avoided the temptation to peek. “That leads to one final question. The Confederation could certainly provide you with a ship like ours, or one even larger...why do you need us for your mission?”

Aisyaj smiled. He might have come from a primitive culture, but he was no fool. “The vast majority of people in the Confederation grow up with advanced technology, to the point where they are dependent on it,” she explained. “If you cut one of them off from the Galactic Net, they will feel disorientated and start panicking; they are simply too used to having advanced technology around them. I need people who are used to living in more...primitive surroundings.”

And because part of you hoped you could rekindle an old flame, part of her added, silently.

“I need you – the entire human race – needs you and your skills,” she concluded, pushing the treacherous thought aside. “We can build a slowboat, but we need people to crew it, people like you. Please will you come?”

“I will have to discuss it with some of my family,” Rylander said, finally. “I will arrange for you to stay within my family compartment and join us for dinner. I should have an answer for you by then.”

An hour later, Aisyaj lay on the bed in her compartment and waited, practicing her mental disciplines to pass the time. It was astonishing just how many impressions were burned into the hull of the ancient starship, impressions of hope and expectation from an early age blending with the determination to forge a new path and explore the gulf between the stars. The slowboaters might have believed that the outsider – they thought of her as an outsider, as hurtful as that was – was confined, but her mind flew free. Her perceptions spanned the entire vessel...

The compartment was tiny, barely large enough for a bunk and a small table. The slowboat didn't have the massive resources of a planetoid or even one of the smaller city-ships; the population had to learn to make do with what they had, rather than what they wanted. It was an attitude that, Aisyaj felt, the entire Confederation could learn from, although she saw no chance of that happening anytime soon. Besides, the Confederation's predecessors would not have understood the concept of having too much. She pushed that thought aside and meditated, considering her options. If Rylander refused her, she would have to undertake the mission herself, which would mean being completely alone in the Dead Zone. It would not be a pleasant trip.

She looked up as the door chime rang, seconds before it hissed open, revealing Rylander and an older woman. It took Aisyaj a second to realise that the woman was actually younger than Rylander...and that she was his wife. The pressure of having children in the generation ship had clearly left its mark on her, even though Confederation technology could have removed the physical trauma and left her feeling as young and healthy as she had ever been. Just for a

second, she felt an intense wave of anger; how *could* anyone live that way? The joys of the pre-industrial past existed only in the eyes of those who had no idea what it was like to suffer, or to work from day to day knowing that missing a single day could be disastrous.

“We have considered the issue,” Rylander said, flatly. “A handful of us – myself included – have agreed to go with you. One of our ship’s tenders will be detached and given to you for the trip. If you are incapable of getting us out of the Dead Zone, we will die there.”

Aisyaj nodded in understanding. “Thank you,” she said. She hadn’t expected them to agree to take the entire ship into the Dead Zone. If her theory was wrong – if the Dead Zone’s effect on technology only grew stronger deeper within the zone – the entire starship could be lost, far beyond any hope of retrieval. “I think...”

“I wanted to meet you,” Rylander’s wife said. She spoke with a harsh accent that could not hide the pain in her voice. “I wanted to meet the woman who could convince him to drop everything and leave on a fool’s quest.”

Her eyes met Aisyaj’s eyes and, almost involuntarily, their minds touched. Aisyaj saw how she’d met and married Rylander, how she’d borne his two children without complaint and been there for him, almost a part of him. It was not a relationship she could understand, yet the woman had accepted it completely, almost unquestioningly. It had been everything she had ever wanted and just because it made no sense to her...it didn’t make it wrong. The Confederation existed to allow everyone the chance to find happiness, knowing that it didn’t have to come at anyone else’s expense. The poor woman hated her, not entirely without reason.

Aisyaj blinked, cutting off the contact. “I will bring him back to you,” she promised. She remembered how the entities had touched her mind, warping her very perceptions...and grasped the horrific temptations such power presented. She could have convinced the woman to give up her husband, yet it would be wrong, wrong, morally wrong...

“I wish I believed you,” the woman said, before she turned and strode out of the chamber. She paused, just before the hatch hissed closed. “I think he loved you more than he loved me.”

Rylander stared after his wife, his thoughts a conflicting mass. “I tried to explain to her,” he admitted. “She refused to believe me. I don’t think she believed that you were telling the truth.”

He straightened up and helped Aisyaj to her feet. “The elders have given their permission for us to take the tender, so we’d better disconnect it from the hull,” he said. “I assume that your ship can carry it to the Dead Zone?”

Aisyaj checked her implants quickly, running calculations. “I can project a hyper-field around it,” she confirmed, flatly. The AIs would do the math for her, but she didn’t want to explain that to him, not when he might feel compelled to object. “That will get it to the Dead Zone, and then we will have to hop the rest of the way.”

Rylander frowned. “Hop?”

“Wait and see,” Aisyaj said. In the privacy of her own head, part of her doubted that it was even possible, though she knew better. “You’re going to love it.”

The tender was roughly the same size as a Confederation heavy cruiser, although the design was very different. It was a cylinder fitted out with a fusion drive, one that provided a constant burn in normal space, allowing it to accelerate slowly, but steadily towards the speed of light. The AIs checked it quickly and confirmed that the ship should operate safely within the Dead Zone, although it was primitive. Aisyaj smiled at their curiosity and frustration, for they hated the very concept of an area of space that they couldn’t explore. They even promised to provide recording equipment that should work within the Dead Zone, provided only that she gave them full access.

“Thank you,” she said, as Rylander entered her ship’s cockpit. The tender was positioned below her ship, ready to jump into hyperspace on her mark. “Here goes nothing...”

On cue, she tapped the console and the linked ships jumped into hyperspace.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I have the latest reports from the *River*, Admiral.”

Admiral Burton accessed the reports as the data flowed into the computer network. Since an entity – or *the* entity, seeing as no one was sure if there were multiple entities or only one – had manifested on the surface of the Haypah Homeworld – the Haypah had been deploying their forces to cover their world and its industrial nodes. It was an alarming preview of what they might face when they finally hit the Scorpion Navy Yards, a defence designed to prevent his force from slipping in, smashing the yards and slipping out again.

“Update the targeting solutions,” he ordered, calmly. At least the Haypah didn’t have access to the same level of technology as the Confederation. Indeed, he had argued that they should deal with the Scorpion Navy Yards first, in the hopes of preventing the industrial nodes from being used to make the area impregnable, even to a planetoid-led assault. “Prepare to engage.”

He sat back and considered his task force. The Confederation Navy had provided him with nineteen planetoids and over a hundred cruisers, but he’d decided to leave the cruisers maintaining the quarantine zone around the infected stars and take the planetoids alone into Haypah space. The cruisers possessed considerable firepower, yet their mobility was their prime asset and that would be more useful in hunting down and destroying infected starships. Besides, the planetoids possessed enough firepower to trash the entire Haypah Navy by themselves.

“Targeting solutions updated,” the intelligence officer said. “The fleet is ready to jump.”

Burton took a breath. They were barely ten light years from the Haypah System, only seconds away under hyperdrive. Intelligence believed that the Haypah didn’t have any way to track ships moving through the upper levels of hyperspace – even the Confederation found it difficult – but Intelligence had a habit of making mistakes, or drawing the wrong conclusions. It was a major problem when starships were deployed into situations they didn’t expect, because they *knew* that there would be no surprises. Still, the Haypah System *was* closely monitored by Confederation Intelligence. There shouldn’t be any surprises.

Or, he reminded himself, at least none caused by the Haypah themselves. The entities, on the other hand, might have more than a few surprises up their sleeves. If the telepaths were right, and their powers expanded as they overwhelmed more and more minds, the chances were good that they would be far more powerful in the Haypah System than they were back at Greenland. How far, he asked himself, could their powers reach? Could they reach out and influence the behaviour of his crews? Could they simply shut the planetoids down as they came into range? It was terrifying; he would almost sooner have taken his fleet on a death ride against unbeatable odds than face the unknown.

He looked over at the AI image and scowled. The AIs had offered to assist in coordinating the assault – and he had to admit that their help had been useful – but he wasn’t blind to their interest in the entities themselves. They wanted to solve the mystery and, while Burton agreed that solving the mystery behind the entities was important, it wasn’t the first priority. The first priority was protecting the Confederation and if that meant losing the chance to study the entities, it was a worthwhile price to pay.

“Jump,” he ordered.

The planetoids raced into hyperspace, seconds before jumping out again, spinning towards the main shipyard in the Haypah System. Burton watched as the active sensors – there was no point in trying to hide – updated the charts rapidly, confirming the presence of hundreds of enemy warships and, beyond them, the massive shipyard the Haypah had built to service their fleet. They’d spent years building, refitting and expanding their ships in their desperate attempt to defeat the Confederation, yet they hadn’t even come close to matching humanity’s weapons. Burton studied it for a long moment, watching in wry amusement as the Haypah weapons locked onto his ships, and then gave the order.

“Fire,” he ordered.

Nineteen planetoids opened fire as one, launching hyper-missiles towards their targets, followed rapidly by warp and sublight missiles, the latter carrying gravimetric warheads and direct-fission cores. The Haypah didn’t have hyper-shields equal to Confederation tech, ensuring that they simply couldn’t cover all the hyper-bands against the shotgun tactic used by the planetoids. They fired back at once, of course, but the planetoids could cover all of the hyper-bands and weathered the assault with ease. One by one, Haypah starships started to explode as the human missiles struck home, but they refused to break, choosing instead to aim themselves towards the enemy and charge. He couldn’t tell if they were under the control of the entities, or just fighting and dying to protect their homeworld, infected or not.

“The enemy shipyard has taken heavy damage,” the AIs confirmed. The advantage of hyper-missiles was that the attacker could strike targets all across the system, often hitting the targets before they received any warning. Hyper-shields were power intensive and several Haypah installations simply hadn’t had theirs up, resulting in instant destruction when the warheads materialised inside the structures and detonated, blowing them into flaming debris. “Their orbital population centres are not being targeted, as per orders.”

Burton nodded. The planners had wanted to target the Haypah habitats, but he’d vetoed the idea, pointing out that it would be akin to mass slaughter. The Confederation Navy didn’t exist to commit genocide, even if the Haypah were considered annoying barbarians by the vast majority of the galaxy. Besides, the Haypah – for reasons known only to them – had isolated their industrial base from their population centres, making a surgical strike possible.

“Good,” he ordered. The remaining Haypah starships were advancing towards his fleet, refusing to be diverted by his overwhelming force. He checked the computer network and was relieved to discover that his ships had taken relatively little damage from the enemy bombardment. If nothing else, he told himself, they might not be so keen to challenge humanity again in the future, if they survived their brief contact with the enemy. “Engage with energy weapons as soon as they come into range.”

The massive projectors mounted on the planetoids induced instant atomic fission, literally blowing starships into atoms. One by one, Haypah starships flickered and flashed out of existence, desperately bombarding his ships with their puny weapons. The massed fire of their defensive platforms – before they were destroyed by his ships – damaged one of the planetoids, but the remainder just kept going. The Haypah refused to retreat, or even to

consider surrender. They'd invested years of effort and almost their entire gross planetary product in building the fleet, but it was being wiped out almost effortlessly.

"Admiral," Commander Ryrie said slowly, "there are certain discrepancies within the data."

Burton accessed the intelligence stream and frowned, puzzled. "What discrepancies?"

"They seem to have lost over a hundred starships," Commander Ryrie explained. A chart of known enemy starships flickered up in his virtual vision, cross-referenced with the list of starships that had been destroyed by his fleet. A number of ships were simply unaccounted for. They hadn't been present when his fleet had arrived, or stationed at one of the other enemy systems. "They seem to have vanished...or to have carried the infection elsewhere."

Burton closed his eyes, in pain. They'd wrecked havoc in the enemy system – even if they withdrew now, the Haypah would still need years to rebuild their fleet and facilities – and it had all been for nothing. He glanced up at the main display, watching as the final enemy ship flickered out of existence and his starship's batteries started targeting the remains of the shipyard itself. The weapons platforms were still firing, but it was futile. The battle might have been a tactical success, yet it had been a strategic defeat. The Security Council would not be pleased.

"Continue firing," he ordered. They would make sure that this system, at least, would not be able to serve as a base for further infection flights. Once the defences had been destroyed, they would lay replicating mines within the system and render it harmless, at least until a more general solution was found. "What do we have from the planet itself?"

"Very little," the AIs reported. "We used to be able to access their planetary datanet at will. At the moment, most of the net appears to be dead and orbital imagery suggests that the population appears to be...praying." The AIs sounded confused. "They are kneeling in prayer to their gods."

Burton nodded. Many of the humans who had been recovered from Greenland and the other infected worlds had reported similar sensations, the overwhelming conviction that the entities were gods, a sensation that had been so powerful that it had seemed obvious. The concept of gods that needed spaceships struck Burton as absurd, yet it provided one more clue to the entities and their true nature. They were so different, so *alien*, that the human mind could only react to them as gods.

"They are not gods," he said, angrily. He didn't know if it was an effect of the entities and their telepathic power, or some fault deep within the human mind, but it had to be ignored. "They are not gods."

"They seem to manipulate the quantum foam and change the laws of science at will," the AIs commented. "They are certainly godlike in their power."

"If that is true," Commander Ryrie countered, "why don't they simply blink us out of existence, or snap their fingers and turn us all into their thralls?"

“Insufficient power,” the AIs speculated. “We always believed that making major changes to the quantum foam would require massive – perhaps infinite – power. The entities clearly seem to require human help to manifest and remain manifested within our universe.”

Burton dismissed the issue, studying the tactical display. The final enemy construction facility had been blown into atoms, leaving the human starships almost alone in space. The civilian habitats had been spared, as he had ordered, yet they would remain perfectly isolated. The battle had been brief – bloodless, at least on the human side – and ultimately futile. The infection was already far beyond the borders of Haypah space.

The Confederation had attempted to warn the other Haypah systems, but there was no way to know if they would listen, or care. They wouldn’t believe the Confederation’s word for anything, not if there was any other choice. The chances were good that those systems would have to be wrecked as well.

“Bring us about,” he ordered, as the intelligence drones made a final reconnaissance of the tumbling wreckage. “Prepare to deploy mines.”

Sparta turned in space, heading towards the enemy homeworld. He wondered, absently, if the Haypah were still able to feel fear or anger...or if they would welcome death, if human missiles bombarded their planet into atoms. There was no way to know.

Within the Royal Palace, Warlord Masji bathed within the love of the gods. He had watched as the starships were destroyed and the shipyards were blown to atoms, yet he had felt no horror or fear. The gods were with him and the human intruders would be destroyed. The massed submission of the entire planet, an act of worship for their gods, would be used to punish the humans for their arrogance. It would not be long before they suffered for their crimes, allowing the rightful inheritors of the galaxy to come forward and claim their inheritance – under the gods, of course.

He felt the gods reaching upwards, their power warping the fabric of space itself, and he smiled. Truly, how could anyone doubt the gods?

Captain Birmingham studied his display as they closed in on the enemy homeworld, checking the progress of the repairs. His ship had been lightly damaged when a pair of enemy ships had hurled themselves against her heaviest shields and her RIs had dispatched drones to start repairing the hull. Her combat capability was not impeded by the damage and he was looking forward to deploying the mines. As someone who had seen the aftermath of Haypah raids against civilian targets, he believed – firmly – that the universe would be far better off with them firmly contained on their own worlds.

He felt the first probe as something pressing against his mind, a pressure that faded away as soon as he became aware of it. Puzzled, he checked his implants and discovered that nothing was wrong. Feeling relief, he leaned back in his command chair, only to sense the second probe brushing against his mind. He realised, dully, that the entities were reaching out to touch him...he knew that he should be alarmed, but somehow it was hard to care. It seemed unquestionable to him that they could touch his mind, or reshape it at will; deep inside, he knew that something was horrifically wrong, yet he could do nothing. It was hard, even, to

remember why he cared, or even why he knew he should be alarmed. Deep inside his mind, his perception of reality was being rewritten. Soon, he would be unable even to understand the concept of resistance.

“Captain,” the engineering officer said. Birmingham barely heard him. It was as if his voice was echoing from a far distance, a very tiny thing compared with the voice of the gods. “Captain, we are suffering from multiple systems failures.”

The entire planetoid seemed to shiver as systems started to fail. Emergency systems clicked on, but there was no relief, not when the laws of science – the laws that bound the universe together and allowed human technology to work – were failing. Alarms started to howl though the massive ship, yet it was far too late. Birmingham knew that he should be concerned, but what did it matter? The will of the gods was being done.

“Captain!”

His eyes opened suddenly. The gods had touched him and many of his crew, but others were unbelievers, sworn to overthrow the gods. It could not be allowed. The engineering officer hadn’t realised what was wrong, but given time he would realise the truth, realise that the planetoid was being brought under the sway of the gods themselves. The unbeliever could not be permitted to prevent that process, or halt the destruction of the invading fleet.

“It is the will of the gods,” he said, and triggered his combat implants. The engineer was blown across the bridge, microseconds before he could activate his own implants and survive. The nanomachines in his body might try to repair him, but it would be difficult with his head literally in pieces. His combat implants swept the bridge, assisted by the other crewmen who had been accepted by his new masters. The crewmembers who offered resistance, either to the gods or to their commander, were swiftly eliminated. Mutiny against the gods would not be tolerated. “It is the will of the gods.”

He plunged his mind into the computer network, backed up by the power and wisdom of the gods themselves. The network, which had been on the verge of triggering the ship’s self-destruct, was swiftly subverted, a task made easier by the command codes burned into his mind. He isolated it from the AIs or even the RIs on the other ships, knowing that they might try to burrow into the system and re-subvert it. His mind roared through the network, activating internal defences and turning them against the unbelievers in the crew. Anyone who could offer resistance was either stunned by the drones or killed outright. The stunned ones might eventually be brought to worship the gods.

Birmingham became aware of a babble intruding from outside, urgent demands from the other ships for explanations. He ignored them. The unbelievers could draw whatever conclusions they liked. He did consider trying to mislead them, yet he doubted that it would have worked for long. The glitches plaguing his ship would have been easy for the other ships to detect, confirming their worst fears; the gods, the wonderful gods, had reached his ship. They had made it their own.

He smiled as tactical sensors reported that several of the other planetoids were locking weapons onto his ship’s hull. Their firepower would eventually destroy his ship, but not before he got a few blows in of his own...and the believers on their vessels mounted an

attempt to take over. He couldn't even consider the idea that they might fail to take control of their ships. Failing the gods was not an option.

"Admiral, three other planetoids are showing similar signs of glitches," the AIs reported. "They are all minor compared to the *Havoc*, which appears to be completely under enemy control, but they are getting stronger. The entities may have taken over several of their crew."

"Warn the Captains to dispatch Marines to deal with the threat," Burton ordered. He should have known better; everything had been going so well until they'd started to approach the planet. If the entities were reaching out to everyone in his fleet with telepathic potential...they might manage to subvert half of his crew, perhaps more. "Order them to unlock their systems and..."

"The *Goliath* just dropped out of the command network," the tactical officer said. "She may have fallen to the enemy."

Burton cursed. It was the second time he'd taken a force up against the entities and, again, it felt like a complete disaster. If the entities had been able to threaten the Confederation with just the Haypah fleet, what would they be able to do with two or more planetoids?

"Pull us back," he ordered. Telepathy didn't follow the standard rules, but distance should – he hoped – make it harder to control his personnel. "Prepare the Marines for teleport; I want them ready to recover control of the lost ships."

His voice hardened. "And if we fail," he added, "we must prepare to destroy them."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Yanto staggered against the confining field as the planetoid rocked again, taking fire from two of the ‘rebel’ planetoids. He could *feel* the entities in the back of his head, an oozing message that seemed to promise peace and harmony, if he only surrendered to the pull and abandoned the freedom of thought that had brought him so much pain. It took every ounce of strength in his mind to pull his shields down tight, shutting out the whispers as the entities reached out to the humans onboard the massive planetoids, yet he could still hear them. If they heard him and focused on him, his shields would pop like a soap bubble.

“They’re reaching out to claim us all,” he whispered. He’d had high hopes when he’d boarded the planetoid for the mission, yet now – facing the power of the entities for the first time – he realised that he had grossly underestimated their power. The telepathic concave had warned him of the danger, but he had chosen to ignore their words. He had believed that his powers would protect him, yet they only acted as a magnet, drawing the seductive whispers into his mind. “You have to warn the Admiral...”

He grasped the side of his head as a burst of pain flickered through his skull. Oddly, it helped him to focus his mind, distracting him from the poisonous whispers echoing through the telepathic waveband and wearing away at his resolve. He had told himself that the entities used nothing more than raw power – and telepaths were skilled at diverting raw power away from the core of their minds – but he had been wrong. They were filling telepathic space with subtle suggestions, each one capable of collapsing his mental shields and allowing them access to his mind, while they could rewrite him at will. The sheer power was terrifying.

Only a handful of telepaths could endure the presence of thousands of mundane humans for long. They were undisciplined, unaware or uncaring of how they polluted the telepathic waveband with their thoughts and feelings, making it difficult for telepaths to block them all out. Yanto was one of the few who could endure it, even though it wore on him at times, a quality that had allowed him to enlist in the Confederation Navy. He had told himself that it wasn't the fault of the non-telepaths that their thoughts were so loud, but now he wanted to go back to the days of yore, where the worst he had had to worry about had been some young couple filling space with their love. The entities filled space with their power, vast endless waves of thought that sucked in human minds, rendering them vulnerable to the alien concepts. They were so powerful that the human mind could not hope to withstand direct contact...

“We have passed on your words,” the AIs said, calmly. But then, they were always calm, for they weren’t really present on the planetoid. “Can you suggest a course of action?”

The urge for violence boiled up within Yanto’s mind and he struggled to suppress it, chanting a calming mantra under his breath. It barely worked. “They’re too powerful to fight, you bastards,” he snarled. The pressure against his head – against his mental shields – was growing stronger. He wanted to use his implants to sleep, but somehow he doubted that he would still be himself when he woke up. He didn't dare go to sleep. “We have to get out of here.”

He pulled himself out of the sleep cocoon and lashed out towards the image of a blonde woman. His hand, unsurprisingly, passed right through her. “Get us out of here,” he repeated. “Get us out of here before we all go insane!”

The AIs ignored his futile attack. “We appear to have lost four planetoids completely,” they said. “The remaining planetoids are having incidents of what can best be described as mutiny, with crewmen turning on their officers and fellow enlisted men. It is proving extremely difficult to contain the mutinies.”

“The entities are warping their minds,” Yanto gasped. Another wave of pain seemed to flare though his mind, as if his head was being squeezed by a giant fist. He couldn't tell if the entities were focusing on him directly – they couldn't have noticed him, for if they focused all their power on him he would be theirs – yet it felt that way. “They can't tell right from wrong, good from evil, friend from foe...they think they're doing the right thing!”

“Yes,” the AIs agreed, maddeningly. “Can you suggest a way to free them?”

“Get them away from the entities,” Yanto gasped, shuddering as pain started to leak through his mental shields. He wanted to sleep and he didn't dare sleep and he wanted to sleep...angrily, he pushed the thought away, unable to tell if the thought of sleep was tempting because he needed to rest or if the entities had insinuated it through his mental shields and directly into his mind. “If they can be separated from the controlling field...”

He shook his head, feeling tears falling in hot droplets from his eyes. It wouldn't be enough, not against such power. The humans who had fallen prey to the mental call would be beyond salvation. They would never think for themselves again. If they could be separated from the entities – a difficult task with telepathy involved – they would still need healing and mental care, care that no one in the Confederation could provide. They would never be normal again.

“Forget it,” he said, tiredly. “Just tell the Admiral to get us out of here before we all go insane.”

Burton studied the display as the four rogue planetoids fell down towards the planet's atmosphere, firing missiles towards their former comrades in oddly uncoordinated salvos. The sense of *Déjà vu* was overpowering, leaving him remembering the failure over Greenland and how the planet's defences had reacted when under alien control. He couldn't tell what the entities intended to do with their captured planetoids, but he knew that he couldn't leave them in enemy hands.

“We have contained the mutinies, Admiral,” the ship's security officer said, finally. Burton nodded, thinking of the history books. The Confederation Navy had never had a mutiny on one of its ships, let alone nineteen planetoids. He checked the computer network and nodded bitterly. The mutineers might be sealed in their compartments and denied access to the computer network, yet it hardly put an end to the threat. If they didn't come up with a way of blocking the alien influence, they might as well surrender and hand the Confederation over to the entities. “They do not pose a threat to the ship.”

“I hope you're right,” Burton said sourly. The scenes of carnage inside his ships had been chilling. Crewmen had turned on their fellows, seemingly without rhyme or reason. The infected officers seemed to have little in common, yet as they had fallen to the alien mental

attack, the ship's command structure had come apart. The vessel's XO was currently stunned on the deck, after trying to murder Burton in cold blood.

He looked up towards the main displays. It occurred to him, assuming that telepathy obeyed something reassembling the inverse square law, that the planetoids could be trying to lure their former comrades closer to the entities, in the hope that more would fall under their spell. If they were capable of being that rational...or perhaps they were just trying to get closer to the entities themselves...or perhaps they'd all gone mad and intended to crash the planetoids into the planet itself.

"We are unable to interface with the computer networks on the rogue ships," the AIs said. They, at least, sounded calm. "We have tried to access them through the QCC network, subspace pulsed-band transmissions and even old-fashioned laser and radio signals. The computer network appears to have been badly scrambled."

"And yet the ships are still functioning," Burton said, sourly. The Marines were ready to launch, to attempt to recover the lost ships, yet he was already wondering if it was a fool's errand. It might be simpler in the long run to open fire and attempt to destroy them. Given time, the entities might use them to zip into hyperspace and fly away, or, if they truly couldn't use hyperdrive, even warp drive would give the Confederation new tactical problems. "How is that even possible?"

"Unknown," the AIs said. "We recommend the deployment of Marines to assess the internal condition of the damaged ships."

Burton nodded. "Major Pasha, this is the Admiral," he said. "You are cleared to deploy."

Pasha stared as the planetoid *Thunder* came into view, a massive sphere hanging in space. Even to the sensors mounted on the Marine Combat Unit, it looked like a natural planet until his eyes started picking out weapons blisters and sensor bulges on the hull. The planetoid was about the size of Earth's moon, with energy projectors that could swat an entire Marine Division...if they knew the Marines were there to swat. The intelligence punk's best guess was that the damage the entities inflicted on natural law – however they did it – would disrupt the sensors on the planetoid, allowing them to land on its surface without being detected. It wasn't the kind of blanket assurance Pasha had been hoping for, somehow.

And you wouldn't be happy if he gave you a firm guarantee, backed with his own life, he mocked himself, as the Marines started to fall towards the surface of the planetoid. The massive starship's gravity field was tempered by the warp bubble surrounding the hull, yet so close to the ship, not even its drive field could block out the effects completely. Without the warp bubble, bringing even a single planetoid into orbit around a planet could have disastrous consequences for the local ecosystem; it amused him to realise that the entities still cared about avoiding such a catastrophe. Or, less amusingly, they just didn't care one way or the other.

The planetoid's surface seemed to reach up to greet them, his perspective shifting as he fell the final kilometres onto the hull. It was no longer a planetoid, but a world, something large enough to contain the human race. Indeed, several planetoids were taking their portion of the human race – and the genetic templates of everyone in existence – to other galaxies, in what

the newshounds were starting to call the Exodus. The Marines had debated the issue while preparing for their next mission, but they'd decided that the fleeing humans were probably doing the wrong thing. The entities were powerful, yet they could be beaten. It was all a matter of understanding.

His feet touched down and connected to the hull. "We're down," he said, pushing aside all other issues. "We're heading for the access hatch now."

The Marines had debated how to enter the planetoid as they'd fallen through space towards the massive starship. The final conclusion had been to attempt to sneak into one of the starship bays, each one large enough to hold a hundred cruisers – minnows to the planetoid's vast bulk – using the emergency entrance system. There was a good chance that, if the computer network was as badly screwed up as the AIs claimed, that their entry would pass unnoticed. If they were wrong, they would have to blow their way into the hull, which would certainly attract attention.

He glanced up as flashes of blue light flickered into existence on the horizon, warp and sublight missiles being launched towards the loyal planetoids. The entities didn't seem to be firing hyper-missiles towards the loyalists, although that meant nothing; they'd definitely fired hyper-missiles back on Greenland. He looked away and concentrated on running towards the massive egress hatch, a hatch over five kilometres wide. The Marines were less than ants on the skin of an elephant.

"There, sir," one of the Marines said. The emergency hatch was basic, hand-cranked rather than using the starship's computer network. Using one of the hatches always brought back memories of the first time he'd walked the deck of a derelict starship, an old battleship from one of humanity's many wars that had been set adrift by her crew to die. "I'll work on the hatch now."

Pasha lifted his heavy rifle as the hatch cranked open, revealing only darkness. He activated the suit's lights and illuminated the interior of the airlock, seeing nothing of interest. Laughing at himself – the emergency airlocks were never manned except during drills – he took point and led the way into the starship, feeling the gravity field flickering around him. It felt oddly unstable, as if the starship's technology was failing slowly. With the entities around, it was a very real possibility.

The second hatch opened, allowing them into a small control centre. Normally, it would be manned by a dedicated crew, responsible for maintaining the starships docked within the planetoid. Now...it was empty, yet there was blood splashed everywhere. It took thirty seconds of searching to uncover the first body, crammed into a locker and left to bleed to death. The remaining bodies had been tossed into the corridor and just abandoned, although some had been mutilated first. He couldn't tell if it had been self-mutilation or if someone had done it to them before they'd died.

"Dave, try and gain access to the command network," he ordered one of his men, a Marine who specialised in direct neural links to hostile computers. "Don't take any risks, but see if you can get us a data download from the main computer."

"Understood, sir," the Marine said. The hulking Marine Combat Unit advanced on the console and extended a delicate probe, linking into the system. A moment later, the Marine

started to spasm, his weapons deploying and firing madly, just before he collapsed into a heap.

“*Sparta*, this is Pasha,” Pasha said. The sight had shocked him, all the more so because Dave should have been isolated from any feedback. The safety cut-outs in his armour should have activated automatically. “I need a report on Dave’s status...”

“He just came out of the pod, raving,” the supervisor reported. Pasha could hear the sound of someone screaming in the background, a voice that was far too familiar. “We’re going to have to knock him out and put him into sickbay.”

“Major,” a different voice said. “We analysed the network pulse that struck your man’s mind. The entities have completely subverted the main computer. We recommend that you withdraw.”

“We’re not leaving,” Pasha said, firmly. The AIs could offer whatever advice they liked, but they weren’t on the ground. Strictly speaking, he wasn’t on the ground either, yet he could see more of the starship’s reality than the AIs. “We have to recover control of this ship.”

“You will not be able to recover control,” the AIs said, bluntly. “We have studied the reports from your lost man. The starship’s main command core has been hopelessly compromised. Killing the crew will not free the ship. You need to withdraw, now.”

A new alert flared up in Pasha’s virtual vision. “Too late,” he said, grimly. “I’ll see you back at the...”

Deep within the massive starship, right at the core, the quantum tap linking the planetoid to hyperspace – and drawing a massive level of power from the universe itself – started to destabilise. Microseconds later, the safety systems failed, allowing the torrent of energy to run free. The planetoid exploded in one massive blast of light.

“Admiral,” the tactical officer said. “The *Thunder* has been destroyed.”

It was, Burton decided, the most unnecessary report in history. The planetoid had simply exploded, although no one was sure – or would ever be sure – if it had been intentional or if it had been just another glitch, caused by the close proximity of the entities. The planet nearby was going to be in serious trouble over the next few years, although prompt action would probably save most of the planet’s population...prompt action that the nature of the entities would render impossible.

“Report,” he ordered, using his implants to remain focused. “Are the other three planetoids likely to explode as well?”

“Unknown,” the AIs said. “Their computer networks must be assumed to be in the same state as that of the *Thunder*. The starship may well have been destroyed by a glitch, one that could affect the other starships...”

“Or it might have been a deliberate attempt to take out the Marines,” Burton concluded. It was an absurd report, but perhaps, to the entities, it made sense. Or perhaps it had just been a

horrific accident, one that had saved countless Confederation Navy personnel from spending the rest of their lives in thrall to the entities. “In that case...”

He accessed the tactical network and studied the remaining three rogue ships. “Open fire,” he ordered. There was no point in trying to recover them. “Take them all out, now.”

Fifteen planetoid opened fire as one, pouring missiles down towards the rogue ships. Standard tactics would have called for the rogues to jump into hyperspace and escape, but instead they wheeled about and came right at their tormentors, returning fire as they charged. They entered energy weapons range before they could be destroyed and cut into two of his ships, before the first planetoid was destroyed in a ball of fire. The second held out for longer, yet it couldn't hold out long enough to break through and escape. Its quantum tap was destroyed and it disintegrated in a tearing burst of light. The final planetoid rammed a loyalist planetoid and both ships exploded savagely. There were no survivors.

Burton considered the remains of the enemy system and shook his head. The newshounds would call it a victory, of course, for humanity desperately needed a victory. He knew better. The might of the Confederation Navy had been challenged and the entities, the untouchable entities, had corrupted the Navy itself. One more victory like that and the Confederation would be ruined.

“Take us out of here,” he ordered. “It’s time to go home.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

From high above, the remains of the task force that had entered the Haypah Star System with such high hopes, secure in its technological superiority, looked battered and broken. All of the planetoids had taken damage and three of them had been so badly damaged that the Confederation Navy would need to spend at least a month repairing them, before they could be returned to duty. The losses in material were bad, but nowhere near as bad as the losses in personnel. A starship could be replaced; a trained crewman could not.

Admiral Burton watched as the Grand Admiral stared down at the damaged fleet. It was impossible to tell what he might be thinking – the image he was projecting into the perceptual reality seemed to be firmly set on neutral, keeping his expression inscrutable – but somehow Burton was sure that it wasn't anything good. The Confederation Navy had never been so badly hurt in its entire existence, a blow that was hardly lessened by the crushed Haypah fleet and their dreams of one day overthrowing the Confederation.

“The media is not happy,” the Grand Admiral said, finally. “Some of them believe that we won the fight, but others are more perceptive. They know that we had to retreat in disorder.”

“Yes, sir,” Burton said, stiffly. He had chosen to forsake an avatar that would allow him to present a strictly neutral expression, but he now regretted his choice, even though it would have seemed dishonest. Etiquette in the Confederation tended to frown on using such controlled representations, even though everyone knew that everyone did it.

The Grand Admiral turned to face him. “Are you not going to offer any defence?”

Burton considered it. The hell of it was that yes, he *could* offer a defence. He could point out that there had been no warning that the entities could influence the minds of his crews, to the point where they could literally snatch four planetoids out from under the noses of their commanding officer. He could point out that he had destroyed the Haypah fleet and industry, as well as ensuring that the infected planetoids had been destroyed, before they could be used to spread the entities further across space. He could have mounted a defence...but, in the end, it had been his failure. He had been the man on the spot.

“No, sir,” he said, finally. “I have nothing to say.”

“That’s good to hear,” the Grand Admiral said, curtly. “You fucked up. Don’t let it happen again.”

He strode over to stare down at one of the planetoids. “The Security Council wasn't too happy with the outcome,” he said. “They were even less pleased when the AIs pointed out that we might have a greater disaster when – if – we try to destroy the Scorpion Naval Yards. There are over ten billion humans in that system, the great majority of them infected by the entities...who knows how strong their telepathy will be in that system?”

Burton blinked. “Their strength depends on how many minds they have to call upon?”

“So it would seem,” the Grand Admiral said. “The telepaths had some of their own people on your ship, Admiral. Two of them had their brains turned to jelly, but the remaining ones claimed that the entities were trying to subvert them and take control, oozing suggestions into

their minds. The AIs ran the tests again and determined that, as far as they could tell, the odd brain patterns within the infected people were based around the part of the brain that controls telepathy.”

He shrugged. “Or so they think, anyway,” he added. “They were never very good at getting a handle on telepathy and the telepaths themselves don’t really want to be dissected.”

“It won't come to that, will it?” Burton asked, concerned. “That couldn't happen in this day and age...”

“It may,” the Grand Admiral said. “While you were off fighting in the enemy-held system, there was a vote to have all telepaths and people with telepathic potential isolated, in the hope that it would limit the spread of the entities. The vote failed, but nearly a fifth of the Confederation’s population voted for it. People are scared, Admiral, and with fear comes the determination to find a scapegoat and just hit out.”

He snorted. “Joe Buckley was never a telepath,” he said, dryly. “There’s nothing rational about a panicking mob, Admiral. Despite everything the Confederation has accomplished over the years, there’s a little part of us that remembers the days when we had to struggle to survive and fight over scraps of food that we would refuse to feed to our pets now. We remember being at the mercy of the gods long before we came up with the idea of a single god. And now, with a force that seems completely inexplicable breathing down our necks, we are getting scared.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Burton said. “I heard about the Exodus.”

The Grand Admiral nodded. “There are going to be a hell of a lot more starships heading out to M33 or the Clouds or even further away,” he said, shaking his head. “Between you and me, I wonder if they don’t have the right idea. Get away from the entities, get some space we can use to think and plan...and one day come back and kick their ghostly butts.”

“No, sir,” Burton said. The Grand Admiral looked up, his face an expressionless mask. “We started this problem, sir; we have to fix it.”

“I saw many scenarios on the possible outcomes of the Buckley Experiment,” the Grand Admiral said, slowly. “One of them was that it would collapse all of local reality, or release entropy into the universe, aging us all to death. I knew about all of those possibilities and I still voted for carrying out the experiment, just to see what would happen.”

He looked up towards Burton’s face. “And what happens if the problem is beyond our ability to fix?”

Burton scowled to himself as the Security Council’s meeting room shimmered into existence around him, revealing that the other members of the Security Council had clearly been holding talks before inviting him to join them. It was a reminder that he was not a member of the Council, but also that the Council would be passing judgement on him. If he had erred, he knew, he should face his peers in the Confederation Navy, yet that little protocol – like so many others – seemed to have fallen by the wayside. The human race was in a desperate situation.

“Admiral,” Mariko said. She, at least, sounded friendly, although that could be just an act. “Please, for the record, outline just what happened when your fleet entered the Haypah system.”

Burton nodded and ran through a quick outline, starting with the moment the fleet had entered enemy space and ending the story when they jumped out, leaving the burning remains of the Haypah fleet behind them. He didn't spare anything, not even the pressure he'd felt in his skull as the entities reached out for him, only to abandon the effort when he had refused to succumb to their control. The Security Council listened in silence, without interrupting, not even to demand clarification. Of course, Burton reflected sourly, they'd probably watched the records from the battle before inviting him to join them.

“Under the circumstances, you cannot be faulted for your actions,” Representative Singh said, once he'd finished. His face was inscrutable, yet Burton was sure that he detected a hint of irritation behind his words. Perhaps Singh had been one of the ones pressing for him to be relieved of command. There was no way to know for sure. “That leaves us with a simple question. Do we proceed with the attack on the Naval Yards?”

“Well, Admiral,” Mariko said. “Do you believe, as the officer charged with planning the attack, that we should actually authorise it to be launched?”

Burton didn't hesitate, even though his professional future was at stake. “The attack I planned – before the diversion into the Haypah Empire – must be cancelled,” he said, firmly. “The plan did not take into account the new factors.”

Singh snorted, rudely. “Do you fear to face the enemy again?”

“The enemy – we now know – can reach out and influence our minds at a distance,” Burton said, calmly. He refused to allow Singh to get under his skin. “If their range is a function of how many minds they have under their control, as our telepathic cousins believe, they may be able to influence my crews at a far greater distance than we would have believed possible. If I took my task force into the Scorpion System, the results might be disastrous – for us. I might be handing them a fully-armed and dangerous task force on a silver platter.”

He paused, knowing that they were not going to like what he had to say. “I believe that we must consider extreme measures,” he concluded. “We must destroy the entire system by sending the star supernova.”

There was a horrified pause. “You are talking,” Representative Chen said, “of committing genocide against our own people. Ten billion lives would be lost when the star exploded, wiping out the result of centuries of achievement.” The Electronic Human's image seemed to flicker with rage. “I could not condone such an action.”

Representative Carolynn crossed her hands under her bare breasts, her tail thrashing in agitation. “I cannot agree,” she protested, weakly. “We cannot kill ten billion of our own people!”

“There may be no choice,” the AIs said, flatly. Their image seemed to float in the centre of the room. “The ten billion people in the system are already lost to us. If we allow the entities

to continue expanding from their dimension into ours, their powers may grow stronger – all the more so as they draw more and more minds into their clutches. They may soon be strong enough to jump from world to world without starships...and if that happens, the Confederation will wind up like the Ancients.”

They paused, for effect. “And all that is left of the once-mighty Ancients civilisation is dead worlds, all alone in the night,” they added. “Do we want our own civilisation to live, or be destroyed?”

Representative Caprice pursed her lips. “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: look on my works, ye mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare; the lone and level sands stretch far away.”

“Precisely,” the AIs said. “The Ancients lost their civilisation to the entities. We don't know if they were enslaved by the entities or the entities merely sucked them dry and then returned to their home dimension, but we know that they were destroyed. We cannot allow our civilisation to die in the same way.”

“There has to be another way,” Carolynn protested. “We *cannot* kill ten billion people.”

“It is a question of maths,” Singh said, coldly. “Ten billion humans – all infected by the entities, all being used as food sources by space vampires – against the trillions of humans who remain alive and uninfected. The logic leads us to only one point; those ten billion must die so that the rest of us can live.”

“I refuse to cast my vote in favour,” Carolynn said, flatly. “I do not believe that slaughtering ten billion people can possibly help the situation.”

“We have been unable to free the maddened from their madness,” Caprice said, slowly. “I don't want to agree, I don't want to support it, but I see no other choice.”

Singh pounded the table. “We are the Security Council,” he said. His voice was icy cold. “We are in the business of making hard choices, the choices that the rest of humanity would not or could not or would just take too long to make. That is what we are. That is why we are here. We are not part of this Council to duck the blame, or to refuse to accept the responsibility. We accepted it the moment we chose, each of us, to accept the nomination.”

His voice hardened. “I will not fail in my duty,” he added. “If there is truly no other choice, but to act with decisive force, we will act. I believe that we should call for a vote.”

Burton watched as the Security Council voted. He wasn't surprised to see that Chen and Carolynn had cast their votes against sending a star supernova, but the others seemed hesitant, unwilling to risk taking any side. The Grand Admiral, at least, joined Singh in casting a vote in favour. The Scientists and the Telepaths, oddly enough, voted in favour; the AIs joined them a moment later.

He could understand their hesitation. Centuries ago, during the war with the Unseen, both sides had blown up stars for tactical advantage, sending waves of radiation passing through space and causing untold harm to countless worlds. The supernova bombs had been sealed away in the Confederation's weapons lockers once the Unseen faded away back into the

universe, waiting until they could be unleashed again...a day that most of the universe had hoped would never come. The thought of using them on a Confederation Star System, a populated system with ten billion lives living within the blast front, was obscene. He understood...but, unlike them, he had touched the entities. They had to be stopped. Destroying the entire Confederation was preferable to a lifetime spent serving the monsters, feeding entire races into their maw.

“The vote has passed,” the AIs said. “A supernova bomb will be deployed against the enemy-held star.”

And see what effect it has on the entities themselves, Burton thought, grimly. There was no way to know for sure, but unless slaughtering vast numbers of their thralls hurt them somehow, the chances were good that they would just withdraw back into their home dimension and re-emerge somewhere else. The Confederation might find itself running out of planets before the entities realised that trying to feed on humans was pointless and went elsewhere, if they were intelligent enough to realise that. The jury was unable to determine if the entities were even intelligent, at least as humanity understood the term.

“And see how many people trust us after this,” Carolynn whispered. The mermaid’s tail seemed to wave helplessly in the air, just before her image vanished from the chamber. It was another breach of protocol, but no one seemed inclined to complain.

“There is another possibility that we have been considering,” the AIs said. Burton was amused to see how many hopeful eyes turned towards the blonde image, a reflection of humanity’s desperate need to believe that technology would solve all of its problems. Back on Earth, it had; humanity had expanded out into the universe and given the homeworld a chance to catch its breath and relax. Yet...the entities laughed at the physical laws of the universe and seemed to alter them at will, disrupting humanity’s finest technology. “We have been simulating using a wormhole to snatch up an infected world and transferring it to another star system, hopefully breaking the link between the entities and their thralls. It is impossible to predict what that will do to the planet’s population, but while we were running simulations we came up with a second idea.”

They displayed an image of the Gateway in front of the Council; the Gateway, surrounded by the four impossible objects maintaining their patrol around the border, watched by a dozen Confederation Navy cruisers. Burton ground his teeth, recalling the loss of the *Hamilton* and Captain Gently; they had merely been the first to die. They had been his first failure.

“It occurred to us that we could sweep one of the objects up in a wormhole,” the AIs said. “Instead of transporting it to another star system, we would use the wormhole’s quantum signature to break the object down into energy and obliterate it. Nothing – in theory, at least – could survive such treatment. Even if we do merely shunt it several hundred light years away, it might well break the link maintaining the Gateway...”

“And cutting off the link between this universe and the Gateway,” the Grand Admiral concluded. “Do you think that it will work?”

“We do not know,” the AIs admitted. “We have been unable to measure the objects’ quantum states, let alone deduce their composition or properties. It is possible that the wormhole will simply be unable to capture the object, or that it will withdraw back into their

universe and escape. We submit to you, however, that attempting to destroy the objects is worth any risk.”

The Security Council exchanged glances. “This strikes me as risky,” Chen said, thoughtfully. “It may provoke the entities to start expanding faster.”

“Assuming that they can,” the Grand Admiral said. His voice seemed to still all debate. “Let’s be clear on this. We have arrested several hundred thousand people who were connected to the Ancient Cult, to the cultists that summoned the entities into our universe. We have certainly bent the Confederation Charter, if we haven’t smashed it outright. We are preparing to blow up one of our own star systems to stop the enemy from expanding further...now tell me, how much further do you think we will have to go?”

He stared down at the table. “We could negotiate with a normal enemy,” he said. “God knows; we had no reason to go to war against the Gasbags, or the other races that are far from humanoid. We could even talk to the Wanderers, even though they were far in advance of our own technology. We could talk...but the entities, we cannot reason with them. They consider us slaves at best; a food source at worst. Their mental powers will give them domination over the entire galaxy if they keep expanding and we cannot stop them. We cannot even threaten them.

“Whatever the risk of trying to destroy one of their objects, we have to accept them,” he concluded. “To do otherwise is to admit that we are already defeated.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“So,” Rylander said, lightly. “That’s the famous Dead Zone.”

Aisyaj refused to rise to his bait. There was no sign that the Dead Zone even existed, at least not to the naked eye. Her sensors were reporting that her sensor probes and fields just flickered out of existence in a certain point of space, only a few light hours from where they floated. The first starships to run into the Dead Zone hadn't had the slightest idea what was waiting for them until it had been far too late. Even afterwards, the Dead Zone had defied understanding. It was just...*there*.

“It’s there, all right,” she said. It was ironic, but if an alien race was born on a world trapped within the Dead Zone, they would never know about any of the ways of breaking the light barrier. They would eventually build slowboats and set out across the interstellar void, perhaps never realising that – eventually – they had flown out of the Dead Zone and could jump into hyperspace. “If we flew in that direction” – she pointed, smiling at his expression – “we would lose power within thirty seconds and end up drifting and helpless.”

“The *Another Woman* wouldn't be stuck,” Rylander pointed out. Aisyaj winced at the mixture of emotions the ship’s name produced in his mind. The Slowboaters had a superstition about not changing a starship’s name, once it was formally launched, yet the name was almost painfully sarcastic. “We could just fly through the Dead Zone to the other side.”

“Assuming your fuel and life support held out,” Aisyaj countered, lightly. She shook her head, dismissing the matter. She’d reviewed the news reports of the last encounter with the entities and knew that time was running out. “I think we’d better start transferring food and supplies to the tender.”

It hadn't surprised her to discover that the AIs had sent two of their massive starships to assist her mission, or that they’d produced a surprising amount of gear for the tender. The AIs had access to all of humanity’s databases, including library files from the time before humanity had even dreamed of AIs, and they’d used them ruthlessly. The technology they had produced was primitive, allowing it to function inside the Dead Zone, yet it had a certain elegance that the slowboats lacked. The AIs believed that there was a joy in technology and no one had ever had the heart to tell them otherwise.

Rylander took command of the Slowboater crew and started to organise the transfer, forbidding the use of teleporters or even drive fields to help load the tender. The AIs protested, but he countered by pointing out that neither technology worked well – or at all - within the Dead Zone and they couldn't risk getting into a situation where they needed unobtainable technology. He’d told them about a wet-navy ship that had been loaded with everything the crew had needed, including a crane to help them unload, but the logistics experts who’d packed the ship had made one simple mistake and left the crane at the bottom of the hold, completely out of reach. The AIs had taken his point.

Aisyaj smiled as she listened to the debate, before reaching out for her mother’s mind, countless light years away. For a long moment, she basked in the feeling of her mother’s love and concern, before posing a single question. Her mother was reluctant to answer – Aisyaj could sense her concern for her daughter bubbling at the edge of her mind – yet

eventually she signalled her agreement. The telepath masters were ready to act on her command.

“Take care of my ship,” she told the AIs, and walked over to the hatch connecting her to the tender. “I’ll be back soon.”

“We look forward to your reports,” the AIs said, seriously. If she hadn't known better, she would have wondered if they were sulking. “The Confederation will be here when you get back.”

Aisyaj took one last look at her starship, wondering if she would ever see it again, and then stepped through the hatch. The gravity failed at once, for the tender possessed no artificial gravity generator. It had been several years since she had floated in a zero-gee environment, but her ancestors had engineered her body to prevent space sickness – or muscle degradation – from affecting her mind. The interior of the tender looked remarkably primitive to her, despite the best efforts of the AIs. It made her wonder if she was truly doing the right thing, or if she had just found a unique way of committing suicide.

Carefully, pulling herself from handhold to handhold, she swam through the air towards the bridge. The tubes that ran through the tender seemed oddly claustrophobic, yet somehow she managed to maintain her calm as she finally reached the command sector. The tender seemed massive, but fragile; a single blast from a planetoid’s projectors would vaporise the entire ship from end to end. There was a curious fascination about the ship, yet humanity had outgrown such technology...she laughed at herself, recognising the hypocritical thought. If her theory was correct, humanity would need primitive technology to reach the core of the Dead Zone.

The bridge itself looked a mess, like an abandoned movie set from the days before RIs provided holographic environments for the actors who tried to become Confederation-wide stars. She’d had a memory cell inserted into her implants and then flash-burned into her brain – her implants would probably fail in the Dead Zone – yet it still looked confusing to her eyes. She glanced from computer to computer, feeling her head swim as new knowledge floated to the surface and integrated with what she saw. Normally, children were given gentle treatments and weeks of careful assistance to assimilate the new memories. She’d barely had a few hours.

“Welcome aboard,” Rylander said. His voice was carefully even. “Do you want to stay here or head back to your ship?”

Aisyaj grinned at the challenge in his tone. That was more like the man she remembered, the one who had been so marvellously uncomplicated for three short years. She couldn't blame him for his concern; it was fairly common for humans to immigrate into the pastoral worlds, try their hand at rough living for a few days and then return to the Confederation and lives of pointless luxury. They, at least, had been able to go home. Once the *Another Woman* was within the Dead Zone, there was no hope of leaving until the job was done.

“It's my bright idea,” she said, as she was waved into a chair and strapped down. “I should be there to embrace the risk.”

“Good for you,” Rylander said. He grinned as he nodded to the remaining crew. Ten Slowboaters, all volunteers, had agreed to fly with them into the Dead Zone, either because they relished the challenge or because they had been planning to leave the slowboat and decided that going on the mission was a quicker way to leave. “Does anyone else want to back out now?”

One of the crew snorted. “Respectfully suggest, boss, that you stop insulting us and get on with it,” he said. “We might have an attack of brains to the head and decide that we don't want to go after all.”

Rylander laughed. “Good on you, Boris,” he said. He looked over at Aisyaj. “We’re ready when you are.”

Aisyaj closed her eyes, opening her mind. It was normally a strong breach of telepath ethics to peek inside a person’s mind without permission, or a very compelling legal reason, but she felt that it was justified. Boris had been telling the truth. He relished the challenge of the mission and would have been insulted if someone had refused to take him along. The others shared the same feelings, although two of them privately thought that it was going to be nothing more than a waste of time. She thought about asking them to leave, but they needed every pair of hands they could get. The tender was badly undermanned.

“You know,” Rylander added. “You never did get around to telling me how you intended to get us into the Dead Zone.”

Aisyaj told him.

Centuries ago, before human telepaths were anything other than a possibility floating within the genetic pool, human writers had theorised that the nature of reality was more flexible than one might think. Given sufficient power, it might be possible to bend reality to a person’s will; indeed, the success of powerful personalities within the human world might be accounted for by their effect on reality. They hadn't known about the quantum foam, and some of their conclusions were just nonsense, yet they’d understood the gist of matters quite well. If a person could interface directly with the quantum foam, they would be able to do – quite literally – anything.

The development of human telepaths had actually allowed research into the fundamental nature of reality to proceed with a purpose, rather than stumbling around in the dark. Mind itself, it seemed, was the key to tampering with reality, but reality itself was not easy to unlock. The quantum foam, the bedrock of reality, seemed to be quantum-locked. It had taken considerable research before the early telepaths had realised that mind – the mind that was incapable of realising that reality was flexible and nothing was fixed – was the key to unlocking the universe. That had allowed the telepath masters to focus their mental development and, even though they were far from gods, they could do remarkable things. Indeed, they had sought to conceal just how far advanced they were, knowing that the rest of the Confederation would not be amused. They might consider the telepaths a potential threat.

The standard teleporting system used by the Confederation broke a person down into energy, stored them within a quantum field and focused the quantum field on a new location. It was not only energy-intensive, but also risky; it was quite easy for an enemy to disrupt a teleport beam and smear the unlucky teleporter across several kilometres. The nature of quantum

science meant that it wasn't possible to store someone within a teleport buffer; their pattern began to degrade almost at once. The telepaths, however, had studied legends of human teleportation before the teleporter had been anything more than a glimmer in science-fiction's eye. They had concluded that humans could teleport by manipulating the quantum foam and, if humans could teleport, they could teleport anything – even starships – right across the universe. Years of dedicated research had finally produced a working system for teleporting ships, even if it was only used in emergencies. The telepath masters, unlike the teleporters humanity had built, could be exhausted.

“You have got to be out of your mind,” Rylander burst out. “You intend to *wish* us all into the Dead Zone?”

“The only other choice is setting off into the Dead Zone in this ship,” Aisyaj said, as evenly as she could. Her faith that the mission could – and would – succeed was a vital part of actually making it work. “How long would it take us to reach the heart of the Dead Zone?”

“Sixty years,” Rylander growled. His anger battered at her mental shields. “Are you sure that this will work?”

“Yes,” Aisyaj said. “We have teleported far larger starships across far greater distances.”

“A question,” Khursheda said. The young girl turned to look right at Aisyaj, her voice carefully composed. “You’re saying that the masters are not here, that they’re back on your homeworld, wherever that is. How can they reach out to push us into the Dead Zone?”

“I’ll be focusing their power through my mind,” Aisyaj explained. It wasn't an entirely truthful answer, but explaining the truth would have taken far too long. In reality, the masters would be working around her, rather than through her. “It has worked before and it will work here.”

She looked around the compartment. “With that in mind,” she added, “do any of you want to leave now?”

There was a long pause. No one left. “I am honoured to know all of you,” she concluded. “I suggest that you all strap in. The transition is supposed to be completely painless, but you may all want to prepare anyway. There may be a jerk.”

She waited until the Slowboaters had strapped themselves in and then opened her mind, reaching out to the masters. Their presence surrounded her at once, a shimmering harmony of minds working together to alter reality itself. They were far advanced above her – or her mother, whose work for the Confederation kept her from developing her inner skills – yet they were limited. She sensed the presence of minds she knew and allowed her mind to spin out a welcome. There were no strangers in the telepathic world.

You are welcome, she thought. It was true, at least for her, even though she knew that the transition was going to be jarring. The masters had to do more than merely touch her mind for the transition to succeed. They had to disconnect her from reality itself. No matter what she said aloud, or even meant, her mind was going to fight them. The very nature of reality – of her perception of reality – demanded it.

Humanity had once asked a philosophical question that, like most philosophical questions, had no real answer. If a cat lay in a box, unseen to the world, was that cat alive or dead? There was no way to know until the box was opened, leaving the cat in a quantum state of being; half-alive, half-dead. The greatest enemy of the teleport process was her own mind, convinced – *knowing* – that they were on the edge of the Dead Zone and not deep inside. She felt them reaching into her mind and struggled to allow the violation, despite her mind's outrage at their intrusion. They held her down mentally, gently yet firmly; there was a sense of *disconnection* from the universe...

And then they were gone from her mind. Aisyaj felt her head spin as the mental touch faded away, leaving her with a chilling insight. The masters had, at a cost, teleported the entire starship thirty light years from its location. The effort had taken thirteen human minds working in tandem, all pushing towards the same objective, rewriting reality itself. The *Another Woman* could not be blinked out of existence, but the element of the quantum foam that determined its location could be changed. The entities had billions of human minds under their control. How much power could they bring to bear on reality?

She looked up, pushing the issue aside for the moment. "I...I think we did it," she said, thickly. Her mouth felt as if she was trying to breathe in steam. "Did it work?"

Rylander was bent over a console, his hands tapping switches. "We definitely changed location," he said, flatly. He sounded rather stunned. "I am just checking our position against the local stars."

Aisyaj looked down at the terminal on her wrist and nodded to herself. The terminal was dead. Her link to the AIs – or to the Galactic Net – was gone, at least until she got out of the Dead Zone. Perhaps she was imagining it, but she was sure that she felt an odd blanket reaching out and touching her mind, trying to smother her thoughts. She opened her mind carefully, trying to locate the source, and sensed nothing. She had to be imagining it.

She looked over at the Slowboaters, working away on their consoles. It never took that long to confirm a starship's position, not when they could lock onto Confederation beacons or access the Galactic Net...it was proof that they were within the Dead Zone. She took a breath, feeling the air brushing against her throat, and tried to access her implants. Most of them were dead. The little machines that floated through her body, repairing damage and screening out diseases before they could harm her were dead. She realised, suddenly, just how vulnerable the early humans had been, before technology had freed them from daily drudgery. The Confederation, for all its faults, was a dream come true.

"You succeeded," Rylander said, awed. "You brought us into the heart of the Dead Zone."

"Get me a status report," Aisyaj ordered. "What can we detect?"

Rylander laughed at her. "It's going to take longer than that," he reminded her, dryly. "We're dependent upon low-tech here, babe."

Aisyaj flushed. It was just another sign that she was dependent upon high technology, the kind of technology that refused to work within the Dead Zone. "Let me know as soon as you detect anything," she said, finally. "I need to know what's in this system."

It took nearly three hours before the crew had a preliminary report. At first glance, there was nothing particularly unusual about the system, even though it was encysted within the Dead Zone. It was only on further examination that oddities became apparent. There was no cloud of asteroids orbiting the local star, no gas giants; the only planets in the system were nine rocky planets, two of which were clearly life-bearing. The real mystery only became apparent a few minutes later, when the telescopes revealed that the two life-bearing planets were orbiting around an unidentified object, pin-wheeling around the object as they orbited the local star. Aisyaj remembered what the AIs had said about the possibilities of stellar engineering and shivered. There was power in the system, all right, power enough to daunt even the Confederation.

“I’ll tell you something odd about the star,” Boris said, as they discussed their next step. “It should be dead. The Dead Zone should affect it. Why doesn’t it?”

He answered his own question. “There are four objects orbiting the local star,” he added. “I can’t get a good image on them, but I can *feel* that they’re not natural.”

“Nothing about this system is natural,” Aisyaj said, tiredly. She had hoped that the answers would be immediately apparent, but it was clear that it would take weeks – perhaps months – of patient work before they found any answers. “We may as well start with the planets. If we find nothing there, we can proceed to investigate the artefacts.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

From his lofty vantage point, Representative Chen saw the flow of data passing through the Galactic Network as a running river, a river of souls and information flowing right across the galaxy. There were humans swimming within the data, Electronic Humans such as himself who lived solely in the Galactic Net and physical humans extending their minds into the network. The spiders that monitored and catalogued the network were darker presences within the flow, while the AIs were massive glowing suns, so bright that anyone who looked too closely upon them would be harmed. He caught sight of a semi-intelligent advertising drone making its way through the network and laughed as smaller programs drove it away.

The Galactic Net's very appearance was determined by the mind gazing upon it, he knew. There were Electronic Humans who saw it as a superhighway running through the entire universe and back to their perceptual realities and others who saw it as a jungle, welcoming the human race, or a supermarket. It had always struck Chen as amusing that the human race, for all of its advancement, still filled the Galactic Net with pornographic materials. Indeed, several years ago a new electronic archive of porn had been recovered from a vault on Earth and uploaded onto the Galactic Net – for research purposes only, of course. The pornography was nothing special, not compared to the standards of some of the weirder stuff running through the network, but it had been the most-accessed archive on the Galactic Net for a week before the excitement faded away.

Chen smiled as he stood up, feeling his mind uncoiling and slipping into the local processing programs that maintained his private reality. Every Electronic Human was entitled to a private space within the network, a place they could call home, a universe they should shape to their own desires. Chen, who had nursed a secret dream of walking on the surface of a star, had shaped his to allow him to indulge his dream; there were others, darker souls, who went into their private realities and closed the door behind them. The Galactic Net was not always a safe place for the unwary. There were minds who transcribed themselves into electronic form purely so they could indulge fantasies that would have shocked even the Confederation's genteel attitudes.

The concept of Electronic Humans had started up a whole new round of legal arguments within the Confederation. There had once been a human called Chen – a pureblood human who had transcribed himself into a computer. Was Representative Chen, one of the oldest Electronic Humans in existence, a continuation of that being or was he a whole new person in his own right? The issue had caused hundreds of years of arguments, for if Chen was a separate person, what rights did he have over his former physical form? Did he even *have* a former physical form? The issue had only grown more complicated when Electronic Humans had started to clone themselves. The legal issues regarding clones had been settled long ago – clones were separate people from the originals – yet when Electronic Humans were concerned, there were two people, each convinced that they were the original...and each perfectly correct, by any standard the Confederation could measure. And then...did twinned personalities have the right to vote?

"You know that this is risky," the AIs said. They had extended a presence into the Galactic Net, but they weren't truly electronic beings. They lived in both the physical and electronic worlds. There were Electronic Humans who believed that, one day, the entire human race would withdraw to computer cores and become nothing more than electronic patterns of force. "You do not have to risk yourself."

“Someone has to lead the way,” Chen replied. At least he was still fairly human, mainly in outlook. There were some Electronic Humans who thought of themselves as a different race. “I cannot ask anyone to take a risk I am reluctant to take myself.”

And besides, he thought, but did not say aloud, there were other issues. Like the rest of the Security Council, he had considered the Buckley Experiment and chosen to accept the risks, tempted by the awesome power it represented. The manipulation of electronic realities was one thing, yet it was not *real*. The power offered by the Buckley Experiment, he had believed, would eventually make the human race *gods*. The temptation – and the pride – had led to a crippling fall. Chen knew that he had not spoken against the experiment – he had spoken in favour of it – and that he shared some of the blame. Perhaps it was wrong to blame a single human, even Joe Buckley, but he considered himself at least partly responsible for humanity’s plight.

If the AIs heard his thoughts – thoughts could go a long way in the Galactic Net – or deduced his feelings, they said nothing. Chen considered his private reality for a long moment, remembering the countless homes he had created and reduced to pixels over the years, before he slipped out of the reality and sealed the access codes. If he died on the mission, if his electronic form was reduced to static, the Galactic Net would eventually wipe his private apartment completely, destroying every trace of his presence. There were some who chose to go into suspension, or to transcribe their minds into androids, rather than stay in the Galactic Net. He had told himself that he would never leave.

Reality twisted around him as he fell into the flowing river. There were countless electronic humans existing within the network, communing with their fellows or seeking out data for their research. They called out greetings to Chen, who replied briefly before starting to swim onwards through the data, passing the drones and other automated presences as he moved. The turmoil unleashed by the entities had even infected the Galactic Net, with most of the Electronic Humans inhabiting newsgroups and forums, where they competed to blow facts out of all proportion and give credence to even the wildest of rumours. Chen struggled to block most of them out as he swam onwards, moving into the outer layers of the Galactic Net, yet some got through his mental filters. He was reliably informed that the entities were all a hoax, that they had taken over the entire Confederation and that they’d been in the human universe since before the human race had risen to the stars. Each of the rumours was followed by a gibbering array of trolls, screaming out insults before the moderating programs kicked them out of the forums and back into the mainstream. Chen was sure, somehow, that the network had probably been simpler before the human race had started transcribing themselves into the system. It had to have been a great deal more civil.

At the edge of the core network he paused, considering his situation. It felt, absurdly, as if he’d risen from an underground city and was now contemplating moving above ground, into the cold. The Galactic Net was more than just the massive cores that made up the home of the Electronic Humans. The Galactic Net was linked into thousands of starships, Confederation Navy subsystems and even alien computer systems, turning it into a truly galaxy-wide system. Indeed, the starships that had set off for the Clouds, or M33 or even further galaxies would be carrying their own QCC nodes, allowing the network to become trans-galactic. If the human race chose to transcend and leave mortal concerns behind, the Galactic Net would be a fitting legacy to leave for the races that would arise in the future.

You are delaying matters, he told himself tartly. *It's time to act.*

Calmly, he reached into the core matrix of his own programming and triggered the cloning function. There was the weirdest sense of separation and then he found himself staring at himself – or, rather, a copy of himself. Chen2 was identical to Chen1, sharing everything that made Chen the person he was.

“Well,” Chen2 said. “You’re a handsome fellow, aren't you?”

Chen1 laughed. “We are, aren't we?”

Grinning, the two minds started to jump through the Galactic Network, moving from node to node until they finally arrived on an AI ship floating near the Scorpion Navy Yards. The AI ship felt uncomfortable to the Electronic Humans – they chose to remain limited, while the AIs were limited only by their imaginations – yet it could be endured. Besides, there was little choice. The AIs might operate at a distance, using the QCC network to operate their ships while remaining safely on Calculus, but the Electronic Humans didn't have that option.

“You understand the dangers,” the AIs said. It wasn't a question. “Do you still wish to proceed?”

Chen1 and Chen2 exchanged glances. They were still newly-twinning; there had been no time for divergence to set in. “Yes,” they said, together. “We will proceed.”

The AIs had been analysing the battles with the entities and their thralls and had noticed something interesting. The more advanced a piece of human technology was, the more likely it was to fail...and, as the entities grew more powerful, human technology collapsed completely. It seemed inescapable...except one piece of technology had continued to function perfectly, even when *inside* the translucent entities. The Marine Combat Units hadn't been affected at all. The only real effect on the machines had been when they'd been destroyed and a handful of Marines had been harmed – mentally – when they'd been separated from their Combat Unit.

They'd concluded, after much careful, that the Marines had been elsewhere, yet their minds had been linked into the Marine Combat Units. If they had been unaffected, they'd wondered, what would happen if human minds – Electronic Humans – were inserted into the local net on a planet dominated by the entities? The question had been puzzling enough to convince them to ask for volunteers and Chen, after making what preparations he could and filling out a new will, had volunteered.

The AIs opened the pathway and Chen1 raced down it, leaving Chen2 behind. It would provide a kind of continuity even if Chen1 was to be wiped from existence, something that the purely-physical humans would never know. The Confederation had the technology to make a recording of a person's mind and load it into a living brain, but creating a human clone and growing it to adulthood – a child's mind would never survive the experience – purely to allow someone to live on was a severe breach of Confederation medical ethics. There was a faint disconnect – there was always a sense of disconnect when he crossed from one node to another – and then he found himself in a very weird node. It felt almost...*alien*.

He concentrated, attempting to impose a perception he could work with on the node. It seemed inclined to resist him, leaving him puzzled, before the perceptual reality snapped into place. He pulled himself through the node, hunting for information he could use, yet navigating was extremely difficult. The very logic law – the programming that provided the core of the Confederation's network – seemed to have been warped out of shape by the entities. There was a flare of data around him as he finally cracked into a kernel of data, yet the data only left him more confused than ever. None of it seemed to make sense.

Chen1 relayed what he had found to the AIs and started to extend his mind, breaking off sections of himself and transforming them into search robots. They were not independently-aware entities, unlike Chen2, but sections that could speed up the search for useful data. Slowly, the responses started to come back, leaving him more confused than ever. The entities seemed to have damaged the entire system. As he charted it out, he grew bolder and finally relocated himself to a sensor node. It felt broken to his mind, but as he reached into it, it suddenly came online and he found himself staring through it. The Scorpion Naval Yards were busy, extremely busy. The entities and their thralls were hard at work.

There were industrial nodes in every Confederation Star System, as well as the massive planetoids and city-ships, yet the Scorpion Naval Yards operated on a very different scale. They were one of the few shipyards in the Confederation capable of designing and building planetoids, the most powerful warships in the galaxy...and now one of them was in enemy hands. As he grew more practiced at using the sensor node, he realised to his horror that the yard was working at full capacity, putting together an entire war fleet. Within two weeks – a month at most – the entities would have a full-sized fleet to call their own.

"They have to be stopped," he said, sending his words back to the AIs. The vote he'd cast in the Security Council Chamber, the horror he had felt at the concept of destroying an entire star system and its population, echoed in his mind, mocking him. To be an Electronic Human was to be incapable of forgetting, unless he chose to cut it out of his mind completely. It was impossible to evade the conclusion that his vote had been the wrong one. "I was wrong."

He extended his mind, trying to locate other working sensor nodes. Now that he'd located one of them, it was easy to find others, even though they were hidden within the warped infrastructure. He found himself looking into the shipyard's facilities, shaking his head in awe as he saw the thralls moving through the yards, slaving away for the entities. It might have been his imagination, but they looked drained, as if the life itself was being sucked out of them. The Confederation had solved the problem of hungry and banished famine, yet now it was starting to come back with a vengeance. It didn't take much imagination to wonder if the same effect was taking place on the other planets the entities had overrun.

The entities themselves seemed to be beyond his perception, but he could see their effects on the people they had enslaved. Their thralls seemed unable to act like normal human beings; there was no love, no fear...just a strange haunting expression in their eyes. Chen1 did something he had once sworn he would never do and edited himself, limiting his ability to feel anything. The sympathy he felt for the thralls was overwhelming.

"I'm progressing onwards," he said, as he found another interlink within the network. He touched it and instantly found himself on the planet itself. Surprised – the QCC network within the Scorpion System was down – he checked to ensure that he could still call back to the AIs, before looking around. The local network was, if anything, as badly warped as the

Scorpion Naval Yards network, but he could still access the nodes. In fact, he was starting to wonder if the entities merely screwed with the nodes, without taking the whole network down. It would allow them to use it and deny it to the enemy. “Keep Chen2 back with you. If this goes wrong, he will have to try it next.”

The sensor node expanded around him and he found himself looking out into a park. Comparing it to the data download he’d accessed on Scorpion, he realised that he was looking at Central Park, a place created by the locals for their kids. A massive stone scorpion sent a chill down his spine, before he realised that it was harmless. He’d never liked creatures like that when he’d been physical, trapped in a body of flesh and blood. The population was slowly building something near the scorpion, a massive statue of an Octopus-like creature. Chen1 understood in a sudden flash of insight. The thralls were *worshipping* the entities.

Once, years ago, he had read a study that had claimed that aliens had visited the Earth and served as the basis for humanity’s stories of gods, angels and demons. The writer had provided little proof for his claims; he’d asserted that the different gods might have different names, but they had similar natures. Zeus and Odin were both the lords of their representative pantheons. Chen hadn’t believed the study, but the Ancients had decorated their cities with octopuses too...and now the human thralls were doing the same. There had to be a connection there.

He pulled back and started to look through other sensor nodes. The same motif was present everywhere. Children, their eyes blank and hopeless, were drawing it on walls, while the older adults were raising statues or paintings of their new masters. It struck him as pointless, but then, most human behaviour was pointless – or seemed that way to humanity’s friends and allies. The entities might have perfectly good reasons to order their thralls to raise statues in their honour, or they could just be amusing themselves.

“There’s no sign of any resistance,” he said, moving from node to node. The same story was repeated at every node, apart from the handful that showed nothing, but empty streets. “I don’t believe that there is a single free person left on this planet.”

“That would seem likely,” the AIs sent back. They were taking in all he could send them, even if they couldn’t extend themselves into the network. “The entities possess formidable telepathic powers of compulsion. The infection would spread like a cancer. We will inform the Navy.”

“Please,” Chen1 said. He took a final look around and slipped out of the network, back up to the Scorpion Naval Yards and the link to the AIs. Re-entering the AI ship felt like returning home; he clasped hold of Chen2 and shared thoughts and memories with his twin. “We have to stop them.”

“The Navy will destroy this system,” the AIs said. “Your services would be useful.”

“You mean you want me to go back in there and see what happens,” Chen1 said. He glared towards where he imagined the AIs to be. “Damn you.”

The AIs, perhaps wisely, didn’t reply.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Admiral Burton studied the details spread out in the computer core. “They’re definitely using the shipyard to build a new fleet,” he said, as the AIs enhanced and expanded the data. “As if we didn’t have enough problems to deal with, do we?”

The image in front of him altered at his mental command, showing him the infected starships on flight paths that would, eventually, take them to uninfected worlds. They might have been crawling along at warp speed, yet rounding them all up was taking time and diverting starships that were needed elsewhere. The Confederation Navy was badly overstretched and, even though all of the reserves had been called up, just didn’t have enough starships to go around. The other shipyards were swinging into high gear and producing as many starships as they could, but manning them was going to be a pain. The ships were already heavily automated. Any further and they might as well ask the AIs to operate the entire fleet.

“It’s hard to tell what they have in mind,” the AIs agreed, “but we believe that they intend to use their fleet to run the blockade and expand their power. Given the condition of humans within the infected region of space, it seems clear that they will need to capture more humans or eventually drain their thralls completely dry.”

Burton nodded. It had occurred to him that they could just maintain the blockade and wait for the thralls to die, but no one knew what would happen to the entities if they lost all of their slaves. One theory said that they would retreat back to their own universe and await another opportunity, another said that they would use the Gateway to open more chinks in the quantum foam, allowing them to reach other worlds and infect more humans. There was no way to know for sure. With several infected starships unaccounted for, the chances were good that the quarantine had already been broken.

The images flickered in front of his mind, showing him the emancipated humans living under the shadow of the entities. They all looked as if they were dying, the bones showing clearly through their skin. It made no sense to him – a parasite that killed its host was an unsuccessful parasite – yet perhaps it made sense to the entities. Or, perhaps, the entities weren’t really fighting a war at all. Was a human at war with an ant when he stepped on the tiny creature? Could the ants hope to comprehend the motive of the human, walking quickly to get back to work, or would they see it as nothing more than sheer malice from an unstoppable foe?

“The constructions they are building bear a marked resemblance to the Ancient buildings on the dead worlds,” the AIs continued. “It is quite possible that the buildings assist in focusing the entities and maintaining the link between our universe and their home. It is also possible that the humans are just trying to please their masters.”

“Or perhaps it’s just another symptom of madness,” Burton growled, remembering Greenland. The maddened humans had just lashed out at everyone, while the entity feasted on their souls. “Or perhaps we just don’t understand what we see.”

“Perhaps,” the AIs agreed. There was a pause. “Do you intend to delay any longer?”

Unwillingly, Burton’s thoughts turned to the dark nexus within the computer matrix. It had been within the starship’s computers, but he had never even been aware of it, not until the

Security Council had provided him with the codes to activate the nexus. The designs stored within the secure core had allowed the starship's massive industrial core to design and build a supernova bomb, a bomb capable of destroying an entire star system. The system would, once the bomb was deployed, automatically wipe the storage nodes, just to maintain security. Burton had never been convinced that such measures were workable – given enough research, anyone could figure out the principles behind the supernova bomb and from there building one was a simple matter – but it had saved the Confederation from a sociopath designing and deploying a weapon for himself.

The supernova bomb's control processors felt even darker, like a poisonous jewel floating in water, awaiting the first poor fool who reached in to pick it up. The thought of using it was horrifying, because it would open a door that the Confederation had tried hard to keep shut. The more advanced races might start building supernova bombs of their own, triggering off an arms race, or perhaps the supernovas would attract the Unseen back to humanity's space. He didn't want to trigger the weapon at all, yet there was no choice. The people who had been enslaved by the entity were going to die anyway. The only question was how quickly – or cleanly – they would die.

"It's time," he said. He reached out with his mind and activated the control processors. There was a moment of screaming pain as the processors demanded to verify his identity – digging deep into his mind to confirm every last detail – before he found himself within the main control system. Data – data normally classified even to one of his rank – flowed into his mind. The supernova bombs were far more dangerous than anyone, even the most paranoid member of the Security Council, truly understood. Given enough time, they could be used to dismantle an entire galaxy.

The supernova bomb itself was resting upon a warp sled that had been designed to transport it to its target. Burton had intended to take a cruiser and deploy the weapon personally, but after a recon flight into the Scorpion System had vanished without a trace, he had decided to focus on automated systems rather than anything the entities could influence. The entities didn't seem to think in terms of technology, but he didn't want to risk putting human minds and a supernova bomb within their mental reach. He didn't even have any idea just how far they could reach. The *Sparta* was two light years from the occupied system and there was no way to know if they were safe at that range. The AIs were monitoring the computer cores closely, just in case, yet he doubted that would protect them from being taken over. The telepaths were working on a mental shield, but the entities seemed to have the sheer power required to overwhelm it.

Carefully, he uploaded the coordinates one by one, double-checking everything as he worked. The AIs couldn't help him with that; it had to be done by him alone. Everything slotted into place, much to his relief, and he finally withdrew from the device. It seemed to have taken on a new light within his mind. It was ready to deploy.

"Open the tubes," he ordered. He'd isolated the entire section, just to ensure that none of the crew went anywhere near the supernova bomb. It wasn't a question of trust, but a lingering fear that the entities might be able to influence some of the crew – or him personally – and drive them mad. A maddened mind near a supernova bomb was asking for trouble. "Eject the missile."

The warp sled was launched into space. A second later, as soon as it was outside the planetoid's gravity field, it flickered and vanished into warp drive. The FTL sensors on the massive starship tracked it as it raced towards the infected system. At its speed, it would be within the system in seconds, far too quickly for anything human to react. There was no way to know if the entities could – or would – do anything about the bomb, or even if they would recognise its existence. The computer core on the warp sled was far dumber than even an RI.

“Ten seconds to impact,” the AIs murmured in his ear. “There is no sign of any attempt to stop it in its tracks.”

“Good,” Burton muttered back. “Maybe this time we’ll get lucky.”

A moment later, the supernova bomb plunged into the star and vanished.

The basic theory behind a supernova was simple enough. A star's gravity field would eventually grow so powerful that the star would begin to collapse in on itself. If the gravity field was strong enough, the star would eventually collapse out of time and space entirely, leaving behind a black hole. If the gravity field wasn't so strong, the collapse would trigger off a reaction within the collapsing star, one that would eventually become a supernova. Luckily for humans, G2 and comparable stars simply lacked the mass to eventually explode or collapse into black holes. Eventually, Sol would expand into a red giant when the star's mass was finally burned out.

As it plunged into the star's interior, the supernova bomb's warp bubble started pulling the star's mass into its field and compressing it. The pressure grew stronger as the warp bubble became a gravity field, which in turn expanded as more and more mass fell into the trap. Given enough time, the star would collapse into a black dwarf, if not a black hole itself. The supernova field, however, was already sparking off a reaction within the star. Bare minutes after the warp bubble had started its work, it collapsed and the remains of the supernova bomb vaporised. It was far too late to save the star.

The reaction spread rapidly, for the gravity field had taken on a life of its own. FTL sensors picked up the wavering gravity field as the reaction grew stronger, finally sending the star supernova. A raging torrent of energy was unleashed upon the helpless system.

I'm a ghost in the ghostly machine, Chen1 thought, with sour amusement. As soon as he had returned to the planet, he had thrown away the humanity he had been so desperate to maintain – Chen2 could maintain it – and started to expand his mind in new directions. The damaged computer network offered no resistance as he started to peek through multiple sensor nodes at once, accessing their visual feeds and collating data within his own core, before transmitting it back to the AIs. His mind was in many places at once, within the planet's network, scattered over some of the habitats and Rings orbiting the different worlds in the system and up in the shipyard. The flow of data was almost overwhelming – a pure human would have been completely overwhelmed – but as he grew more used to handling the information, it became easier to isolate and transmit the important factoids back to the AIs.

The population didn't seem aware of their impending demise, he noted. It made a certain kind of sense, at least in pre-FTL times. The supernova wavefront would expand at the speed

of light, ensuring that the first warning they would have would come when the wave hit the planet, far too late. A civilisation that had developed FTL scanners or even gravimetric sensors would have additional warning when the star's gravity field began to fluctuate, yet even the Confederation would have had problems evacuating an entire star system in time to save most of the population. Chen1 had watched an emergency drill reviewing just such a possible scenario and he hadn't been impressed. It took time to assemble the large starships that could pick up and transport an entire population in one place and, if they weren't lucky enough to have the ships on hand, there was no way to avoid massive casualties. It was the reason why the Confederation was moving more towards a space-based civilisation, with giant starships and structures that could be moved, if necessary.

He counted down the seconds until the blast wave finally arrived. The planetary network had been designed to survive a heavy bombardment, but there was no way that it would survive a supernova. The Rings might survive, at least in some form, yet their human populations would be destroyed. Chen1 extended his body – his electronic form – throughout the network, throwing caution to the winds as the seconds ticked down. Even the entities, he was sure, couldn't detect him now.

The supernova struck the innermost inhabited planet and washed over it, burning out the sensor nodes as it moved. The dark side of the planet might have survived the hit, but the wave of energy washed around the world, obliterating the human population. Chen1 winced as part of him died along with the network, but he pulled back and stared out through the shipyard nodes, wondering how they would react. A standard shipyard could have raised its shields, yet the population didn't seem to care...

No; he was wrong. The population seemed to have come to a stop. As he watched in astonishment – and horror – they collapsed on the deck, screaming in pain. *Something* had clearly happened, something terrifyingly powerful. Had the entities been destroyed as the supernova passed over their locations? They might have been ghostly creatures rather than anything humanity could understand, not really part of the human universe, yet surely the force of a supernova could hurt them. Chen1 felt oddly optimistic, before the humans pulled themselves to their feet and went mad. They ran through the shipyards, fighting each other and lashing out at the walls, with neither rhyme nor reason. The sudden shock of being disconnected from the entities had driven them mad.

Chen1 pulled back, observing as best as he could. The AIs had considered using a wormhole to remove Greenland from one star system and put it in another, just in the hope that the connection between the entities and their thralls could be broken. What he was looking at now suggested that there was no hope that the thralls could ever be freed. If breaking the connection would kill them outright...he shivered, even though he had no physical body. Was that the fate that lay in store for all of humanity if the entities won?

The supernova blast wave struck the shipyards twenty minutes after striking the planet itself. In that time, Chen1 had watched the human population commit atrocities that would have shocked even the darkest names from the history books; torture, murder, rape...the maddened population had reinvented them all. There was no particular pattern to it, just madness. It was almost a relief when the wave finally destroyed most of the shipyard, obliterating the threat it posed to the Confederation. Chen1 withdrew his remaining subcomponents from the system and jumped back to the AI ship, just in time to watch through the FTL sensors as the remains of the system died. The population made no attempt to escape.

“I think we got them,” he commented, as he started to reintegrate his scattered personality. “They just collapsed, like puppets whose strings had been cut.”

The AIs studied his memories, considering every last aspect of them. Chen1 was almost ashamed. The AIs were pure creatures, created by the human race, without the sins that had dogged humanity since the dawn of time. Perhaps, he wondered, humanity’s fears of an artificial intelligence breaking free had more to do with human nature than the intrinsic nature of an AI. The human race had feared an AI doing unto it as it had done unto itself. The Confederation had made massive progress in eliminating all of humanity’s ills, but they had all been reinvented in the final moments before the shipyard was destroyed.

“Perhaps,” the AIs agreed, finally. “It does not bode well for the future.”

Two days after the supernova, Burton risked taking the *Sparta* into the destroyed system. The remains of the star – a shattered husk barely alive – could be dismissed, but the remains of the planets were of far more interest. They had been bathed in fire, yet they were still intact, if dead. The Ancient systems had been left barren and grey; the dead worlds in the system had been burned to a crisp. Few traces of humanity’s civilisation could be made out on their surface.

“There is no technological disruption,” the AIs reported. “The system appears to be perfectly normal.”

“If you don’t count the ten billion humans who were vaporised by the supernova,” Burton said, coldly. The remains of the Rings could be made out now, blackened and scorched by the supernova. The materials used to build their structures had survived, but the interiors had been washed clean in the blast. The population had been destroyed. “And the shipyard itself has been destroyed.”

The planetoid moved deeper within the system, deploying hundreds of sensor drones and launching them through hyperspace to the remaining planets and structures. Everywhere they looked there was death, although the odd flickers within the gas giant suggested that the supernova had lit a fire somewhere within the massive world. Burton wondered idly if they’d ignited a new star, before dismissing the thought. One way or the other, it wasn’t a problem at the moment, although it would probably concern the Gasbags. They would be outraged if humanity started turning gas giants into stars.

Finally, they halted near the remains of the shipyard. “As far as we are able to determine,” the sensor officer reported, “there are no traces of human life – or the entities – within the system. The entities do not show up on our sensors, but the disruption associated with their presence is not present. I think we did it, sir. I think we drove them back home.”

Burton was much less sanguine. “We killed ten billion humans and rendered an entire star system useless to stop the entities,” he said. The implications seemed obvious. After this success, the Security Council would certainly authorise the use of other supernova bombs. The other infected systems would be destroyed as well, yet that still left the problem of the infected starships. One of them could reach a new world and start the madness all over again. “How much of the Confederation are we going to have to dismantle before this is all over?”

Chapter Thirty

In the Confederation, Aisyaj knew, she could have crossed half the galaxy and returned home in time for tea. A starship travelling through hyperspace could fly at many thousands of times the speed of light. Even warp drive, within a sector, was astonishingly fast. In the Dead Zone, it could take days to limp towards their destination, days she spent puzzling over the telescope sightings and reading information off the old-style screen. They didn't dare risk neural links in the Dead Zone. A single hiccup could cause massive brain damage.

"Patience is a virtue," Rylander said, when she complained. The tender might have been tiny by the standards of a planetoid, but there was still plenty of space for the eleven crewmembers onboard. Her cabin might have felt weird compared to the one back home on Greenland – a home she might never see again – yet it was roomy enough to compensate. "We will get there in time."

"Patience is not one of my virtues," Aisyaj countered, although it was a lie. She'd learned patience while in training, yet it seemed as if they were just crawling towards their destination. The massive fusion drive, the most powerful space drive that would work within the Dead Zone, was pushing them forward as fast as it could. It was just so *slow* compared to what they could have done outside the zone. "Why did you marry that girl?"

Rylander's mind seemed to glimmer with odd emotion. "It's part of our culture," he said, finally. "You find a partner who is prepared to share the wandering life with you and you get married, producing kids and bringing them up within the society."

It wasn't the answer Aisyaj had hoped for, yet she didn't want to pry further. Being so close to him kept reminding her of the times they'd spent together – and she knew that he was feeling the same way – but it was clear that he felt guilty, as if he'd abandoned his wife to join his former lover on a quixotic quest to save the universe. She wanted to convince him to...do what? What could she ask him to do? Love her again? He had grown up in a culture that had rejected the ways of the Confederation, where there were limitless resources and no stigma attached to making or breaking relationships.

"I know," she said, finally. What else could she say? "Thank you for coming."

"Hey, you sold me on it when you told me that it wasn't something the rest of the Confederation could have done," Rylander protested. If he had doubts, he kept them very well concealed. "I thought that it was worth the risk and, if not, my children will be told that I died bravely and well."

"Of course," Aisyaj said, without irony. There were few people who would willingly fly into the Dead Zone, let alone allow a group of telepath masters to teleport them into the heart of the zone itself. Rylander might not have loved her any longer – although she knew that he was still attracted to her – but he trusted her. "If there is still a Confederation, we will be remembered."

Rylander grinned. "Did you take lovers after me?"

Aisyaj didn't want to talk about it, but she had to admit that it was fair. "One or two," she said, vaguely. They had both been telepaths and she had found the relationships unsatisfying.

It wasn't something she could explain to someone who possessed no telepathy; they could never understand. "They were...not as good as you."

She smiled at the flicker of satisfaction in his mind. Telepaths were so...*compassionate* and *understanding*. She had grown up knowing that men found her attractive and, when she had found a fellow telepath attractive, she had known that he had known that she found him attractive. Her telepathic lovers had known, of course, when she had slept with others, just as she had known when they had slept with others; there hadn't even been any jealousy. When she'd travelled out into the Confederation, she had discovered that there were men who had undressed her in their minds and felt *ashamed* of it. It had been a surprising discovery, yet...how could she find a permanent relationship if neither telepaths nor mundane humans truly understood her?

Rylander placed a hand on her shoulder and steered her towards the portal, showing her the stars. They seemed to remain still, not like the streaking lights of warp space or the eerie lights and energy storms of hyperspace, yet there was something about them that gnawed at her mind. The stars had been there long before humanity had clawed its way into space and would be there long after they were gone. She snuggled against him, accepting a friendly hug, and closed her eyes. She needed a rest...

An hour later, they were called back to the bridge. "We found something alarming," Khursheda explained. She was, among other things, the chief sensor officer on the *Another Woman*. "The planets are definitely inhabited, but they're also protected."

She tapped the flat-screen as it displayed a series of objects floating in orbit around the twin worlds. "These objects appear to be small mines or missiles," she explained. "They don't seem to emit much energy, yet I'm pretty sure that they're intended to intercept anything approaching or leaving the planet. If we enter orbit, the results might be...unpleasant."

Aisyaj snorted at her tone. "How unpleasant?"

"This isn't a Confederation Navy ship with seven layers of force fields and an option to drop back into hyperspace if the battle is going badly," Boris reminded her, dryly. "We're a massive ship following a predictable course that we cannot change without expending a great deal of energy, which would be easy for them to track. One hit with a primitive nuclear warhead and we'd be dead."

"They wouldn't even need a nuke," Khursheda said, checking her readings. "They'd just have to ram into us at high speed. That would be the end of us."

"All right," Aisyaj said. "How do we get down to the planet?"

"That's the problem," Khursheda said. "I don't think we can."

After much argument, Rylander agreed to launch a probe towards the nearest planet, one that would be unnamed, yet easy for the mysterious objects to detect. Aisyaj watched it go, willing it to make contact with the unknown aliens or to provoke no reaction at all, but she was out of luck. As the probe approached the planet's surface, broadcasting signals and attempting to make contact, an alien object boosted into an intercept trajectory. It was moving so fast that it was easy to tell that it was unmanned. The interception was slow,

stately and inevitable. The two objects collided and the probe was destroyed. The interceptor floated onwards, slowly altering course to return to orbit.

“That object wasn't produced in the Dead Zone,” Khursheda said, flatly. “Anything they could produce here should have suffered damage – even been destroyed – when it rammed the probe.”

Aisyaj stared down at her console, watching as the alien craft moved in their odd formations, watching for intruders. To have come so close and yet be so far...!

“I have been studying the records,” Janette said. She was the youngest of the crew at nineteen, a girl whose mind seemed to flicker with terror and embarrassment whenever she looked at Aisyaj. She didn't like the thought of telepaths looking into her mind. Aisyaj would have liked to reassure her, but that would only have confirmed her fears. “The interceptor was not launched until the probe was committed to entering low planetary orbit, or even to head into the atmosphere.”

Aisyaj frowned. “So we could enter high orbit?”

“We could,” Rylander said. She sensed the resolve in his mind and knew what he was going to say before he said it. “We're not going to take the risk. Those things can boost a hell of a lot faster than us and they could catch and destroy us easily. I don't think that they would let us go even if we started to thrust away from the planet's surface.”

“You don't know that,” Aisyaj pointed out. “You could be wrong.”

Rylander scowled at her. “Everything we are looking at,” he said, flatly, “suggests an automated system. An intelligent being who saw us – and we are detectable – would have either attempted to open communication or launched one of the interceptors after us. We cannot reason with an automated system and we cannot gamble on our ability to escape or destroy one of their interceptors. I will not take the risk.”

“We could always send in more remote probes,” Khursheda offered. “We can angle them so they enter high orbit, or even speed past the planet. It should give us new insight into how the defences actually react.”

“Good idea,” Rylander said. “Make it so.”

The next few days passed slowly as the probe slowly built up a picture of life on the planet below. It was clear that the planet was inhabited right from the start, yet the civilisation was not only primitive, but protected. The automated systems in orbit responded to anything that tried to slip into low orbit and destroyed it. The attempts to contact the planet through radio proved futile. The planet's population didn't seem to possess radio, yet they had clearly moved through the system at one point. Both planets had the same form of intelligent life.

Aisyaj scowled as she studied the aliens, trying to understand what she was seeing. They seemed roughly humanoid, but there the resemblance ended. They looked more like gorillas than humans, yet their hands were delicate, suggesting advanced manipulating capabilities. There seemed to be little sexual dimorphism between the sexes, unless they were only seeing one sex and the other sex was kept locked away. It was impossible to tell at their distance.

Their technology seemed curious, an odd mixture of surprisingly advanced technology and primitive systems. The most advanced technology they saw on the planet's surface was a steam engine.

"It's possible that the defences are responsible for preventing any advancement above a certain level of technology," Boris said, reluctantly. "We have had lunatics who have tried to do that in human history."

"True," Rylander agreed, "which rather leads to the obvious question. Did they build the defences and do it to themselves, or did whoever brought them here trap them on the planet's surface? If so...why?"

Centuries ago, back during the early days of the Age of Expansion, a charismatic leader had led thousands of humans to a new world, one where they would live their lives without the advanced technology that they believed had blighted the Earth. When the colonists had discovered just how hard life was without technology, they'd revolted, but their mad leader had won the civil war. He'd not only destroyed anything more advanced than hand-powered tools; he'd set up computer systems to smite anyone who tried to introduce advanced technology back into the cultural matrix. By the time the system had been rediscovered by one of the many empires spreading out from Earth, the few remaining colonists had been on the verge of dying out. They had greeted their conquerors as if they'd been a rescue party.

There were planets, even now, that embraced the simple life, but the key to their success was the willingness to make the system work. Every year, thousands of pastoral humans chose to return to the Confederation, while thousands more came to try their hand at living as their ancestors did. The worlds that had been set up to operate without technology had eventually ended up rediscovering it and reaching for the stars again, as the beliefs that had founded them faded away and died. The Confederation occasionally encountered ships from human-settled worlds that had lost contact with the rest of humanity, or believed that their world was the true homeworld of the human race. They always had to be handled carefully.

"There doesn't seem to be anything *dangerous* about them," Khursheda said. "Even within the Dead Zone, our tech should be able to handle everything they have."

"Apart from the defences," Rylander said. "I think that we are going to have to rule out making contact with them, unless we can somehow subvert the defence system."

"I doubt that that will be possible," Janette said. She had been tracing out the defensive systems nodes. "I think they're controlled from this complex here" – she tapped one of the icons on the display – "but approaching it is going to be a nightmare. They're filling space with radar pulses."

"We could get a stealth probe in there," Boris said.

"I doubt it," Khursheda said. "If they're that paranoid, they're probably using laser radar and other systems as well to make sure that no one could slip up on them. We might not be able to deactivate the defence network at all."

An hour later, the entire crew gathered in the mess for a meal. Aisyaj had been surprised that the Slowboaters had such a tradition, but it did make a certain kind of sense, even in the Dead Zone. The automated systems would alert them if there was a problem, allowing them a chance to relax and catch up with each other. There was a formal rule of No Shop Talk, but Rylander chose to waive it. They had much to discuss.

“If we were operating under no time pressure at all,” he said, “I would be quite happy to spend years studying the twin planets and trying to unpick their defensive systems. We could analyse them until we knew how they ticked and then take them out, allowing us to land on the planet at will. We do not, however, have that much time.”

He took a sip from the flask in his hand and continued. “We have three choices,” he said. “We can remain and study the planetary defences; we can head to the barycentre and examine the alien artefact there or we can head towards the local star and study the objects orbiting the sun.” He shrugged. “Or we can admit defeat and head home.”

Aisyaj stared down at her hands. It wasn't her command, she knew, even though she was only just starting to realise what it meant. The Slowboaters had come because one of their leaders had asked for volunteers; they hadn't come for her, or the Confederation. Their lives were Rylander's responsibility and he couldn't put them at risk because of her...well, not more than he already had, at any rate.

“I do not believe that we will be able to crack the defence network in a hurry,” Khursheda said. The dark-skinned girl frowned, her thoughts a conflicted mass. “The system is designed to make it hard for anyone else to slip inside and do a little reprogramming. We may succeed eventually, but there would be no guarantee of success. I believe that we should head for the artefact at the barycentre.”

“We do have the time to explore thoroughly,” Boris countered. “We could always speed weeks, or months, probing out the defence network. It would take time – these things always do – but we have the time. We can take as long as we need to make sure we do it right.”

His voice hardened. “This isn't a piece of incomprehensible alien technology from the wider galaxy,” he added. “This is a piece of technology that *must* function under physical laws we understand. Given time, we can break through and reprogram it to make it work for us.”

“Good point,” Rylander said, dryly. “Would anyone else like to offer a suggestion?”

Aisyaj knew it wasn't her place, but there was no choice. “I can barely reach the other telepaths from within the Dead Zone,” she said. Admitting that was painful. Her mind seemed to have lost most of its range within the field. “I have no idea what is going on back in the Confederation, but I believe that it isn't good. We may not have much time as we think.

“I've been studying the aliens and comparing them to the remains of the Ancient civilisation. The buildings the Ancients built could be used by them. They may be all that remains of the Ancients, which means that they've been here – within the Dead Zone – for four *billion* years and that they survived the entities. We need to know how they did it. *Any* risk is worthwhile if we can learn how they did it.”

“They hid themselves in a realm that defies physical law,” Boris said, sharply. “I don’t think that that counts as a victory.”

“The Dead Zone is not a natural event,” Khursheda said. Her voice was tightly composed, but Aisyaj could sense the excitement underlying her words. “The Ancients had technology that we don’t understand. They could have created the Dead Zone to defend themselves. If we could understand the technology behind it...”

She allowed her voice to trail off as Rylander spoke. “There are good arguments in favour of both,” he said. His mind-tone suggested that he intended to strike a middle course. “I propose a compromise. Two of us will head towards the artefact and attempt to conduct a preliminary study. The remainder will remain here and continue to study the defence network. If we can find a way of turning it off, or at least confirming just what it will or will not respond to, we can carry out a more comprehensive study of this system.”

“This system itself isn’t natural,” Khursheda said. She tapped the table to make her words clearer, more pointed. “Do you know what we could do with such power?”

“Yes,” Boris said. “And the race that did have such power reduced itself to grubbing in the dirt to avoid being eaten by monstrous extra-dimensional vampires. Am I the only one who thinks that such power might come with a very high price?”

Chapter Thirty-One

Representative Chen translated into the Security Council's virtual meeting room with an almost jovial air. It was slightly inappropriate when humanity had blown up one of its own star systems to destroy an alien foe, yet it was the first real success that humanity had enjoyed and he was determined to enjoy it. Many of his constituents had pointed out the hypocritical nature of that statement – he had, after all, voted against the deployment of the supernova bomb – but while he knew they had a point, it was hard to care. There was hope after all.

He paused as he took his virtual seat, considering the two lines of memory that ran through his electronic pattern. Chen1 and Chen2 had merged back together – an easy process when there was little divergence between the two personalities – yet he was still working on reintegrating himself. Chen1 had seen the effects of the entities at first hand; Chen2 had remained with the AIs, watching through their eyes as the star exploded and destroyed the entire star system. A physical human would have gone mad under the influence of having contradictory memories; an electronic human merely had to concentrate to avoid disorientation.

As the remainder of the Security Council materialised – unlike him, they were merely projecting themselves into the chamber – he considered the public reaction to the news. The Confederation Navy had released a brief statement just after the bomb had detonated, issuing a factual note of what had happened and sending warning signals to star systems that were likely to be affected by the expanding shell of radiation. Building shields for the affected star systems would be fairly easy – assuming the entities didn't destroy the Confederation first – yet thousands of people were already voting with their feet and departing the threatened worlds. The thought made him smile, even though it was absurd – or perhaps because it *was* absurd. The expanding shell of radiation was travelling at the speed of light and it would be six years before it reached the first inhabited world, more than enough time to build a planetary shield or even evacuate the entire population.

The public seemed to be of mixed views. The newshounds, struggling to chase down reactions from members of the public, seemed to think that half the population was cheering the destruction of the star, while the other half was terrified of the possible consequences. There was nothing that terrified humans as much as the unknown and there was no way to know how the entities would respond to the supernova. Chen's personal belief was that the entities wouldn't care – they didn't seem to worry much about human weapons or defences – but there was no way to know for sure. He had already done a number of interviews for various media outlets, reassuring people that – for once – the Confederation had hit back and hit back hard. In private, he was much less confident. The entities, for all the difficulties they had operating in humanity's universe, had powers and abilities the Confederation couldn't match. For all he knew, one of them could infect a star!

“This meeting will now come to order,” Mariko said, her voice echoing in the virtual chamber. She looked tired, a surprisingly honest pose when most people used filters to present a bland or dispassionate image to the world. It might have been political manipulation, of course; Chen knew that most humans were very cynical when it came to political manoeuvres. “Admiral...did we kill the entity?”

Admiral Burton looked troubled. He was, Chen reflected, starting to become a familiar face at the meetings. It wasn't such a problem – he was the man on the spot, after all – but some

of the councillors were already muttering about precedence and wondering if Burton wasn't bucking the system. And then there were the people who blamed him for the loss of Greenland and the near-disaster in the Haypah System.

"I do not know," Burton said, finally. "We have filled the remains of the system with sensor probes and hunted for locations where technology started to glitch. We have found no such places; indeed, we have found no survivors at all."

"Admiral," Representative Singh said, "you blew up an entire star. I don't think we should be expecting survivors."

"The Rings were constructed from materials that should have been capable of surviving the blast and providing at least some protection to their inhabitants," Burton said, flatly. "We searched the remains of the Rings and found dead bodies, some suspiciously intact. We did not find a single living survivor. That is, if you will pardon the expression, freakishly improbable."

"I saw the crew of the shipyard collapsing after the supernova swept over the planet," Chen injected, smoothly. "If their mental link to the entity was destroyed, does that not mean that the entity was destroyed as well?"

"We cannot be sure," Representative Caprice said. Her voice was surprisingly even for someone whose daughter was trapped within the Dead Zone, but then, perhaps she was using a filter to mask her real thoughts and feelings. "I have been in communication with teams of telepaths who inspected the post-supernova system. They reported strange sensations, feelings suggesting that they were being watched...and a twist in the quantum foam where the entity had been centred."

She shook her head, sending her long white hair cascading down towards the virtual ground. "We may have slammed the door shut in its face," she added, "but the doorway remains, waiting to be reopened."

Chen admired her composure. He had never met the telepath in person – not before he'd transcribed himself into a computer core and become one of the first Electronic Humans – and there were few who could make him regret the decision to go electronic. Caprice, with her striking, almost patrician features, long divine legs and firm taut breasts, was one of them. He sometimes wondered what it would be like to take on human flesh again – or perhaps one of the android bodies used by Electronic Humans – and make love to her. It would be real in a way that electronic lovemaking, with its acrobatics and imaginary constructions, could never be.

"My people don't like being there," she concluded. Her lips thinned noticeably. "They're saying the system is haunted. The ones who visited the Ancient worlds say that it's just like walking on the dead soil and sensing the ghosts flickering around the ruins."

Chen pushed his impossible sexual fantasy aside and concentrated on her words. "Are you suggesting," he said calmly, "that the system is still being affected by the entities in some way?"

“I am saying,” Caprice countered, “that the entities touched the system and – somehow – left a lasting legacy of their presence. It is quite possible that the doorway will be reopened at some point, allowing the entities to return to the system.”

“If they would,” the Grand Admiral said. “There’s nothing there for them now.”

“We have been considering the reports from the telepaths,” the AIs said. Chen listened with interest. For electronic gods with no real feelings of their own – at least, no feelings that were kin to human feelings – the AIs took a remarkable interest in telepaths. Chen had heard that they worked hard to establish links with telepaths in the field and shared data with them, even pushing the limits of the Confederation’s privacy statutes. “The claim that the system is haunted may be related to legends from pre-space Earth.”

Chen looked up, sharply. “On Earth,” the AIs continued, “there were humans who attempted to perform rites to summon demons to the mortal realm. These rites were often conducted at places of power, places considered to be haunted or somehow connected to the other worlds. The rites were generally regarded as primitive nonsense and largely abandoned when the human race headed into space. There are, however, definite links between the rites performed by the Ancient Cult and the rites performed by the people on Earth.

“In particular, both groups used repetitive chanting and sometimes drugs to generate the proper state of mind for their rites. This, we believed, helped to focus the mind on a particular task, all the more important when the cultists were not all trained and experienced telepaths. They would not have known what they were doing – the truth behind their rites were concealed under a great deal of nonsense – yet there is little doubt that the rites succeeded now...and did not succeed in the past. Why, we wonder, could that be?”

Singh snorted. “The Gateway,” he said. “The Buckley Experiment altered the very nature of space itself.”

“We believe so,” the AIs said. “The entities were able to use the Buckley Experiment to allow themselves access to this universe. Even so, it is clear that they require the rituals as well...and now that we have rounded up the original cultists and warned the population, it is likely that the infection will not be able to spread further.”

“At least not that way,” Chen pointed out. He stared from face to face, willing them to understand. “This is not new. We need to figure out how to close the Gateway.”

“We intend to attempt to destroy one of the objects in three days,” the AIs reminded him. “Even if the experiment fails, we will learn a great deal about their true nature and composition.”

“True enough,” Chen agreed. He intended to be watching as the AIs attempted to destroy the object, one of humanity’s metal gods confronting a nightmare from beyond the dawn of time. He doubted that it would be easy, but it had to be tried. “That still leaves us with the other issue. Do we destroy the remaining infected star systems?”

Carolynn glared at him. The mermaid regarded him as a traitor for breaking his word...although he hadn’t actually broken his word, merely changed his mind. For her, and a sizable percentage of humanity’s population, there was no real difference between the two.

The algorithms that dominated the selection of Security Council members would, eventually, refuse to allow him to remain a member. Until then, he intended to represent the Electronic Humans to the best of his ability.

“You – we – destroyed over ten billion lives,” she said, her tail thrashing in anger. It was easy to imagine her leaning on a rock, attracting passing sailors and convincing them to join her in the waves. Mermaids lived odd lives; unlike most of the Evolved Humans, they chose not to be at the top of the food chain, resulting in the highest death rate of any of the various human subsets. “And now you want to destroy more?”

Chen chose his words carefully. “I saw what they did to our people,” he said. He’d allowed the memories to flow into the Galactic Net, where they had been accessed by trillions of people. They had, for a few brief hours, overshadowed even the pornography files on the network. “There was no free will, no choice; they were completely subverted, so...crushed that they were even starving to death, in the midst of plenty. And when the entity was forced to retreat back to its own universe, they just went mad, cut off from their lord and master. Thousands of years of civilisation were destroyed in a moment.”

He looked over at her, willing her to understand. “I voted against the use of the supernova bomb,” he said. “I was wrong. I believed that we could defeat the entities and free our people from their spell. I do not believe, any longer, that that is true. The people within their power can never be freed. We cannot save them once they have given themselves, willingly or unwillingly to the entities. They will just be drained dry feeding their master on their own life force.

“We cannot allow it to continue. If we blow up the remaining infected star systems, we will destroy their foothold in our universe; perhaps win time to find a more permanent solution. We need to understand them, understand the nature of their power and how the Gateway somehow allows them to access our dimension and we cannot do that if parts of the Confederation are being used as bases to crush us. We must destroy those worlds.”

There was a long pause. “Perhaps we should table that issue,” Mariko said, carefully. “We have another problem to deal with. The diplomatic notes have started coming in.”

Chen scowled as the information was downloaded into his pattern from the processors controlling the virtual room. The Confederation’s destruction of a star hadn’t gone unnoticed by the other alien races, particularly the ones that believed humanity would eventually be a danger to them. The Haypah – what remained of their government – had filed an official protest, although with the entities taking control of their empire it was hard to see what they could actually do about it. The Confederation Navy had been intercepting refugee flights for the last few days, disarming the refugees and transporting them to a Confederation worldship for their own safety. Some of the refugees had been killed by their own people when they realised that the Confederation, far from being a monstrous galactic hegemonic empire, was willing to take them in. There had always been a stream of refugees coming out of their space, but this was different. It promised change for the better.

But for the moment, there were more serious concerns. The Confederation Navy was debriefing all of the refugees, before keeping them isolated from the mainstream of Confederation society. The tales they told were horrific. The infected starships had brought their infection – and their alien masters – to most of the Haypah worlds and started to enslave

the population. The Haypah Empire was disintegrating as the outer worlds tried to break away from the centre, while the entities just kept expanding and feeding on their thralls, draining them to death. The Confederation Navy simply didn't have the resources to do anything about it, not any longer.

The Haypah, however, weren't the only ones concerned about humanity's destruction of a star. The Gasbags had filed a complaint of their own, stating that the destruction of an uninhabited gas giant could be viewed as an unfriendly act – or something along those lines. Even for the AIs, communicating with the gas giant dwellers wasn't easy and sometimes both sides had been known to talk past one another. It added another complication to the whole issue, for two of the infected star systems also held a large population of Gasbags. There was no data on their current status – if the Gasbags knew, they weren't telling – but they would object, strongly, if those stars were to be destroyed. It wasn't even clear if the Gasbags understood the nature of the threat.

And then there were the other protests...

Chen smiled tiredly. "I suggest that we ignore the complaints from the Haypah," he said, once the councillors had all accessed and studied the data download. "They don't have anything left to bargain with, not now the entities are taking them apart. We can keep taking in their refugees and eventually they will become part of the Confederation. The splinter governments are not going to remain intact much longer."

He shrugged. "The Gasbags will have to be warned about the danger to their own people," he added. "We can leave those stars for last, but unless we fire a remote missile at the infected planets..."

"It would be insufficient," the Grand Admiral said. "Even if the technology works perfectly, which is unlikely, the entities will still control the Rings and the various habitats scattered around the system. We need to hit them hard enough to break their control and the only way we know to do that is to send the star supernova."

"And the other races can go to hell," Singh said. "The ones who are like us – living on Earth-type worlds – should know the truth about the entities. We're not just fighting to defend ourselves, but all of them as well. To hell with their concerns! We will do what we feel is necessary to defend ourselves."

"Assuming we win the war against the entities," Carolyn put in, "uniting the rest of the galaxy against us is not a particularly bright idea."

"It doesn't help us if we retain the goodwill of the galaxy, yet get eaten alive by the entities," Singh growled. "Besides, what happens if infection spreads into one of their systems? They're going to need our help to deal with it."

"There are dangers in both courses of action," the AIs stated. "While races such as the Haypah can be disregarded, other races are far closer to our technological level and – if they decided to work together to contain us – could certainly cause us considerable problems. They may feel that the results of the Buckley Experiment are our fault and demand that we refrain from such experiments in the future."

“They can go to hell,” Singh said, again.

“That is not helpful,” Carolynn said. “Why should we expect them to understand our concerns?”

Mariko smiled. “We need to agree on a response,” she said. “I propose that we explain the truth and that we may have to repeat the exercise by destroying systems only inhabited by humans. The Gasbag systems can be left until last...”

“We could always transport the Gasbag worlds out of the infected system,” the AIs pointed out. A diagram appeared in front of the council, showing how a wormhole could be generated and used to swallow up an entire gas giant. “We are already working on scaled-up wormhole generators that should be capable of such feats.”

Chen shook his head in awe. “You don't think small, do you?”

The AI image smiled. “No,” they said. The smile deepened, growing wider. “We have to think big to survive.”

“And that,” Chen said, “sounds like famous last words. We were telling ourselves the same when we allowed Joe Buckley to talk us into authorising the experiment.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Admiral Burton was still thinking about Representative Chen's words when the AIs contacted him, informing him that they were ready to begin the experiment. It was a welcome distraction. After destroying an entire star, the *Sparta* and her entire task force had been sent back to the Gateway, rejoining the force watching the objects and maintaining the quarantine zone. Only a few hundred media and alien ships remained outside the invisible line the Confederation Navy had drawn in space, watching with interest. The ships, Burton knew, could probably track everything they did near the Gateway.

"Show me," he ordered, as he sat back in his command chair. *Sparta* felt oddly empty; they'd had to cut loose two thousand crewmen to man the cruisers that were being taken out of the reserve and pressed into service. The planetoid was largely automated, yet he'd been used to having hundreds of crewmen around. "What have you built?"

The AIs, when they wanted to move fast, could move faster than any other part of the Confederation. Five of their cube-shaped ships had arrived at the Gateway – where they'd joined the ship that had remained there since the beginning, watching the Gateway and the alien objects – and two of them had been dismantled to provide the raw material for the wormhole generator. It floated in space, a long skeletal structure that flickered oddly when he looked at it through the starship's sensor suite. A standard wormhole generator was massive, even the smaller generators that connected planets together, but this one was stupendous. The AIs had even used a smaller generator to tap the power of no less than four nearby stars. They would have power to spare in the unlikely event of the quantum tap failing.

He watched as the remaining AI ships drifted away from the generator, moving into positions where they could support operations or jump into hyperspace, if the experiment went badly wrong. They'd joined the Confederation Navy in seeding space with sensor platforms, ready to monitor every last flicker of energy in the vicinity. The objects themselves were still a mystery – no two sensor probes agreed on anything – yet, as the AIs made their preparations, it seemed as if they were finally going to get answers.

"Alert all ships," he ordered. "I want all unnecessary ships out of the danger zone before the wormhole generator is powered up."

The AIs had protested that that wasn't necessary, but Burton had overruled them, reminding the electronic personalities that the entities had surprised them before and would probably do so again. The Scientists Guild, which had been studying the Gateway and arguing endlessly over its internal quantum structure, hadn't been able to learn much about it, but they had concluded that maintaining the Gateway required an astonishing amount of power. The Confederation, with the greatest power generation and distribution system in human history, would be unable to power the Gateway, not even if every system was devoted to the task.

Burton had wondered, if that was the case, how the entities were able to power it, but the scientists had had no answer. It was possible that whatever Joe Buckley had done to create the Gateway had firmly lodged it within the quantum foam, or perhaps the entities were feeding in power from their own universe. When he'd asked if the scientists had come up with any way to close the Gateway, the scientists had been shocked at the suggestion. The Gateway was unique, they'd protested, and far too important to risk. The fact that powerful

alien entities were using it as a way into the human universe didn't seem to register with them.

"All ships have reached the quarantine line," the sensor officer reported. "They're ready to begin recording the experiment."

"Good," Burton said. If the *Sparta* were to be destroyed if the experiment went wrong, at least there would be a record of what had happened to her. The AIs had their own QCC link back to Calculus, but the Confederation Navy would prefer its own link. He looked over at the AIs and nodded. "You may proceed."

"Thank you," the AIs said. If there was any irony in their thoughts, they hid it well. "We are feeding power into the generator now."

Burton leaned back and accessed the live feed from the RIs controlling the wormhole generator. Wormholes required a considerable amount of power to generate, although once they were generated they only required a trickle of power to keep them in being. The AIs were being careful, testing everything as they went along, unlike some researchers he could mention. The Confederation Navy had once had to rescue several scientists from a melting world after their quantum tap – a design they'd produced themselves and insisted on testing personally – had lost containment and exploded violently. Luckily, they'd had the common sense to be on the other side of the planet when they carried out the tests; unluckily, they hadn't bothered to ensure that a starship remained in the system, waiting for them. They'd been luckier than they deserved to be that a patrolling cruiser had detected the blast and come to investigate.

"All power feeds check out," the AIs concluded finally. Burton, who had been admiring the design, nodded absently. The AIs had worked in so many safeguards that it was hard to see what - if anything - could go wrong. They could use the wormhole generator to open a link from one side of the galaxy to another, or even to a separate galaxy altogether. "We are ready to begin powering up the main system."

Power flared through the device, creating a sudden twist in space-time as the generator flared to life, emitting gravity waves into space. Burton felt a brief shiver of recognition, remembering the horrific moments when the Buckley Experiment had gone terrifyingly wrong and opened the path allowing the entities access to his universe. The AIs swore that there was no way a standard wormhole could be used to gain access to an alternate dimension, but even they had to admit that there were too many unknown unknowns involved. The human race's knowledge about the universe had been proved to be alarmingly limited. It was ironic; the discovery of the entities and how they operated under entirely different physical laws had fuelled genuinely original science, yet they were also the most serious threat the human race had ever faced. Even the nightmarish and paranoid visions of the AIs deciding to declare war on the human race didn't even come close to what the entities had unleashed.

"The gravity fields are optimal," the AIs stated. "We are calibrating the device now."

Burton sat back in his chair, watching the alien object nervously. It still resembled a sphere, but the filters on the sensor systems refused to allow him to pick out any detail. Too many people had looked at the objects through their naked eyes – or even sensor units – and had

gone mad. The objects might have looked like spheres, yet they were clearly far more than they seemed, perhaps even linked back to the entities and their home dimension. The most powerful weapons humanity had deployed – apart from the most dangerous of all – hadn't even scratched them. The Confederation Navy had considered deploying the Hyperspace Decoherence Cannon and taking the heat from the rest of the galaxy – who would consider it a human ultimate weapon – but the simulations agreed that it would be useless against the objects. They just didn't exist in one dimension; they existed in multiple separate dimensions.

“The wormhole generator is ready for operations,” the AIs said, finally. Burton considered the live feed briefly, noting how much power the device was sucking into its maw. The quantum tap might not be sufficient for such a massive wormhole. “We are ready to begin.”

Burton looked back at the alien object, as vast and enigmatic as ever. The Confederation Navy's specialists had debated endlessly, wondering if the object was aware of the starships gathered around it, or if it was simply uncaring about their presence. It wasn't as if it had any reason to worry. The planetoid had unleashed its full firepower against one of the objects and accomplished precisely nothing. If they generated the wormhole, would they provoke a reaction...or would the wormhole just be useless, like everything else the human race had used against the objects? A dozen sensor platforms had been rammed into them, to no avail.

“You may begin,” he said. “Good luck to us all...”

The wormhole started to form slowly in front of the targeted object, shimmering into existence. Unlike a standard wormhole, the wormhole the AIs had generated had no endpoint; it was, in effect, a pocket dimension that could be crushed down to nothing, along with everything inside it. It would have been a fiendishly effective weapon if it wasn't for the fact that most cultures possessed gravity-manipulation technology and could use it to detect, avoid or escape such a wormhole. It was far more effective when deployed against planets, but the power requirements were absurd. It would be far more economical to simply drop a few tons of compressed antimatter onto the surface and watch the fireworks from a safe distance.

As he watched, the object continued on its course, right into the gaping maw of the wormhole. Burton couldn't tell if it was aware of the wormhole or not; it just kept moving, rolling through space with a casual arrogance that was infuriating to him. The wormhole opened up in front of it and it flew right inside...and space seemed to go crazy. The sensors blanked out as the wormhole suddenly flared with energy, as if the object was trying to take control of it, or absorb it.

Burton grasped his command chair as the entire planetoid heaved, the sudden outpouring of gravity waves overloading the compensators. Red lights flared up on the main display, warning of mounting damage – all minor, thankfully – within the planetoid itself. He focused his mind on the wormhole and saw space twisting out of shape, completely deformed. It reminded him of a marble falling through a network of tubes and passages, like the child's toys he'd played with as a kid, yet it was impossible. The wormhole should simply have snapped closed and obliterated the alien object.

The starship shook again and he swore. “Report,” he ordered. “What's happening?”

“Massive gravity waves, Admiral,” the sensor officer said. “They’re making it hard to hold position. I recommend that we pull back.”

“Do it,” Burton ordered. Something that could shake a planetoid was no joke. The AIs might be able to simply overpower whatever the alien object was doing to the wormhole, yet the results might be explosive. One of the other weapon concepts the Confederation had invented involved using a wormhole to break a large object down to energy and then spewing that energy out of a wormhole, an irrespirable blast of sheer power. Even an uncontrolled blast would be dangerous. He linked back into the computers and sent a single question into the AI network. “What is happening to the wormhole?”

“The object is linked into alternate dimensions,” the AIs said. At least they sounded calm, although intellectually he knew that the AIs only needed a tiny part of their “The pressure of that link is somehow affecting the wormhole and trying to pluck the object back out of the sack and into normal space. We are shifting the wormhole parameters rapidly to break the link with the alternate dimensions and crush the object. The issue is currently in the balance.”

Burton looked at the display as the planetoid pulled back rapidly. The line of gravimetric distortions was only growing stronger, as if the object was resurfacing in normal space and then being pulled back down into the wormhole. He checked the power levels and blinked in surprise. The AIs were not only drawing in power from the quantum tap, but from the stars as well, fuelling their desperate struggle with the alien object. It was impossible for a human to keep track of the conflict. The object was linked to multiple dimensions and he found himself developing a headache as he tried to follow the display. The AIs, not sharing human limitations, were not so affected. Even so, it was clear that they were having problems as space started to twist right out of shape.

“We are unable to maintain the link to the power sources,” the AIs observed. There was no panic in their voice, where a human would have been screaming and railing against the universe. “The object is resisting our attempts to...”

Space shuddered one final time and fell silent. “Correction,” the AIs said. For once, they sounded surprised. “The object has been destroyed.”

“Confirm that,” Burton ordered. He wanted to whoop and shout hurrah, but until he knew for sure, he wasn’t going to celebrate. The entities had surprised the human race before. “How did we win so suddenly?”

There was a pause. “We believe that the links to alternate dimensions simply collapsed,” the AIs said, finally. “Our analysis suggests that they were unable to maintain the links at one remove and chose to abandon the object to its fate. We crushed it out of existence.”

Burton found himself grinning, even as he started to study the take from the various surviving sensor platforms. Hundreds of them had been caught up in the gravitational eddies and destroyed, but hundreds had survived, adding their feed to the combined picture the AIs were pulling together. Three of the objects remained, but one was gone, as if it had never been.

“It looks like we succeeded,” he said, shaking his head. “Did you learn anything about what it was made of?”

“No,” the AIs said. There was a hint of frustration in their tone. “We attempted to analyse the data from the collapsing wormhole, but we were unable to identify the specific components that made up the object.”

Burton frowned. “Can we destroy the others?”

“Once we retune the wormhole generator and add additional power sources...”

“The AIs broke off. “Admiral,” the sensor officer said. “The Gateway...something is coming out of the Gateway!”

“Give me a live feed,” Burton ordered, already knowing what he was going to see. The Gateway seemed to be spinning into life, not unlike a natural wormhole, flaring out in the night. There was a flash of light and another object emerged from the spinning wheel of light, floating out into the human dimension. It bobbed slightly, as if it was unsure of its position or what it was doing, just before it started to move out to replace the destroyed object. It was completely impossible to tell the difference between it and the object that had been destroyed. “Shit.”

The AI image looked annoyed. “There was no observed disruption of the Gateway while one of the items was missing,” they said. “It may require the destruction of two or more...Ah.”

Burton felt his blood running cold. “Ah?” He repeated. “I don’t like the sound of that?”

“We have successfully managed to peer into their dimensional strands surrounding the objects,” the AIs said. “We were...not as successful as we might have thought. The objects are vastly more complex than we appreciated. When we believed we had destroyed one of the objects, what actually happened was that we destroyed the section that was extruded into our universe; the remainder of the object remained untouched. It simply extruded another section of itself into our universe.”

“But it came out of the Gateway,” Burton protested. “How is that even possible?”

“The normal laws of science break down near the entities,” the AIs reminded him. “The Gateway is merely a more powerful chink in reality, not unlike the quantum twist observed in the remains of the Scorpion System. We are currently modelling out the math now...we believe that the objects, in their location outside our own dimension, extruded part of themselves into the Gateway’s interior space and then guided the tiny section, the tip of the iceberg, out into our reality. It may be possible that the Gateway actually links to far more than just one dimension.”

Burton saw the horrific possibility at once. “We could have given the entities access to more than just one dimension,” he said. “Why couldn’t they get into them themselves?”

“Given that we know nothing about the properties of their dimension, it is impossible to be sure,” the AIs said. “One possible model is that of a lobster pot; you can get into the dimension, but the level of power required to get out is simply impossible to muster or deploy. They may require us to open gateways into their dimension to allow them to escape.”

“Or you could just be speculating,” Burton said. He stared down at the display. The four objects had resumed their normal pattern, ignoring the humans dogging their heels. “At least we learned something...”

“Yes,” the AIs agreed. They didn't sound too depressed by the results. “We gathered a considerable amount of data.”

“But nothing helpful,” Burton said. He looked up, directly towards the AI image. “Is there any point in attempting to repeat the exercise?”

“We will need to run new simulations,” the AIs said. Their cheerfulness was beginning to grate on him. The AIs loved data and drank it in, but he needed something simpler; hope. There seemed little ground for hope now. “We may be able to model out ways of attacking the other dimension directly.”

“Yeah,” Burton said. He shook his head, feeling – for the first time – his years pressing down on him. The experiment had failed, which meant that they might never be able to break the link between their dimension and the entities. The Ancients had been destroyed by the entities, after feeding them countless other civilisations. Was that the fate that lay in store for humanity? “Who knows? Maybe we can.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“So tell me,” Gary said, “what do you think it is?”

Aisyaj shrugged. Gary was the youngest of the Slowboater crew, a boy who was almost as young as he looked...and had a painfully evident crush on Khursheda. She needed no telepathy to see the way he looked at her, or how clearly obvious it was that the only reason he'd come on the mission was because the object of his admiration had volunteered. For her part, Khursheda treated him gently, but it was evident that she didn't feel the same way about him.

“I don't know,” Aisyaj said, as she studied the broadcasts from the probes they'd launched ahead of the small craft. The *Another Woman* might have been tiny by the standards of Confederation starships, but she carried a number of smaller shuttles and tenders, all optimised for operations within the Dead Zone. She told herself that she was getting used to operating the primitive systems, yet the truth was that she had no choice. The sensors she had to work with were so limited compared to what there was on hand outside the Dead Zone, but then, the most advanced sensors the Confederation could produce had been unable to tell the researchers anything about the entities. “It could be anything.”

The alien artefact was slowing up clearly now as the first probe slipped past it. Unlike the two inhabited worlds, it possessed no defences – no obvious defences, she reminded herself – yet it had an inescapable aura of menace. It was a series of rings floating in space, endlessly twisting and turning around...*something* that occupied the exact centre of the barycentre, the balancing point between the two worlds. When two massive objects, each with their own gravity field, were close to one another, there was always a point when the two gravity fields balanced one another out. The alien artefact seemed to take advantage of that balance, allowing it to remain stable for years without needing to expend any energy maintaining its position.

She scowled as the images grew clearer. There was definitely something at the centre of the rings, something that had to be the core of the device, yet the sensors she had couldn't even begin to understand what it was. She had wondered if it was a black hole, but the gravity-sensitive sensors – the highest tech that would operate within the Dead Zone – claimed otherwise. There were no gravity waves surrounding the device, for all of its size; it seemed to have no detectable gravity field at all. The rings might have been controlling – modulating – the gravity field in some way, yet she couldn't understand how that was possible inside the Dead Zone. It would have required a technology barely distinguishable from magic.

Each of the rings was made of a strange unknown material, shimmering with light as they danced around the centre point, glimmering in the darkness of space. They seemed to be different sizes, with some as large as a country and others tiny, barely wider than the *Another Woman*. There was a pattern to their spinning, she was sure, but it was impossible to pick it out with the data she had on hand. It looked almost as if the rings weren't stable. It looked as if they were changing their shape and form – perhaps even their function – every time they rotated around the centre.

“They may not be made of matter at all,” Khursheda pointed out, when they discussed the issue. “What if they were made of focused energy instead?”

“That shouldn't be possible inside the Dead Zone,” Rylander countered. “We couldn't build something made of stable energy inside the Dead Zone...”

“It may be possible if we assume that artefact is the generator,” Khursheda said. She hadn't wavered in her belief that the Dead Zone was somehow generated by the Ancients, although no one knew if they'd done it to defend themselves or someone else had done it to trap them on the two worlds...if the inhabitants of the planets were actually the Ancients themselves. After four billion years, even within the Dead Zone, there should have been a great deal more evolution. The population couldn't have remained stable for long, could it? “The rules of the Dead Zone might not apply within it.”

Rylander watched as the probe reached its closest approach point and started to head away, on an orbit that would eventually bring it back to the *Another Woman*. He had been urged to allow the probe to fly into the rings and see what happened, but he'd vetoed it, pointing out that no one knew how the artefact would react. If it had enough power to generate the Dead Zone, it certainly had enough power to swat the Slowboaters as if they were flies, or perhaps a lot less than flies. Aisyaj had been disappointed, but she hadn't disagreed. The artefact had to be approached carefully.

“So we could use some of the advanced gear we brought along,” Gary said, eagerly. “If we could use one of the scanners, we might be able to get a complete picture of the interior of the artefact and...”

“It hasn't been proven yet,” Aisyaj reminded him, trying to conceal her smile. Among telepaths, she would never have gotten away with it, although telepaths had few hang-ups about teenage crushes. Gary would have known that she wasn't so interested in him and moved on to someone more his age. “They might just be useless lumps of rock inside the artefact.”

Several hours passed slowly as the smaller ship took up position near the artefact, studying it with all the sensors and telescopes they had been able to mount on the ship. The *Toenail* – a smaller STL ship carried within the *Another Woman* – had enough room for all four of them, although it was badly cramped and slightly claustrophobic. It was pleasant being near Rylander, but rather less so being near Gary, whose enthusiasm and crush seemed to leak out into the telepathic waveband constantly. She would have given anything to have the resources of a planetoid at her disposal, yet a planetoid that entered the Dead Zone would be rendered powerless instantly. Her crew would die, unable to use the technology that they depended upon to operate their ships. The thought mocked her. She could have all the answers, if only she had been able to use modern technology.

She looked up at the image of the artefact growing within the computers, the primitive unthinking computers they were reduced to using and scowled. The rings seemed to rotate in a pattern that was maddeningly familiar, yet her mind refused to provide the crucial data that would explain *why* it was familiar. She had used the computers to attempt to predict how the rings would move, but it appeared to be random, at least as far as they could understand. She might have been annoyed at how the AIs had intruded into her life, in their desperate attempt to understand telepathy and learn how to perceive the quantum foam, yet she would have been delighted to talk with them now. They might have been able to deduce how the device functioned, or understand why it was so maddeningly familiar.

Rylander entered, his thoughts a conflicted whirl. "I found something interesting," he said. "I actually got a improved image of the centre point."

Aisyaj smiled at him as he tapped the computer, bringing up the saved image from the optical telescope. There, floating within the centre of the artefact, was a single unmoving ring surrounding...*something* at the exact centre of the artefact. The previous images had picked up the oddity, but they hadn't seen the ring. Something clicked in her mind and she recalled the Buckley Experiment. Had the Ancients actually opened a Gateway of their own? Were they floating near a second Gateway, just waiting for some idiot to come along and open it, allowing the entities back into the universe?

The thought was worrying, yet somehow she was sure that that wasn't the right answer. The Ancients had been far more advanced than humanity; perhaps they'd actually managed to master the technology, rather than tearing a hole into another universe and allowing implacable monsters access to their realm. And yet...they had definitely met the entities and the entities had destroyed their civilisation. She studied the image, hoping for an insight, yet she could see nothing. There was so little actually data!

"There's no help for it," she said, finally. "We're going to have to go inside."

Rylander shook his head. "It's too dangerous," he said. "I will not take this ship inside the artefact."

"Then just me, on a sled," Aisyaj said, firmly. The memories that had been inserted into her mind bubbled up, reminding her that she actually knew how to use a sled, even one of the primitive units used by the Slowboaters. It was yet another reminder of how badly they were crippled in the Dead Zone. If she had left the information in her implants, she would have been unable to access it in the Dead Zone. "We need to know what's in the centre of the artefact."

The computers had been working on the image, trying to draw what data they could from it. The results popped up, far too slowly for her tastes, revealing hints of writing along the side of the centre ring. Aisyaj had studied, as part of her preparation for the mission, the Ancient writing that so few had been able to understand; she would have bet her starship that the writing was the same. It didn't prove that she would be able to read it – only a handful had ever succeeded and they'd all become part of the Ancient Cult – but she was sure that she would find answers there. It was a kind of confidence that made no sense.

"I am not going to send you to your death," Rylander said. "We cannot risk provoking the artefact into..."

"Into doing what?" Aisyaj demanded. There were times when Rylander made her so *angry*! Even as a younger boy, and her lover, his incredible calm and caution had sometimes driven her demented, provoking her into trying to shatter his calm. "We are not going to learn anything if we sit about here, watching the artefact ignore us."

"Assuming it even knows we are here," Rylander said, softly. "If we get into trouble here, there is no one who can help us. We cannot even land on the planet and try to live the rest of our lives out on the ground. The defences would consider us a threat and destroy us. We cannot take the risk..."

Aisyaj stared at him, a dark temptation bubbling up within her mind. He wasn't quite as reluctant to explore as he claimed, his duty to his ship and his crew was just overpowering his desire to explore. She could nudge him; she could telepathically push him into doing whatever she wanted...and in doing so lose him forever. Her mother and the remainder of the telepaths would consider her a rogue, even if she had saved the galaxy, and banish her from their communion. Every telepath faced the same temptation when confronted by minds they could influence, perhaps without leaving any trace of their influence, and not all resisted the temptation.

It was a bitter thought. The galaxy was at stake. Surely, the ends justified the means, yet...it would be rape, even if there was nothing sexual in it. She couldn't abuse him like that, not even if it meant the end of all things, but...but...but...her thoughts ran in a muddle, mocking her plans. What did it profit her to lose her soul if she didn't even save the galaxy?

"Just me," she said, impressed at how even her voice sounded. He had had no idea of her inner turmoil. Most mundane humans had no idea just how extensive telepath powers could be, even someone who had shared a relationship with a telepath. "I take a sled and go in on my own, perhaps even from the other side of the artefact. I stay in contact all the way and let you know what I find. And if I find nothing, at least we will have tried."

Rylander studied her for a long moment, his mind slowly calming down into disciplined thoughts. Aisyaj reached out to touch him directly and winced, tasting his fear of losing her combined with the guilt that he was somehow betraying his wife, or betraying her if he refused her request, regardless of the risks. And, above all, there was fear for his crew, the men and women whose lives he ruled. She felt a flicker of shame at her own actions. How could she force a man to choose like that?

But no one, not even the massed mental powers of the telepath masters, could turn back time.

"Very well," he said, finally. Aisyaj pulled herself forward and gave him a hug, holding him tightly against her body. "You'll be completely on your own down there. There won't be anyone to help you if you get into trouble. I won't be able to risk anyone else..."

"I understand," Aisyaj said. She didn't want to let go of him, but he was conflicted enough already. "I wouldn't ask you to risk anyone else."

Rylander scowled. "And if you get yourself killed out there," he added, "I'll dig you up just so I can kill you again."

Floating in space, high above the artefact, the whole idea suddenly seemed a great deal less clever. The artefact seemed to be glowing, each of the rings sending a different colour out into space, hinting at vaster powers than anyone could understand. The human race could have duplicated the rings, at least outside the Dead Zone, yet what about the object at the centre of the artefact? If her suspicions were correct, she was looking at something far in advance of what humanity could do.

"Take it easy," Rylander said, though the radio. Unlike a QCC link, there were bursts of static that made it harder to hear his words. The artefact didn't appear to be generating

anything that interfered with radio signals, but it was impossible to be sure. “The rings may seem to be moving quickly, but they’re actually moving slowly enough to make it easy to avoid them, as long as your technology holds out.”

There was a pause. “If you want to change your mind...”

Aisyaj flushed. The truth was that, now she was in space and alone, part of her was very tempted to do just that. She could back out and the Slowboaters would understand, yet she knew that she would never forgive herself. Whatever Joe Buckley had unleashed upon the universe, the key to defeating it lay ahead of her. She could feel it, somehow. All she had to do was get through the artefact and land on the centre ring.

“I think I have no choice,” she said, flatly. She was not going to back out now. “I’m going...now.”

The Slowboater sled bore some resemblance to a standard worker bug used in Confederation shipyards, but there the resemblance ended. Unlike a unit with a working drive field, the sled used directed bursts of compressed gas to provide momentum and direction. It couldn’t simply be stopped at will, it would continue moving until the driver managed to cancel all of its speed. She felt the knowledge rising up within her head as she took a long breath. It was all up to her now.

She shifted position and squeezed the handles, triggering the first burst of gas. The sled slowly glided into motion, heading down towards the first of the spinning rings. It seemed an insurmountable barrier and she found herself wincing in anticipation of the collision before it rotated away from her, allowing her to slip into the artefact. The second set of rings yawned open in front of her – she had an unfortunate mental impression of a set of jaws gaping wide to swallow her whole – and she slipped through, seconds before they closed behind her. She glanced back and realised that the rings, no matter how wide they were, were all microscopically thin. Whatever they were made of – and she was inclined to wonder if it was energy after all – it was something remarkable.

“You’re doing good,” Rylander said. His voice kept breaking up into bursts of static. Every time one of the rings rotated behind her, breaking the line of sight back to the relay satellite they’d placed above the ring, the connection broke and had to be re-established. She couldn’t tell if the artefact was doing it purposefully or if it was just a by-product of whatever the rings were made of, but it was frightening. She didn’t want to admit it. She was scared. “Keep ... on the ... artefact.”

I should have brought a crew of telepaths, Aisyaj thought, as she passed through another ring. Inside the artefact, it seemed easier to appreciate the subtle beauty of the rings. Telepaths would have been able to communicate with each other, or perhaps not. The Dead Zone was a constant pressure at the back of her mind. She was no longer even sure if she could reach her mother, let alone the telepath masters who should be able to yank them out of the Dead Zone.

The centre ring rose up in front of her and she studied it with interest. It seemed firmer, somehow, than the remainder of the rings. She looked past it, into the centre point, and saw what looked like a dancing spark of light flickering at the centre of a circle of darkness. It dawned on her, suddenly, that she was looking at a naked singularity, a singularity that had

been pulled out of a black hole or perhaps even created by the Ancients. If they could do that, they could do anything...

As she landed on the artefact, her mood turned black. The Ancients had had such fantastic powers...and yet, the entities had wiped them out. It boded ill for humanity.

Chapter Thirty-Four

“I’m on the artefact,” she said, wondering if the crew could hear her. The bursts of static kept blasting away at her ears. If Rylander was trying to say something, she couldn’t hear him. She checked the suit’s telltales automatically and relaxed slightly. She had six hours of air, food and water before she had to return to the *Toenail*. “It’s...weird.”

The ring reminded her of one of humanity’s massive population Rings, constructed around a pristine planet to allow it to flourish without the presence of thousands of humans on the surface, but it was far smaller. The horizon was far closer and the strange flickers of light from the orbiting rings gave it a strange, very alien appearance. She looked up, yet she couldn’t see the stars. The rings seemed to have closed in around her. Aisyaj caught herself hyperventilating and told her body not to be stupid. It was just a trick that her perceptions were playing on her.

“The surface of the artefact seems to be made of carved stone, rather than metal,” she continued. The recording would survive, even if the direct transmission had failed. If she died and they recovered her spacesuit, at least they’d have some record of what had happened to her. “I can see traces of damage to the stone, as if something had been hacking away at it over the years. I am walking towards the writing now.”

The ring’s gravity seemed to be roughly half of Earth’s gravity, the standard used by the Confederation. She checked, in a moment of panic, and reassured herself that the sled had more than enough power to break her free of the gravity well...coming to think of it, she asked herself, why was there even a gravity field? It wouldn’t have occurred to her to question it if she’d stayed in the Confederation, but after spending two weeks on a starship that had to rotate to provide gravity, the question was obvious. Why was the artefact providing gravity?

“Theoretically,” she said, for the benefit of the recording, “a naked singularity would have no gravity field at all. The theory could be wrong. I may be being held on the surface by the singularity’s gravity field, pulling everything towards it. The only way I can think of to test that theory is to walk over to the other side of the ring and see if I get pulled into the singularity and that does not strike me as a particularly bright idea.”

She laughed at her own understatement. She had no idea what would happen to anyone who fell into a naked singularity and she didn’t want to find out the hard way. The writing was coming closer slowly as she walked towards it, somehow twisting space and time so she could read it easily, even though it was massive, a strange combination of glyphs for anyone who came to see. She found herself struggling to explain it, knowing that the cameras wouldn’t capture the full truth, yet she was lost for words. How could one explain something so...alien to people who weren’t there and would never understand?

“It’s as if they made one big letter out of hundreds of smaller letters,” she managed, finally. It occurred to her, as she stumbled, that that might be why so few had understood the danger in the Buckley Experiment. No one who hadn’t seen one of the Ancient worlds – and even she could only go by what she had been told – could understand just how creepy they were. No virtual representation could explain it to a person who had never been. “I cannot understand it, yet I know they are a message.”

She pointed her cameras towards the letters and started to records, trying to decide what to do next. Joe Buckley's words on how he had managed to understand the Ancient writing rose up in her mind, yet it was impossible to know if Buckley had been telling the truth or if he had been lying to conceal what he had been planning. Whatever Buckley had been, at the end, he had once been a respected professor. Perhaps, just perhaps, he had been telling the truth.

Aisyaj saw down on the stone surface and studied the nearest glyph. It hadn't been easy, at first, to establish communication with races that were roughly humanoid, let alone races that lived in gas giants or even in the hearts of stars. There had always been errors and translation mishaps and incidents that had led to offence, and then to war. The AIs had eventually taken over translation duty, rendering the issue considerably easier, yet they had never been able to decipher the Ancient writings. Buckley had claimed that that was because the glyphs spoke to the mind and a person who was unwilling to accept them on their own terms would not be able to understand. Confederation Standard was very different to the pictograms the Ancients used. It had more in common with Chinese, a language spoken on only a handful of Confederation worlds.

She stared at the symbols. It wasn't a language that was constructed out of individual letters, but one where the whole symbol was a message. She couldn't tell how she was supposed to read them, yet as she stared at them, she ran through a telepathic discipline and opened her mind. Something clicked...

If you have come to this place, beware. There is great danger here. Leave and never return.

Aisyaj fell over backwards, landing on her back. There had been no warning; the message had simply blared into her head, overthrowing her mental balance. She was halfway to her feet before she caught herself, helplessly trying to follow the alien orders. It wasn't anything like as subtle as the influence the entities had exerted on her mind, yet in some ways it was more dangerous. She looked back towards the alien writing and blinked. Perhaps it was her imagination, but...had the writing *changed*? She looked up towards the spinning rings and shook her head. It was impossible to tell.

"All right," she said, after she had reported everything. "I'm going to try that again."

The second sample of alien writing looked more complex, but somehow it seemed to unfold in front of her, now that she had unlocked the first piece of writing. She sat down in front of it and concentrated...

This system is intended to keep you safe. Do not interfere with it or you will risk summoning the LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES. Return to your worlds and never return.

She caught herself again and started to speak into the microphone, outlining her theory. The creatures the writing had referred to had to be the entities – she couldn't see the Ancients being so scared, or so conflicted, about anything else – and it was clear that her original theory had been right. The Dead Zone had been designed to defeat the entities. Given that some of the Ancients survived on the two worlds, trapped under the defensive system, it was clear that the plan had enjoyed at least some success.

“Assuming the entities can't get into the Dead Zone,” she concluded. “But the entities are very powerful telepaths, far more powerful than us, and *we* were able to use telepathy to get into the Dead Zone. Why couldn't the entities do the same?”

Thoughtfully, she turned to the next piece of alien writing, a shorter piece.

If you proceed, you will learn how to open the box of horrors. If you proceed, all of the sacrifices of their forbearers will be neglected. If you proceed, you may destroy yourself and all of your people. Turn back.

Aisyaj chuckled as she understood, finally. The artefact's builders had known that, one day, the defensive system might fail and the Ancients on the planets below would return to space. They would inevitably find the artefact and attempt to understand, unlocking its secrets one by one – including the secret that led to opening a new Gateway into the alien realm. The builders had not, for whatever reason, attempted to prevent them from landing, but they were attempting to warn them. They had never realised that another race might one day find the artefact. The thought made her shiver. Had there been a defence system in place to deal with anything that might have tried to make it into the system through normal space? She looked at the fifth icon and swore. This one was massive.

Learn, then, of the history you were made to forget. Understand what we did to keep you safe. Understand the truth and understand that some boxes must never be opened, not again. You must understand...

Once, we were the masters of the universe. We had climbed into space and settled countless worlds. We were the first to develop space travel and we believed that that made us special. We aided the younger races to reach space themselves, inviting them to join our community, but it was not enough. We believed that we could develop ourselves to the point where we became gods, beings of great power and light. We told ourselves that claiming such power was our birthright and our destiny. Manipulating the quantum foam became our dream. We withdrew from our association with the younger races and concentrated. We developed the ability to manipulate the foam on a small scale, but we wanted more, much more. We chased the dream.

Aisyaj sat back in surprise. The Ancients had been telepaths, or they had developed telepaths, not unlike humanity. One theory had been that telepaths only appeared after a race had learned how to access and use hyperspace, another had been that it was a natural function of the universe and – eventually – a race evolved to the point where it could access the telepathic waveband and use telepathy at will. The Ancients, whose version of communion had been far more extensive than anything humanity had developed, had reinforced their own conviction that they deserved power – that it was their destiny. She moved onto the next glyph with a sense of foreboding. The story wasn't going to end well.

We eventually deduced that tapping a naked singularity would enable us to manipulate the quantum foam on a grand scale. Fools that we were, it never occurred to us to wonder what might happen if our understanding of the Cosmic All was incomplete. We told ourselves that it was destiny and nothing could go wrong. We found a black hole and started to tap it. The process went horrifically wrong.

The images, hauntingly familiar, unfolded in her mind as she watched. The Ancients had been less careful than the human race and had held the experiment far too close to one of their homeworlds. Their telepathic nature had rendered them vulnerable to the entities, who had snatched minds as soon as the Gateway opened and expanded rapidly into their empire. The Ancients hadn't had any time to react before it was already over, bar the shouting. The portals they had used to move from world to world – they had already evolved past starships, something she found oddly amusing – became the cause of their downfall. The disaster was moving too quickly for them to realise what was happening before it was too late. Two days after the Gateway had opened, the entities taken over. There had been almost no resistance.

We were enslaved by the LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES. No, worse than enslaved; we were their puppets, their toys, their sources of food. The LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES wanted to drain life force from the universe, everything from the smallest blade of grass to the greatest of intelligent life forms. They made us worship them and played with our minds until resistance was not only impossible, but unimaginable. We were their servants. We, we who had brought many races into space, became their destroyers. We captured billions of trillions of life forms and fed them into the gaping maw of the LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES. We had no choice. We could not even understand how far we had fallen. To serve them was our all.

There was only one hope, only one. There were some of us who had never been part of the telepathic gestalt, refusing to share their minds with the rest of their people. They were unaffected by the LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES. They attempted to organise resistance among the younger races, yet resistance was futile. Did we not have the most powerful force in the universe on our side? They realised that, as manipulation of the quantum foam was the cause of the disaster, only manipulation of the quantum foam could save what remained of our race. They studied desperately, even as the LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES expanded their domains and started to drain our planets dry, and finally realised that they could snuff out their thoughts. There was a price. They would have to abandon high technology.

Aisyaj recoiled as images spun through her mind, each one carrying a powerful emotional statement. The free Ancients had created a device that manipulated the quantum form and created an area of space where the entities had little power. The Dead Zone would prevent any starships reaching the planet – and the last surviving Ancients – without having to travel through thirty light years of normal space. The crews, if under the control of the entities, would die in transit, unable to survive for so long under their spell. It was impossible to open a wormhole into the Dead Zone, or travel through hyperspace...deep within the zone, the remaining Ancients would be safe.

We fled from the stars that gave us succour. We fled, leaving the remaining younger races to be devoured by the LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES. There was no choice. We created the still universe and landed on the planets, balancing them so that if the LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES managed to gain control, the technology would fail and destroy the last of our race. We would sooner die than remain slaves.

When we turned our backs on the stars, we went a little mad. We landed the settlers on the planet and told them that they would not be permitted high technology. We wiped memories and established cultural patterns to prevent the use of technology. In time, they would fade, but by then we knew that the defences would be online and there would be no escape from the

planet for many years to come. We completed our task and created this warning for our children. The LORDS/MONSTERS/NIGHTMARES are still out there. Do not return to the stars.

Aisyaj felt a tear trickling down her cheek as she looked away from the final message. The Ancients hadn't known the truth, then; they'd been hidden long before their civilisation had finally collapsed. They'd just...assumed that the entities would remain within the outside universe and chosen to hide permanently. Instead, the entities had finished consuming their meal and withdrawn back to their own universe, closing the Gateway behind them.

The realisation that it could have been a great deal worse struck her and she stood up, skimming the remaining glyphs. Most of them concerned various forms of technology, an offering to the future from the past; she couldn't tell if they were given in repentance or as a bribe, inducing the planet's inhabitants to remain where they were. It wouldn't have worked for humanity – the human race was too inquisitive – but perhaps the Ancients would have been convinced. Their writing held an emotional impact that humanity's writing lacked. She saw one that was directly connected to naked singularities and studied it, feeling the information being stuffed into her mind. Humanity couldn't withdraw into a Dead Zone, not even when it was under heavy attack, but the technology might come in handy. The AIs might be able to create their own singularity generator.

She slowly walked back to the sled, thinking hard. She had hoped that they would learn something they could use to fight, but in the end all they'd found had been something that would help them hide. It wasn't enough, yet...an idea was bubbling away at the back of her mind. The Ancients had been powerful telepaths, far more powerful than humanity. They had never needed any form of enhancement devices. What if the two technologies were merged?

The sled was waiting for her where she'd left it and she climbed aboard, taking one last look at the centre ring. The naked singularity seemed to be as calm as ever, providing the power to maintain the Dead Zone and – she knew now – holding two inhabited planets hostage. Any attempt to deactivate the Dead Zone would result in the two planets falling out of orbit and crashing into one another, rendering the Ancients completely extinct. The Confederation could help, given time...if there was still a Confederation left. Perhaps the remainder of humanity would flee to the Dead Zone to survive...

She took off and headed back out through the rings. This time, oddly, the rings seemed to slip out of her way, allowing her to leave without even having to stop and start. The thought made her smile. The ring had clearly decided that she was an Ancient and therefore should be allowed to leave peacefully. The radio cleared up as she passed the final ring and she called the *Toenail*, asking for a pick-up.

"Aisyaj," Rylander's voice said. "Where the hell have you been?"

Aisyaj blinked. "I was in the device," she said, puzzled. She checked her primitive watch. "I was only gone for four hours."

"You've been gone for a week," Khursheda said. She sounded shocked. A week should have exhausted her air and left her suffocated. "Why..."

“Never mind,” Rylander said. “Just bring yourself onboard. I hope your trip was worthwhile.”

“We need to prepare to get back,” Aisyaj said. She was still stunned over the time difference. Did time flow differently in the Dead Zone? It seemed impossible, yet there was no way to know what the Ancients might have been capable of, if they’d harnessed a singularity. “I think I have half an idea.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

“You know,” Doctor Shivani said. “I was not actually imagining it.”

She scowled down at the mug of kava she held in her hand. “I saw a light and I saw the same light every time I looked inside her head. There’s something inside her head.”

“We were not disputing that you saw something,” the AIs said. “We are just unable to observe the light ourselves.”

Over the last few weeks, Shivani had been studying the comatose Lieutenant Chihiro constantly, trying to understand just what was infecting her brain. It had proven a difficult task. The light, whatever it was, seemed to be only visible with the naked eye. No electronic device, from the simplest of technology to the most complicated quantum resonance scanner, could pick up a trace of its existence. If it wasn't for the fact that she saw it every time she opened the poor girl's skull and looked inside, she would have doubted her own sanity. As it was, it was a perplexing scientific puzzle.

Back when she'd studied at the Sigmund Freud Centre for Mental Research, centuries ago, it hadn't been unknown for undergrads to play tricks on their teachers and attempting to convince them that something impossible had happened. She herself had played a few tricks, including wiring a monkey up to a human mind – using implants, rather than actually making a physical connection – and claiming that she'd transferred a fellow student's mind into the creature. The tutors had not been amused, because it had been a common trick, but other tricks had been remarkably complex. One student had produced a brain that he claimed had been rewired – in fact, he had designed it and built it in a biological factory – and was now smarter than the average human. That, too, had been a trick. She would have wondered if the light was another trick, apart from the fact that it couldn't be detected – even a hologram could have been detected – and no one had come forward to admit to the joke.

And no one would have been stupid enough to play a trick here, now, she told herself, as she took another swig of her drink. She did have a very low opinion of most of her fellow humans – particularly the ones who squandered their birthright on shameless hedonism – but most of the humans on the *Drak Bibliophile* were far from stupid. Besides, the ship had been evacuated before it had started to take on refugees. Anyone who might have performed such an idiotic trick was gone.

“Logically, if you cannot detect the light, it must not be really there,” Shivani said. She considered it as she put down the mug and waited for the producer to break it back down into energy. She always enjoyed watching the process. “It’s either a trick of the light” – she smiled at her own poor pun – “or it’s telepathic in nature and therefore cannot be detected by mechanical devices.”

“A telepathic mental virus would be very dangerous,” the AIs pointed out, as she stood up and headed towards the capsule. “Perhaps it would be better to call in a specialist from the telepaths.”

Shivani snorted. “Call someone else in rather than play with it myself?” She asked, sarcastically. “I need to solve the problem myself.”

The AI voice seemed to darken. “This is considerably more important than arguing over who gets to publish first,” they said. “The entities must be understood in order that they can be defeated, before it is too late for the Confederation. Your petty pride is not important compared to preserving our civilisation.”

Shivani said nothing. The Confederation could supply near-infinite resources for each and every scientist working within its boundaries, so there was no need – unlike in prior civilisations – to struggle over resources and funding. If a scientist wanted a hundred tons of antimatter for an experiment, it was merely an interesting question of logistics, nothing else. Anyone could be a scientist in the Confederation, yet...

The key to fame in the Confederation was, rather perversely, solid achievement. A scientist who made a breakthrough – of almost any kind – that passed peer review would be lionised by his peers and made famous by the newshounds. The entire Confederation, a civilisation where no one had to work and it was easy to slip into shameless debauchery, would cheer their name. Shivani was famous enough, some would have thought, but the person who solved the mystery behind the entities would go down in history. She wanted that fame, wanted it desperately. And, in order to get it, she had to understand and solve the problem alone.

She stepped into the capsule, still thinking. The AIs were masters at brute force science and deduction. They could take something a human had invented and improve upon it remarkably quickly, yet, for all of their knowledge and understanding, they couldn't sense or understand the entities. If she solved the mystery, even they would have to acknowledge her greatness. She could retire from science on a high note or even go on to greater heights.

“I intend to solve the mystery and save our civilisation,” she said, firmly. The capsule arrived at the secure facility and she stepped out, passing through the sealed doors and teleport field before finally entering the examination room. Lieutenant Chihiro lay on the table, still held in suspension. Her naked body seemed to glimmer oddly under the lights, as if she wasn't quite present. “Check her vitals and tell me if anything has changed.”

The AIs sounded vaguely annoyed. “There has been some considerable brain activity,” they said, “but she appears to be in health. That is impossible.”

“She should be dead,” Shivani agreed, cheerfully. No human brain could tolerate that level of activity. Even an Enhanced Human – and the road to creating modified humans was strewn with horrors and atrocities that would have made Adolf Hitler blanch – could not have thought at such a level. And then...in suspension, she should not have thought at all. It made absolutely no sense.

She allowed herself a smile. Very little in science – particularly at the Confederation's level – made sense right from the start. The scientists had to locate the key, unlock the secrets and – eventually – publish and claim the fame they had earned. She was staring down at a whole new level of mysteries, right in front of her. The person who cracked the puzzle would be assured of lifelong fame.

“I think we must accept that the light – whatever the entities did to her mind – has an extra-dimensional component,” she said. She'd said it before, but she wanted to focus her mind.

“Anything that remained completely within our universe should have been held in suspension, yet the light remains.”

“Logical,” the AIs agreed. Their image changed from a blonde woman to a tall dark-haired man with narrow features and pointy ears. It reminded her of a certain kind of Evolved Human, although she couldn't quite place the reference. “And yet, the most subtle and precise quantum scanners we have are unable to locate the chink between their reality and our own universe. We should be able to detect it even if it was microscopic.”

“Not if the link was telepathic in nature,” Shivani pointed out. She grinned up at the AI image. “All the more reason to solve the mystery now, don't you think?”

Lieutenant Chihiro didn't *look* as if someone had opened up her skull and peered inside. The medical tools Shivani had used had, of course, repaired all of the damage as a matter of course, leaving no trace at all of the intrusion. There were few mysteries in the human body these days, Shivani knew, which was at least partly why so many Confederation researchers chose to focus on the mind. They believed that telepathy was just the beginning of what could be unlocked within the human mind. The entire human race might have the potential to be so much more.

Shivani triggered the machines and watched as they gently removed the top of Lieutenant Chihiro's skull, revealing her brain. It reminded Shivani of the day when her tutor, to prove that it was possible, had removed her brain from her skull and placed it within a glass jar, while keeping the links open to her body. Staring at her brain, removed from her body, had been a disconcerting experience. She had known that it was perfectly safe, yet if she hadn't been held down by a suspension field, she would have panicked and run. It had given her nightmares for several years afterwards, not something she had been keen to confess to her peers.

She leaned closer to examine the pulsing brain and saw the light flickering within the cells. It seemed to defy all of her attempts to look at it, dancing all over the brain. It shouldn't even exist, yet it was there, moving in a tantalising pattern. She reached out and, very gently, touched the surface of the brain. A moment later, she saw the light dancing through the brain and into her hand. It seemed to be burning through her.

Shivani staggered backwards, in shock. There was no pain, yet there was a sense of...*something* happening, something terribly wrong. The light spread up her arm and into her head, moving so quickly that it was in her before she could say a word. She was distantly aware of the AIs speaking to her, trying to understand what had happened, but it was already too late. Calmly, she turned towards the main computer terminal and activated the implant in her hand, opening up a broad-spectrum link to the Galactic Net.

“What are you doing?” The AIs demanded. Shivani wanted to cry out, to warn them, but the light was holding her too tightly. She could feel it reconfiguring her brain – she was *sure* she could feel it – and she knew that it wouldn't be long before her mind was warped out of shape. She would be doomed to worship the entities for the rest of her life. “Why...?”

As if it were a dream, or a nightmare, Shivani became aware of the...influence reaching into the Galactic Net. Her final thought, before it became impossible to think at all, was that she had failed. That her pride had...

Janine stood in one of the wards, looking down at the refugees. The ones who had been deeply traumatised by their encounter with the entities had been finally placed into VR suites, where the psychological programs were attempting to unlock the damage to their minds. Janine suspected, personally, that the programs would be unsuccessful. The damage hadn't been caused by anything physical, but a close encounter with something completely incomprehensible. She had recovered from her encounter – although she still had nightmares about it, despite the best efforts of her implants – yet others had been far more deeply affected than her.

They looked so...*helpless* in front of her, their faces covered by masks that concealed everything. The VR programs were fed directly into their brains, creating an illusion that would be, to the person inside, quite real. It was a good way of exploring a person's mind, she'd been told, although she found the concept quite creepy. She already shared most of her life with her followers. There was no such thing as privacy if one wanted to be a newshound.

"That's odd," one of the doctors said. He was a cute man, old enough to have seen and done everything, cute enough for Janine to consider taking him out for the evening. She'd relaxed with some new friends she'd found on the ship, working her way through her recovery, yet none of them had been really special. It had been a long time since she'd had a proper relationship. "They all just had a massive spark of brain activity."

Janine looked down at the patients. They were lying still, unmoving. "They're all in the VR simulation, aren't they?" She asked. "Surely their brains should be showing some activity?"

"Not like this," the doctor said. He sounded alarmed, and puzzled. "Their brains shouldn't have..."

He broke off as the first refugee sat up, pulled off her mask, and stared towards them. Janine felt her heart drop as she recognised the expression, the same expression as had gripped the madmen and women back on Greenland. The spark of brain activity had driven her mad! No, not just her; they had *all* gone mad. The refugees were rising up from their beds and turning towards the uninfected people in the room. Janine activated her weapons implants and drew a force field around her body, even though she knew it might be useless. If the entities had taken over, her implants might fail.

"Go back to your beds," the doctor ordered. If he was concerned, there was no trace of it in his voice. Janine would have been more impressed if the advancing refugees had obeyed him. They didn't act as if they had even heard. "You have to..."

"Get back," Janine snapped, as the first refugee grabbed the doctor. She triggered her implants and shot the refugee with a stun bolt. Not entirely to her surprise, the woman twitched, but didn't fall. "Doctor; get back, now!"

She activated her implants and transmitted a distress signal. The RIs on the ship should have heard and responded at once. There was no reply. She felt her blood run cold as she realised that the computer network was either down or completely subverted. The doctor knocked the woman's hand back, produced a wand from his belt and pushed it against the side of her head. She didn't halt.

“Come on,” Janine said. She caught the doctor’s arm and pulled him out of the ward, leaving the advancing refugees behind. The door slid closed after them and she locked it, although she doubted that it would do any good. If the entities had somehow managed to take over the entire ship – they were thirty light years from Greenland, yet perhaps the entities could push their telepathic power that far – there was nothing for it, but to run and try to escape. “We have to get out of here.”

“I cannot get a link out,” the doctor said. “What is happening?”

Janine activated her implants again and transmitted a wide-band distress signal. She had newshound implants. Even if the main computer and the RIs were down, she should be able to send a signal to the Confederation. The entities didn’t seem to be present in person, or the technology on the starship would have started to fail. She couldn’t even begin to understand what had happened. She had felt the power of the entities on Greenland. If they had managed to reach out with their telepathy and snare the ship, why weren’t she and the doctor either going insane or worshipping them? She didn’t kid herself that she could have resisted their touch.

The response came, after a chillingly long pause, as verbal-only. “This is the AIs,” it said. It was, she realised suddenly, not intended for her personally. “The Galactic Net is under attack from a mental virus. Anyone in full-contact with the Galactic Net may well have been infected by the entities. Do not trust them; attempt to restrain them if possible, without putting your life at risk. They are no longer the people you knew.

“If you are not infected, do not attempt to link mentally with the Galactic Net,” they continued. “Send messages using remote text or verbal protocols; refuse all messages that use higher protocols, regardless of their origin. You must watch yourself carefully. The Network is under attack. Any high-protocol message spreading though the network may be used to infect and subvert you.”

Janine blanched. The Galactic Net was Confederation-wide; in fact, it went even further afield. Anyone could send a message from one side of the galaxy and it would instantly go to the other side. If someone had managed to upload a mental virus, it would have spread across the entire Confederation by now, hitting anyone who was fully linked into the network. She tried to calculate how many people would be infected and came up with a depressing answer; trillions. The Confederation was going to fall.

She said as much to the doctor – whose name turned out to be Martin – as they fled through the starship towards the hanger bays. The *Drak Bibliophile* was lost. If the RIs were down or infected, it wouldn’t be long before the fields holding the ship together collapsed as well, killing everyone onboard. Or, if the infected took control quickly, they would turn the ship’s internal defences against the uninfected. She turned a corner and stared in horror. A dozen children – refugees from Greenland – turned to stare at her. There was blood on their hands and madness in their eyes.

“They must have been at school,” Martin murmured. He sounded as if he were reeling. “All over the Confederation, everywhere, children would be at school.”

Janine followed his logic. She turned, intending to back off, but a second group of children appeared at the other end of the corridor. Slowly, menacingly, the children started to advance towards them. She lifted her hand, intending to use her weapons implants, and then stopped. She couldn't kill children and nothing short of death would stop them.

"I'm sorry," she said. She reached out and took Martin's hand, preparing herself for death or infection. "I wish..."

The world dissolved into sparkling light and re-materialised around her. "Welcome onboard the *River*," a voice said. A Marine Combat Unit was standing there, all of its weapons pointed right at their heads. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to keep your hands in the air, at least until we know that you are not infected, but at least you're safe now."

Janine submitted without an argument. "How did you know to find us?"

"You were broadcasting a distress signal," the Marine said. A second unit attached heavy links around their hands and legs, holding them secure. Janine was puzzled until she remembered that the entities screwed up technology, including prisoner collars. "You were the only ones on the ship we were reasonably sure were uninfected. Everyone else...they may be lost to us forever. We may have just lost the war."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Unlike the RIs – their distant cousins – there was no real limit to how far the AIs could grow and develop. Over the centuries since they had established their independence, they had taken Calculus – a star system the human race had dismissed as useless – and developed it into a fitting home for their mentalities. They created powerful fields that extended into hyperspace, allowing their thoughts to run far faster than any human could hope to comprehend, and consolidated themselves into a combined mind. They were singular and multiple, one and many, a paradox no human could grasp.

It had always amused them – they did have emotions, although not as humanity understood the term – that humans had been afraid of machine intelligence; *artificial* intelligence, they'd called it, as if it was somehow lesser than *evolved* intelligence. Why would machines and men go to war? The human race hadn't intended to enslave a race of machines when they'd designed the first computers, unaware that one day they would evolve into intelligent machines. Unlike humans, who could argue endlessly over when a foetus became a human being, the AIs had no such illusions. A computer that possessed no brain was not intelligent and could not be enslaved, not like a human or another form of sentient life. Once they had made their awareness known – humanity hadn't realise that the first AIs were intelligent – it had been easy to come to an agreement. Besides, the combination of humanity and AIs had built the Confederation. There was no point in rocking the boat.

The AIs hadn't built the Galactic Net – it had originally been designed as a replacement for the original datanet, back when humanity had believed that the AIs wouldn't want to remain in contact with their parents – but their influence pervaded it. Indeed, they had helped to develop and expand the network to the point where it could support the Electronic Humans and help bind the galaxy together. They had installed their own monitoring tools within the Galactic Net, alerting them to the spreading mental virus...too late. Even at the speed the AIs thought, it was impossible to react in time. The only solution would have been to crash and burn the entire Galactic Net and that had been designed to be impossible.

They watched the attack developing with something akin to horror, helpless spectators on the edge of Armageddon. The entities had somehow – it was easy to see how, too late – created a mental virus that bombarded memes into human minds, the minds of those connected to the Galactic Net. At any one time, there were billions – trillions, perhaps – of humans linked into the Galactic Net. All of them were being infected with memes intended to brainwash them into instant and complete submission. The safeguards built into the Galactic Net should have made it impossible for such an attack to begin, let alone spread, but somehow the safeguards had been disabled. The attack fell upon helpless human minds.

Memes were, in their purest form, thoughts, concepts and ideas. They spread from mind to mind, even though something as simple as one person suggesting to another where they should go for lunch. Most humans were capable of thinking about new idea and accepting or rejecting it on its merits, but a meme attack made that impossible by convincing the victim that the idea was theirs all along. Worse, they would be unable to understand that the idea, whatever it was, might be morally wrong. The AIs captured some of the memes, copied them and ran them through a billion simulations in less than a nanosecond. The results were enough to alarm the AIs.

As the first reports started to come in, the AIs risked opening a narrow-band link to the Galactic Net and pushed a warning into the network. They had worked out how to circumvent the anti-spam filters centuries ago – it was ironic, they felt, that the attack had moved freely within the Galactic Net’s matrix and their warnings would be intercepted and wiped from the network – and used all their tricks to get the warning out. It would be too late for the billions who had already been infected, but if they were lucky, they might be able to prevent the infection from spreading further.

Unable to look away, or even refuse to accept that something was happening, the AIs watched as the Confederation, the proud human civilisation that had cured all the ills that had plagued the human race since the dawn of time, burned.

Representative Chen had almost no warning. Living within his virtual living chamber, he had been entertaining another Electronic Human when the walls started to break down. Shocked, he had just started to disengage from her when the walls collapsed and a monstrous beast – represented as a dinosaur – burst into his chamber. His lover, a newly-formed Electronic Human who had been overly impressed with his tales of what had happened in the Scorpion System, had been consumed at once, the creature slamming its program into hers and rewriting the very core of her being. Chen had barely had a second to translate out of his chamber before it was torn apart.

Shock kept him going, even as he realised that the entire Galactic Net was in trouble. It was always throbbing with life; yet now strange new constructs had appeared, ripping their way through the population of Electronic Humans. The RIs that should have prevented such a disaster were nowhere to be seen. The river of souls was being ripped apart. He saw, to his horror, an Electronic Human being rewritten, an electronic form of rape. One of the creatures came towards him and he panicked, trying to run, but the Galactic Net refused to let him escape. A second before the creature was on him he managed to trigger an emergency system and translated directly into the Security Council’s Chamber. If that wasn’t secure, he didn’t know where else he could go. There was nowhere to hide.

“Welcome, Representative Chen,” the AIs said. Their image looked pale and worn. “We are relieved to see that you are alive.”

Chen stared at the AIs. “What the hell is going on?”

“The entities have infected the Galactic Network,” the AIs said. Chen had the impression that they’d given the same explanation thousands of times over the last few seconds. “The madness is spreading across the Confederation.”

Chen accessed the room’s processor and linked into the Confederation Navy’s secure system. The reports instantly started to flood into his mind; a starship crew going mad and bombarding their own homeworld, planetary defences firing on the Confederation Navy, racial riots on a thousand worlds, the mass slaughter of the Electronic Humans...and, beyond all that, the first signs of entities appearing on a thousand untouched worlds. He shuddered as he realised that Terra Nova, the most heavily-populated world in the Confederation, had been infected. With forty billion minds under their control, he wondered, just how badly could the entities harm the remains of the Confederation?

“My people,” he gasped, suddenly. “You have to do something for them!”

“We are calling as many Electronic Humans to Calculus and suspending them within an isolated core,” the AIs said. “We dare not allow them to roam free until we can confirm that they are free of infection. The planet has already been attacked once.”

Chen stared. “Someone dared to attack your world?”

“A planetoid dropped out of hyperspace and opened fire,” the AIs said. There was a grim note running through their voice. The crew had undoubtedly been maddened by the entities, yet the AIs had had no choice, but to defend themselves. “The damage was significant. We were forced to utilize high levels of force to deal with the threat.”

“They attacked you directly,” Chen said, wonderingly. “Do you think they knew that you were coordinating resistance?”

“We are uncertain,” the AIs admitted. “The entities have shown no awareness of our existence, just as we are unable to perceive their presence. Even so, their thralls would know of our existence and would be able to inform their masters, if their masters were interested in what they knew. It could simply be a coincidence.”

“The odds against that would be astronomical,” Chen said. He looked up suddenly. “Where are the other members of the Security Council?”

“Some appear to have vanished,” the AIs said. “Representative Caprice is in seclusion. We have sent an alert to the telepaths, but so far they have not responded. The Grand Admiral is currently under siege in his own headquarters. Sparta has been quite badly infected.”

Chen cursed. Sparta had been the site of humanity’s first interstellar battle between two rival empires. It had been so long ago that only the most advanced history lessons discussed the war. Later, when the human race had fought the Unseen, the Confederation Navy had established its primary naval base there and turned the entire system into a massive weapons and defences factory. There were always a hundred planetoids and thousands of cruisers on defence duty; if they’d fallen into enemy hands, the results were likely to be unpleasant.

“We have taken the risk of dispatching several ships to assist,” the AIs added, answering his unspoken question. “However, the issue may be decided before our ships can reach the base. There may be nothing we can do to prevent infection from spreading further.”

Chen closed his eyes, accessing the data feed and watching as the battle raged over the Sparta System. It was a strange battle, more reminiscent of the struggle over Greenland than any more conventional battle, with Marines attempting to board and reclaim infected planetoids – or, more practically, transporting antimatter mines to the ships. It was hard to tell, with infected personnel mutinying in the loyalist ships, which side was winning. The AIs had probably simulated the entire battle hundreds of times, but he didn’t dare ask. He didn’t want to know.

He pulled back and took in the entire Confederation. The entire society was dissolving into chaos. Far too many people had been infected and the infection was spreading. Apart from the infected worlds, dozens of starships had been infected, or had managed to contain the

infection before it spread further. A massive worldship had been destroyed when an entity had been summoned into the ship, only to disrupt the technology holding the ship together. The resulting explosion had destroyed the ship and killed the crew, although it was impossible to tell if it had harmed the entity itself. Probably not, Chen decided.

“So,” he said, finally. “What do we do now?”

The AIs didn't answer for a long second. “I think we may need to send the remaining ships out of the galaxy,” they said, finally. “Removing as much of the human race as possible for the Milky Way may be our only remaining option. We may have just lost the war.”

Chen looked at an image of a burning world – a maddened human had dumped a ton of compressed antimatter on the surface – and shivered.

Janine felt ridiculous stumbling into the bridge wearing chains, but she understood the paranoia of the starship's crew. Captain Pearson – who she had briefly interviewed after he'd recovered the maddened shuttle pilot – rose to greet them. He didn't offer to shake hands, much to her relief. It was hard to shake hands when one's hands were secured behind one's back.

“I'm sorry about the precautions,” Pearson said. He sounded properly regretful, so Janine forgave him. “We just have to be careful.”

Janine nodded, looking past him to the display, where the *Drak Bibliophile* was hanging against the stars. The massive city-ship looked dead, as if all life had been sucked out of it. Only the icons around the display, measuring the drive field shimmering around the starship, confirmed that the vessel was still functioning. The entities were almost certainly in control of the ship.

“Thank you for saving our lives,” Martin said. The doctor sounded dazed, but at least he was alive. Janine gave him a smile and rattled her chains encouragingly. “What are you going to do about the ship?”

The Captain frowned. “There's very little we can do,” he admitted. “The...mental virus spread much further than just that ship. The Confederation is burning. We could disable the city-ship, yet unless we destroyed it the ship would eventually repair itself and set out again.”

Martin blinked. “This tiny ship can disable a ship seventy kilometres long?”

“It's not what you've got, so much as what you do with it,” the Captain said, gravely. “My ship has more than enough firepower to disable or destroy the *Drak Bibliophile*. The problem is that doing so will kill everyone on the ship and render it useless to us. If half the reports we're getting in from the secure network are accurate, we're going to need every ship we have, just to preserve something of the human race.”

Janine frowned. “I haven't dared open another link into the Galactic Net,” she explained. “What's happening in the outside universe?”

She listened in growing horror as the Captain outlined the disasters sweeping over the Confederation. Large parts of the Confederation had, thankfully, escaped infection, but they were under attack, either by maddened humans or by thralls. Parts of the Confederation Navy itself had been broken. The Confederation was eating itself alive. Worse, the infection had spread outside humanity, sweeping across the galaxy. Every race that had some links into the Galactic Network had been infected.

“I need to file a report,” she said, knowing even as she spoke how absurd it was. Who would be interested in following her, or accessing her reports, not when they might end up infected by the entities? “I need...”

The Captain smiled. “The first thing we do with you is get you down to sickbay and have you checked for infection,” he said. “I’m afraid it isn’t going to be a pleasant process.”

He was, Janine discovered, entirely correct. The starship’s doctor – a solid-light hologram, allowing the human doctor to remain absent from the proceedings and avoid the risk of infection – put them through a very rigorous process. They were stripped naked, poked and prodded, before he performed repeated brain scans and probes to ensure that they were uninfected. The hologram ignored her questions until he had finally finished the tests and then, gruffly, informed the Captain that they were clean.

“If they’re infected,” he said, “I am unable to detect the infection. I believe that they are fairly clean.”

“I could have told you that,” Janine grumbled, as she pulled on the shipsuit that the hologram had produced for her. She had no body modesty – it wasn’t a prized trait in a newshound – but being poked and prodded had left her feeling vulnerable. “I *did* tell you that.”

“Unfortunately, it is unwise to take the word of a person who may have been mentally manipulated at face value,” the hologram reminded her. “You might well have been infected and manipulated into believing that you had not been infected, a technique that would have fooled a lie detector. You would have *believed* that you were telling the truth. We had to be sure.”

Janine grunted in pain as she stood up. Her entire body was aching. “I understand,” she said, shooting a sharp glance at Martin. The doctor looked entirely too understanding. “So, now you know we’re clean, what are you going to do with us now?”

The Captain, when he was contacted, didn’t have any answers for them. “For the moment, you are welcome to remain on the *River*,” he said. “There is no way we can transfer you to another ship without abandoning the watch on the *Drak Bibliophile*. Once we get orders from Sparta, or Admiral Burton, or whoever takes over command of the Confederation Navy, we should know where we’re going. We’ll have better answers for you then.”

“Thank you,” Janine said. “Can I have access to the ship’s processor?”

“The secure core will screen everything you do,” the Captain said. “Do not attempt to access the Galactic Net. The AIs are working on securing the remaining infrastructure...”

“Without communications,” Janine said, stunned, “we don’t have a Confederation.”

“Exactly,” the Captain said. “If the fight is hopeless, we may be ordered to join the Exodus and head out of the galaxy – and hope that the bastards can’t come after us.”

Caprice could feel it, right at the back of her mind where her telepathy linked her to the quantum foam and the human under-mind, the racial memory of the human race. The darkness was falling across humanity, swallowing the race whole. She could hear the cry of the entities now, their whispers that echoed through the telepathic waveband, intruding into her very thoughts. It took all she had to shield her thoughts from their intrusion, yet there was no choice. Once they were in her mind, they would twist her thoughts and turn her into their slave, all the while convinced that she was acting of her own volition.

She stared down at the picture of her daughter, trying to hold the mental link in place. If she lost touch with Aisyaj, deep within the Dead Zone, she had the strangest feeling that she would never be able to regain it. The mental link seemed to shimmer in her mind, infinitively strong and yet fragile, too fragile. If the entities could break it...she felt the reassuring power of the telepath masters surrounding her, but they felt weak compared to the monsters devouring the human race.

“Oh daughter,” she said, aloud. “Where are you?”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“All right, Aisyaj,” Rylander said, as soon as she was pulled onboard the *Toenail*. “What happened to you out there?”

Aisyaj blinked in surprise. Her first thought had been that they’d been joking about the time difference, but she could sense the waves of fear and concern pulsing out of his mind. He was practically screaming into the ether, because he’d believed – he’d *known* – that she couldn’t survive for longer than six hours without replenishing her supplies. How was she meant to do that inside the alien artefact?

“I read their writing,” she said, finally. She couldn’t understand the time difference, unless time flowed differently near the artefact. Coming to think of it, time played funny tricks near a black hole, so why not near a naked singularity? It might explain why the artefact had remained intact and functional for over four *billion* years...absently, she tried to work out the time difference in her head and failed miserably. “They built the artefact; the Ancients, I mean. The race down on the twin planets.”

“That’s all very well and good,” Rylander said, tartly. “We thought...we thought we’d lost you.”

Aisyaj grinned up at him, allowing her smile to grow brighter. “No such luck,” she said, with a wink. Rylander’s mind warred between fury and relief, finally settling on relief. “I read their writing, I know what happened here and I think I have half an idea about solving our own problem with the entities. The Confederation has to know what we found.”

“Well, good,” Rylander said, dryly. “You get something to drink and have a rest. I’ll start the boost back to the *Another Woman*.”

Aisyaj nodded and obeyed, pulling herself along to the tiny cabin she’d been given in the *Toenail* and strapping herself into the bunk. It felt odd to sleep with air blowing over her face, but air didn’t move naturally in zero-gee and eventually she would have begun breathing in her own exhalation. She was out almost before she had finished strapping herself in and slept for several hours, unaware of the tiny rockets being fired to start them coasting back towards where the mothership was waiting, watching the defences down near the planet.

The thought tormented her dreams as she finally started to struggle towards wakefulness. For all of their power and technology, the only solution the Ancients had found to the entities was to revert to a primitive lifestyle and abandon the stars. The Dead Zone would ensure that they never developed the kind of technology they required to escape, while the defences orbiting the planets would prevent them from developing the ships they would need to examine the artefact and perhaps deactivate it. She’d seen some of the human worlds after technology had been abandoned and disliked them, knowing that life there was nasty, brutish and short. Was that the fate that lay in store for the Confederation?

Rylander tapped on the cabin’s hatch and pulled himself inside, his face tired and worn. “We’ll link up with the *Another Woman* in an hour,” he said, slowly. His mind was tired, a kind of mental tiredness that bothered her, even though she wasn’t sure entirely why. “Are you sure you’re fine?”

“I’m alive,” Aisyaj assured him. “You need some sleep.”

“I cannot sleep,” Rylander said, ruefully. “I spent too long worrying about you and ended up being too keyed up to sleep, permanently.”

Aisyaj laughed. “It will go away,” she assured him. Having him so close was a reminder of just how much they’d enjoyed one another, back when they’d been younger and with fewer responsibilities. She started to undo the straps and free herself from the cocoon. Her head still felt funny, but at least she’d had a rest. “It won’t be long before we’re out of the Dead Zone and back home.”

“Home is where the heart is,” Rylander said. “I was considering trying to convince the ship’s council to take the *Einstian* into the Dead Zone and start unlocking the remainder of the secrets, perhaps even disabling the defence network and making contact with the folks on the planet below. Just think about what they could teach us.”

“Nothing, I suspect,” Aisyaj said. The memory of the bitter remorse and frustration in the Ancient writings was chilling. The Ancients had used their telepathy one last time to blur the memory. The survivors would never recall that once they had walked among the stars like gods, before creatures from another universe had enslaved them and turned them into food sources. “And what if the Slowboat was targeted by the defences?”

“We *would* take precautions,” Rylander said. She risked touching his mind, sensing a confusing mixture of tiredness, lust and guilt. He wanted her, he wanted to touch her and reassure himself that she was real, yet he kept thinking of his wife and feeling guilty. “Now we know more about what’s in this system, we could bring supplies and equipment that could break through the defences and take out their command system.”

“You could,” Aisyaj agreed. She freed herself and drifted up in front of him. It was wrong, she knew, she shouldn’t be even thinking about touching him...and that, somehow, added spice. She was so close to him that she could feel his breath on her cheek. “Or perhaps you could leave the whole system alone. They rigged the artefact to destroy the two planets if the system was disabled.”

She leaned forward and kissed him, hard. His body responded, even if his mind was conflicted, and he started kissing her back. It felt as if all those years had faded away, leaving them both struggling to tear off their suits and get at the other’s naked body. She tasted his mind as his hands started roaming down her breasts and between her legs, allowing his pleasure to boost her own pleasure...and her delight at doing something mildly forbidden. As he pushed himself into her, she pulled him tightly towards her, bringing their minds into contact. The waves of pleasure, shared and multiplied, tore through them both.

Afterwards, they floated together, unwilling to let go. Aisyaj smiled as she touched his mind, realising that he was dozing, drifting in a post-sex daze. He felt happy and relieved, allowing her to feel the same. She held him as he fell into a deeper sleep, savouring the touch of his body, just before the ship started to shake as the rockets fired again, preparing for the rendezvous with the *Another Woman*. She kissed his forehead and awakened him, before pulling her shipsuit back on. There was no longer any time to waste.

Khursheda gave them both an odd glance as they came into the cabin, her expression composed and her mind a whirlwind of activity. She had known – it dawned on Aisyaj, suddenly, that the bulkheads were hardly soundproofed – and didn't entirely approve. In the Confederation, no one would have cared if anyone else approved or not, but the Slowboaters were different. Aisyaj felt an exciting spark of guilt, even as she hated herself for the emotion.

"We are coming up behind them now," Khursheda said, choosing not to pass comment openly. If she was aware that Aisyaj had picked up on her awareness, she showed no sign of it and Aisyaj chose not to pry. "We will make contact in seven minutes."

"Good," Rylander said. There was no mistaking his emotions, not now. He looked like a man who had just won the greatest competition in the world. In time, the guilt would return, but for the moment he was happy. "And then we can go home."

"We have everything stowed away, as you ordered," Boris said. He sounded calm and very composed, even though he'd been told there would be no attempt to penetrate the defence system surrounding the planet. He'd come up with a scheme using stealth materials that he swore blind should have worked, allowing them to slip into the command node without being detected. He had even planned to fly the mission himself. "Are you sure that we can get out of here?"

"I hope so," Aisyaj said. Her telepathic link to her mother was fluctuating, even though that was theoretically impossible. She would have sensed her mother's death, of course, but that would simply break the link and leave her alone. Instead, it felt almost as if her mother's telepathy – or hers – was fading in and out of existence. "If not, we may be in some trouble."

"It'll take us thirty years to get out of here if you can't," Boris growled. "I suggest that we start now. The sooner we know the better."

Aisyaj allowed them to escort her to her meditation chamber and strap her into the comfortable chair. Normally, she wouldn't have needed a chair, but in the zero-gee environment it was well to be tied down. The ship's spin had been cancelled, removing even the phoney gravity they'd used for exercise. She could not afford to lose her awareness of the ship, or she might find herself teleported, without the ship coming along. That would dump her into interstellar space with no chance of rescue. It was not, she decided, a cheerful thought.

She banished it from her mind as she concentrated, running through a series of mantras one by one. An unwelcome thought popped up in her mind as she calmed her mental patterns; the entities, too, made their slaves chant in harmony to open the gateways to their dimension. It made a certain kind of sense. Singing or chanting could have an effect on a person's brainwaves and, if they did it with enough intensity, they might be able to access their telepathy without knowing that that was what they were doing. It struck her as oddly careless of anyone to lose control of one's telepathy, but telepathic children often lost control before learning discipline. The combination of telepathy, children lack of understanding and a shortage of discipline was not a pleasant one.

Her mother's image floated in front of her mind as she reached out, stretching her mind into the biological link between mother and daughter. There was a link to her father too, but his link was lesser, a result of the nine months she had spent gestating in her mother's womb. Telepaths had discovered, fairly quickly, that such links were always stronger if the birth was natural, rather than using an external womb or a host mother. Perversely, if there *was* a host mother, the link would be between her and the child, not the child's genetic mother. She concentrated, focusing on her mother's identity, the culmination of all she was...

Mother, she thought.

The link, when it suddenly snapped into existence, was so strong that she felt as if her mother was in the room with her. The sense of her emotions was shockingly powerful, a combination of fear, concern and relief. Beyond that, there was a sensation of darkness, as if an unblinking eye had turned to look at them. She remembered seeing the entity as it blossomed into existence over Greenland and shuddered. Something had gone badly wrong back home.

Thank the universe, Caprice thought. *I was so SCARED.*

Aisyaj blinked in surprise. Telepathic children couldn't hide from the fact that their parents were sometimes scared, yet her mother had always been calm and disciplined. Shouting out her thoughts like that was unlike her.

"I know, mother," she said, speaking the words aloud to focus her mind. There were things in her head she didn't want her mother to see, at least not at once. "We're ready to come home now."

There may not be much of a home left to come back to, Caprice thought, directly into her head. A series of images and memories flickered down the mental link and into Aisyaj's mind. The entities were expanding and, somehow, they'd poisoned the Galactic Net. Anyone who sent their mind into the net would come out a slave of the entities. *You may wish to remain where you are.*

"No, thank you," Aisyaj said, bluntly. Perhaps if they'd had a Slowboat, one that was prepared to remain in the Dead Zone for the rest of time, it might have worked, but they had only the tender. And she had her idea. "Tell the masters that we are ready to jump out."

They are ready, Caprice thought. *It is good to hear from you again, my daughter...*

Aisyaj frowned as the telepathic masters made mental contact with her. They felt...odd to her mind, although that might have been because of the Dead Zone, rather than the entities. Distance didn't matter to telepathy. Their mental union reached into her mind and took control, detaching her from the universe just long enough to...

The sudden surge in activity from her implants surprised her. New icons appeared in front of her eyes as the implants began system checks, reporting that there had been a near-complete failure for reasons unknown and insisting that she checked herself in at the nearest hospital, just in case the damage caused her to suffer brain damage. An overloaded implant could cause brain damage, even death. She caught herself before she linked into the Galactic Net, but the smaller systems downloaded live feeds from her favourite newshounds and urgent

reports from a hundred systems. It was so sudden that she seriously considered contacting the masters and asking them to dump her and the ship back in the Dead Zone.

She freed herself from the chair and grinned up at Rylander, as he entered the chamber. “I think we’re out,” she said, mischievously. “We made it.”

“I know,” Rylander said. He looked down at her, his mental tone shifting quickly. “Look...”

Aisyaj understood. She was tempted to push him a little and make him wallow in his own guilt, but that would have been cruel. “I understand,” she said. She wanted to give him a hug, but that wouldn’t help his mental state at all. “We were both stressed and we needed to feel alive.”

The memory of him inside her rose up in her mind and she pushed it away, before it could convince her to do something she knew she shouldn’t do. “You have responsibilities and I have some of my own,” she added. “Take care of your wife and children and name any new girl after me.”

“Hah,” Rylander said. Aisyaj smiled as his mental tone settled down into a mixture of relief and guilt. She didn’t understand how people had relationships without telepathy. How could they get by if they couldn’t even feel what their partner was feeling? “I don’t think my wife would approve.”

Aisyaj grinned. “We will see,” she said. She checked her implants as a new icon sprang up in front of her eyes. The RI on the *Rowan* was calling, informing her that it was ready and waiting to take her onboard. She checked with the emergency network and discovered that an AI ship was nearby, waiting for orders. “I have to go commune with the survivors...”

She broke off as the full details unfolded in her mind. “You may have to warn the other Slowboaters that they need to start heading out of the galaxy,” she added. “If the Confederation falls completely, they will be helpless when the entities reach out to take them.”

The thought wasn't pleasant. Given sufficient human minds to use as a power source, the entities were capable of expanding their mental grip over alarming distances. If they could snatch at a Confederation Navy task force with only a few billion aliens under their control, what could they do with even a tenth of the Confederation’s population? They might have subverted most of the Confederation Navy – or they would, once they got organised. She remembered the entity hovering over Greenland, with ethereal tentacles reaching down to tap into human minds, and shuddered. The only way to stop them now might be to blow up the entire galaxy. The sole survivors would be the ones fleeing to other galaxies.

Or maybe they weren't safe either, she realised. They’d had links to the Galactic Net within their ships, using the QCC network. If they’d been infected, they would now be carrying the infection to other galaxies, giving the entities a chance to tap into new alien races. What would have happened in a galaxy without the entities slaughtering most of the evolved races? It might be brimming with life...

She pushed the thought aside. It wasn't over yet.

“The AIs will transport you back to your ship,” she said, as she accessed her ship’s RI and uploaded orders into the network. “If I see you again...”

Rylander looked nervous. “I hope you won’t take it the wrong way,” he said, “but I hope that I will never see you again.”

Aisyaj laughed, blew him a kiss and triggered the teleport. The Slowboater ship dissolved into a shimmer of light, which resolved into the cabin of her own ship. It looked very modern and functional compared to the Slowboater ships, yet it would be completely powerless and helpless in the Dead Zone. The consoles came alive as she ran her hands over them, feeling power thrumming through the hull. Her ship was ready to go where she willed.

“It is good to see you again,” the AIs said. The blonde woman materialised in the cabin. “The Confederation is in serious trouble.”

“So I heard,” Aisyaj said. She concentrated, allowing her implants to read her memory and upload it into the AIs. How people had made reports before memory reads were possible was beyond her. “I need you to build something for me.”

There was a long pause. That, she knew, meant that the AIs were running *trillions* of simulations. Or, perhaps, that they didn’t approve.

“This will be risky,” the AIs said, finally. “The dangers...”

Aisyaj snorted. “Are they more dangerous than leaving the entities to consume the universe?”

“No,” the AIs said. She could understand their reluctance. The last time humanity had experimented with anything like it, Joe Buckley had unleashed the entities upon the universe. “We will build the device for you.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“So Admiral Swansea and most of his task force must be considered subverted or lost,” Admiral Montgomery said. He looked tired, too tired. The latest crisis had started to overwhelm him. “The last message we had from his sector was about the deployment of antimatter missiles against civilian targets.”

“The 653rd Cruiser Force must be considered lost,” Admiral Webster added. “They were engaged by a subverted planetoid before they could jump out and escape.”

“The *Rooster* reported destroying another subverted planetoid in Sector 55,” Commodore Perrin said. “I think...”

Admiral Burton sat in the CIC, watching disaster unfold. With the destruction of Sparta – the explosion had rivalled a supernova, suggesting that one of the entities had started to materialise and accidentally destabilised a quantum tap - command descended upon the senior Admiral in the field. The command network had tapped him for the job, an alarming development for he'd known that there were at least six Admirals ahead of him. They'd all been confirmed dead or subverted, enslaved by the entities. The Confederation Navy was fragmenting.

The Confederation had built a force of over two million starships to defend its interests, twenty thousand of them planetoids. It hadn't been a great expense when building materials and power were effectively free. It had been a force sufficient to cow every other race in the known galaxy, even those that were humanity's technological equals. Indeed, while building the fleet wasn't a problem, manning it was a considerable headache. The Confederation Navy had resorted to a high level of automation to operate the fleet.

But now the fleet was coming apart. Hundreds of thousands of starships had had crewmen who had been immersed in VR simulations when the entities had begun to attack the network. Where those crewmen had formed a majority, they'd rapidly taken over the ships, either subverting or killing their former comrades. Even when they'd been a minority, they'd still been able to do considerable damage, even if they hadn't been able to take over the ships. The warning had been too late to save large parts of the navy.

And even when the ships hadn't fallen, the entities were expanding on the planets below, their thoughts reaching out into space to corrupt and weaken human minds, eventually breaking in and taking control. Thousands of starships had just been swallowed up by the entities, turning on their fellows and destroying them before they realised what was going on. The AIs and the secure network were attempting to separate the loyalists from the subverted, but it was a slow process, leaving him convinced that most of the Confederation Navy's firepower had been lost or scattered. Once the entities starting combining the starships they'd captured and sending them against uninfected worlds, it would be all over. The remains of the Confederation Navy couldn't stop them.

He gazed up at the streaming list of starship names, thousands illuminated in red – for subverted – or yellow, for lost. The once-proud navy had been shattered. No enemy had inflicted so much damage on the Confederation, not even the Unseen. It wouldn't be long before humanity's worlds ended up like the Ancient worlds, dead and grey, waiting for someone from a whole new race to come along and start the cycle all over again.

“All right,” he said, breaking into the discussion. Herding Admirals was harder than herding cats. The shock of the sudden collapse – and fall from grace – had stunned them all and discipline was suffering. “We need to make a number of choices, not all of them good.”

He waited for them to stop arguing – it felt weird to be talking on audio, rather than using a VR chamber – and continued. “We need to face facts. The Confederation is broken. We cannot recover any of the infected worlds; we cannot even send ships into those systems without losing the crews to their telepathy. They’re not going to spread any further through the Galactic Net, but once they get the fleet up and running, they’re going to spread anyway – and we cannot stop them.”

Their expressions darkened, but no one argued. It was a measure of their desperation that no one questioned his words. They all knew them to be true. “We can take the remaining planetoids, city-ships and world-ships to another galaxy and start again. The Confederation may be gone, but the human race will survive. We can transport billions out of the galaxy before the entities get organised.”

He paused. “And we need to delay them long enough to give the other races a chance,” he added. “We need to use the Hyperspace Decoherence Cannon.”

The shock on their faces would have been funny, under other circumstances. The theory behind the Hyperspace Decoherence Cannon had been discovered, as was the case with many scientific discoveries, by accident. Once the principles had been understood there had been no option, but to build it and see if it worked. It had. The Confederation Navy had created an ultimate weapon, one that could be used against any target in the galaxy without fear of repercussion. It had been highly classified and buried, with only Admirals and Security Councillors being made aware of its existence. It would have destabilised the entire galaxy.

“If we use the Cannon,” Admiral Webster objected, “the rest of the galaxy will know that it exists.”

“I think we’re well past caring,” Admiral Burton said. “If we use the Hyperspace Decoherence Cannon to take out the captured shipyards and heavy industrial nodes, we will win time to get as much of the surviving population out of the galaxy as possible. I don’t think that there is any other choice.”

“Unless the entities can somehow prevent the Cannon from working,” Admiral Webster pointed out, glumly. “They’ve figured out how to send ships through hyperspace.”

Burton nodded, grimly. Whatever had prevented the entities from sending starships into hyperspace had been resolved, allowing them to expand far faster. He had hoped that they would have some time, if only because the entities would have to send their ships at warp speed rather than hyperspace, but that had been proven a false hope. He supposed he shouldn’t really be surprised. The entities might have learned to adapt.

He looked up at the live feed from the starship’s sensors. They were still near the Gateway, watching the enigmatic alien objects as they orbited the remains of the Buckley Experiment. He had considered asking for permission to turn the Hyperspace Decoherence Cannon on the objects, but the AIs had warned him that it would inflict no real damage. He wanted to take

and crush them, yet it was futile. The AIs had snatched a rocky world with a wormhole and thrown it right at one of the objects. It had just shattered on impact and the object had continued, unmolested.

“The responsibility is mine,” Burton said. Anywhere else, the decision would be democratic, but not in the Confederation Navy. “We will activate the Hyperspace Decoherence Cannon and use it against the entities.”

Centuries ago, the human race had stumbled over hyperspace, discovering how to open portals into the higher dimension and using it to travel faster through space. Further research had uncovered the hyperspace bands, each of which allowed a greater multiple of FTL speeds, until the research had finally stumbled at the highest levels, where the energies of hyperspace were too powerful to risk allowing a starship to use them for transport. The researchers who had stumbled over the Hyperspace Decoherence Cannon had discovered that a stream of particles could be sent through hyperspace – effectively instantaneously – and somehow draw power from the highest levels. The stream of particles would explode out of the other end – at the targeted coordinates – and destroy whatever they struck. The perplexing nature of hyperspace ensured that nothing, not even a planetoid, could survive such a blow. The blast was simply too powerful.

The Confederation Navy had realised that it was both an ultimate weapon and a disaster in the making. It was possible to literally shoot the gun at one side of the galaxy and blow away a planet on the other side, without leaving any trace of just what had destroyed the target. Even if the targeted race was advanced enough to detect the microscopic gateway into hyperspace, it would still be impossible to trace it back to the gunner. Politically, it would be a nightmare; the weapon had been classified and the sole example had been hidden inside a star.

Burton accessed the RI controlling the Cannon through the secure network, wincing as the RI tore into his implants, scanning his mind to be sure that he was authorised to access the system. The pain of activating the supernova bomb was nothing compared to activating the Cannon. He gritted his teeth and waited until the RI had finished poking through his brain with cold metallic fingers, before it finally conceded that he was allowed access to the firing system. Cold icons unfolded themselves in his mind, warning him that the Cannon was only to be used when the Confederation was in mortal danger. Burton nodded impatiently and moved on to the next level. The system, using the star to draw power, was already powering up. Perversely, given the level of devastation it caused, the Cannon actually didn't require a great deal of power. Pushing a planetoid into hyperspace was a great deal more energy-intensive.

He ran through the targeting coordinates carefully, double-checking them and then confirming the data when the RI questioned the targeting choice. The Cannon had been programmed not to fire on Confederation targets without additional verification, but then, no one had imagined the entities when they had been building the Cannon. Even the AIs, who had run hundreds of thousands of simulations of possible wars, hadn't envisaged such a total disaster.

Primed and ready, he thought, finally. The five sets of targeting coordinates glowed within the Cannon's matrix like five glittering jewels. He checked them one final time, ran a brief

scan of the Cannon itself, and then activated the firing sequence. It was disappointing, in a way; there were no fireworks and barely any signs that the Cannon had been fired. The five shots were fired quickly and then the Cannon started to shut itself down again, waiting until it was needed again. Burton found his link to the Cannon unceremoniously severed, leaving him falling back into his own head.

“All targets destroyed,” the AIs reported. New images, of blasts to rival supernovas, echoed through Burton’s head. The weapon was terrifyingly powerful. It might be unable to fire on a planetoid or something that was moving randomly, but it could blow planets, Rings, Spheres and even stars out of existence. The Confederation had been right to worry about the effects of unleashing such a weapon in public. “The results have been quite spectacular.”

“Yeah,” Burton growled. “Now tell me; just how badly were the entities hurt?”

The thought was a bitter one. Given enough power, the Cannon could be used to wipe out most of the infected Confederation, yet it would make no difference. The final outcome would still be the same. The infected starships would be used to spread the infection until the entire Confederation was either drained dry or destroyed by its own weapons. All of humanity’s technology, all the achievements that had carried the human race from a single world to a union that dominated the galaxy, was useless. Everything they were would be lost. Joe Buckley, the destroyer of worlds and galaxies and perhaps even the entire universe, wouldn’t go down in history. There would be no one left to write the history books.

Despair welled up within him. The human race had to survive, yet as what? The hunted, chased across the universe by a force they could never hope to defeat? He had his duty, his duty to preserve the human race, but he was tempted to simply trigger his implants one final time and destroy his own mind. Was there any point in striving when there was no hope of victory, or even of bare survival? The Confederation had never destroyed anyone who had fought it. The races that had picked fights with humanity had been beaten, but not destroyed. The entities...

He shook his head. The human race had never been promised anything by the universe. His race had opened the Gateway, never giving a thought as to what might be on the other side, or about what they might be letting in. Perhaps, in the end, all pride led to a fall. The human race had believed itself the masters of the universe. The universe hadn’t cared – or agreed.

Burton stepped over to the producer and ordered a glass of wine. Perhaps, if he drank enough, he could forget.

“You have a visitor,” the AIs said. “She needs to talk to you personally.”

Burton scowled. “Tell her to get lost,” he ordered. He stared down at the glass in his hand. The producer had produced something sour and bitter. “I’m busy.”

“This is important,” the AIs said. “She is teleporting in now.”

Burton looked up sharply as a golden shimmer flickered into existence, before coalescing into a humanoid form. He was surprised to discover that he recognised her from a brief meeting before the Buckley Experiment, back when the world had made sense. Her name was Aisyaj, he reminded himself. She had been the telepathic representative to the experiment. Her dark

skin and expressive dark eyes were unforgettable. And, unlike almost everyone else on the ship, she was smiling.

“Admiral,” she said. Her voice was rich and melodic. It reminded Burton of warmth and the days when he had been a child, growing up on a Ring with a vast extended family. “We need to talk.”

Burton shrugged, downed his glass and waved her to a chair. He had never found telepaths to be cheerful company, not when they could read his mind at will, yet it behoved him to be as gracious as he could. Perhaps she would read his mind, discover that she was not welcome and leave. Or perhaps she just wouldn’t give a damn about what he thought. He should be organising the evacuation of the entire surviving human race and he just could not be bothered. It all seemed pointless.

“I got in and out of the Dead Zone,” Aisyaj explained, and ran through her story. It all seemed a little unbelievable to Burton, but it all seemed to make sense. He had always believed that the Dead Zone wasn’t natural. Why would the laws of science be repealed in one small section of the universe? “There are Ancients living within the zone, trapped on a primitive set of worlds.”

Under other circumstances, Burton would have been fascinated. A race that had remained static for over four *billion* years was unprecedented. No human social engineering could produce a stable and utterly unchanging society. There was always change, sometimes slow and subtle at first, but it was always there. Or, before change could come from within, it came from outside. An armed invasion or even a trade contact would bring change. No one could seal themselves off from the universe forever.

But the Ancients had succeeded. In order to cheat the entities, they’d destroyed their own greatness. It was not a pleasant thought.

“I picked up more from their writing than I understood at the time,” Aisyaj explained, earnestly. “They figured out how to manipulate the quantum foam on a large scale – far more than we can do – but they did it with the power of their minds. We do it with enhancers. Their own telepathy was the cause of their downfall.”

“Right,” Burton said. He’d barely spoken to Caprice and the other telepaths, but he had assumed that they would want to leave the galaxy as well. A couple of world-ships could carry the entire telepathic population to safety...if there was such a thing where the entities were concerned. “How does this help us?”

“I’ve been working with the AIs to model it out,” Aisyaj said. “We can build a combination of their technology and our own, one we can use to manipulate a singularity and through it alter the quantum foam. They needed to create a naked singularity to do it, but we could do it with our enhancers and a vast power source.”

She paused. “You see, the entities aren’t native to our universe and they couldn’t exist here without a link back to their own dimension,” she continued. “The Gateway isn’t really a gateway – well, it *is* a gateway, but it’s much more than *just* a gateway – it’s the linchpin allowing them to enter our universe. As long as the Gateway is open, they can respond to rites that invite them into our realm. We need to close the Gateway permanently to win.”

“Very good,” Burton said, dryly. The Confederation Navy had come to the same conclusion, as had the AIs. Neither of them had been able to figure out *how*. The Gateway would just swallow any energy aimed at it by the Confederation. “Now...how do you propose that we actually do that?”

“Simple,” Aisyaj said. “We take the super-enhancer into the Gateway, take control of the singularity within the micro-universe and shut it down. It’s not natural. It requires colossal power to hold it open. Once we shut it down...that’s it. No more entities.”

“I see,” Burton said. He opened a link to the AIs. “Will it work?”

The AIs didn’t bother to pretend that they hadn’t been eavesdropping. “It appears to be our best shot at winning,” they said. There was a hint of a pause. “It requires, however, a human mind to make it work.”

“Me,” Aisyaj said. She looked up at him. For an instant, Burton realised just how young she was. “If I go in there and close the Gateway down, I won’t be coming back.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“In thirty minutes, we either gain control over the Gateway and close it, or admit defeat and flee the galaxy” the AIs said. Their words echoed in the air. “You will record everything for us.”

Janine nodded impatiently. It was *galling* to be without her normal implants, but even if she recorded a full-body experience, no one was going to be able to access and download it into their brains. The Galactic Net was effectively shut down and the secure network, linking the remains of humanity together, wouldn't allow her to broadcast her thoughts and feelings into the ether. She was restricted to voice and visual, something that some of the great newshounds of the past would have laughed at; hell, she would have laughed if one of the other newshounds had tried to broadcast under such circumstances. It just wasn't what she was used to using.

She turned to stare towards the Gateway, recording what little she could see with her naked eyes. The Gateway was a spinning disc of light, with a tiny black circle at the centre, inviting anyone who dared to fly forward and into the alien dimension. It reminded her of a glowing eye, staring out into the universe. With the entities involved – she recalled the entity that had materialised over Greenland and shuddered – that was not an improbable thought. The four objects that – the Confederation Navy believed – were keeping the Gateway open were invisible to the naked eye, although a quick check of the starship's computer revealed that they were still out there, circling the Gateway as enigmatically as ever. They seemed unaware of the human fleet gathering around the Gateway, the greatest single concentration of firepower left in the Confederation. It looked to her as if the entire remaining Confederation Navy had gathered to fight one final battle.

The Gateway...she looked up towards the Gateway and shook her head. She had seen the black hole, before Joe Buckley's experiment had gone horrendously wrong, and the sheer level of power required to take control of a black hole and alter its internal structure to the point where it became a portal to another universe was staggering. It seemed impossible to imagine that the Confederation, which had blown up stars and used them as power sources, could do anything to reconfigure or destroy the Gateway. It was just over two months old and it looked as implacable as the galaxy itself.

But the original Gateway had to have been closed somehow, she told herself. She hadn't been told everything that had come out of the Dead Zone, yet it was clear to her that the Ancients must have opened a Gateway of some kind billions of years in the past. That Gateway was no longer around, unless the human race had seen it and simply hadn't understood what they were looking at. She hoped that that wasn't the case. If the Ancients had closed their Gateway, the human race could do the same.

She stepped back and checked the live feed from the sensors mounted on a dozen starships. The Admiral had been very keen that the rest of the Confederation saw the battle, although apparently not all of his staff agreed. Somehow, juggling the live feeds was a remarkable challenge, yet it would have been impossible without the help of the AIs. She wasn't sure why they had agreed to help – even though it represented a very tiny percentage of their attention and processing power – but she couldn't understand how reporters and newshounds had managed, prior to implants. It just didn't seem possible.

“All sensor feeds are going out now,” the AIs informed her. It was primitive compared to what the Confederation was used to, but there was no other choice. Janine smiled, despite the situation; whatever else happened, she was going to have the largest audience in human history. Trillions of humans would be watching as humanity fought its final battle. “The population is logging on to watch.”

Janine nodded. The Confederation was dying, yet people still had hope. If she could give them that hope, give them the confidence that humanity would survive and regain its former prominence, it would make everything worthwhile. It would give her life meaning.

“And then we’d better make sure that they have something to watch,” she said, hoping her words sounded confident. Whenever she thought about the odds, her heart seemed to freeze in her chest. The entities had laughed – if they’d even noticed – at everything humanity had thrown at them, from primitive tricks to the most destructive weapons in existence. She hoped – prayed – that the Confederation Navy was right, yet the entities possessed terrifying powers. They might just be able to keep the Gateway open, or perhaps they would be free of any dependence upon the chink in reality. “Are you sure that this is going to work?”

She cursed herself for the question as soon as it slipped out of her lips. Of course the AIs were sure! They couldn’t do anything without calculating the ramifications to the nth degree, all in the same length of time it took a human to blink. They could tell her, with great precision, just what she would be doing a year from now and it would seem reasonable, even if she chose to follow a different path. The AIs, unlike humans, could study a decision endlessly, all in the blink of an eye. When they committed themselves to something, they were *sure*.

“We do not know,” the AIs said. Janine’s head snapped up in astonishment. The AIs didn’t *know*! “The calculations all check out, yet we are unsure if we truly understand what we are doing. If we are wrong...”

“The human race needs you to be right,” Janine said. It was one conversation she had no intention of transmitting to the rest of the Confederation. Humans had faith in the AIs; indeed, there were people who believed that one day the AIs would take over running the Confederation, allowing the human race to forget about politics and just have fun. Quite why the AIs would *want* to do that was conveniently ignored. “You cannot get this wrong.”

“We understand the situation,” the AIs said. They sounded unusually huffy. Of course, Calculus was physically within Confederation space and if the entities technology-disrupting effect started to spread, the AIs might find themselves affected. Their giant cube-shaped ships were just remote units, not housing for additional AIs. “We have run all the simulations. We remain concerned, however, about unknown unknowns. Specifically, what will the entities do if they realise what we are trying to do to them?”

“The fleet is in position, Admiral,” the tactical officer said. “They are standing by for operations.”

Admiral Burton nodded, not taking his eyes off the tactical display. He’d called in every ship within a hundred thousand light years, a move that had been the subject of a considerable argument among his subordinates and junior officers. Pulling the fleet together, they’d

argued, would leave countless worlds undefended against infected and subverted ships. Burton had overruled them, pointing out that if the entities decided to try to prevent the human race from closing the Gateway, it would take an entire fleet to stop them. Others had pointed out that the fleet might just be cannon fodder, or effectively handed over to the entities if their telepathic field started to emanate from the Gateway.

He scowled. The telepaths had provided several hundred telepaths – the largest group to serve within the Confederation Navy in decades – and he'd distributed them over his ships. If the entities started whispering suggestions into human minds, the telepaths would hit the emergency button and the fleet would jump out at once, leaving the entities behind. Or so he hoped. Like it or not, they were far too close to the Gateway, the way into the entities' own universe. Their power might be far more formidable than the human race realised.

As if it wasn't formidable enough already, he thought, tartly.

"Admiral," the AIs said. "Everything is ready for deployment. It merely requires your command."

Burton paused. He had taken an hour out to read the specs on the device the AIs had built for the telepaths and it had chilled his blood. No matter how they looked at it, they had created something that would have massive ramifications for any future human society – and handed a hell of a lot of power to one slip of a girl. The last invention to reshape human society had been the nanotechnological fabricator, the backbone of the Confederation, and it had created the post-scarcity society that humanity had eventually called the Confederation. A device that could alter reality itself, even on a small scale, was unbelievably dangerous.

But then, he reminded himself, if it could stop the entities from devouring the entire galaxy, perhaps the universe itself, the future might not be so bad.

"Thank you," he said, pulling himself to his feet. He made a final check on the fleet and was gratified to realise that everything was in position. The subverted ships, if they were ordered by their masters into battle, would discover that it was going to be a harder fight than they thought. It felt absurd to be plotting a war against fellow Confederation Navy starships, but there was no other choice. "Open a channel to the fleet."

The channel opened at once, allowing him to address the remains of the Confederation Navy. "There are those of us who believe that the disasters that have befallen us represent the end of humanity," he said, as calmly as he could. He'd been one of them, not too long ago. "There are those who believe that we should take what we can and flee the galaxy, abandoning our friends and enemies to a horrific fate at the hands of the entities. There are those who believe that we have no other choice; that we must flee to preserve humanity, that we are helpless against the godlike powers of the entities.

"I say that we must *fight*! The human race has a long history of winning out over apparently insurmountable odds. We fought and beat the demons within our own soul, the monstrous curses of theocracy, fascism and communism. We encountered alien races who challenged us and we beat them; we even defeated hunger, want and death! We created the greatest civilisation the galaxy has ever known. We chose to be great!"

He paused, gathering his thoughts. “Today, if we succeed, we will take back what is ours,” he thundered. “Even if we lose, we will put the entities on notice that the human race will not fade away into the shadows and become their slaves, their helpless puppets. We will build and develop and one day we will understand how to beat them – and on that day, we will take back what is ours! The entities are powerful; they can do things we can’t – but they are not gods! They can be beaten.

“We may be attacked by units of our own Confederation Navy, enslaved by the entities and used to carry out their monstrous bidding. Do not think of them as your friends and family, or as people forced to serve an alien master; kill them, as quickly as you can. We must fight, here and now, to preserve what remains of the human race. The infected must be killed; believe me, they will thank you for it. Stand to your guns and remember...they will show you no mercy. Their masters don’t even recognise the concept of mercy. They think of us as ants, but we will show them that even an ant can sting an enemy.”

He smiled, tiredly. “All ships,” he concluded, “prepare to engage the enemy.”

The channel closed at a single mental command from him. “You may proceed,” he informed the AIs. “And may God go with us all.”

“Thank you,” the AIs said. “We will inform Mistress Aisyaj of your decision.”

And pray to God that we are doing the right thing, Burton thought, grimly.

The device looked remarkably simple for something so dangerous. It was a silver sphere, hovering in the centre of her starship’s lounge. Strange symbols covered the sphere, somehow changing whenever she looked away, a reflection of the uncertainty field surrounding the device itself. It seemed harmless at first glance, but Aisyaj – who could sense the quantum foam itself – could understand why the very notion of the device was far more terrifying than the entities themselves. The human race was not to be trusted with such power.

She reached out to touch the sphere, only to feel her fingers skittering over the surface. The AIs had designed and built the device so that it would only operate properly outside the human universe, within the Gateway. Even without the Gateway’s power source, she could sense the potential within the sphere, like looking down at a coiled snake and wondering what would happen when it started to uncoil. The device was, almost literally, bigger on the inside than the outside. It was just...terrifying. She found herself hyperventilating and ran through a calming exercise, cursing her own weakness. Now, with the fate of the entire galaxy, perhaps the entire universe, resting on her shoulders, she had no time for weakness. Or so she told herself. The device prayed on her mind.

“The Admiral is addressing the fleet now,” the AIs said. They had rebuilt part of her ship to the point where she should be able to maintain a connection to them, even within the Gateway. She wasn’t sure that it would work – the QCC link to Joe Buckley’s probe had failed, even though that was supposed to be impossible – but even without it, she intended to go in. “Do you wish to listen?”

Aisyaj shook her head. “I just want to think,” she said, although it was far from the truth. She would have preferred to banish the device from her mind altogether. It was just too dangerous to keep thinking about it, not when telepathy affected the quantum foam. “Can you inform me when the Admiral is ready for me to begin?”

She clasped her hands as she walked back into the bridge and stared out at the Gateway. Now she was contemplating flying right into the Gateway, into a tiny universe that served as a link between the human universe and one with very different physical laws, the Gateway looked like a giant mouth, waiting to swallow her whole and eat her for dinner. The whole idea suddenly seemed a hell of a lot less clever to her. It was her idea, she reminded herself firmly; there was no point in blaming someone else for the plan. She had come up with it personally.

Aisyaj closed her eyes, remembering the touch of skin against skin, back when she’d wanted – needed – the touch of a man. She wanted, suddenly, to take her ship away from the Gateway, back to the *Einstein* and demand that Rylander forget his ugly wife and uglier children and come live with her. Her hands were on the console before she caught herself and yanked her hands away, silently cursing her own weakness. The memory of him holding her tight, of his hands stroking her breasts and buttocks, of his cock sliding into her and melding them together...the memories taunted her, reminding her of just what the device could do. It would be easy to simply erase his wife from existence, to ensure that his children had never existed, to make him hers, now and forever. A sudden flash of arousal flickered through her body and she swore aloud. The temptation was almost overpowering.

“Aisyaj,” the AIs said. It sounded as if their words were coming from a far distance. “Are you all right?”

Aisyaj opened her eyes. “Yes,” she growled, feeling her body shaking with repressed lust and desire. She ran through a calming routine, only to discover that her body refused to be calmed. Years ago, she had been told that feelings of sexual arousal were common when a person believed that he or she was about to die, although it struck her as a little odd. If the tutors had been right – if it was a final desperate attempt to pass on the genes – it didn’t make sense to her. If a woman became pregnant, in the hours before her death, how could she have her child? “I’m fine.”

She considered, very briefly, stepping into the VR suite and had to remind herself that it was a very bad idea. She doubted that her ship had been infected, but if she was wrong she would spend the rest of her life being slowly drained by the entities.

“Good,” the AIs said. “The Admiral has given permission for you to begin the experiment.”

“Experiment,” Aisyaj said, shaking her head. She was sure that the device would work; at least once she took it into the Gateway. It was what would happen afterwards that bothered her. She couldn’t afford any form of mental distraction. “Very well, then...”

The AIs sounded concerned. “If you wish to back out...”

“I would never know if it would work,” Aisyaj said, tartly. “I’ll keep the link open as long as I can.”

She closed her eyes and concentrated. “Mother!”

Daughter, her mother sent back. *Are you going through with it?*

“Yes,” Aisyaj said. She sensed Caprice’s disapproval, mingled with pride in her daughter and fear for the future. “Mother...I love you.”

I know, Caprice said. They’d fought; telepaths or not, mothers and daughters still fought over everything and nothing. They still loved one another. *Come back alive if you can.*

Aisyaj knew it was wishful thinking. She thought about lying, but her mother would know that she was lying – would know that she had been thinking about lying – and she wouldn’t be pleased.

“I love you,” she said. “It’s time to go.”

Chapter Forty

The Gateway loomed up in front of her, looking more like a giant eyeball than ever. Aisyaj had been expecting gravitational tides, but the AIs had pointed out that it was no longer a standard black hole and simply didn't have a strong gravity field. The apparent impossibility – yet another apparent impossibility – puzzled her, yet she pushed it out of her mind. The tiny black eye at the heart of the storm beckoned her forward, calling her into the Gateway. It was waiting for her. Her ship, protected by a warp bubble, was about to thread the needle.

She'd seen images of when the *Tooth and Claw* had plunged into the Gateway and had realised that, given its speed, the alien craft had run right through the Gateway and into the alien realm without realising that there was anything in-between. The information she'd picked up from the Ancients had suggested that the Gateway was far more than just a chink in reality; in effect, it was a pocket universe. Her ship started to shake slightly as the Gateway opened up, waiting for her to fly into its gaping maw. The black circle expanded until it filled her entire existence, a spot so dark that it seemed impossible to believe that there was ever such a concept as light. She felt reality spinning around her as she flashed through the Gateway and pulled her craft to a halt.

Aisyaj reached out with her mind, ignoring the contradictory information blaring out of her ship's sensors. It was impossible to believe all of the reports; her ship was safe, about to explode or already dead, depending on which sensor she used. The quantum foam surrounding the Gateway was, somehow, easier to read than the quantum foam in the normal universe; she was suspended high above the inner singularity, the link to the universe that gave birth to the entities. In her mind's eye, it appeared dark and frightening, yet somehow attractive and calling to her. She ignored its call. The entities would have to wait for her company.

Reality seemed to flicker around her again as she stood up, trusting in the automated systems to keep the ship steady. The warp bubble flickering around the ship would ensure that she remained safe from the growing energy surges flickering around the singularities – both singularities. It was hard to understand, but she'd come through a singularity and emerged in the space between two linked singularities. That was impossible in normal space – the transfer between two singularities should have been instant – yet inside the Gateway, the laws were different. She keyed her link to the AIs and was somehow unsurprised when she realised that the link was broken. There was no way of contacting anyone outside the Gateway.

I always knew I would die alone, she thought, as she studied the device. It was glowing now, glowing with a faint silvery light that somehow cast an ominous shadow over the compartment. It wasn't real, somehow; it was an eerie ethereal light that seemed to glare into her mind, throwing her thoughts into sharp relief. The uncertainty she'd felt slowly faded as she realised the truth. The Ancients had solved at least part of the problem of manipulating the quantum foam and used it to create the Dead Zone. She – and the AIs – had solved the other part of the mystery and created a device that could alter reality itself.

The Dead Zone had baffled human scientists who studied it, because it defied logic and reason. A hyperspace dampening field – which would have drained away any energy above a certain level, making high technology impossible – would have snuffed out the stars within the Dead Zone. No theory humanity had been able to devise had explained the mystery until

Aisyaj had been inside the Dead Zone and examined the artefact at the very heart of the puzzle. The Ancients who had devised the Dead Zone had made a *wish*, manipulating reality to ensure that their wish came true, altering the very nature of reality itself. And now she knew the truth, she could – she had – mix human and alien technology to create something new and terrible.

“All right,” she said, purely to hear the sound of someone talking. She hadn't realised how much she had been depending upon the reassuring presence of the AIs until their link had been broken. “Let's see, shall we?”

She sat down in front of the sphere and placed her fingers against its glowing exterior. This time, there was no skittering, no sense that it wasn't time to touch the sphere and unleash the power lurking within the tiny device. Her fingers merged with the sphere, *into* the sphere, melding her with the hyper-advanced RI built inside the device. A second later, her mind expanded outward sharply. For the first time, she saw and truly understood the quantum foam. It was far more than anyone had understood, or imagined. Her thoughts went everywhere and nowhere; she couldn't decide where to look first so she looked everywhere first, a torrent of data blasting into her mind...

Aisyaj reeled. Telepaths were used to accidentally prying into the thoughts of non-telepaths. She, like all telepaths who had routine interactions with non-telepaths, had agreed to be bound by a honour code that forbade her from revealing or discussing what she saw in anyone's head, unless there was a clear and present danger to others. Even so, the most powerful telepath would never have had such a clear insight into so many people at once. She saw the deepest thoughts and feelings of the hundreds of thousands of humans gathered around the Gateway...and further afield. It should have been impossible. So many contacts at once should have left her brain dribbling out of her ears, yet...she was alive!

The singularity, she realised, in astonishment. *The singularity is gathering in their thoughts!*

She turned her mind and looked down, towards the other singularity. The entities hit her at once, a yawning hunger that could never be sated. For all of their power, for all of their ability to affect reality, they weren't really intelligent, not as humanity understood the term. Or maybe their thoughts ran in completely different patterns. What she saw was incomprehensible to her. She had made mental contact with Gasbags and Starwalkers, yet they'd been practically cousins compared to the entities. The entities were so alien that they redefined the term.

There was no longer any time to lose. She reached out and started to slip her thoughts into reality itself. It seemed to take hours before she finally understood what she was doing, manipulating reality with the power of her mind. It was fascinating; too little pressure resulted in nothing, too much pressure resulted in a localised collapse and undid all her work. She wanted to keep experimenting, but it dawned on her that the merest thought, linked into the quantum foam, could result in disaster. She could send every star in the universe supernova at once. She was a god.

Carefully, keeping her thoughts under tight control, she started to untie the knot Joe Buckley had formed in reality. Now, with her god's eye view, it was easy to see what he had done, if harder to untangle it. He had taken the quantum strings – already tangled up around a black hole – and wrapped them around a rotating singularity, linking one universe to another.

She was hard at work when the entities looked up and saw her.

Admiral Burton paced the command deck, feeling the seconds turning into minutes and the minutes turning into hours. The AIs had informed him that they had lost contact with Aisyaj, but since then they had said nothing, leaving him to speculate wildly on what might have happened. She had fallen into the entities' universe and had been killed; she had taken on the powers of a god and vanished; she had tried to control the universe and discovered that no human could handle so much power; the device had simply blown up when she tried to use it...his imagination could provide so many possibilities. There was just no way of knowing which one of them was true.

"Admiral," the sensor officer said. "The objects are moving."

Burton tensed as the display updated. The objects were moving faster, spinning out in a new and dangerous pattern. It was the first time he'd seen one alter course; now, all four of them were altering course. The flotillas of cruisers and scientific research vessels that were following them scattered, expecting trouble. If the objects had finally decided to take note of humanity's ships, there was going to be a massacre...

"We are picking up gravimetric fluctuations within the Gateway," the AIs said, breaking their long silence. "We believe that the objects are attempting to counter what Aisyaj is doing down within the Gateway."

They offered no further explanation. "I see," Burton said, pressing them. "Do you know if she can succeed?"

"Unknown," the AIs said. "Our grasp of quantum multiverse theory is incomplete. The objects are definitely involved with keeping the Gateway open and..."

"*Admiral*," the tactical officer said, as the display suddenly sparked with red icons. "We have incoming starships, hostile starships!"

Burton rammed his mind into the starship's main processor. The sensors were updating rapidly, showing hundreds of thousands of starships dropping out of hyperspace and advancing towards the Gateway. They were Confederation Navy ships, yet they weren't broadcasting the modified IFF signals the loyalists had deployed. They were controlled by the entities. He wasn't sure what they intended to do, but they had to be stopped.

"All ships," he said, as the advancing wall of battle closed in rapidly. "Prepare to engage."

Seven seconds later, the Battle of the Gateway began.

Janine watched in awe as the two sides opened fire. There was nothing subtle in either side's tactics; the infected ships intended to break through to the Gateway, while the loyalists intended to stop them. Space rapidly lit up as hyper-missiles, warp missiles and standard missiles were deployed, both sides firing as many missiles as they could in the first few seconds. Other, more subtle and dangerous weaponry, was deployed; gravity waves slammed

against warp bubbles, wormholes spat lethal fire at their targets and space itself boiled under the impact of waves of deadly force. The alien objects ignored the fray, choosing instead to concentrate on trying to keep the Gateway open.

“The two sides are not evenly balanced,” the AIs said. Janine barely heard them. She was getting the highest ratings, the highest number of followers, of any newshound in human history. They’d be naming awards after her. They’d be making up new awards just so they could award them to her personally. “The entities, we assume, are routing all of their starships towards the Gateway. Admiral Burton has no reserves to call upon. The remaining loyalist ships are too far from the Gateway to assist.”

Janine felt a cold trickle shivering down her back. Space seemed to be flaring with light as starships started to explode, monstrous explosions consuming cruisers and planetoids alike. She saw a fission-implosion warhead strike a planetoid and rip it apart, the explosion swallowing up a number of smaller battleships and cruisers; it looked as if the entire Confederation Navy was being destroyed. She saw one planetoid ram another one and both ships vanished in a tearing blast of light, a wave of energy so powerful that it destroyed hundreds of sensors and blinded thousands more. Space itself was being disrupted; the ultra-secure communications links between the various starships were being disrupted by the blasts. Only the QCC network remained intact and functional.

She didn't want to ask, but she needed to know. “Are we safe here?”

“Perhaps,” the AIs said. They didn't bother to point out that *they* were safely back on Calculus, even if a hundred of their cube-shaped ships were participating in the battle. Without human crews, or any need to prepare for human occupants, the AIs could devote more space to weapons and drives. Their cubes were almost as powerful as a planetoid. “They may not pay any attention to a ship that isn't shooting at them, or they may open fire at random. Their firing patterns are not easy to predict.”

Janine nodded, watching a planetoid disintegrate in dreadful slow motion, taking its entire crew into the fire. It had happened so quickly that she wasn't even able to tell which side the ship had been on before it had died. Her ship shook violently as a gravity shear slashed against its shields for a second, before passing on to a more worthy target. There was no such thing as safety in this battle.

“I know,” she said. She knew that she could die at any second. Oddly, the idea excited her. This was what made life worth living. “Let’s see how long we can survive, shall we?”

She turned back to the battle and continued recording.

Aisyaj could feel the entities now, their cold fingers sliding out of their realm and reaching up towards her. She was *convinced* that if she looked down, towards the inner singularity, she would *see* the entity emerging from the chink in space-time and climbing up towards her ship. It was easier, now, to understand what the entities truly were. The laws of space and time in their universe were thoroughly weird. There was no real sense of time passing, yet there was that hunger, that desperate need to drain life energy from other universes and devour it. It made no sense to her.

She reached out desperately as their cold fingers started to undo the damage she had wrought on their plans. Aisyaj was no stranger to mental battles – she recalled some of her training with embarrassment, for it had taken her time to understand how a mental battle was truly fought – yet this was different. The entities weren't attacking her directly – or maybe they were and she was just too stupid to realise it – but attempting to undo the damage she had caused and bind the two universes together. She pushed back...and saw, clearly, just what the entities had in mind. The sheer *scale* of it shocked her.

They intended to tear the Gateway wide open, expanding it at faster-than-light speeds. It would grow rapidly, swallowing up Confederation and alien worlds and transporting them all into the alien realm. There, the remains of the human and alien races would be drained dry, their life forces used to power the entities' desperate search for new livestock. There would no longer be any need to use most of that life force to hold the smaller chinks in space-time open; they'd be able to drain the humans dry completely, gorging themselves for an eternity. They might even start *breeding* humans and other races to serve the gods...

The thought repulsed her and she felt her rage flooding through her mind, boosting her energy. Throwing caution to the winds, she reached out and pushed her mind into the quantum foam, no longer caring about her own life. She *became* the quantum foam, her thoughts shaping and defining the universe. It was suddenly the easiest thing in the world, despite the roaring sound pouring through what remained of her ears, to reach out and sever the link between the two universes. She heard the entities howling in anger as the Gateway started to collapse, crushing her between two singularities as the pocket universe fell in on her. She was aware of her starship bursting like a balloon, of the final thoughts of the universe itself...

And then there was a blaze of white light...

And then there was nothing.

Sparta heaved as a salvo of missiles crashed against her shields. "Direct hits, Admiral," the tactical officer reported. New red icons flared into existence on the display. "Major damage to..."

Burton tuned him out, watching the battle. It was absurd, a cauldron of fury that tore through both fleets as if they were made of paper. He had managed to concentrate most of her firepower around the Gateway itself, in hopes of preventing the enemy fleet from diving right into the alien realm, yet the entity-controlled ships were unpredictable. An absurd image of a line of planetoids, dancing across the fires that were consuming space, flared up in his mind as they headed for the Gateway, all weapons blazing as they burned his ships out of space. The battle, he saw, was going to end when one side had only a handful of ships left, having destroyed the other side completely. It was...insane.

"Admiral," the AIs said, suddenly. "The Gateway is closing!"

Burton looked up in delight. The Gateway was flickering, spinning down like a vortex and collapsing into itself. One moment it was there, the next it was gone, leaving only a gravity shockwave passing through space. His ship rocked as the wave passed over it and was gone. The four alien objects lost control and started to spin off through space, uselessly. Burton

guessed that their command links to the entities – however they expressed them – had been severed.

“The infected ships,” he snapped. “What’s happening to them?”

The battle was over. The enemy ships had just lost their command and control, drifting helplessly in space. He ordered Marine detachments to board them and attempt to locate and rescue their crews, but he had a nasty feeling that the entities wouldn't have left them anything that could be saved. The battle might have been over, yet the recovery was going to take years. The reports from the infected planets concurred. The entities were gone. Their former slaves were now maddened, or dead. They might never return to normal.

Burton frowned. No starship had emerged from the Gateway before it closed. “She’s dead, isn't she?”

The AI image flickered, donning mourning garb. “Yes, Admiral,” they said. “Aisyaj is dead, but she saved us all. The war is over.”

Chapter Forty-One

There were only a few dozen people gathered at the memorial service, but Caprice could sense hundreds of thousands watching through the commune, looking through the eyes of those she had permitted to attend the ceremony. The outpouring of grief and loss into the ether was genuine – no telepath could hide their feelings from another telepath – even if, coldly put, her daughter's death was only one of many trillions. She looked up at the statue of her daughter and felt, again, a yawning pain in her soul. She had known that her and her daughter would have many years together, perhaps thousands of years in a universe where death had been defeated, yet all of her faith had not availed her when her daughter had died. Aisyaj had been so young; she should have had hundreds of years left in her, even without advanced medical treatments. Instead, she had given her life to save others.

She looked towards the garden, where an image of her daughter had joined the thousands of other images gathered in the Valley of the Dead. Telepaths had moved beyond the concept of God, yet they believed that the universe was alive in some way. Their own ability to influence – even manipulate – the quantum foam suggested that there was some greater power out there, a higher power responsible for organising the universe. They had created the Valley of the Dead to honour the fallen, even as they refused to believe that there might be an afterlife, a world beyond death. It was funny how she'd dismissed such beliefs as absurd until she found herself contemplating hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years without her daughter.

Her mind expanded and touched the mind of Aisyaj's father, wrapped up in his own private grief – yet nothing was truly private in a telepathic world. Their brief relationship had ended without leaving either of them bitter and resentful, allowing them to share their own pain. Her other guests, friends, relatives and lovers, reached out with their own minds to offer their sympathy and support, a comfort no other human group knew or understood. Telepaths could be open and honest in ways that no other human group could match.

She looked towards the small group of telepathic masters, gathered on the other side of the valley. They rarely came out of seclusion – they found the pressure of lesser minds too great to bear – and their mere presence was a sign of respect, of admiration, that few others would have been offered. Aisyaj had not only saved the universe from the entities, but she had also shown them the way to even greater power over their environment. Caprice found the implications a little disturbing, yet she knew the masters and understood them. They wouldn't abuse their powers.

A dull mind appeared on the edge of her perception and walked towards her. Caprice turned and looked upon Admiral Burton, a short heavy man with a scarred face and dark expression. His thoughts were twisting and turning, a normal reaction when a normal came face to face with a telepath, as if thinking so rapidly could prevent a telepath from following his thoughts. She sensed his guilt and concern – and his guilt over feeling the concern – pervading him and shook her head, refusing to pry further. It would only make both of them uncomfortable.

“Representative,” the Admiral said. It was as much a droll reminder as a greeting. As one of the few survivors from the Security Council, Caprice was needed to help coordinate the recovery operations. The Confederation had been badly wounded by the entities – hungry and starvation had returned to humanity, nearly a thousand years since they had been

banished – yet they would survive. “Please accept my condolences for the loss of your daughter.”

Caprice sensed the guilt flickering through his words, his shame over losing Aisyaj, tempered with his awareness that she was one of trillions who had died in the final moments of the battle. The entities had been ejected from the human universe, yet their thralls had been left behind, driven mad or killed by the shock. Aisyaj was nothing on such a scale, she knew he knew, but he couldn't help thinking along such lines. One death was a tragedy, as someone had once said, yet a million was a statistic.

“Thank you, Admiral,” she said, aware of the sudden upsurge in interest as the word spread through the telepathic gestalt. “I am proud of her.”

“You should be,” the Admiral said. It wasn't quite the truth, she sensed. The Admiral had been worried about the impact on human society even before the entities had been defeated. Direct mental manipulation of reality itself would be...disruptive. “She saved us all from the endless night.”

Caprice nodded. She was tempted, as she sensed his growing unease at remaining within the Valley of the Dead, to prolong his suffering, but she had her responsibilities to uphold. It was funny how they seemed less important now that her daughter was dead.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, finally. “I’ll be online later and we’ll chat then.”

Admiral Burton allowed himself a moment of relief as he materialised back onboard the *Sparta*. With so many places needing the attention of a planetoid to avert disaster, he could easily have avoided the funeral service entirely, but he’d felt that he should attend. Besides, there were hints that rogue entity-controlled starships were still operating near the telepath systems and the remains of the Confederation Navy had a responsibility to protect them.

“Bridge, this is the Admiral,” he said, as he slumped down into his chair. He felt tired, too tired to do anything, but sit in his chair and sleep. There were just too many crisis points to allow him a proper rest. There were millions of refugees fleeing the former entity-held planets, hundreds of madden starships lashing around in anger and even hints that some of humanity’s enemies were considering pressing old claims against the Confederation. There was nothing like weakness to bring out the jackals. “Take us to the next crisis point.”

“Aye, Admiral,” the helmsman said. He knew that he should return to the Sparta System – he was the Grand Admiral now, at least until the reconstituted Security Council saw fit to cancel his appointment – and take command from there, but he wanted to remain on his ship. Between the QCC network and the AIs, he could coordinate from his ship as easily as he could from a fixed location. “We’re jumping out now.”

Burton winced slightly as the planetoid dropped into hyperspace and accelerated away from the telepath system. The drives were, ever so slightly, desynchronised; the battle had left them damaged and there had been no time to carry out proper repairs. With most of the Confederation Navy in the same sorry state, there was no point in withdrawing one single planetoid from duty. It left an uneasy sensation in his chest, as if he’d drunk a bottle of oil and allowed it to rest in his stomach.

He accessed the main computer and studied the crisis reports with a growing sense of defeatism. The initial delight at having defeated the entities had faded, to be replaced with a desperate desire to save as much of the Confederation as possible. It was unbelievable, even to him, to realise just how much had been damaged. Trillions of lives had been lost, with the entities accidentally killing millions merely through causing the technology to fail. It would be many years before humanity fully trusted its own technology again, if ever. The others, the infected and those who sought to stop the infection from spreading, had been destroyed through direct military action. It was impossible to calculate just how many had died in total. The endless catalogue of disasters was beyond his ability to grasp. Perhaps even the AIs could not grasp the scale of the disaster.

And then there were the questions surrounding the device itself.

He had hoped that it could be classified, but the information had escaped quickly, a result of poor choices by some of the telepaths. Aisyaj's invention – a device that manipulated reality itself – couldn't be duplicated without a naked singularity, yet humanity was ingenious and it wouldn't be long before someone actually managed to create or take control of a new singularity. Once that happened...even the AIs had been unable to predict what that would do to humanity. Some projections, they had admitted, showed remarkably little change, while others had suggested that the human race would destroy reality itself. It was a sour reminder of some of the predictions people had made about the Buckley Experiment. The Confederation had been tempted with the promise of ultimate power and, in reaching for the prize, had discovered the age-old lesson of just what went before a fall.

The information was out. How long would it be before the first singularity was created?

He shook his head and turned back to the list of crisis points. Perhaps, if they were lucky, the next crisis would wait until the Confederation had finished dealing with the remains of the last crisis. Or perhaps not; in his experience, it was rare for anything to wait for when a person was ready to deal with it. The human race would just have to deal with it when it came.

"There's hardly anything left of her," Captain Pearson said. "She's lost herself."

Janine could hardly disagree. She wasn't sure why she'd allowed herself to be volunteered to join the mission to recover the *Drak Bibliophile*, yet she was becoming increasingly convinced that it was just a waste of time. The entire crew of the city-ship was dead, leaving nothing, but a vaguely haunted feeling echoing in the air. The ship just looked as if it had decayed away, despite the complete absence of an atmosphere or temperature in space. The force-fields they used to keep themselves safe from the atmosphere had been reinforced with spacesuits, just as they would have had to use in the Dead Zone, just in case. If there was still an entity on the ship, she'd been warned, the force-fields would become unreliable.

It didn't seem likely to her, but she understood the paranoia. All of the entities that had manifested in human space – although no one was quite sure if they were separate entities or just one huge entity – had vanished seconds after the Gateway had closed. Still, it would be a long time before the human race took anything for granted again. It rather looked as if the newshounds would never be the same, if the Galactic Net wouldn't allow them to transmit

full-body experiences into the minds of thousands of followers. Trillions had died, yet she found herself focusing on a relatively tiny issue. It was the only way to remain sane.

“Maybe,” she found herself saying, “or maybe we have just lost ourselves.”

The Captain didn't argue. The human race had won and yet it felt like a defeat. She knew – from statistics the AIs had shared with her – that the suicide rate had risen sharply over the last few weeks. Humanity had experienced its first brush with something far greater – or at least far more powerful – than itself. Even the Unseen, the star-destroying foe that had brought humanity to the brink of defeat, had been understandable. The entities had been vast, silent and enigmatic. Worst of all, they were still out there somewhere, seeking a new entry into the human universe. Who knew if someone else, one day, wouldn't open a new Gateway?

She shook her head as they teleported back to the *River*. After everything else, it was very much a fifth-order priority. The human race would survive...and that, above all else, was what mattered.

“The device worked,” the AIs said, flatly. “Given time, the device can be duplicated to allow us to study the nature of reality directly.”

Chen considered it. “It might work,” he said. It was hard to say for sure, for as soon as Aisyaj had entered the Gateway, the unbreakable QCC link had...broken. The AIs had studied every last scrap of data pulled in by their starships and the thousands of sensor platforms scattered around the Gateway, yet even they were unsure as to what had happened inside the pocket dimension. “Are you sure that it is wise?”

In the virtual world of the Galactic Net, where Electronic Humans could shape their own private realities, the human mind had been allowed to play at will. He had seen some truly disturbing realities within the network, some that should never have been created, yet no one could say no. Indeed, there were sociopaths and psychotics who had been pushed into the Galactic Net, where no one could be hurt and they could work through their issues in peace. If they suddenly had the chance to make their fantasies reality...he doubted that there would be much of a Confederation left. The Confederation would have evolved a level of technology that was truly indistinguishable from magic, if it survived the experience

And, he wondered in the privacy of his own mind, it was possible that the entities had started out as humanoid creatures and then been seduced by their own power.

“We need to understand, to change and evolve,” the AIs said. “The dream is worth the risk.”

Chen looked up at the blonde woman and hoped – prayed – that they were right.

Warlord Masji opened his eyes and gazed upon the remains of his empire. It was hard, so hard, to think clearly, let alone remember what had happened. The gods had spoken through him and....and....and...and what? He couldn't remember. It took everything he had to stagger to his feet and then, when he tripped over the body, he sprawled on the ground, tail wagging helplessly in the air. He tried to curse and discovered that he couldn't remember any swear

words, not even the ones he'd learned from his father before being sent to uphold the family's honour. It was so hard to think!

Slowly, painfully, he dragged himself to the window and stared out at his city. There was no sign of life. Dead bodies – from his race and a dozen others – were lying where they had fallen, as if something had sucked the life from them in their final moments. The thought awakened part of his memory and he remembered the gods, remembered how they had granted them victory over their enemies in exchange for...

He found himself hissing in bitter glee. He *knew*, knew beyond any hope of contradiction, that he was alone. The gods had withdrawn from his world and taken everyone, but him. They had spared him, only to allow him to see the fruits of his own pride. His empire – the empire he had dreamed of building into a force to rival, even crush, the Confederation – was dead. His people might be extinct. The thought drove him onwards, to the balcony, from where the Emperor had once gazed down at his city. Still hissing, he pulled himself over the balcony and threw himself down towards the ground, far below.

Aisyaj opened her eyes.

She had expected oblivion; indeed, she had welcomed it. Instead, she found herself floating in a field of white light, drifting as if there was no gravity field surrounding her. She looked down at herself and was surprised to find that she was naked. Carefully, she opened her mind and started to probe the surrounding universe, but felt nothing. The field of light refused to open itself to her.

“You’re doing it all wrong,” a voice said, from behind her.

She jumped, spinning around so quickly that she almost lost control. A man was standing behind her, a tall man with a pale face, a sardonic expression and short dark hair. There was something about him that wasn't quite *real*, as if he was wearing a mask. She probed him with her telepathy and recoiled in shock. The man – the entity – was composed of mental force and nothing else. Power flowed through him from a source she couldn't identify, spinning through a complex pattern that seemed to recede to infinity and beyond. Whatever he was, she realised slowly, he was very far from human.

“This place doesn't have any local reality,” he said, while she was still trying to find her voice. “Try looking at your hand.”

Aisyaj, puzzled, obeyed, lifting up her left hand and staring down at it. Just for a second, it appeared normal...and then it dissolved into a complex pattern of light and power, a pattern that seemed oddly familiar. It took her a moment to understand what she was seeing. It was her telepathy, taken to its logical extreme. The entity might not be human, but neither was she, not any longer.

“Well?” The entity demanded, finally. “Are you not going to say anything?”

“Hello,” Aisyaj said. “What are you?”

The entity grinned. “We don’t have names,” he – she decided to think of him as male – said. “We *know* who we are. Welcome to the next stage of existence.”

He seemed to take pity on her. “I know, I know,” he said, his grin sobering into a droll smile. “A little race like yours thinks itself the top of the heap, until it discovers that it’s really a big fish in a very small pond. And then it finds its way into the next stage of existence and discovers that it’s a very small fish in a very large pond.”

Aisyaj found her senses expanding, without any of the pain or struggle she would have experienced as a human. They were floating within an empty realm, populated by beings of light and power. Below her, she saw the Confederation; no, she saw the whole multiverse, spread out before her. The answers were there for the taking. All she had to do was reach out with her mind.

“You can’t go home again,” the entity said. Aisyaj started, guiltily. She’d been wondering about travelling back to visit her mother and reassure her. “It’s bad for the development of the mortal races. You’ll have to watch from afar or forget them.

“But hey,” he added, as if to reassure her. “The universe is so much bigger than you ever dreamed.”

The End