

Continuing from NOVA WAR

Empire of Light

Gary Gibson

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Empire of Light

Third Book of the Shoal Sequence

TOR

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Chapter One

Consortium Standard Year 2544

Seventeen thousand light-years from home, drifting through an unmapped star cluster on the edge of the Core, Dakota Merrick finally stumbled across the first faint signals that betrayed the Maker's whereabouts.

The signals utilized compression techniques of dazzling sophistication in order to cram the maximum amount of information into the smallest possible packet burst. A less sophisticated vessel than her Magi starship might never have been able to distinguish the signals from random noise.

She followed the transmissions back to their point of origin, passing through a dense cloud of cosmic dust filled with stars so young that their planets had barely formed. When her ship finally emerged from the cluster, she came across dozens of shattered Atn clade-worlds orbiting far out on the edges of much more ancient systems.

More stray transmissions drew her towards a halo cluster a thousand light-years above the galaxy's ecliptic plane. She drove her starship forward until the Milky Way slowly revealed its shape as the Core now a brilliant bar of light wreathed in black smoke.

As time passed, she picked up the signals of ancient emergency beacons, still active after more than a hundred and fifty thousand years. Before very long it became clear she'd stumbled across the remnants of Trader's own expedition from long ago. She found coreships that had been reduced to airless hulks, their hailing systems still firing out fading requests for help long after their crews had turned to dust.

The transmissions grew more dense, and Dakota found her attention drawn more and more to the vicinity of a red giant on the edge of a star cluster. Long-range sensors finally revealed the nature of the Maker: rather than being a single entity, it proved instead to be a vast swarm of objects interlinked via instantaneous, faster-than-light tach-net transmissions. There were trillions of them, scattered across an area of several light-years, with the red giant at its centre.

The swarm filled the superluminal ether with short-range bursts of data, a cacophony of unintelligible voices all shouting to each other across enormous distances.

While the ship closed in, Dakota spent her time drifting through the infinite virtual worlds held in the Magi ship's memory stacks, subjective days and months passing in what were only seconds in the universe beyond the hull. She became a flock of birdlike creatures that flew through the dense air of a high-gravity world, diving into the waters for prey. She experienced life as a twist of self-awareness, magnetic vortices in the photosphere of a star, then searched through the ruins of a drowned city in the body of an eel-like creature whose remote ancestors had built it, then forgotten their past. Her own body felt like a distant memory, and in truth it had long since been subsumed into the body of the ship.

freeing her mind to roam at will.

~~There was a part of her that wanted to stay locked away in these worlds for ever, while another part still remembered what it meant to be human.~~

Dakota had become aware she was being haunted.

At first the ghosts remained out of sight, vague presences of whom she caught only fleeting glimpses, but over time they grew more solid, more real. They carried the voices and faces of people she'd known and loved, and who had died because of her. She found herself wondering if it meant she was losing her mind.

'Do you see?' one of them cried, following her through a maze of data. It had Josef's face. 'The swarm isn't just a cloud of interconnected objects – they're a single entity. When we listen to its transmissions, we're listening to its *thoughts*.'

'Go away!' she screamed, fearful of the memories he aroused. But even as his ghost faded, she realized what he'd said was true. Each member of the swarm – each *component* – was a single neuron in an enormously distributed brain. The Maker was alien in a way she had never encountered before; he had taken the principles of instantaneous communication by tach-net signal and used it to create a new kind of machine life. But then she remembered what she had become, and wondered whether she was really so different.

A few days later – as measured in the external universe, at any rate – Dakota had the ship rendezvous with one of the swarm-components. She proceeded cautiously, wary of how it might react to her ship's presence, or her gentle probing of its internal systems. When it appeared that no resistance would be offered, she had the starship draw the component inside it.

For the first time in over a year, Dakota reconstituted her physical body, creating a space within the starship both for herself and for the newly captured component. Her dark hair flopped across her eyes, the deep browns of her pupils again topped by the thick black comas of her eyebrows.

The swarm-component was perhaps ten metres in length, delicate sensors and neural conduits hidden beneath a series of tough plates streaked and pitted from centuries of microscopic impacts. That it was a Von Neumann machine, capable of endlessly replicating itself, was clear; isotopic measurements and analysis of its hull showed that the raw materials used to construct it had been drawn from asteroids and drifting interstellar bodies.

Since her arrival in the red giant's vicinity, Dakota had discerned a variety of different types of component. Some appeared to act primarily as relays for transmissions within the body of the swarm, while others did nothing but carry out repairs on other components, either by manufacturing parts or by breaking down older machines in order to construct new ones. Still more appeared to be scouting, ranging far from the main body, perhaps in order to locate resources. The particular component Dakota had chosen to study was, she suspected, close to the end of its useful life.

She flexed her fingers, feeling the half-forgotten play of muscles, and realized that she wasn't alone. She felt her skin freeze when the ghost stepped out from behind the component's pitted bulk and regard her with calm grey eyes.

He wasn't a true ghost, of course, merely a doppelgänger of her dead lover, Josef Marados, now made flesh from her own memories. A way, perhaps, for her increasingly rebellious subconscious to combat the growing loneliness of being so very far from home.

At least, that was the rational explanation.

'This thing's alive,' he commented casually, as if picking up the thread of a conversation. 'You'

know that, right? But it doesn't seem to know we're here.'

Dakota had a sudden vivid recollection of Josef's bloodied corpse lying crumpled on the floor of his office on Mesa Verde. She hadn't been to blame for his death, not really; at the time she'd been under the murderous control of Trader in Faecal Matter of Animals, an agent of the Shoal. He had exploited her fatal weaknesses in her machine-head implants and turned her into his unwitting puppet. She knew this, and yet the guilt remained.

If I act like the ghost is real, then that means I really am crazy.

But she did, anyway. She couldn't help herself.

'I . . . I think, with some time and effort, I could use it to try and communicate with the rest of the swarm.'

The ghost laughed, eyeing her with a half-smile that suggested he saw through to the deep well of uncertainty at the core of her soul. 'Time,' he replied, 'is the one thing you might not have.'

He meant the red giant, of course. It was now weeks, perhaps only days from death. A new and entirely natural nova would result, as it expelled most of its mass in one single cataclysmic blast. Despite the obvious danger, untold billions of the swarm-components remained within close proximity to the star, like fireflies dancing at the edge of a forest fire.

'Don't.'

Dakota stared at the ghost with a puzzled expression. 'Don't what?'

'You were about to apologize. Don't start saying you're sorry for killing me.'

'I wasn't—'

'You made me, spun me out of your memories, and that means I know every thought in your head even before it appears. Now,' he said, leaning down with hands on knees to peer at the component on the hull, '*this* is interesting . . .'

Part of her wanted to touch the back of his neck, in case his skin was still warm and soft and carried the same scent as the man she'd known. Instead, she had her ship feed her highly magnified images of the component's exterior. It was studded with millions of extremely miniaturized tachyon transceivers, each one packed with dense molecular circuitry.

This particular component appeared to have a relatively simple function, storing and analysing data from all across the electromagnetic spectrum as well as more exotic phenomena such as gravitational fluctuations and superluminal tachyon drift. If the swarm did have an overarching intelligence, as she suspected, it was almost certainly an emergent property resulting from its sheer complexity.

Dakota lightly touched the fingers of one hand to the component's hull and closed her eyes, tensing despite herself. She could hear the whisper of its transceivers, and realized it was still communication with its brethren.

Perhaps she could tap into that flow, talk directly to the swarm . . .

She hesitated, drawing her hand back.

'Go ahead,' the ghost prompted. 'It's the opportunity to talk to something that's been alive for billions of years.'

'It's also responsible for creating the caches. The same ones that destroyed the Magi and could still destroy us. What if I . . . made it angry?'

'Life, Dakota, is a series of opportunities preceded by risks. We have the chance to finally find out what the swarm's ultimate purpose is. So go ahead and try.'

She nodded, and put her fingers once again on the component's hull, listening to the swarm's chatter. What had been unintelligible noise suddenly became clear, and what she learned was so shocking she pulled her hand back with a gasp.

'It's trying to . . .'

'Re-engineer the universe,' the ghost finished for her. 'A project it doesn't expect to finish until'

billions of years from now.'

'That's incredible,' she said, 'but how does it help us?'

'Look here,' said the ghost, directing her attention to one particular strand of data. 'There – a way to stop the nova war.'

Once again, she placed her hand against the component's hull. More data came pouring through, almost swamping her conscious mind.

The ghost grinned in jubilation. 'Did you see?'

She nodded. 'I saw it. We've really found something.'

A name, fished out of the depths of the Maker's collective intelligence, and a little more besides.

'*Mos Hadroch.*' Severn rolled the phrase around his tongue.

They were walking side-by-side through a simulation of the streets of Erkinning, on Dakota's home world of Bellhaven. The winter winds felt so entirely real that she had bunched her hands into fists, pushing them deep inside down-lined pockets, a padded collar pulled up close around her neck and chin. The scent of food and the sound of voices drifted to them from the direction of the city walls, where Grover refugees taking advantage of the daily amnesty had set up a market.

Dakota had murdered Chris Severn while he'd been recovering in an Ascension clinic, cutting off his heart and watching his life-support read-outs flat-line. Another figment of her mind made real, whether she liked it or not – dressed up in the skin of someone who'd died because he'd made the mistake of loving her.

'Whatever it is, it means a lot to the swarm,' Dakota replied. 'It meant something to the Magi as well, but what that meaning is still isn't clear.'

'The *Mos Hadroch* is a legend,' Josef told her, stopping off at a stall to buy hot tea for them both. 'Or as good as, anyway. There are no surviving records to prove it really existed. It's a weapon, supposedly, built by a predecessor civilization in the Greater Magellanic Cloud.'

Dakota drank the bitter black tea and felt its heat diffuse down her throat. 'It can't be that much of a myth if the swarm wants to find it. We need to try and find out what else it knows.'

Severn frowned. 'You might want to exercise some caution. Trader found out, the hard way, that the swarm can be lethal.'

'There's not enough time to be cautious,' she muttered irritably. 'We need to find out everything we can.'

'Knowledge won't be much use to you if it only gets you killed. The swarm acts like we're beneath its notice, but how can we really be sure?'

More days passed, and the starship learned how to decipher more of the data streaming through the captured component's transceivers. For the first time, an accurate picture of the swarm's origins began to form, where before she'd had only disparate fragments of knowledge loosely knitted together with conjecture.

Once the starship learned how to tap into the swarm's senses, Dakota was able to look out on the universe through trillions of eyes.

She eventually discovered that the swarm was very, very old – and not alone. There were others scattered through distant galaxies, having seeded themselves across the face of the universe over vast epochs of time. The origins of this particular swarm dated back to a time when the Earth's sun had barely coalesced from interstellar dust.

It was clear that these swarms maintained contact with each other, despite the vast distances that

separated them, by some means Dakota did not yet understand. Although tach-net communications were instantaneous, the amount of energy required to boost a signal so enormously far staggered the imagination. How the swarm obtained the requisite energy was a question that, at least for the moment, might have to remain unanswered.

Mos Hadroch. The term turned up again and again, and it soon became clear that, whatever it might be, the swarm regarded it as a major threat to its primary mission, even while its precise nature remained frustratingly elusive.

‘We’re getting nowhere in trying to work out what the Mos Hadroch is,’ said Dakota. ‘I’m going to get in contact with the other navigators back home, see if they can help.’

She was standing with Josef’s ghost on the roof of a kilometres-high structure on an otherwise deserted world drawn from the ship’s memory. A real-time image of the red giant hung above them, great loops of fiery plasma torn from its surface outlining the flux of its magnetic fields.

He looked at her with a doubtful expression. ‘What could they possibly do? For all we know, the Mos Hadroch might be somewhere back in the Greater Magellanic Cloud – or might not even exist anymore. Maybe we should be trying to think of something new.’

‘No, you don’t understand. The Shoal abandoned a coreship before they left our part of the galaxy. What if there’s some clue buried in its data stacks? Or in the wreck of the godkiller back in Ocean’s Deep? There are navigators back home who’ve been flying their own Magi starships for a couple of years now. If I send them everything we know, they might find a correlation within minutes.’

I’m talking to myself, Dakota thought, as she studied the ghost. *That’s all he is: another part of me that thinks it’s someone else*. More evidence, if it were needed, that her mind was now unravelling.

‘The risk of making contact with home is enormous, Dakota. It’s suicidally risky.’

‘How do you mean?’

The ghost turned towards her. ‘Think about the energy cost of transmitting a signal across seventeen thousand light-years, all the way back to Ocean’s Deep. Without enough power, it’ll de-cohere into random noise before it even gets there. You’re going to have to drain the drive’s energy reserves to make sure they receive the message.’

‘So?’

‘It’ll take the ship days to claw that energy back out of the vacuum, and until then she won’t be able to carry out any superluminal jumps. We’ll be at the swarm’s mercy, if it decides to turn on us.’

‘We’re at a dead end here, anyway,’ Dakota insisted. ‘We have to act now.’

‘It’s a mistake,’ the ghost warned her.

‘No. It’s a risk, but one we’re still going to have to take.’

Chapter Two

Nathan Driscoll looked up and noted that one of the suns had gone out.

He stepped back, his hands greasy with gore and his nostrils full of the scent of burned flesh, and watched as an evac team carried away the injured soldier he had been tending, and then loaded him into a waiting air-ambulance. The medbox units that had once been an integral part of the ambulance interior had long since been stripped out, so the soldier's stretcher was instead slotted into one of several brackets, the rest of them already occupied by other injured men and women.

Nathan studied the pattern of dim red balls that clung to the coreship's curving ceiling, a dozen kilometres above the city of Ascension, his breath frosting the air. He couldn't work out precisely which of the thousands of fusion globes had just failed, but he had sensed the sudden, marginal drop in ambient light; the world had just become a little bit darker than it already was. He pulled his scarf tighter around his neck in a futile attempt to counter the biting cold.

He brought his gaze back down, and in that moment saw her.

A group of refugees – perhaps a dozen men, women and children in all – was making its way past the ruined façade of a mall about half a block away. Probably they'd been forced to abandon their homes as the fighting between the Consortium and Peralta's *terroristas* spread along the banks of the Fire Canal. Despite the half-light, Nathan had spotted a woman with long brown hair gathered up in a bun, her terrified features smeared with dirt.

It was only the briefest of glimpses, but his heart leapt nonetheless.

Ilsa.

Almost as soon as he'd spotted her, a cadence of ground-rattling thumps heralded the return of a four-legged rover-unit from the battle, troopers clinging to its sides while the most seriously injured were lifted on to pallets mounted on top of the rover itself. Nathan rushed forward with the other two volunteer medics, and helped to load the wounded into another air-ambulance that had dropped to the fractured tarmac almost as soon as the previous one had lifted off.

Nathan began to doubt himself, even as he worked. It had been the merest, most fleeting glimpse; only part of her face had been visible. She had been wrapped up in layers of clothing, a rag pulled tight around her neck to ward off the plummeting temperatures; because, ever since the Shoal had abandoned them, the temperature had dropped even as the light failed. It didn't take a genius to realize the coreship was dying.

Nathan pulled himself up inside the second air-ambulance, along with Kellogg and the other nearest volunteer whose name he'd already forgotten. The ambulance's jets began to whine, preparing for takeoff, but his mind was on other things.

He was almost certainly mistaken, of course, as he imagined he saw Ilsa everywhere he looked: in the faces of the troopers and volunteer aid workers, or among the refugees who vastly outnumbered them all; or the corpses that had come to fill the streets and canals as the fighting intensified.

But then again, this *might* have been her. It might have been Ilsa. If he could find her . . . if she was still alive . . .

Nathan hopped back down from the open rear of the ambulance. He could see no sign of the refugees, but he guessed they were heading for the shores of the canal. His fluorescent plastic waistcoat – meant to identify him clearly as a non-combatant – flapped around his waist in the backwash from the jets.

‘Nathan!’ Kellogg bellowed down at him. ‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing?’

Nathan looked up, shook his head. ‘I saw someone I know,’ he yelled over the noise.

More than likely the refugees intended to wade across the canal under cover of darkness, since the bridges were frequently targeted. If they could get to the other side, they had a chance at escaping the worst of the fighting.

‘Nathan, get the fuck back in!’ Kellogg yelled again. ‘Once this thing goes, it goes!’

‘I’ll find my own way back,’ Nathan replied, and started to jog away, heading towards the canal. Kellogg yelled something else, but the words were lost as the ambulance’s VTOL jets lifted it high above the ground. It tipped its nose in the direction of Third Canal and northwest, and began to accelerate.

The streetlights had been down ever since Peralta had targeted the city’s primary fusion reactor systems. Nathan stripped off his waistcoat and shoved it deep inside a pile of rubble.

He jogged on past the ruined mall and kept going, squinting into the deep shadows as he went. He alternated between running and walking until he finally arrived exhausted at the banks of First Canal several minutes later. His bones ached, and more than ever he felt the slow onslaught of late middle age.

Nathan crossed the street and peered down the embankment at the black waters. The dark shapes of bodies drifted by, carried along by the artificial tide. Ice had formed on either side of the canal, and he squinted up and down its length until he sighted a huddle of dark shapes moving along the path at the foot of the slope, maybe fifty metres away.

Nathan slipped and skidded down the steep stone facing of the embankment until he reached the path they were on. Some of the refugees were already braving the ice and the freezing cold to wade across the slow-moving waters.

‘Hey!’ he yelled, waving as he came towards them.

Several turned and shouted out in fear, assuming, in the dim light, that he must be one of Peralta’s soldiers. A few more threw themselves further into the water and started swimming frantically.

Nathan slowed down and raised his hands. Their faces, even in the faint light, were clouded with terror and suspicion. ‘I’m not with Peralta or anyone else,’ he yelled. ‘I’m just looking for somebody I thought she might be . . .’

Then he moved a step closer and saw her: an angular woman with brown hair, her eyes dulled by fatigue. It wasn’t Ilsa, though. Now he could see her more clearly, he could only wonder how he might have made such a mistake.

‘What the hell are you doing, running straight at us like that?’ one of them demanded, his face looking bruised and ugly in the dim light, fists bunched in readiness at his sides. Like the rest, he wore several layers of extra clothing to try and keep the cold out, the topmost layers already ragged and worn.

‘I’m sorry, I—’

Bright light suddenly flared down on them. Nathan crouched instinctively, and squinted up the embankment towards several figures that had suddenly appeared there, silhouetted by arc lights mounted on top of a rover. He heard one of the refugees mutter the word *terrorista*, but Nathan knew these new arrivals were Consortium troopers.

Some of the troopers quickly made their way down a series of steps leading to the waterside path, their weapons held up in readiness against their shoulders. The rover came closer to the rim of the embankment, its blunt, instrument-shrouded head swinging slowly from side to side, scanning the environment constantly for threats. Its brilliant light shone down on the filthy waters, illuminating the bloated shapes of the dead.

One of the troopers came up close, pushing her visor up to reveal a small round face, a lick of dirty blonde hair pushing out from under her heavy black helmet. *Karen*, he realized with a shock. Sergeant Karen Salk, his sometime lover.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the rest of the refugees, who had finally realized they weren't in immediate danger. The rest of the squad kept their weapons raised regardless. *terroristas* had a habit of hiding amongst those fleeing from the fighting.

A military transport of similar design to the air-ambulances dropped down towards the road that ran parallel to the top of the embankment.

'Kellogg said you'd run off in the middle of a fucking combat zone!' Karen shouted at him. 'I mean, what the *fuck* was going through your head?'

Nathan found he couldn't frame an answer, so he remained mute as she tugged him towards the transport, and the beckoning lights of the transport waiting above.

Several minutes and a dozen kilometres later, the same transport dropped down towards a camp that spilled out along the streets lining both sides of Third Canal. Smoke rose from clusters of tents and prefabs where a sea of refugees warded off the freezing cold by burning furniture and anything else combustible. These were the lucky ones, awaiting immediate evacuation; in the surrounding city, there were tens of thousands dying more slowly of starvation or freezing inside their homes.

The transport's lights picked out the landing pad on the roof of the clinic and began to drop towards it. Nathan glanced out of a window and saw in the distance the great flickering wall of energy that delineated the nearest perimeter of the coeship's human-habitable zone. Closer to hand loomed the black shape of one of the sky-pillars, a great, carved rock limb that was only one of hundreds supporting the coeship's outer crust.

'Hey Nathan, you stupid bastard. Wake up. It's me. Karen.'

Within minutes of disembarking from the ambulance, he'd crawled on top of a spare trolley in the clinic, and passed out. He groaned and sat up, blinking in the harsh lights and rubbing at a sore spot on his arm.

Karen regarded him with a mixture of scorn and pity. She'd taken off her helmet and matte-black body armour and let her hair fall down to her shoulders. One of the doctors stood next to her, a dark-skinned woman in disposable paper clothing.

The clinic, unlike almost anywhere else currently in Ascension, was warm. The doctor leaned towards Nathan and pulled one of his eyelids up, shining a bright light directly into his pupil.

'Seems okay,' she remarked, her voice brisk. She then took out a hypo and aimed it towards Nathan's arm, almost before he realized what she was doing.

'Hey!' he shouted, sliding off the trolley and out of her immediate reach.

The two women stared at him with almost identical expressions of exasperation.

'For God's sake, Nathan,' said Karen. 'Doctor Nirav is trying to *help you*.'

'Thanks, but I don't need any shots.'

'What, you fucking *phobic* or something?' she replied in a voice full of scorn.

‘Command think Peralta’s got his hands on some kind of nerve agent,’ explained Nirav. ‘That means everyone gets a shot, and we also take a blood and DNA sample at the same time. Everyone has to do it, no exceptions.’

Nathan glanced warily towards the doctor. ‘Forget it. No samples of any kind, either.’

‘Why the fuck not?’ asked Karen.

‘Sorry,’ said the doctor, patting a pocket. ‘Got that already while you were out cold. So how about you stop whining and take the shot now, so I don’t have to get some of the guys from security to come here and hold you down while I give it to you anyway?’

He hesitated, and even thought about making a run for it and taking his chances outside before they could identify him from his DNA sample. But where could he go? His work as a medic had given him a sobering overview of just how bad things were in the city; outside lay only a cold and hungry death.

Instead he nodded, and Nirav pressed something cold against his neck. There was a hiss and a sudden jolt of pressure against his skin, and then it was over.

A block of ice immediately settled into the pit of his stomach. It had only ever really been a matter of time before they worked out who he was, and there was literally nowhere he could run.

As Nirav departed, Karen folded her arms and studied him with a mixture of motherly concern and mild contempt. ‘To be honest, Nathan, after the way you ran off back there, I was worried maybe you’d caught a whiff of that nerve gas and gone crazy. *Who* was it you said you saw?’

Nathan shook his head. ‘I made a mistake.’

She sighed and reached out to tug him closer to her. ‘How awake are you?’

‘Not very.’

She shook her head. ‘Not the right answer,’ she said, pushing a hand through his hair. ‘It’s been a long day, Nathan. Let’s go back to my place.’

What Karen called ‘her place’ was a room in a commandeered administrative block on the other side of the main refugee camp. She had cleared it of most of its remaining furniture, whatever hadn’t already been burned or looted, and had installed a spare cot from the clinic. Technically this was against the rules, but nobody seemed to care enough to enforce them. The illicit arrangement did have the advantage of giving her and Nathan some privacy.

A small portable heater glowed in the dark nearby, illuminating Karen’s warm lithe body from behind her. Nathan slid his hands around her waist, then moved them up to cup her small breasts. His tongue felt wet and salty as it licked against his lips. He felt himself stiffen, a wave of sudden, needful ardour washing over him.

She grinned and slithered expertly on top of him, quickly sliding him inside her. She was already wet. Her hands pressed down hard on his chest, the sensation almost painful, then she began to move, her hips grinding slowly.

Even the building’s basement generators, augmented by their tiny heater unit, could not together quite keep the cold out, and soon he shivered, his skin prickling in the frigid air. He thought of the bodies he’d seen floating along the canal, picked out by the rover’s unforgiving searchlights, and felt his ardour begin to fade.

‘I’m not sure I can,’ he muttered, and felt a sudden wave of fatigue wash over him. It had been, as she had said, a long day. ‘Maybe we should try and get some sleep.’

‘Shut up,’ she said, her voice ragged, hands pressing ever more forcefully against his chest. ‘Don’t disobey the orders of a superior officer.’

I’m not in your fucking army, he thought. But he dutifully held on to her plump thighs and banished those images of death and decay from his mind, concentrating instead on the tumble of her hair across

her shoulders and the moistness of her lips when she leaned down to kiss him. To his surprise worked, and he listened to the increasing hoarseness of her breath just before she climaxed and came to a gasping halt. Her head tipped back, before she finally collapsed against his chest.

‘Oh fuck, I needed that,’ she moaned.

‘You’re welcome,’ Nathan muttered. He glanced towards the window, where he could see the underside of a sky glowing a dull red.

Karen slid back down beside him and lay there for a few moments, her head resting on his shoulder. He sensed something else was on her mind and, after a few minutes of silence, she pushed herself up on one elbow and stared down at him.

‘So who was she?’ she asked, regarding him with a serious intensity.

Nathan gazed at her blankly until he realized she meant Ilsa. ‘What makes you think I was looking for a she?’

‘Intuition.’ Karen’s expression softened a little and she smiled. ‘I’m not saying you have to answer. I’m just curious.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘You know, Nathan, it doesn’t take a genius to guess you’re hiding something.’ She rolled on to her back beside him and sighed. ‘I guess there’s never going to be a good time to tell you this.’

‘Tell me what?’

‘I’m being reassigned. They’re sending several new expeditions into the rest of the coreship, and I’ve been asked to join one. We might even try to penetrate the command core this time round. It’ll be a joint operation, undertaken with the surviving Skelites and Bandati in the other zones.’

‘What are you hoping to find? The coreship is dead.’ He’d seen external shots of the starship taken by the Legistate ships that arrived a few weeks after the Shoal had abandoned it. Almost all its drive spines had been burned away as it escaped Night’s End. Early hopes of finding a way to pilot it back to Consortium territory had been quickly dashed, but contact had now been made with races in the other environments, including one or two previously unknown to mankind.

Karen frowned. ‘You understand what I’m saying, don’t you?’

Nathan smiled and stroked her hair for what he guessed would likely be the last time. ‘That won’t be seeing each other any more, is that it?’

‘I wasn’t sure how you’d react.’

‘I think we both always knew a day like this was coming.’ He looked inside himself and realized he wasn’t lying. Life had been grim, desperately so for too long now, and their time together had helped keep him sane. ‘No more chasing after General Peralta, then,’ he added. ‘You must be relieved.’

She scowled. ‘Peralta’s a dead man. He’s never leaving Ascension alive. He must know it too, but he just keeps fighting.’

Nathan found himself wondering what she might think if she were to find out he had been Peralta’s employ until a few months before. The warlord, faced with a stark choice between arrest and execution on the one hand and a slow, lingering death on the other, had demanded safe transportation off the coreship for himself and his inner circle, almost as soon as the first relief operations had arrived. The Consortium had other ideas, however, and Peralta had then made good on his threat to carry out attacks on refugees until he got exactly what he wanted.

Ilsa had been amongst the first to slip away from Peralta’s compound under cover of night, and even since he had made his own escape a few months later, he had been searching for her so they could find a way out of Ascension together. He had hoped his volunteer work on the ambulances would improve their chances of being lifted out of the coreship, once he’d found her.

‘Unless he can find a way to mix in with the rest of the refugees and slip past you,’ Nathan suggested. He was careful to keep his voice casual.

‘They scan everyone who goes through,’ she replied, and yawned, pulling herself in closer to him. ~~‘With DNA profiling, biometrics, the works. Don’t you worry, there’s no way in hell anyone gets on a ship without us knowing exactly who they are.’~~

‘That’s good to know,’ he muttered, staring up at the ceiling, and wondering if Nirav had yet checked his DNA profile against the Legislature’s security databases.

‘Hey Wake up.’

Nathan grumbled and shook his head, opening bleary eyes. He could tell it was dawn because the light outside the window was now marginally brighter than during the night. Karen was already sitting up, the thick grey blanket pulled up around her naked breasts.

Two men stood by the open door to the office, dressed the same as any other troopers except for the grey shoulder markings that identified them as internal security. They were armed with pulse-rifles.

‘Ma’am,’ one of them said to Karen, throwing her a salute but unable to hide the smirk on his face. ‘Sorry to wake you, but we’ve got orders.’

‘What goddamn orders?’ she snapped.

Nathan glanced down towards Karen’s pistol, still in its holster and half-hidden under her tangled clothes, and decided his chances of surviving a shoot-out were minimal in the extreme.

‘We’re here to take Mr Whitecloud into custody,’ said the trooper who’d spoken. ‘The orders came from Representative Munn. You’ll see they’re marked highest priority.’ He passed the credentials to her.

She scanned the papers for a moment before looking back up. ‘Ty Whitecloud?’ she asked, looking utterly confused. ‘Who the hell is Ty Whitecloud?’

‘He is, ma’am,’ the trooper replied, nodding towards the man who had been calling himself Nathan Driscoll.

Karen turned to stare at him like she’d never set eyes on him before.

Chapter Three

PRIORITY MESSAGE Code ALPHA security rating 15 Compiled by OFFICE OF SECURITY OCEAN'S DEEP/DATE:2544:6:6 via Hubert Tach-Net Array. Authorized by WILLIS, OLIVARRI OUSPENSKY.

REPORT SUMMARY FROM:

Navigators GILLIES, SATIE, YUSEF, MAZZINI, YOSHI Direct observations of artificial induced novae to date: 15

Sightings of Emissary fleets: 13 Estimated Threat Level at time of report: 7 (0-10)

Notes: Navigators GILLIES and YUSEF report contact with Emissaries at 0.91+0.78 kiloparsecs 2544: 6:2+2544:5:29

Location of Navigator SATIE unknown following last report: filed under MISSING.

SUMMARY ANALYSIS: Dispersal of Emissary fleets in region designated 'Long War' suggests likely contact with colonies in maximum 1.577×10^7 seconds

RECOMMENDATIONS: 1:CITATION for Navigator SATIE. 2:Raise Threat Level to 8(0-10) PRIORITY MESSAGE ENDS

OFFICE OF SECURITY

The blow was unexpected, a hard jab that caught Lucas Corso on the side of his ribcage and half-spun him around. He staggered slightly before regaining his balance and quickly dropped into the correct defensive posture, ready for the next assault.

'You're dead already,' Breisch snapped, flexing the fingers of his free hand. The other held a short sword, its blade slightly curved and razor-sharp. 'Attack, not defence.'

Corso scented his own blood, mixed with sweat, where Breisch had slashed him across the chest. He kept his breathing under control and snapped out with his feet and arms in a series of coordinated lunges, pushing his opponent back across the training suite.

Corso yelled with each lunge, barking his anger as Breisch dodged and dipped and spun out of reach. He sucked in air, legs slightly bent at the knees, almost a dancer's posture.

Breisch was right: if this had been the real thing, he'd be dead by now. He was slipping badly, and the reasons were all too obvious.

A priority alert then appeared in the form of a softly glowing lozenge of light projected from a ceiling-mounted mechanism. Breisch saw it and immediately relaxed into a non-combat posture, legs straight, hands clasped behind his back. His skin was slick with sweat, so at least Corso knew Breisch hadn't made it too easy for his teacher.

'That was a bad slip you made,' Breisch told him calmly. 'We're going to have to work on you'

response times. It's a weakness that any half-decent fighter could exploit, Senator.'

'I appreciate that, Mr Breisch,' Corso replied, ~~picking up his shirt and using it to wipe the sweat~~ from his neck and face. Breisch was one of the best deadly-combat trainers in the Freehold, and it had taken a lot of money to persuade him to leave Redstone and become his personal trainer.

'The gravity here on Eugenia may also be an issue,' Breisch added. 'We may have to work on more strategies for coping with different strengths of gravity, particularly if you keep moving around as much as you have been.'

'Noted,' Corso replied. 'We'll pick up from here tomorrow morning.'

Breisch nodded and left the room. Corso stepped through to a shower room and washed the blood and sweat away, then used some coagulant to stop the bleeding before applying a strip of bandage to the wound.

'Report,' he said to the air, once the water had shut off.

There was a soft chime in his right ear, and a female voice with rounded tones began to speak. 'Nisha here, Senator Corso. There's been another sabotage attempt. A robot cargo transport deviated and made straight for Eugenia. The good news is that we caught it long before it got anywhere near us.'

'You're certain it was sabotage? Not just a systems failure?'

'The platform's brain had been very expertly hacked, Senator. There's no doubt it was deliberate.'

Corso groaned silently, and started to towel himself dry. Another crisis to deal with. 'Anything else?'

'An urgent request from Ted Lamoureaux, who wants a meeting with you straight away. Something for your ears only, he said.'

'First things first.' Anger flowed like heat through his thoughts; there had to be some way to make people understand he wouldn't tolerate these constant acts of terrorism. 'We need to be seen to be reacting to this strongly and positively. Do we have any idea at all who's responsible for the sabotage?'

'Nothing clear as yet, but we've got analysts taking the transport's brain apart right now.'

Sometimes he wondered just whose bright idea it had been to give him this much responsibility, and then he reminded himself, for the millionth time, that he had volunteered for the job. Previous investigations of attempts to either kill him or hurt the colony in Ocean's Deep had a nasty habit of running into dead ends. Would-be executioners and saboteurs either proved to be mercenaries with no knowledge of who'd hired them, or simply turned up dead by the time the Consortium's own intelligence services tracked them down.

'Who's our most likely suspect?' he asked. 'I'm talking governments here, Nisha. Who would you say wants rid of me the most of all this week?'

'I would guess. . . the Midgarth security services are near the top. There are rumours they've been soliciting secret talks with both Morgan's World and Bohr. In addition, they've been openly vetoing our request to take part in the next round of crisis talks. Also, some of their more recent candidates for navigator training turned out to have connections deep within their respective intelligence communities. We rejected them, naturally.'

'We've been sitting around while other people take potshots at us for far too long. Where's Willis right now?' Corso asked, referring to his security head back at Ocean's Deep.

'Probably asleep, Senator. I reckon Leo Olivarri would be on active watch-duty about now.' Olivarri was Willis's deputy.

Corso grunted and checked the bandage in a mirror, to make sure it wasn't going to slip. His arm and chest were marked with a fine criss-crossing of scars, like memories of pain and death carved in his flesh.

He started to get dressed, pulling on an anti-ballistic vest made from compacted layers genetically enhanced spider-silk, then a formal dress shirt on top. A carefully concealed holstered pistol was next, followed by a slim blade tucked down the back of one boot. He kept himself armed all times these days, and had recently spent a lot of time in the company of men like Breisch, learning how to properly use the various weapons he carried.

In the two years since Dakota had left, his chest had broadened and any excess fat had drained from his face, lending him a much more angular appearance. His fingers had grown calloused from months of weapons and hand-to-hand combat training. There was a long, dark burn mark on the inside of his left arm, invisible beneath his shirt – testament to a challenge he had taken part in less than a year before.

‘All right, Nisha, this is what we’re going to do,’ he said, pulling on his jacket. ‘Tell Leo to wake Willis up. I want them to locate and round up every Midgarth representative to the Fleet he can find in the Ocean’s Deep, and have them hauled in. They can call it protective custody, but make sure that, one way or another, at least some of them are formally arrested and charged on suspicion of espionage.’

‘I’m not aware that we have sufficient leads to warrant any such arrests, Senator.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Do it anyway. If they don’t like it, they can catch the next ship going home.’ He thought for a moment. ‘And if we can’t find any leads, keep them locked up, anyway. Let’s see if we can stir up some shit for a change.’

‘They won’t be happy, sir.’

Understatement of the century, thought Corso, but said, ‘Fuck them. I also want all of the representatives’ assets, financial and otherwise, frozen pending an immediate investigation. Have the office put together a general press release after the fact, nothing too specific. But I want it worded such a way that it’s clear we intend to take a stand. Even if Midgarth isn’t involved, maybe some of the others will think twice if they think their heads might wind up on the block as well.’

‘Yes, Senator.’

The chime sounded again, indicating that the link had been broken.

Corso took a deep breath, and pulled a small vial out of his jacket pocket. He shook a couple of pills out of it and swallowed them dry. How many hours a night of sleep was he getting these days? Four maybe five?

The medication helped, but he knew he was overdoing it.

Corso exited the gym and met the half-dozen heavily armed men and women that comprised his personal security detail in the building’s lobby. From there it was a short walk across an open plaza to the domed building that housed Eugenia’s government offices. His guards surrounded him, their weapons discreetly tucked into pockets or within easy reach inside jackets. Tiny security devices whirred in the air around them like mechanical insects, scanning for anything that might be missed by ordinary human eyes.

Eugenia had started life as an asteroid and, like so many of the larger bodies scattered throughout the Sol system following first contact with the Shoal, had been transformed by using the Shoal’s own technology. A gravity engine had been buried at the asteroid’s core, while shaped fields completely surrounding it retained a pressurized atmosphere and protected it from radiation. Fusion torches suspended from poles that pushed through the shaped fields like pins through soap bubbles – shot heat and light down on the tiny world.

It was the first boosted world Corso had ever found himself on, and he couldn’t say for sure if he was enjoying the experience. His stomach lurched every time he caught sight of the impossibly close horizon.

For all that, Eugenia was one of the largest of the Main Belt boosted worlds, and a little over two hundred kilometres in diameter. It had started out larger, but its original rough, potato-like shape had

been less than ideal, so it had been blasted and sculpted into something more approximating a sphere. It had even been allowed to retain Petit-Prince, one of its two small moons. An iron sculpture of Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince stood near the centre of the plaza, gazing up at a point where his namesake would pass overhead every five days.

But before very long, the asteroid and its moons were going to become eternally separated. The Little Prince was going to have to make his own way through space.

Yugo Stankovic, one of Corso's aides, was waiting for him in the foyer of the government building. 'All right, Yugo, Nisha already gave me an outline of what's happened. Is there anything else I should know?' Corso asked, as Stankovic matched pace with him. The security detail made their way elsewhere while Corso and his aide headed for a bank of elevators.

'What she told you, she got from me. We managed to disable the cargo platform remotely without any further incident, but it was pretty close.'

'How bad could it have been?'

'It could have wiped us out. The Consortium's own intelligence services are working hard to stop any word of this getting out to the media, and Eugenia's prime minister took the chair of an emergency session about five minutes ago.' Stankovic smiled and shrugged. 'We're not invited, of course.'

An elevator arrived and they stepped inside. 'Who's in charge of figuring out who's responsible?'

'Lieutenant Nazarro of our own Authority security is working on it with the local security heads in a separate meeting,' Stankovic replied. 'I should have an initial report from him within the hour.'

Corso flexed his hands, and found himself wishing for a more tangible enemy. All the careful manoeuvring of the last few years was coming to nothing. Whoever was responsible for these acts of sabotage was doing a good job of remaining eternally elusive, leaving him with the near-certainty that the only ones capable of covering their tracks so thoroughly were precisely those governments that coveted the Peacekeeper Authority's power the most. As far as most of them were concerned, he was the one thing standing between them and the stars.

The elevator doors hissed open and they stepped into a suite of offices. Ted Lamoureaux was already there, sprawled on a couch.

'Ted,' said Corso, stepping forward and shaking Lamoureaux's hand, after the other man stood up to greet him. 'Good to see you. We'll talk through here.'

The starship navigator was a slight, pale-featured man in his thirties, with a perpetually worried look. He was also – in common with Dakota Merrick and every other Magi-enabled navigator with the Consortium – a machine-head, his skull filled with consciousness-altering technology that made him uniquely suited to interfacing with the starships that Dakota had summoned to Ocean's Deep.

Lamoureaux followed them into an office with a wide picture window. Hundreds of newly installed drive-spines – spaced equidistant from each other all around Eugenia's surface – were visible beyond the window. They were a recent addition, an essential part of the asteroid's slow transformation into a full-fledged starship. Each spine was hundreds of metres tall and gracefully curving, giving Eugenia the appearance from a distance of some enormous space-going bacterium coated in metallic cilia.

Corso dropped on to a couch. 'Whatever it is you wanted to talk to me about is going to have to wait a few minutes. I need to know why Eugenia's new FTL drive still hasn't arrived.'

'It's all in my report.'

'Yeah, I know. Just humour me, Ted.'

Lamoureaux shrugged and slipped a ring from the finger of one hand, then dropped it on to the active plate of an imager unit set up near the window. He touched the machine's controls, and a

image of an airless dwarf planet appeared above the plate, slowly rotating. A Maker cache had been found there little more than a year before, at Iota Horologii – the Tierra system, as it was more commonly known. Other images appeared, cut-away schematics showing the cache’s layout, kilometres-deep shaft drilled deep into the planet’s crust, with thousands of needle-like passageways extending out from the shaft.

One of these passageways, Corso knew, contained a machine called a drive-forge, a template-driven fabricator that could manufacture new superluminal engines for faster-than-light travel.

The Tierra system had briefly been home to a Uchidan colony before the Shoal Hegemony had reclaimed it without explanation. The uprooted colonists had been evacuated to a new home on Redstone, an ill-fated decision that left the Uchidans in a state of near-permanent war with the Freehold colony already long established there.

Much more recently, it had been discovered that the Shoal had been actively suppressing knowledge of the existence of these caches for a very, very long time. When they’d discovered this particular cache orbiting out in the very farthest reaches of the Tierra system, the Shoal had reneged on the existing contracts with the Uchidans.

But now the Shoal themselves were gone, and the cache had been quickly rediscovered, and subsequently placed under the control of the Peacekeeper Authority. Corso had been locked in a political battle with the Consortium Legislature ever since, desperate for the resources and personnel needed to exploit the cache, but forced to make more and more concessions in order to get them.

‘All the latest research is right here on this data ring,’ Lamoureaux explained. ‘It can take up to a couple of weeks to produce a single superluminal drive, and as soon as one is finished half a dozen different colonial governments, with their own agendas, start threatening embargoes and worse if we don’t give it to them. At the moment most of the drives are meant to go into ships intended for relief operations throughout the Consortium, but we’ve got no guarantees that’s what they’ll get used for. That and about a hundred other reasons are why there are so many delays, and why Eugenia doesn’t have its drive yet. And that’s before we even get to considering the increasing rate of neural burnout in our machine-head pilots. We’ve had to retire nearly a third of our longest-serving navigators in the past six months.’

‘“Neural burnout”? Is that what they’re calling it now?’

‘That and the bends, but the neurologists prefer not to call it that. It’s primarily affecting the ones who’ve been piloting Magi ships the longest.’

‘Like yourself.’

‘So far I’ve been fine, but it might only be a matter of time.’

‘And we still don’t know what’s causing this?’

‘Nope.’

Corso leaned back and stared up at the ceiling, suddenly feeling wearier despite the pills. ‘In other words, we’re even more fucked than we already were.’

Lamoureaux spread his hands. ‘Look . . . I don’t want to be the one to have to say this, but if things keep on the way they are, we’re going to wind up losing navigators faster than we can replace them. We might then be forced to give the Legislature at least some of what it wants.’

‘Specifically?’

‘Relaxing the rules governing the recruitment of new navigators. Allow the Legislature, and the governments it represents, to share the responsibility for finding and training them.’

‘Which would leave the Peacekeeper Authority without any purpose. Or authority.’

Lamoureaux’s expression was carefully non-committal.

‘Yugo,’ Corso asked, ‘your thoughts?’

‘If I can speak candidly?’

Corso nodded.

~~‘I think Ted’s right. If we don’t make major concessions now, the Legislature might claim we’re being unreasonable and merely blocking them. That might be just enough of an excuse for them to try to and make a grab for the Tierra cache. The Allocation Treaty means a certain proportion of finished drives go to them, so if they then decided to carry out a military action against us, they’d have the means and resources to do it.’~~

‘Not to mention,’ Lamoureaux added, ‘a lot of ships are being retro-fitted to make it harder for them to be remotely grabbed by machine-heads. That means we might not be able to stop them, even with the help of the Magi ships. Unless we threaten to blow up their suns.’

‘Not even remotely funny,’ Corso muttered. Clearly he was going to have to intervene directly over the business of Eugenia’s drive. ‘Whatever else it is you came here to tell me, I really hope it’s good news.’

‘We received a transmission from Dakota Merrick.’

Corso tried not to look too startled. ‘It’s been, what, more than a year? I was beginning to . . .’ *I wonder if she was even still alive*, he almost said.

‘She’s rendezvoused with the Maker,’ Lamoureaux continued. ‘We received a targeted burst from her several hours ago. According to what she sent us, the Maker is really a swarm of space-going machines, quite vast in number. The evidence points to a single, unified intelligence, even though individual components are apparently spread out across a number of light-years.’

Lamoureaux reached out to the imager once more, and the Tierra cache was replaced by something that looked more like a metal sculpture created by a psychotic than it suggested a space-going vessel.

There’s something evil-looking about it, Corso thought, even though he knew it was pointless to attribute human qualities to something so very clearly alien.

‘The swarm possessed data relating to something called the “Mos Hadroch”, which it apparently regards as a serious threat,’ Lamoureaux explained. ‘According to the Magi’s own records, it’s some kind of weapon of phenomenal power, but – until now – there was never any evidence that it even existed.’

Corso stared at the image of the swarm-component. ‘And this means it does?’

‘Dakota came up against a blank wall, and asked us to see if we could find any correlation with anything known to us. Imagine our surprise when we did. Now, look at this.’

The swarm-component was replaced by an image of a lumpy-looking asteroid. ‘This is an Atn clade-world,’ Lamoureaux explained. ‘You can find them out on the edge of many systems in the Consortium.’

‘I know something about them,’ observed Corso. ‘I studied some of their machine-languages. They travel everywhere at sublight speeds.’

‘And they usually stick to the very remotest part of a system. If Dakota’s findings are anything to go by, the depths of interstellar space are even more densely infested with them than we thought.’

An image of an Atn now appeared next to the hollowed-out asteroid. A large, rectangular metal body, covered in a curious alien calligraphy, sat on top of four stumpy legs. At the end of each leg, thick, splayed metal claws gripped the ground, while a mass of mechanical manipulators extended from a slot just below the brick-shaped head.

‘Since they can visit parts of the galaxy we ourselves couldn’t until recently, there was always the chance we might learn something from them,’ Lamoureaux continued. ‘Which is why we’ve been studying them carefully ever since we came into contact with them.’

Corso nodded. ‘And?’

‘Imagine our surprise when we stumbled across references to a “Mos Hadroch” in some research papers written just a couple of decades ago by a specialist who’s still around. The term crops up

relation to one specific Atn clade called “Eclipse-over-Moon”.’

‘So what do we know about them?’

‘Practically nothing, and the term shows up only once, and in an oblique reference at that. But the man who actually wrote the papers knows more about this particular clade-family than anyone else alive.’

Corso nodded. ‘Then we need to track him down.’

There was a look on Lamoureux’s face as if he was trying to make up his mind whether or not to tell Corso something. ‘Already on it, and . . . I’d like your permission to get him to Ocean’s Deep as soon as possible.’

‘Granted. Who is he?’

‘His name is Ty Whitecloud, Senator.’

Corso sat stock-still for a moment, then stood up carefully. ‘No,’ he said, very simply, and turned towards the door.

‘Senator, there isn’t anyone else who knows as much about the Atn as he does.’

‘Perhaps you didn’t hear me the first time, Ted. I said no. There are other people who could—’

‘With the greatest respect, Senator, but there aren’t,’ said Stankovic. ‘It’s a pretty rarefied field.’

‘I know a little about Atn machine-languages, Yugo. I’ve even read one or two of Whitecloud’s papers. But there are others we could try.’ He thought for a moment. Anton Laroque and Sophie Sprau for a start. They’re leaders in the field.’

Lamoureux shook his head. ‘We checked them out already. Laroque was in Night’s End when it was destroyed, and Sprau’s extremely elderly and on life-support back on Earth. She isn’t expected to survive more than another couple of weeks. That leaves only Whitecloud.’

‘He’s a war criminal,’ Corso barked.

‘Sir?’ asked Stankovic, looking puzzled.

Stankovic was from Derinkuyu, Corso remembered then, a long way from Redstone. ‘Whitecloud was a Uchidan,’ Corso explained. ‘Or at least he worked for them. One of the bright lights of the scientific community at one time. Do you remember the Port Gabriel incident?’

Stankovic’s eyes slid to one side as he strove to recall buried memories of media reports from years before. ‘In the general details only.’

‘The Uchidans found a way to control the minds of machine-heads sent to Redstone as part of the Consortium peacekeeping force. Uchidan skull implants aren’t, after all, that fundamentally different from those of machine-heads. They identified a flaw in the machine-head architecture and exploited it. The result was a massacre that killed a huge number of non-combatants.’

‘And Whitecloud was implicated?’

‘He was,’ said Lamoureux, cutting in, ‘but he was a minor figure in the research project, not at all involved in the actual implementation. It’s important to make that distinction.’

‘That doesn’t make him any less respon—’ Corso snapped his fingers. ‘I remember now. Whitecloud escaped from custody, years ago. And now you know where he is?’

Lamoureux nodded. ‘Legislate agents tracked him down in Ascension a couple of weeks back and he’s being held in a barracks prison there. Turns out he’d been hiding under an assumed identity for years. It’s possible we could spring him, but we’d have to move fast.’

Corso regarded him with a pained expression. ‘Ted . . . if it came out that we were employing war criminals, we’d be kissing any chance of concord with the Legislate goodbye for ever.’

‘Well, that gives us a serious problem, Senator,’ Lamoureux replied, ‘because if Dakota’s on to something, we’re going to need Whitecloud very, very badly.’

Corso glanced at the door and fantasized for a moment about just walking out of there and having nothing to do with what Lamoureux was suggesting. And yet, at the same time, he sensed – not for

the first time – the inevitability of having to compromise what he had once considered the immutable beliefs and values he had long held dear. After the last couple of years, he was almost getting used to it.

He sighed and sat back down. ‘You’re a machine-head yourself, Ted. How can you even contemplate this?’

‘Because sometimes you just have to live with the cards life deals you, Senator. I have good friends who would never talk to me again if they had any idea what I’m suggesting here. If there was another way, believe me, I’d take it. But Whitecloud was far from the worst of them.’

‘And that’s in your best professional judgement?’

‘It is, but we need to move fast on this. Most of the Emissary forces are still kiloparsecs away, but advance scouts have been observed engaging with Shoal fleets a lot closer to home. I’d like to go to Ascension and take charge of this myself, with your permission.’

‘Alright, fine, if that’s what it takes,’ Corso replied, a void seeming to form deep inside his chest. ‘Tell Willis he’s to rendezvous with you there as well. Olivarri can take care of things at Ocean Deep for now. You understand,’ he added, ‘that if any word of this gets out . . .’

‘It won’t.’

Lamoureux left a few moments later, and Corso noticed the fusion globes outside were beginning to dim in preparation for evening, the ghostly band of the Milky Way gradually becoming visible.

Somewhere out there, entire star systems were being destroyed all along the frontiers of the Long War, a vast region encompassing the outer rim of the Orion Arm. There were reports of fleets so vast they were almost beyond comprehension, and these made the idea that Dakota or anyone could possibly affect them seem hopelessly deluded. But they had to try.

‘If this doesn’t work,’ Corso said, so quietly that Stankovic had to strain to hear him, ‘then the only thing left to do is save what we can.’

‘Senator?’

Corso stared out beyond the fading fusion globes, picturing the light spreading out from distant novae like a fiery cancer. ‘If we don’t find a way out of this mess, we’re going to have to dispatch ships, as far away as we can, and found new colonies in some other part of the galaxy where the war can’t reach them. At least that way we might save some.’

He stood and moved towards the door. ‘Arrange for a priority message back to Dakota. Let Ted know about it, too. Tell her what we’ve found out and make sure she’s kept up to date whenever something new comes up.’

Lamoureux hesitated. ‘What about Whitecloud? Do we mention him?’

‘Dakota was at Port Gabriel during the massacres. I think we’d better not mention him at all, don’t you?’

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