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—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

C. A. HIGGINS

LIGHTLESS

The background of the cover is a deep space scene. At the top, there are several bright, colorful stars and nebulae. Below this, a large, dark, swirling tunnel or vortex dominates the center. A bright, glowing blue and white light source is positioned at the center of this tunnel, with a thin, vertical beam of light extending upwards from it towards the top of the page. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, whites, and blacks, with some hints of purple and red in the distant stars.

LIGHTLESS

C. A. HIGGINS



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Lightless is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Part 1

THE ZEROETH LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

If two systems are in thermal equilibrium with a third system, they are also in thermal equilibrium with each other.

Chapter 1

INITIAL CONDITIONS

When there was something wrong in the *Ananke*, Althea knew.

The *Ananke* was a special ship. The *Ananke* was a miracle—a miracle of engineering, a miracle of physics, a miracle of computing. The *Ananke* was beautiful, its gravity-producing mass nestled in its center, contained by a cage of sparking magnets, with the rest of the ship curling out over that core. The lights of windows studding its black spiral like bioluminescence. When it drifted through black space, it looked like an extinct creature of Terran ocean depths, a creature out of time and into space. The *Ananke* was Althea's in heart if not in law, and Althea knew her every inch.

For that reason, when there was something wrong in the *Ananke*, Althea knew.

“Scan of the filtration system reports no abnormalities,” Domitian said from behind her. The crew of the *Ananke* was so small that even the captain had to aid with System-mandated tasks. He sat on the opposite side of the control room, running scans on the other end of the U-shaped control panel. The control room was narrow enough that Althea could have turned around, stretched out her arm, casting a shadow on the dull metal tiles, and touched his broad shoulder with the tips of her fingers.

“Right,” Althea muttered, her eyes tripping from line to line on the code scrolling up the screen.

“Did you finish the atmospheric check?” Domitian asked, his voice a low rumble.

“I'm running it again.”

Domitian said, steady, solid, “Is there something wrong?”

Althea didn't answer him, only continued to scan the results displayed before her. “I'm okay,” said the scans in the language of math and code, but they were wrong; she knew it.

Althea became aware of movement behind her, the scraping of a chair against the metal of the floor, the sound of Domitian's boots against the deck. She felt him lean over, hand braced against the wall. The underlighting from the display made his craggy cheeks covered with gray stubble look rough like old stone.

“Show me what you're seeing when you see it,” he said. “The System wants a report of anything that might be wrong.”

Althea knew. That was why she was running this scan again—for the third time, not that she would tell Domitian—on the faintest feeling of something being off. The System kept order, kept peace, and something that great could not be *afraid*—yet the System had sent down a mandate for increased security, and if there was enough cause for the System to enforce these kinds of countermeasures

Althea was worried enough about her ship to run the scans a third time on a distant suspicion.

“Do you think it’s that terrorist?” Althea asked as the scan scrolled on.

She felt rather than saw Domitian glance up at the ever-present surveillance camera in the corner of the room. The *Ananke* would record everything that camera saw and then send a copy to the System. All ships did, System or not; all locations on planet or off, public or private, did the same.

“It’s not for us to speculate,” Domitian said. “Just make sure the *Ananke* is fine.”

The orders to increase security had come on the heels of a Systemwide raise of the terrorism threat level. Althea didn’t think it was too great a leap to connect the two, but Domitian was right. They probably were not supposed to know.

Althea saw the error before she consciously recognized it. “There,” she said, and paused the scan. It was small, and so it had passed by too fast for her to notice twice before, but now that she saw it, it was glaringly off, glaringly wrong, clearly stitched together with two disparate pieces, as if someone had sewn the head of a man to the body of a dog. Someone else’s code had been inserted into her own. Whoever had done it had been skillful. Anyone else wouldn’t have noticed; Althea almost had not.

She read it through.

“It’s the docking bay,” she said, and then rose, knocking into Domitian’s chest in her sudden urgency. “Someone’s boarded.”

Domitian was moving before Althea had finished the last word, checking his sidearm, any signs of paternal patience vanished from his face.

“Go to the armory,” he said tersely. “Arm yourself and take the spares as well. Then join me in the docking bay. Lock the control room after yourself and be on your guard.”

“Should I wake Gagnon?” Althea had to half chase him; he was already out the door.

“No time,” said Domitian, and then he was stalking down the hall with his gun out, one hand ready to fire, the palm of the other beneath to brace it.

Althea took a breath; adrenaline was making her hands tremble.

Then she did as she was ordered and let training take over. She locked the door to the control room, sent an advisement to the System of their situation, went to the armory, and took the three guns inside to prevent the intruders from gaining any extra weaponry, clipping two to her belt and taking just a single magazine of ammunition, which she thrust into the frame of the gun she’d chosen for herself with only the faintest tremor still in her fingers.

Then she headed back up the *Ananke*’s single long, winding hallway, the spine of the ship, feeling the pull of gravity lessen the farther she got away from the ship’s lightless core. It was because she knew the *Ananke* so well that instead of going directly to join Domitian in the docking bay, she paused in front of the door leading to the physical location of the *Ananke*’s mission data banks.

If someone wanted access to the most highly classified System information that the *Ananke* knew, this was where they would go.

Althea took a breath, flexed her hand around her gun—brought up her other hand to brace it—then pushed the door inward, bursting into the data repository, a steely dark room filled with computer towers flashing dim blue lights.

On the opposite end of the room, bent over the room’s one direct computer interface, stood the figure of a man.

“Don’t move!” Althea said, and he raised his hands in the air.

He was slender, on the short side but taller than Althea, with pale blond hair cropped close. He was wearing cat-burgling clothes, a tight black turtleneck and fitted black pants with black boots so well worn that they didn't creak as he slowly straightened up, black-gloved hands upraised. Althea stepped carefully into the room, eyeing the corners for accomplices. It would be difficult for anyone to hide among the densely packed wires and data towers, the neurons of the ship that covered the steely gray of the walls and even stretched to the gridded ceiling, but Althea would take no chances.

The man started to turn around. Althea snapped, "I said don't move!"

The man completed the turn, and Althea was briefly struck silent. The most brilliant blue Althea had ever seen had been in the sky of the equatorial region on Earth, where she had gone for a brief vacation from her studies. That did not compare to the brilliant color of the man's eyes. His appearance in the *Ananke's* data banks was as unsettling as if the one who had been the most beautiful of God's angels had stepped out of the ether onto the *Ananke* and started to fiddle with the computer.

"It's always a pleasure," said the stranger, and his accent was strange and shifting, Terran now, Martian then, a trace of icy Miranda in the vowels, "to be held at gunpoint by a beautiful woman."

He smiled at her. He had a smile like a wolf.

The sight of that smile loosened Althea's tongue. "Who are you?" she said.

"A passing traveler."

"What do you want with my ship?"

"Your ship?" said the stranger, with keen interest, but before Althea could respond, her name was barked down the winding hall of the ship.

"Althea!" It was Domitian.

"In here."

She heard not one but two sets of footsteps and saw Domitian shoving another man in front of him. There were only three crew members on the *Ananke*; this man was not one of them, and with a sinking heart Althea realized that he was a second intruder. The new stranger was taller and darker than the blue-eyed man, with a fringe of brown hair hanging into his eyes. He had one arm tucked up against his chest, his other arm holding it in place, and Althea's eyes lingered on the swollen portion of his forearm, oddly bent, that indicated a violent and recent break. It was nothing a session in a System medical brace would not heal in a matter of days, but it had to be painful.

At the sight of him, the blue-eyed stranger's jaw grew tighter, then grew tighter still when Domitian shoved him ungentle forward to join the blue-eyed man at the back of the room. Seeing them together the familiar way they traded glances, Althea realized that they knew each other. They must have boarded together.

"Empty your pockets," Domitian said with his gun trained on both men. "Turn them out."

The man with the broken arm scowled and seemed about to protest, but the blue-eyed man, with his expression inscrutable, immediately turned out his pockets, letting a knife, a few small tools, and a variety of data storage chips clatter onto the floor like flakes of steely snow. The man with the broken arm followed suit, with similar items appearing but slender twisted bars following. For a moment Althea could not think what they might be and wondered why he was carrying twisted bits of wire. Then she realized that breaking into the *Ananke* would require more than picking electronic locks; it would require opening physical doors as well. The bits of wire and metal must be lock picks. She lifted her gun back up.

“I want them in separate rooms,” Domitian said to Althea in his calm, even voice. The two men watched him closely like dogs sizing one another up. Althea was faintly relieved to have been excused from the blue-eyed man’s attention. “One in the ship’s brig, one in the storeroom nearby.”

“And what if we don’t go?” the blue-eyed man asked.

“Your friend tried to resist me,” said Domitian. “I snapped his arm. What do you want me to do for you?”

The blue-eyed man smiled, white teeth showing.

“I mean if we think getting shot would be better than going into your brig,” he said, clarifying with a show of false politeness that perfectly matched his Terran accent.

Althea’s hand twitched around her gun. For a moment she was afraid Domitian really would shoot him or order her to fire.

She was not the only one; the man with the broken arm was very tense, as if he were getting ready to move suddenly. Domitian didn’t do anything for a breath of time, his face as cold and set as stone, but then his gun twitched very slightly, the angle of its trajectory changing from the blue-eyed man to the chest of the man with the broken arm.

The blue-eyed man scrutinized him for a moment longer, then glanced at his friend and nodded very slightly. Domitian led the way out of the room, the two strangers following and Althea keeping to the rear, her finger slipping from the trigger guard to the trigger and back again.

There was no trouble putting the strangers in their cells. Domitian must have judged the blue-eyed man to be the more dangerous of the two, and so he ended up in the *Ananke*’s one genuine cell, and the injured man in an empty metal room with the door locked from the outside. Both rooms were near the very lowest part of the ship, in the very last part of the *Ananke*’s spiraled hallway, where the gravitic and the tidal forces were at their strongest. It made even Althea, accustomed to the *Ananke*, dizzy to stay too long down there.

As soon as the door had shut behind the blue-eyed man, blocking his disquieting gaze, Domitian turned to Althea and said shortly, “Wake Gagnon; send him to join me. There may be more intruders. You go back to the control room. Lock yourself inside, update the System on our status, monitor the computer and the cameras. Find out their identity. We’ll communicate via the intercom, but keep chatter to a minimum. Clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Althea said, and left.

—

Gagnon, the supervising scientist on board and the final member of the *Ananke*’s three-person crew, was, like most scientists, not a morning person. He answered the intercom in a tone that suggested that he was contemplating the manner of Althea’s untimely death but was roused rather quickly when she told him about the intruders.

“What?” he said, his voice crackly and thick with static, filtered through the machine. “How do they get on board?”

“They hacked the *Ananke*’s computer and tricked her into letting them board,” said Althea, sitting in front of a vast screen, most of which was taken up by the tiled video displays of a hundred or so of the *Ananke*’s thousand cameras. The part of the screen Althea was focused on, however, contained direct access to the mind of the ship and a message she was writing to be sent to the System.

“How the hell did they do that?” Under other circumstances, Althea would have been flattered by Gagnon’s incredulous tone; at the moment, it only annoyed her.

“I don’t know yet,” she said, and attached photographs of both prisoners, stills from the video feed to the message along with her write-up and sent it. The *Ananke*’s cameras sent their footage of the inside of the ship to the System at regular intervals, but the manpower involved in monitoring the constant solar system-wide surveillance was so great that it was possible no one was watching the *Ananke*’s footage live. The truth was that with the increasing violence in the outer solar system, the System’s resources were overtaxed. It was not something the System wanted its citizens to know for fear that certain sects would take this as a chance to be even more unruly, but Althea knew it. She and the rest of the crew always had to act as if they were being watched, but sending a report would generate a faster and more certain response.

Gagnon, fortunately, took warning from her tone and didn’t pursue the subject. “And Domitian wants me to do what?”

“Search the ship with him in case there are any more,” Althea said. “I have your sidearm; you’ll have to stop by the control room to get it from me.”

When she glanced up at the tile showing the footage of Gagnon’s room, she saw that he was just sweeping his long red hair back into a ponytail and zipping up his uniform jumpsuit, scrubbing a hand across his unshaven chin and leaving the stubble be.

In the video, he stopped at the intercom beside the door and punched the button. In unison with the movement of the image on the screen, his voice came from the intercom at Althea’s elbow: “I’ll be there in a moment.”

Now that Althea knew what the intruders had done, it was a simple matter to track it down and undo it. Here in the control room, with the entire ship arrayed before her in its code and in its cameras, she was nestled next to *Ananke*’s cerebellum.

Gagnon arrived to get his weapon, briefly breaking into her almost meditative state.

“Where’s Domitian now?” he asked, buckling it to his waist, towering over Althea on her gray padded chair.

“Docking bay. When you see him, tell him that the camera feeds from the docking bay when the intruders boarded are completely corrupted; I can’t access them.”

Gagnon nodded and leaned forward to look at the video feed from the docking bay; tall and thin, he leaned right over her without pushing into her space. “That’s their ship?” he asked, pointing at a large ship shaped like a Ferris wheel parked on the *Ananke*’s deck. Though it was tall, it was dwarfed by the vast cavernous emptiness of the *Ananke*’s hold. “Nothing special. Too massive to have a relativistic drive; standard centripetal gravitation model. Transport and living quarters, not weaponized.”

“So?” Althea demanded.

Gagnon’s hand clapped down on her shoulder. “So they’re probably thieves,” he said, “not saboteurs,” and with a quirked smile, he left her alone.

She let out a breath after he was gone and tried not to be too reassured by Gagnon’s certainty. She couldn’t let herself relax until she had seen with her own two eyes that no one had done anything permanent to her ship.

While she worked, Gagnon and Domitian started their sweep of the ship. Whenever one finished sweeping a room, he would tell the other one over the intercom.

“Clear,” said Gagnon.

“Clear,” said Domitian a moment later, his deeper voice rendered staticky and scratchy by its passage through the ship’s wiring. The *Ananke*’s dark core was harsh on electronics.

The more Althea looked, the more it seemed that Gagnon had been right: the men were thieves, not saboteurs, and their interaction with the ship’s computer had been solely for the purpose of getting on board. They had deceived the computer—and Althea—so well only because they were so practiced at coercing ships’ computers into allowing them to board.

Still, she went through all the important processes, checking, just to be *sure*.

“Clear,” said Domitian.

A polite chime from another part of the enormous screen caught Althea’s attention. The System had responded to her message. There were files attached to their response, one labeled MATTHEW GALE and the other LEONTIOS IVANOV.

“Clear,” said Gagnon.

The message itself read:

The intruders have been identified as Matthew Gale (of Miranda) and Leontios Ivanov (formerly of Earth). They are known thieves and work together. On occasion they have a female accomplice named Abigail Hunter (of Miranda) [no photograph available]; perform a complete check of your vessel’s premises. Attached are the files for the two identified intruders. Read all flagged items and respond accordingly.

It was not signed. A single person must have typed it, but it had not come from that individual but rather from the System as a whole. The typist, whoever it had been, had been nothing more than the fingers to type it.

“Clear,” said Domitian.

Althea hit the intercom. “The System has identified our two intruders,” she said.

“Clear,” said Gagnon, and, “So who are they?”

“I haven’t read their files yet. The System says they usually work together on their own, but they might have a third accomplice, a woman.”

“Names,” Domitian demanded, as always terse.

“Matthew Gale and Leontios Ivanov,” Althea said, glancing back at the screen to be sure she got the names right. “The woman they might be working with is Abigail Hunter.”

“Ivanov?” said Gagnon. “That sounds familiar.”

“No chatter,” Domitian said. “Althea, read the files and report to us. Gagnon, this room is clear.”

“Yes, sir,” Gagnon said a little more smartly than was wise, and Althea opened the files.

The first file that opened was Matthew Gale’s. The image was immediately familiar to her as the man with the broken arm, although he clearly had been younger when the photo had been taken. Even though the photograph was a mug shot, he was smiling a crooked smile at the camera, looking fairly cheerful about his apparent incarceration. He hadn’t changed his appearance since the photograph had been taken; his brown hair was still just a centimeter away from dangling into his eyes in the front, and he was still clean-shaven.

Althea looked to the next file, already knowing who it would be.

Leontios Ivanov was the name of the man with the wolfish smile, but the man in the photograph and the man she had surprised bent over her computer were so different in affect that she might have doubted that they were the same man but for the blue of their eyes. He was even younger in his photograph than Gale was in his, wearing a brilliant blue high-collared shirt like the ones that were fashionable among the Terran elite, his handsome face as blank as a mask. The man in her hold had been as graceful and controlled as a wolf hunting was; the man in the picture was nothing more than rigid, stiff.

Ivanov's file had more flags than Gale's did. She told herself that was why she started with his, and not Gale's.

The first flag she encountered was POTENTIAL TERRORIST CONNECTIONS.

She hailed her crewmates immediately, checking Gale's file while she did. "Both our intruders are flagged for terrorist connections."

"You don't think maybe they were more than thieves?" Gagnon asked.

Althea thought nothing for sure right now; she only feared. Before she could respond, Domitian said, his deep voice calming, "We'll find out why they're here in time. Read the files all the way through, Althea."

Althea obeyed. The files clarified the terrorism flag, indicating that both Ivanov and Gale probably were connected to the terrorist called the Mallt-y-Nos, but before Althea could really take this in, he went on to say that the System believed the two men were only tangentially connected to the organization, if at all. Ivanov and Gale were hired thieves, grunts, nothing more. It was far more likely they were on the *Ananke* to rob her than to destroy her.

But why try to rob the *Ananke*? She was clearly not a merchant vessel. The *Ananke* was not designed for cargo but for scientific experiments. Perhaps they had hoped to find valuable scientific equipment on board—they would not have had any luck; the ship's extremely valuable scientific equipment was the ship itself—or perhaps they really had come on to destroy her.

Wondering would get her nowhere. Althea continued to read through Ivanov's file to the sound of Gagnon and Domitian announcing "Clear" as they checked each room.

The next tag said, GENETIC PREDISPOSITION TO ANTI-SYSTEM VIOLENCE.

Althea got back on the intercom.

"Ivanov's the son of Connor Ivanov," she said. "That's why you've heard of him, Gagnon."

"Connor Ivanov, the man who destroyed Saturn?" Domitian asked.

"Yes, him," said Althea. She had not yet been born when Connor Ivanov had declared Saturn and its moons independent of the System and begun a civil war; she had not yet been born when he had lost control of the moons almost immediately or when the System had come down like lightning from a wrathful god and restored peace forever. But she knew the story. It was a proud tale for System citizens to tell one another, how the System protected their peace and their safety without flinching without defeat.

Gagnon sounded triumphant. "That means his mother is Milla Ivanov. Doctor Milla Ivanov. The astrophysicist. *That's* how I know his name."

"Discuss this later," said Domitian. His voice was absolute, like the fall of a gavel, and stopped Althea before she could mention that she'd been to several of Doctor Milla Ivanov's lectures before too.

Leontios Ivanov looked a good deal like his mother now that Althea remembered her, and it seemed he had inherited her intelligence as well. From his father it appeared that all he had inherited had been heavy System surveillance. Althea could tell exactly the kind of man he was from his file: Terran, rich, intelligent—blessed. He had been at the top of his class at the North American branch of the Terran University. The System had sought to employ him.

Except that there was one more tag on his file, the oldest of the tags, and it read MOOD DISORDER.

At the age of nineteen he had tried to kill himself and nearly succeeded.

Althea looked back in the file at his blessed life and then back at the bare, sparse details of the attempted suicide and did not understand.

But sitting and wondering would get nothing done. For the moment, she dismissed her curiosity and moved on to Gale's file.

"Clear," said Gagnon.

Gale had many of the same tags as Ivanov—from what Althea could tell, they had started working together ten years earlier and had never stopped since—but his list of crimes stretched back much further than Ivanov's, back to when Gale was still a child in the foster system. Gale's file was straightforward; there was no incongruity of attempted suicide. Without disparagement she saw someone: lower class, from the outer planets, a problem child. It seemed strange that the two men would partner up.

"Clear," said Domitian.

The oldest tag on Matthew Gale's file was labeled FLIGHT RISK. For a moment, she did not understand what she was reading; then comprehension struck her like a bullet.

"Domitian, Gagnon," she said, interrupting Gagnon's announcement of "Clear!" He and Domitian were hardly halfway down the *Ananke's* central hall; they were far away from the two prisoners in their cells. "Gale is an escape artist. Gale's the one in the storage closet."

She glanced up at the tiled video displays and sought the one of Gale's cell. It was up near the top, far out of her line of sight when she had been reading the files. In the image she could see Matthew Gale, with his broken arm bent up awkwardly against his chest, hand stuck into the neck of his shirt to brace it and hold it partly still, kneeling in front of the door and picking the lock. The heel of his boot had been twisted to the side, exposing a hollow place within; that must have been where he had kept the picks.

Althea turned back to the intercom and was about to warn Domitian and Gagnon, but before she could, Gale shoved his boot back into place, stood unsteadily up, and swung open the door; the sound of the *Ananke's* peeling alarm rang out throughout the ship.

"Gale?" Domitian asked with tension in his voice that was like anger.

"He just picked the door to his room," Althea shouted back over the sound of the alarms. She had to find the display of the camera in the hallway outside Gale's cell to see what he was doing next. "He's in front of Ivanov's door now."

"Stay in the control room; we'll handle this," Domitian said, and in the corner of her eye she saw them leave the rooms they were sweeping and take off running down the hallway. She heard the boots thunder past her door as they ran, and she sat and opened the videos showing Gale and Ivanov turning on the sound, unable to do anything but watch.

Gale was fumbling with one arm broken, holding some picks in his teeth, having trouble getting leverage, getting torque. She watched him drop a pick and heard the quiet sharp exhalation of what must have been a swear, too low for the camera to pick up.

There was a camera in Ivanov's cell. Through that camera, Althea saw Ivanov rise from the cell's slender cot to come stand before the cell door, his face as expressionless as it was in the picture on his file.

Up in the main display of camera screens, Gagnon and Domitian ran down the hall, passing from one camera's sight to another, appearing at seemingly random places in the mosaic of images, only to leave each image again a moment later.

"Mattie," Ivanov said quietly, with the static sound of empty air making it hard to hear. Althea turned up the volume and listened.

Gale seemed to be determined to ignore his partner in crime and continued to try to force the lock.

Gagnon and Domitian were getting closer.

"Mattie," Ivanov said again, louder, and knelt down so that his face was level with the one opening in his cell door, the food slot. Gale still ignored him.

"Matthew Gale!" Ivanov said, so suddenly loud that Althea startled, and Gale stopped trying to undo the lock to slam his hand, open-palmed, against the door. Ivanov didn't flinch but waited, and Althea watched his hands flex into fists.

Gagnon and Domitian were almost in sight of the two. They were blocking the only way up to the docking bay or the escape pods; they were armed and hale, and Gale was unarmed and injured. He would be captured soon, Althea assured herself, and continued to watch, silently urging Domitian and Gagnon to run faster.

Gale opened the food slot, and Althea saw the two men staring at each other through the narrow opening.

"Go," Ivanov said, and Althea watched Gale hesitate, looking up the hall to where he must have known pursuit would come. "Go," Ivanov urged when Gale still knelt there and looked in at him, and Althea felt a curious uncomfortable churning in her gut.

Domitian and Gagnon would catch Gale soon, she told herself, but somehow that did not help the churning, which felt almost like the beginnings of guilt.

Finally Gale seemed to decide.

"This is for Europa, Scheherazade," he said, and let the food slot cover fall, clanging shut. Then he rose to his feet and started to run just as Gagnon and Domitian came into sight, still far distant.

In his cell, Ivanov leaned his head against the door across from where Gale had been, and Althea closed that window and instead focused on following Gale as he ran down, down, down to the very base of the ship's spine. She watched him pull up short at the downward curve of the ceiling that terminated the hall, looking around as if for some way out. Farther up the hall, still quite distant, Domitian and Gagnon still pursued. Gale had nowhere to go.

All throughout the *Ananke* there were computer interfaces in the hallway, separated by about thirty feet. Such frequent access to the computer was necessary in a ship so large with a crew so small, but it meant that there was a way to access the computer at any point on the ship, including at its very base.

Matthew Gale bent over the computer terminal nearest to him and began to type.

"What?" Althea said aloud, and rose to her feet without anywhere to go. "No, no, no," she muttered.

and looked to see where Domitian and Gagnon were—they were there, they were running, they were getting closer but weren't close enough yet—and then back at Gale, who was frowning with concentration and still typing. If Althea could connect to the specific interface he was working from, she could try to stop whatever he was doing, but first she would have to find out which one it was. The interfaces weren't numbered in order, and she'd have to force access; he'd probably stop her, but she could just delay him from doing anything, Domitian and Gagnon could catch up to him and stop him—

Before she could do anything, every screen in front of her—the hundred video feeds, her connection to *Ananke's* bowels, the still-open files on Gale and Ivanov—went black and still, dead with the lights leaving Althea blind in the dark.

When the *Ananke* came back online a few minutes later, the lights flaring on with a suddenness that nearly blinded Althea again, she knew that something was wrong in the computer.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it,” she muttered as the screen brightened slowly and the videos from the cameras blinked on and off, black spaces in the grid of video. “Come on, *Ananke*.”

The screen glowed featureless, white.

There was a screen in the corner of the room that played System official news at all hours of the day. It could not be turned off, but Althea had long since muted it, finding that it interfered with her concentration. Even when it was muted, subtitles streamed across the bottom of the screen endlessly.

Now, jolted by the sudden shutdown and restart of the ship's systems, the screen blared to life.

“Twelve insurgents were caught this morning in a residential home on Triton,” said a beautiful woman with emotionless eyes and a crisp Terran accent; the volume was too high, and her voice slammed into Althea's head like a physical blow.

“God *damn* it,” said Althea, and briefly abandoned her post to dash the few steps across the room and lunge for the mute button.

“Surveillance in their residence recorded discussion of treasonous sympathies,” said the screen.

“Althea!” It was Domitian's voice on the intercom.

“I'm *coming*,” said Althea, though she knew he could not hear her, and punched the mute on the news just as the newscaster said, “Interrogation commences in—”

Althea spun back around to the interface by the camera screens and hit the intercom. “Did you get him? What did he do?”

“He's not here,” Domitian said, and Althea looked up at the grid of videos, which was studded with empty places where the *Ananke* should have been receiving signals from cameras and wasn't. One of the few visible displays showed the base of the ship's spine, where Althea had seen Gale last, bent over her machine; now Domitian and Gagnon stood a few paces apart in an empty hallway.

“That isn't possible,” said Althea. There were no rooms that far down in the ship, no doors for him to hide behind. The hallway did not continue on or loop around itself; it simply ended.

In the video, Althea watched Gagnon spread his arms out and look up at the camera, demonstrating the emptiness of the hallway for her benefit.

The computer screens sizzled with static again, went black, then sharply turned back on.

“Gagnon, what does the screen on the terminal down there say?” Althea demanded. The interface

Gale had used had to show some sign of what he'd done.

"Gale is our priority right now," said Domitian. "Althea, are there any other ways to leave the back of the ship or places to hide?"

She hardly listened to him. The screen before her kept flickering like murmurs in a heart. "He's done something to the computer," she said. "It's bad; I need to fix it."

"He didn't have enough time to do anything," Gagnon said.

"I'm coming down there," Althea said, and ignored Domitian's immediate "Althea, stay there!" as she left the control room, locked the door behind herself, and started running down the *Ananke* hallway.

She passed Gagnon halfway down.

"Domitian's pissed," he warned as he passed her. It was all he had time to say; Althea did not slow down. Doubtless Gagnon had been sent to take the position she'd abandoned.

If something happened to the ship because Althea had not been fast enough to care for the computer, they would all be in trouble. She did not slow down.

Domitian was waiting for her when she arrived, his gun out, his expression black. "What the hell were you thinking?" he demanded as she ran past him to kneel in front of the machine. "Disobeying a direct order?"

"There's something wrong with the ship!"

"I don't care; you obey!" Domitian roared, and Althea flinched. The screen before her showed nothing but the smooth blankness of an empty workspace; Gale had covered his tracks.

"What if Gale had gotten to the control room and found it empty?" Domitian demanded.

"He couldn't have," said Althea. "There's no way..."

"He's not here right now," said Domitian. "Until we know how he could have escaped, we have to assume he could be anywhere on board this ship. Leave the computer and think. Are there any other ways out of here?"

"There's the hallway," Althea said, still kneeling in front of the machine but leaving it alone for the moment.

"Gagnon and I were in the hallway. What else?"

She tried to think past her immediate knee-jerk reaction that there was no way out. "There's the hatch to the core."

She turned to look at it, a heavy hatch near the extreme end of the hallway, set into the floor. Althea could see that it was still locked from the outside.

"What else?" Domitian asked.

"I don't know—"

Domitian walked past her to the hatch and, still with his gun in his hand, undid the latches sealing the hatch shut and gripped the handle. With a grunt of exertion—the gravity this far down made the hatch very heavy—he lifted the hatch and looked down. Althea walked over to stand behind him and look over his shoulder.

Right below them both, trying to pull them down, was the *Ananke*'s beating heart, the electromagnets that caged it humming with electricity, arcs of plasma and reddened photons following the swoops and curves of magnetic field lines and fighting the impossible pull of the mass cradled

the center of the ten-story-radius hollow sphere that was the rib cage of the ship.

If Gale had fallen in or jumped, he would still be visible, his body shredded and stretched and dead, frozen in time just above an event horizon so small that Althea wouldn't be able to see it from that distance even if it could be seen—because the heart of the *Ananke* was a black hole.

If Gale had thought to hide in this enclosure, clinging to the highest part of it, he would not have been able to resist the pull of the *Ananke*'s heart, and Althea now would see him dead down there as well. There would be nothing to hold on to, anyway; the only protrusion inside the hatch was the dead man's switch inside its clear plastic cage, which would shut down the computer if it was flipped and leave the computer solely under manual control.

But there was no one there. Gale had not gone into the *Ananke*'s core.

Domitian closed the door and sat back on his heels.

"What else?" he asked again, and Althea knelt once more before the computer screen.

"I don't know," she said, and urged the computer to open whatever had been closed last. She would see what Gale had done.

"He didn't vanish, Althea," Domitian said.

A window opened on the screen. It took Althea only a moment to recognize it.

"The maintenance shafts," she said.

"What?"

"I don't know how he even knew..." She had no idea how he'd known about them; they were vestiges of the ship's construction, made, sealed, and forgotten except for emergencies Althea never expected to happen. They had not even occurred to her as a method for Gale's escape, and she couldn't imagine how he'd persuaded the program to run. The shafts were airless and frigid, uninhabitable unless the program was running; the program itself was well concealed and responsive only to Althea's clearance level. He must have hacked into the program quickly: the maintenance shaft door could not be opened unless a certain bare minimum of habitability had been achieved, and although the process was very swift, it still took a certain amount of time, time that would have been valuable when he had Domitian and Gagnon running down the hall toward him—

"Althea!" Domitian barked.

Althea collected herself and tried, for Domitian, to speak quickly.

"There are maintenance shafts throughout the ship," she said. "They were shut down after the ship was constructed, but they still exist in case I need to use them for a big repair. He shouldn't have known about them, but somehow he did. He ran the program to make them habitable again."

"He's in the maintenance shafts?"

"Yes." Althea left the computer to run to the back of the ship, to the metal-paneled wall. "There should be an opening—"

It fell open at her touch.

"—here," she finished, and turned to see Domitian checking his gun once, efficiently, then heading for her with a grim expression.

"Where do those shafts go?" he asked, kneeling down beside her to look up into the narrow space.

Althea took a breath. "Everywhere," she admitted.

"I'm following him in," said Domitian, and leaned forward to crawl into the tunnel just as the

Ananke's alarm began to wail.

Domitian was on his feet and going for the intercom before Althea could even process the sound. "Gagnon!" he barked.

"An escape pod has been launched," Gagnon said, sounding tense. "Gale?"

"Do the maintenance shafts go to the escape pod bay?" Domitian asked Althea.

The maintenance shafts went everywhere. They were lucky, Althea thought, that Gale had gone for the escape pods and not for some sensitive part of the ship. "Yes," she said.

"Scan the pod," Domitian said into the intercom. "Confirm Gale's inside."

"The ship's been affected; the sensor readings might not be accurate," Althea started to protest, but the two men ignored her.

"The *Ananke* recognizes one life-sign," Gagnon reported. "Gale's on board."

"Can you fire on him?" Domitian asked.

"I've been trying to start up the *Ananke*'s weaponry system, but it's not responding." Gagnon sounded frustrated. He was never patient enough with the *Ananke*; Althea itched to go up there and coax the shell-shocked ship into obedience. She might be able to do it fast enough to hit the escape pod before Gale was out of safe firing range.

"Keep trying, but even if you can't, we're between planets and outside the usual trade routes," said Domitian. "The escape pods have no mode of propulsion, and if he turns on the distress signal, the System will pick him up. Either he'll starve to death or he'll be captured again."

"Yes, sir."

Gagnon cut the connection. Domitian turned to Althea. "How did Gale get out of his cell?" he asked.

"He picked the lock," Althea said, remembering the video. "He had picks hidden in his boot."

"With a broken arm he picked the lock," Domitian muttered, and then seemed to snap out of his distraction. "Confiscate Ivanov's boots. We don't know what he might have hidden in there."

"Ivanov's in the cell," Althea protested. "There isn't a lock to pick from the inside."

"He could have something else hidden. Confiscate Ivanov's boots. Then you can continue to work on the computer, but I want you to stay by his cell. There's a computer interface near it; work on that."

"But—"

"I have to finish sweeping the ship," Domitian said. "There still could be a third intruder. With the way these people have been manipulating the computer, we need to check manually. Gagnon needs to monitor the control room. Are you going to disobey me again?"

Althea went. Domitian jogged past her up the hall after relaying the same information to Gagnon, and so she was alone when she reached the blank steel expanse of Ivanov's cell door.

The hallway there was choked with wires and pipes that covered the walls and twined through the grates that made up the ceiling, separating the hallway from the blue-white fluorescent lighting above. The lights hummed and whined at frequencies almost too high for Althea to hear. Ivanov's door was indeed almost directly across from a computer interface. This was less by design, Althea knew, than by coincidence; the interfaces were spotted at even intervals up and down the hallway. The wires and pipes of the walls had to bend around the shapes of the computer interface and Ivanov's cell door, distorting like light around a black hole.

Althea stopped in front of Ivanov's door, took a breath, and pulled the gun from her holster, opening and closing her fingers around it until she was comfortable. Then she said through the door, "Put your back against the opposite wall and don't move."

There was no sound of movement from within the room.

Althea hesitated, wondering if she should open the door anyway, but caution won out. She debated going to the computer terminal and trying to coax the *Ananke* into showing her the camera footage from inside the cell, but she doubted it would work and she wanted to obey Domitian quickly. She thought about calling out again and decided that would only make her sound weak. That left her with only one option. She dithered about it for a moment, hoping that Ivanov would speak up from inside the cell, or move, or do something to confirm that he was there, but still there was nothing. She crouched down to eye level with the food slot, as Matthew Gale had done fifteen minutes before, and lifted the slot to look into the cell.

Leontios Ivanov was seated on the floor across from the door. His back was against the opposite wall. She suspected he had been sitting there this whole time and simply hadn't bothered to move. She replied when she'd spoken. When he met her eyes, he raised his eyebrows at her expectantly, as if she were taking up his time.

Althea let the slot clang shut so that he wouldn't see her scowl. She pulled a key from the tool belt around her waist and checked her gun again before unlocking the door. When she opened it, she immediately trained the gun on Ivanov.

He was still sitting and only glanced down at the gun, unimpressed.

Then he looked back up at her.

"Give me your shoes," Althea said.

"Do you know what that thing does?" Ivanov asked instead of obeying. He nodded at the gun.

Althea narrowed her eyes. "It shoots," she said.

"Yes," Ivanov said with a trace of exasperation, "obviously. But it's not an ordinary gun, is it? Do you know what that particular type of gun does to the human body?"

Althea stared at him and brought her other hand over to hold the gun with both hands.

"It's designed for use in spaceships," she said. "The bullets are designed for wholly inelastic collisions. It won't ricochet if it's fired in an enclosed space like a ship. So I can shoot you if you don't do what I tell you and not worry about hurting my ship."

"'Your ship' again," Ivanov said with the same flash of interest Althea had seen back in the data room, and her unease grew. "But that's not what I was asking. Do you understand what that particular type of gun does to the human body?"

Althea opened her mouth, about to say yes, of course she knew, she had been trained, but Ivanov interrupted her.

"It hurts," said Ivanov. "All that kinetic energy from the bullet moving goes into the human body. It keeps none for itself. That bullet will create a miniature explosion in the target's flesh—organs will rupture, muscles will be shredded, blood vessels are more than torn, they're burst. If you fire that in a man's torso, it will liquefy his guts."

Althea stared at him in silence for a long, long minute.

"Give me your boots," she said at last with the gun still trained on his heart.

Ivanov did not move, watching her as if testing her; then he did move, bending forward to unlatch

his boots and slide them off. He tossed them toward her gently when he was done, and she kicked them out into the hallway and closed the door on him, his feet slender and pale and vulnerable against the steel floor as he sat against the wall between the narrow cot and the toilet in a dark cell the size of a closet.

She locked the door behind herself and called Domitian to let him know she had the boots.

Althea worked on the computer for some time without much success. Something Gale had done, some virus he had infected her ship with, undid every change she'd effected, and the errors seemed to propagate out like ripples in a pond. Several of the cameras refused flat out to work. The computer would obey her normally for some time and then without warning execute a random operation that had no reason and no connection to what she had been doing. It was as if every operation on the machine had become a little bit more chaotic than before.

She was so absorbed in the computer that she almost didn't notice Gagnon's arrival.

"Althea."

"What?" she asked flatly, keeping her eyes on the screen in the vague hope that their interaction would be fleeting enough that he wouldn't break the focus of her concentration.

Gagnon leaned in and spoke in a low voice, as if he did not want Ivanov to hear.

"Domitian wants you," he said. "He needs your help up in the control room."

"With what?" Althea asked.

"Repairs" was the cryptic response. Gagnon then said, "I'll stay here and guard Ivanov until Domitian sends you back down."

Althea's concentration was well and truly gone now. She reluctantly closed down what she had been doing and headed up the hall. Gagnon leaned against the wall to watch the door to Ivanov's cell.

Domitian, when she joined him, was standing in front of the holographic terminal in the corner of the room, right at the circular edge of its raised platform, staring at it with the expression of a man who had run out of ideas. His eyes darted to the door once when she entered, but when he saw it was only Althea, he resumed the lost stare she was used to seeing on other people's faces when confronted by technology.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The ship is clear," Domitian said instead of answering immediately. "I located the hatch to the maintenance shafts that opened into the escape pod bay; Gale hadn't shut it behind him when he escaped, so I sealed it, then shut down the habitability program as you instructed—the computer reports that the maintenance shafts are completely sealed and uninhabitable again. And Gagnon managed to access the footage from when the men boarded; only the two of them disembarked. But while Gale was escaping, the System tried to contact us. We received a communiqué, top priority, from a System intelligence agent by the name of Ida Stays."

Althea didn't know the name, but when it came to intelligence agents, that wasn't a surprise. Like every sensible person, she tried to stay out of situations in which she'd need to meet one, and like every sensible person, she tried not to be seen looking too closely into their activities.

"And it's a hologram?" Althea asked, coming to stand beside Domitian and look at the holographic terminal. It was wide and tall enough for a person to stand inside it, but the floor of the terminal was

raised and its ceiling lowered to accommodate the diodes that would create the hologram. At the moment it was dark, dead.

“Yes,” said Domitian. “There’s no text portion.”

Sometimes very high security transmissions wouldn’t have a text portion so that they would be protected from espionage. Althea walked over to the computer and attempted to access the holographic terminal.

At first the terminal flatly refused to turn on. There was no reason for that, so Althea relentlessly tried again and again, and eventually—without any reason—it did turn on with a low hum. The diodes glowed, brightened, and then stuttered.

“Play most recent message,” Althea said, her voice projected with confidence so that the machine would hear and understand even as she frowned at the unusual stuttering of the diodes.

At her words the machine rallied, lighting up again, a form coalescing and then shuddering once more, the visage and shape of a slight woman created by the interference of light coming together and then twitching, jerking apart. Patches of dark and light appeared where there should be none, the ordinary human form appearing briefly monstrous, deformed. Then the whole thing went dark, the premature hologram vanishing.

Althea exchanged a glance with Domitian. On the bright side, she supposed, now he would certainly believe her when she told him that the ship’s computer needed her attention.

Althea hesitated, looking at the holographic terminal and at the unopened message on the screen with her fingertips, then decided to fall back on the age-old solution for all mechanical problems before trying anything more complicated.

She ended the program for running the holographic terminal—stopped it dead—and then turned the terminal back on again.

The diodes glowed, red and cold.

“Play new message,” said Althea.

An uncertain flicker, and then that misshapen woman appeared once again in the terminal. Her head was offset through an accident of filtration, her knee disconnected from her thigh. The recording began to play, distorted and groaning, whining, a harlequin baby born and screaming like tangled steel wool being wrenched into straightness. It was wrong, it was horribly wrong, something terrible poured forth from Althea’s beautiful machine. Even though she knew it was nothing more than an accident of corruption in the ship’s systems, the hellish mistake in the terminal made her hands shake and her skin crawl. But just as Althea was reaching out to turn it off again, the horrible image glitched once more and then flashed into perfect life. Domitian didn’t seem to have been affected by the distorted figure but stood with his back straight, looking at the holographic image as if he were really in the presence of a superior instead of a superior’s image.

The woman in the holograph was petite, slender, and flat, with a strong sharp jaw for someone so delicate, light-skinned with black hair chopped rigidly short, sweeping down to brush the underside of her chin. Her shoes were practical and professional but with a sharp little black heel, and her skirt was fitted and black. Her blouse was loose and flowery, a touch of charming, innocent femininity that contrasted with the rigid lines of the rest of her garb. Her lips were colored like bruises, a red so dark and deep that it touched into purple.

Althea had known women like this woman before. This was the kind of woman who preferred the company of men to the comfortable logic of Althea’s machines, who looked at Althea with her

awkwardness and her impatience and her wiry tangled hair and smirked among others like herself behind their hands.

Althea looked to Domitian to see if he had experienced the same instinctive dislike but saw nothing of the kind on his face. He was only watching Ida Stays's hologram with close attention.

Of course, she thought to herself, the System was watching; the System was always watching. She turned her attention back to the hologram.

In the hologram, Ida Stays had no chance of meeting the eyes of either Althea or Domitian; instead she gazed directly ahead, most likely into the camera that had recorded the message.

"To the crew of the *Ananke*," she said, "detain Leontios Ivanov and Matthew Gale. Take extra precautions in their detainment; they are known for escaping System control. They are crucial to my investigation and the safety and security of the System. I have been granted access to your current location, and I will rendezvous with you at System Standard Time 1700 hours. Do not let Ivanov or Gale out of your sight and wait for me to question them. Ida Stays; end message."

The woman vanished; the diodes went dark.

"That's in an hour," said Althea. "What do we do?"

"Nothing," Domitian said. "We can't pursue Gale; even if we could, we have no means of capturing him. I have already updated the System on our situation, and when Miss Stays arrives, I will handle it."

"Until then," he continued with his eye on something above and behind Althea, where the camera displays were, "I will be interrogating our prisoner."

Althea's heart jumped. "Let me come."

Domitian gave her a strange look.

"I want to find out if he knows what Gale did to the computer," Althea said. "They work together; there must be particular tricks they use all the time. This is one of those tricks; I know it. I just don't know what, or how advanced, or what it's supposed to do—"

"I'll question him," Domitian said. "You stay here, monitor the control room, and work on the computer."

"You wouldn't know what to ask," said Althea, without really thinking it through.

Domitian, fortunately, was always patient with her. "What would you ask?" he said. "Would you give him a list of the computer's problems and ask him which of his and Gale's 'tricks' it's likely to be?" Althea said nothing, as clear as if she had admitted it. "You can't give this man any information, Althea. In his position he survives on his information. Telling him something he doesn't need to know is the same as putting a weapon in his hand. I will ask about the computer, and you will stay here. Understood?"

He held her gaze until Althea dropped hers. "Yes, sir," she said.

When he left, closing the door behind himself, she turned to look at the grid of camera images. Among them she found the footage of Ivanov's cell, where from above she looked down at Ivanov still sitting with his back against the opposite wall and his bare feet crossed at the ankle.

It was standard to interrogate a prisoner until a satisfactory explanation of the reason for his presence was obtained. On most ships, that interrogation would be followed by imprisonment. On ships like the *Ananke*, a System-sponsored research vessel with military applications, an interrogation would be followed by execution.

It was fortunate for Ivanov's sake, Althea supposed, that she and Domitian had heard the message.

from Ida Stays before Domitian had had time to interrogate him.

The files on Matthew Gale and Leontios Ivanov were still open on her abandoned workspace. Althea dragged them to the side, but her next step in attempting to fix the ship involved a long period of waiting, and so, with only the slightest twinge of guilt, she opened the video showing Ivanov's cell and skimmed through the two men's files while she watched Domitian walk down the *Ananke's* long, winding hall.

Looking at the men's files, Althea became more certain that whatever virus had been put in the machine, if it had been some pre-prepared disease, as it must have been to be so complicated and so swiftly created, Gale couldn't have created it alone. He had never even graduated from lower school, much less gone to university. But Ivanov had gone to the North American Terran University and studied computer science. Althea didn't believe that Gale could have fooled her computer system completely himself on the spur of the moment. Ivanov must have helped him design it; maybe Ivanov had designed it himself. Gale had just taken their design and applied it so that he could escape.

That meant that whatever virus was infecting her ship, Althea thought, Ivanov knew how to fix it.

On the video screen, Althea saw that Domitian had reached Ivanov's cell. Without a word, his face still and set as stone, he opened the door. Ivanov didn't move even though he had to crane his head back to look at Domitian's face.

"We know who you are," Domitian said, his low rumbling voice poorly picked up by the camera, so that Althea had to lean forward to listen. "We know who your companion was."

Ivanov cocked his head to the side. The camera in his cell was positioned above where Domitian now stood, and so Althea could not see Domitian's face clearly but Ivanov's face was nearly head-on.

He was smiling, insolent, amused.

"What we want to know," said Domitian, "is why you are on board."

Ivanov took a beat longer to reply than was normal. Althea's fingers were tight around the edge of the control panel.

"Simple curiosity," Ivanov said. His accent had changed. No longer sharply, purely Terran, but broadened by the traces of an adopted Mirandan drawl, it had something of Jupiter in it, faintly similar to Domitian's accent. "We were flying past, and by pure chance we saw your strange ship."

Ivanov's eyes flickered up and straight into the camera. Althea knew he couldn't see her, but she was made uneasy nonetheless and was relieved when a moment later he looked away.

"You don't expect me to believe that," said Domitian.

"I don't expect you to believe anything I say," Ivanov said, "but I'm telling you the truth. Matthew and I were on our ship, headed for Mars, when our path intersected with yours. We wouldn't have even found the *Ananke* if we hadn't nearly run into her. Now, men like us, when we see a ship that magnificent—"

Domitian interrupted. "If you're hoping for rescue, none is coming. Gale was killed trying to escape."

Althea supposed Domitian was telling the truth in a way; Gale would be dead soon from asphyxiation or starvation unless he was picked up by another ship, and with no one looking for him, his escape pod probably would never be found.

Ivanov went very still in exactly the position he had been in, his head cocked slightly to the side. His face showed nothing at all.

Then his face relaxed back into the insolent amusement he had adopted against Domitian.

“You know, the first rule of interrogation is to get the subject’s trust,” Ivanov said. “You just lost it.”

“I killed Gale, and I can kill you, too,” said Domitian.

“Then why don’t you kill me?” Ivanov asked. “You could shoot me in the docking bay. Fire that gun there”—he nodded at Domitian’s hip and the weapon resting on it beneath Domitian’s heavy hand—“right into my chest. And I fall. And then you leave and open the air lock. My body, my blood, and the mess goes flying out into the solar wind. Maybe I’m already dead, or maybe you’re a bad shot and I’m not dead yet, so I get to drown in my own blood and suffocate in a vacuum both.”

Ivanov seemed to be watching Domitian very closely. What he was looking for, Althea didn’t know. But his manner unsettled her.

“So then why don’t you kill me?” Ivanov asked. “Oh,” he said, feigning coming to a realization, one finger lifting to point toward the ceiling. “That’s right. You’ve just told me. You can’t kill me unless you tell me what you want to know.” He smirked at Domitian. “You’re not very good at this.”

“I don’t need to find out anything from you,” Domitian said. “Gale is dead. Once you are, too, the threat will be neutralized. But if you tell me what I want to know, I’ll reconsider killing you.”

“Thanks.” Ivanov had a deft sense for sarcasm.

“Answer me. Why did you and Gale board this ship?”

“I already told you,” Ivanov said. “Curiosity. Nothing more. What answer are you expecting?”

“I want the truth,” Domitian warned.

“And I’m giving you it,” said Ivanov. “We’d never seen a ship like the *Ananke* before. It’s something different. It’s almost an organism instead of a machine, the computer is so powerful. Mattie and I both have a professional interest in computers, and in any case, we figured there would be something valuable on board.”

“Did you come on board,” said Domitian, “on orders of the Mallt-y-Nos?”

Althea thought she saw Ivanov flinch. “I’m a thief, not a terrorist.”

“Then you know her.”

“Not personally.” He was wary.

“You know of her.”

“Everyone does.”

“Tell me what you know about her,” Domitian said.

“Just that she’s a terrorist.” He paused, then lowered his tone as if telling a ghost story, with only a fine edge of sarcasm to spoil the effect. “I know enough about her to avoid her and her hounds. Do you know what her name means?”

“No.”

“It means ‘Matilda of the Night,’ ” Ivanov said. “In mythology, the Mallt-y-Nos was a noblewoman who loved so much to hunt that she said to God, ‘If there is no hunting in heaven, I will not go.’ And so God damned her to hunt forever as part of the fairy host. The sound of her shrieks and howls drives her fairy hounds to hunt the souls damned to hell, hunt them down and drag them there.”

His voice had lowered, hushed, and Althea strained to hear.

“They say that the louder the sound of her hounds’ barking, the farther away they are,” said Ivanov.

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