

EXTRACT FOR REVIEW

CHAPTER 2

At almost two million kilometres from the Kyklos orbit, the four assailant battle ships emerged from their force-envelopes. The starnavis slithered in from a pseudo-horizon like warping metallic eels. The long Jackal starnavis began to power down, huge toroidal rings shielding the vessels, relinquished electromagnetic gravmex field-distortions to bring them from faster-than-light speeds, and by half a million kilometres the saltus-carrousel appeared. The huge prismatic machines cruised toward the devastation in a tactical approach, each an immense five kilometres long. They were narrow vessels, frosted chrome platforms, each encompassed by three large and thick toroidal saltus-carrousel rings from bow to stern like a cage.

The Jackals targeted their diamond shaped bows on the burning Kyklos station in predacious advance. The leader raced ahead, cuttlefish pulses of light blinking across the windowless fuselage. The long machine detached from the saltus-carrousel, ski couplings pulling away from the inner circumferences, folding towards the body. Boosters fed the heavy starnavis forward, leaving the three warp rings to hover in a Lagrange point. The three remaining Jackals arranged a tactical approach pattern, also leaving their saltus-carrousel in far orbital positions of the planet Amora. As they moved, huge conduction points spined from the backs of the ships, glowing to a heated red as thermal radiation was drawn from the heated cores to be purged into space. They lurched forth, ready to destroy any targets meandering from the devastation. Giant exhaust casts cooled, leaving vapours of liquid oxygen behind them, as scores of Arrowhead Strikers sprang from their launch runways and swarmed out to meet with the life boats fleeing from the Kyklos disaster.

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Rynal's face was tight with anger, camphor beads of sweat dripping from his desperate and pained expression.

'They're from Sol!' He barked, turning back from his ship's display field. 'I'm seeing deep space starnavis. Jackal Dreadnaught class! There're four of them.'

'It's not possible!' Said Osmond. 'No! No they must have been waiting here for years!'

Rynal dashed around to the main bridge console. A multitude of holographic display fields enclosed, gloaming around him and interacting with the dendrites of nanology trafficking through his luminous, opalescent veins. His electric, green eyes dilated to absorb data traffic projecting through the bridge. Osmond glared up at the huge holographic orrery projected around on its digital gimbals in the domed roofing of the bridge, orienting their position in space. Rynal could sense his brother by the airlock. His long antennae merged with his brother, a full transqualia request.

'Raven, what do you see?'

Rynal was looking at the burning habitat ahead of him through the bridge of their starnavis. In the same moment, he shared Raven's eyes. He had been glaring at a similar vision through the Cereno's small skull-sized porthole, affirming their doomed home. Raven saw huge burning embers raining down into Amora's verditer sky below. The large saturnine Olympian opened his palm where nanology trackers threaded throughout his skin, glowing. He saw there a map projected by the electronic bacteria in his blood, assembling to detail what was going on outside. Like stars they shifted across his skin, from a pale blue to a crimson red as the mortal coil of each life found its final moment. He watched the blemishes of light in his palm; he saw the growing freckles of red spots amassing before twinkling out forever, more and more. Hundreds of thousands of people, a culture gone in an instant, their history, their creations all wiped out forever. Raven closed up a fist as the main mass of spots died out and squeezed the fury through trembling white knuckles. He turned away from the view of his burning habitat with deep remorse. Rynal felt his emotions, he sensed the fury, he had momentarily become Raven.

'I see no more than thee, my kin.' Raven thought, adding the final word through their psychic transqualia. *'Death.'*

Rynal retreated from the transqualian merger back into his own mind. Then, without warning the Cereno's roll thrusters turned the starnavis on to a new coordinate. It banked with such abrupt urgency that Raven's legs buckled. Vernier thrusters hissed out jets of gas and positioned the bulky ship into a launch bearing. Raven grabbed tightly to a ladder and pulled himself along the rail, chasing it to higher decks where the main cabin was. His ears picked up the disgruntled caterwauls of Malla's child from near the galley as she soothed its wails with motherly croons.

He floated over and reached out to her as she settled her baby into an inertial bed. Restlessly, the child's shrill cries pitched. The baby opened her eyes to set upon Raven as she reached her stumpy distressed arms for him. Raven reached back and the baby's hand grasped at his finger, clinging tight. He could see those two jewels staring into Raven's soul, eyes like ruby and emerald, her left eye green, the other red. Malla turned to Raven contritely, eyes damp, and her pretty young countenance greying to a nervous pallor.

'I don't know if she'll make it,' she declared, 'she's too young for evasive space flight, the inertial forces may kill her.'

'Your child doth harness Olympian genetics,' said Raven securely. 'There are no stronger beings than we. Be steadfast Malla. I trust in her wellbeing.'

'You can't be sure,' said Malla. 'Not even Rynal is sure.'

'It's the only way we can reach the saltus-carrousels from here.' Raven urged softly. 'Secure thyself, time is deficient.'

As he stretched the webbing across her front the baby continued to scream and buck lightly against it, her ruby emerald eyes catching faintly in the dim light. Satisfied they were both secure, Raven kicked away from the side wall and fell over to the adjacent inertial bed. Once there he pulled the webbing across his chest and tried to make out

Malla's fallow face in the darkness. Her red eyes shone back at him, before the beds rotated them in the direction of travel.

'Thy family are secure!' Raven confirmed aloud, adding along the transqualia. *'We may depart now, my kin.'*

He had heard his brother's assurances and prepared for launch. The Cereno angled its nose to Amora's horizon. Holographic gimbals swung around on the bridge command and aligned with the horizon like the layered divisions of Saturn's rings. Then, Rynal settled back into the inertial support, in the same moment initiating the starnavis into a fierce acceleration. He pressed back into the material in the high-gee acceleration, the webbing snapped around his body to embrace him in its sticky elastic as the ship raced for freedom. Vibrations shook their bones and velocity pinned them throughout the acceleration. Rynal synchronised his mind with the ship. Vector displays networked through the sensorium of Rynal's neurosphere interface, imprinting images through his mind, mapping visuals his eyes could no longer see under duress of such pressures. He watched the life signatures, sedulously balancing the tolerable condition of his daughter while maintaining maximum acceleration. They were at the peak now, any faster rate of acceleration and the baby's fragile bones might fatally break. He knew that soon the inertia would taper off as they approached full speed, but he couldn't get them there any faster. External sensory feedback from the starnavis warned Rynal of the advancing Jackal. Their decision to flee had drawn attention. Arrowhead Strikers darted and weaved ahead to intercept them. Their radiation beams slicing apart the floating pods as they gave pursuit.

Bastards, Rynal issued through the neuro-lecium's on-board network. His antenea shone as his neural processes issued to the passangers.

You're right Osmond; they want this to remain covered up. What are they planning? Surely they can't know about the *Elixir*. Surely they can't know. They cannot possibly know!

Nobody knows about the Elixir, Rynal, old Osmond reassured. If they knew...they wouldn't have been planning this sort of assault that's for sure. The fools will doom life as we know it.

A blinding malachite flash emanated at last from the Kyklos's axel core, shattering the resin-nano-tube structure like a frozen spindle and lighting up the cotton clouds and barren mountains of the planet Amora below. Arrowheads dove into the silent explosion with rapturous zeal. The fires set their photovoltaic alloy aglow as they wheeled and bathed like cosmic vampires in the blood of their latest kill.

Rynal felt the explosive light through the neurosphere. The super-structure had finally fallen apart. An historic Earther arc station destroyed in a matter of minutes. He needed to reach the Galileo Coterie; people had to know what happened here.

For John Ripley it was simple; this was a heat, beat and treat mission. Unlike the other strike-ships in the starmada, his was a Solitaire-Class, The Deathwind. A remarkably reliable interplanetary craft suited for duel pilot capacity and armed with the most sophisticated weaponry. The needle canopy of the Deathwind arrowed sleekly from the Jackal's launch tunnels, propelled on a body of magnetic propulsion, it raced into the void. Once the launch was complete, the engines fired and the Deathwind soared ahead into the endlessly vast distances. Ghostly images imprinted into his neurosphere as the Deathwind's TCAS mapped out the flight vectors of his co-pilots' transponders.

They cut through the debris field like shark fins. Sleek, arrow shaped photovoltaic fuselages, slipping into fire and litter, yawing through gaps in the drifting debris. The on-board computer mapped out potential collisions and Ripley cruised and curved between ruinous particles, blinding pulses of jets bursting silently from above and below the canopy, twisting the craft through the vacuum.

'Downlink complete,' said the Commander through the communications network. 'Start your mission CDRs.' She further instructed, 'I need you to be my eyes here.'

'CDRs online,' John Ripley reported.

'CDRs are a go, Quantics calibrated' said another voice. 'Mission is now recording.'

'Maintain optical solar reflectors,' she rejoined, 'the Suntao is a spicy meatball and she kicks up some fierce solar gusts. Nothing you wanna get caught up in.'

'Confirmed Commander,' said one of the masked assailants.

'Target any life boats and destroy, apprehend any potential escapees...'

'Commander,' one of the Arrowhead pilots reported. 'Racer class starnavis leaving orbit, the Cereno, increasing velocity at a steady percentile.'

'All pilots, target that ship,' she ordered, 'we mustn't let anyone escape from this area to report it. They must be heading to a nearby saltus-carrousel. Find any of those distortion-toroids in the area and destroy them! Scout every Lagrange point. That starnavis mustn't velox out of here. Cut...her...DOWN!'

The Deathwind dipped into the southern part of the debris field leftover by the destroyed ring habitat. Ripley channelled his thoughts through a neuro-lectum marked by a series of tattoos on the nape of his spine, a micro-channel for neural information, allowing his psychological reach to manoeuvre and change the behaviour of his strike-ship. He saw the combat sequencers in his visual cortex, a series of codes and abbreviations. He joined other strikeships as they targeted their victims. Powerful beams of concentrated maser light diced up helpless escape capsules. Flashes of radiation stabbed into the burning habitat's debris field as the other co-pilots asserted their joint belligerence. In their assault their neuromissions merged, they shared information to form a single consciousness known as the Nexus interface. The pilots were aware of multiple visuals, they felt blunt emotional discipline seeping from the stronger and less empathic killers to overpower compunction in the more empathic pilots, who vacillated over the killing of unarmed targets. In the Nexus Ripley felt like a huge entity, able to see everything at once, he felt like a creature beyond human, almost as a God.

Suddenly, Ripley heard screaming.

'Wh-what's the noise?' Someone reported across the Nexus.

'Receiving...audio phenomenon I think...'

'That's a negative, there's no audio phenomenon, no radio signal in my vessel, and I'm getting no transmission detection what-so-ever.'

'It's not an issue with the neuro-lecium' another said, *'or the Nexus interface either. I'm running communications through laser transmission, no interference detected. Shit...I can hear too! Oh god it's in my head!'*

'Keep the mission together,' the commander austere directed from the interface, *'target those pods and destroy them.'*

'Can't you hear that?' said another voice, this time coming through the audio network. 'What the...what is that?'

'Ma'am,' said another pilot through the audio comms, 'I shut down my neuro-lecium for manual piloting. I pulled out of the Nexus interface but the noise...it's in my head!'

Ripley tried to blink away the obstreperous cries lancing through his mind. At high speeds, a mere blink could cost a striker-pilot their lives, which was why neurophasing with the strike-ship was vital. The visual field of the neurosphere revealed to Ripley the heat signatures, the burning ring system, the filigree spins of vector lines, radiation waves and random debris all interpreted by his flight computer in the four dimensional space of his mind. He was able to see in every location in real-time. He shut his eyes tight, a reaction to the pain that didn't disturb his cortically enhanced visuals. But the screaming went on and he focussed intently on the formulating ordered patterns of spatial chaos. But nothing he did eased the pain; impossible to focus. It was like a thousand drawing pins had found their way into his skull and learned how to swim.

'They will trick you' said the commander, 'they have ways of breaking our morale. Stay focussed. Purge them all!'

Ripley continued to target the pods, blasting them into bubbles of amber and gold as he hunted down and raced after the Cereno.

'I've got a lock!' He reported.

'Me too, ma'am,' said another pilot.

'Lock confirmed.'

'Warheads authorisation confirmed. Your warheads are now armed,' said the Commander, *'engage the target!'*

Seven tactical warheads knifed through space at tremendous speed behind the Cereno, an inescapable approach without a saltus-carrousel. The first three hadn't managed to make it through the falling debris. Multiple explosions burst in Amora's atmosphere, static cracks of super-lightning jumping between charged points in the upper mesosphere. The fourth warhead was sent hurtling off-course, its propulsion drives extinguished, spinning it aimlessly into the stars. Rynal launched the stern chasers. Hundreds of thermal flares scattered out to distract the warheads

behind the fleeing Cereno, while broadside beam cannons lashed into space, garish stabs of light zipping along the flight paths of the missiles, unable to lock their erratic twists and sidewinding turns. Rynal was forced to make a dangerous manoeuvre. The Cereno dove, rolling into a lower altitude. Intense friction of air particles blasted over the nose of the Cereno in white hot streams of fire as her velocity pushed way over safe re-entry protocols. He exerted the engines, parting the thickening atmosphere like a red hot knife in a fog, competing against the heat with the approaching missile.

Temperature critical, warned the Cereno's AI. **Stabalise velocity now. Acceleration over-ride engaged. Manual re-entry incorrect, drop speed and adjust articulation immediately.**

Rynal kept the nose down. The AACS alarms began signalling objections, klaxons bleating into the bridge. It was now a game of chance. If the two warheads hit they would certainly be dead anyway. Something had to give. The Cereno's hull shielding peeled away at the nose, tearing back slowly like banana skin under the ablation of the thickening atmosphere.

Suddenly there was a breakthrough. The warhead overheated in re-entry and reached critical mass, exploding with enough violence to throw the sixth missile off-course. The moment it happened, Rynal gasped out a cry of long held aspiration and cut the acceleration, angling the starnavis star-ward again and levelling an appropriate escape velocity. The red hot Cereno returned to a safe altitude then cruised away from Amora once more like a firefly to the inky night. Scanners searched assiduously for the seventh warhead but there was nothing in range.

'We did it,' Osmond's voice spluttered through the bridge, wheezing from the stress of the gee-forces. 'By the gods we did it.'

The tactical computer alerted him to take immediate attention to the radiators, and quickly he discharged the lethal heat into a conduction cylinder and purged the white hot element into orbit. He hadn't much more of those. The Cereno was in deep trouble without thermal purge units, the whole core could overheat at this rate.

Guided projectile identified warned the Cereno's AI.

LOCK. LOCK. LOCK. LOCK

No!

A single fuel pellet was released in that moment falling into the focus-fusion caste. It pulsed into full flux, the pellet's reaction triggering a resplendent stream from the aft engines. Yet even with the starnavis' reactor jacked fully into the engines the Cereno's inertial weight was still too great for a quick getaway, and the warhead slammed into

the fuselage. The impact cleaved through the external MLI resin shielding and a flash of plasma momentarily shone inside.

Malla and Raven jolted forth, the cabin pressure tearing through the hole. Her ears rang. The breath snatched from her screaming lips on a gust of air racing into the blackness outside. She felt pinned into her seat as the Cereno spiralled through space, inertial forces pushing over forty rpm. And although the moveable seats adjusted to reduce the inertial strain, Malla, Raven and her child were thrown unconscious.

Emergency sprinklers activated, jettisons of foam racing into the hole punctured in the ship. The foam started collecting, sticking, gathering and growing around the wound. It quickly piled there, travelling on the evacuating air, expanding, sealing everything up in an instant. But the air was faint. Once the foam petrified the oxygen tanks stirred, releasing a fresh mix of air into the cabin again.

The lethal blow cut the engines and the Cereno powered down, catapulted through space on its own directionless momentum. The auto-pilot immediately recognised the crew was unconscious and emergency thrusters worked to counter the ship's spin. Radiation and dangerous overheating was the remaining problem. The whole thing desperately needed to cool, and Rynal had been too cautious with the conduction elements while he was awake. The auto-pilot injected a new element into the core, conducting tones of super hot exposure into the charge, and dispelled the hot cartridge into space. They drifted now through the silence. The damaged starnavis was easy pickings.

'Target is neutralised!' Ripley reported impassively.

The daring of the pilot intrigued him. His gutsy dive into Amora's atmosphere told him he was a risk taker and a born survivor. There was more going on here than desperation, he thought. The weaving through the debris field told him he was skilled, that he understood how Newtonian motion carried his bulky starnavis. Even now as they were dead in Amora's apoapsis, he hoped there was still some fight in them before the maser surgery unpieced their vessel. The Deathwind stayed on course, levelling its long canopy steady with the Cereno's orientation, matching her angle before firing its main engines up. Gee-forces pressed Ripley back into the cushioned seating. His engineered bones flexed and his veins fattened up as his geobacter supercharged the nanoctores, working hard to keep the oxygen where it was most needed, a job his lungs were unable to perform at such speeds. The approach time was a little under five minutes. They'd already covered a great distance, which meant the Cereno was a racer class starnavis. He thought her unusually large to have racer class engines.

The infantile screaming and wailing in his mind had now abated. He could no longer hear the child screaming through his mind. It was a relief they all shared, but the network had fallen silent; his boys were clearly spooked by the phenomenon. This was no radio frequency trick or clever network hacking. The child had been coughing, light hacking coughs, punctuated between the fierce wailings. They all knew that this sound was in their heads, that they all shared its invasive presence.

'Ripley, destroy that starnavis,' said the Commander. 'The crew members are gene-freaks and they're breaking morale.'

'Copy, ma'am.' Said Ripley, emphasising her title with some mild indignation for the derogatory term. *'All gene-freaks to be processes.'* And with that, he returned focus on allies in his close proximity. *'Fall in all strike-ships, target the Cereno, finish the job.'*

CHAPTER 3

When Rynal opened his eyes he saw the entire starnavis had fallen into darkness. The atmosphere lingered, hot and metallic, making his eyes rheumy. Each shallow breath inhaled the corrosive air as though it was spiced with the vapours of fried chilli-pepper. Only the radium pads were left to light the emergency escape routes. His antennae began to glow softly as he searched out the starnavis for his wife and child with the green and red eyes. They were safe, but the forces of the blast had knocked them unconscious. Raven too had been knocked unconscious by the explosion. But he hadn't the time to worry about injuries just now. Their survival was paramount.

'Rynal!' Osmond whimpered from somewhere below.

Rynal reached out, floating towards the inertial bed where the old man lay.

'You're hurt,' he noticed.

'My ankle,' he groaned with wince of pain, 'Just my ankle. Listen son...you have to get the starnavis moving again. Not for me, you understand. You know how important she is. *The child*. We all share her dreams.'

Rynal understood the gravity of this. He had once doubted the existence of clairvoyants and mystics. But since *she* had been born everything changed. Even the Elixir had changed.

'She's a Chronomancer. She must survive.'

'She will,' Rynal vowed determinedly. 'She will, if you can pilot the Cereno.'

'Not as good as you.'

'Go straight. I've locked onto one of the saltus-carousel zones in the velox quadrant. I got us pretty damn close to the nearest station. Couple the starnavis with one of the saltus-carousels and make the exit velox. I'll hold them off.'

'How?'

For a moment he glared stolidly at the old man, his narrow face sullen and determined. 'The catalyst.'

'Rynal,' the old man gasped. 'You mustn't.'

'There's no other way,' Rynal breathed heavily. 'Our culture is out there, dying!' Rynal turned to the dead circuits and began to unhatch wall panels, drawing out crystal boards from their place. 'We got this thing too late. We need to use it.'

'My god...what if that's why they're here?' Osmond asked. 'Did we take the bait? Did we give them an excuse to wage this war?'

'I don't think so,' said Rynal. 'I doubt they'd hand us something that can make a Quanti-magnus. They're here for something else.'

'You can't use it,' Osmond said. 'There's no power source...'

'I'll engage the macro-gravity on the Obsiduranum catalyst and over-mass the material to critical singularity. The catalyst isn't fitted with cold fusion cells and vacuum energy won't work near a Lagrange point; I'll have to power it manually. I have just enough geobacter in my blood to maintain over-mass.'

'What about us? What about the Elixir?'

Rynal sprang towards the core terminal and unlocked more of the crystal circuit boards, the glowing nanology in his blood scintillating like tinsel over his skin, communicating with the circuitry.

‘I doubt they came here for the Elixir.’ He said softly, his face cast in moire tones of blue white fluorescence. ‘You told me about this Titan who came to buy the system. Well I think they’re here to mine the Suntau.’ he explained.

‘Oh god,’ Osmond gasped, piecing together the possibility.

‘But so long as my daughter lives,’ said Rynal, ‘we might have a chance of at least saving the Elixir.’

Rynal opened a holographic window and repositioned several power-nodes to start up the back-up cold-fusion battery cells. Emergency lights illuminated the bridge command again and Rynal operated a diagnosis check.

‘The Casimir plates are misaligned,’ Rynal reported, ‘molecular diodes are out. That missile also tore up our photoelectric fusion core. This is bad. Right now I’ll run the ship from whatever is left of the cold-fusion cells. It’ll take a while for the nanomes to get the molecular diodes online, but the second they’re operating again you get to the nearest saltus-carousel before those bastards find them. There’s a storage station nearby. I’ve programmed the coordinates.’ Rynal checked the basic radars and sighed. ‘We’ve got Arrowhead strike-ships in-bound.’ He reported ‘E.T.A, six minutes.’

Rynal accessed mainframe systems and parts of the starnavis usually locked-out to commercial users. His eyes illuminated with facets of light and information as he toyed with the plates of crystal. A moment later a hatch opened in the middle of the bridge command. He floated over and grabbed hold of a large lever, pulling it down once.

Alert, dormant research catalyst exposed. Obsiduranium material is detached. Potential fatality detected, vacate the area immediately.

‘That should deter them a moment,’ said Rynal with a glimmer of joy. ‘They’re probably wondering what the hell that thing is we just ejected. They’ll be in for a shock when their scanners are done.’ He looked at the old man affably and offered a febrile smile, drawn tired eyes glistening with sweat. ‘You’re her only hope now, Osmond.’ He said. ‘Get them out of here.’

‘*Good luck Rynal Protos.*’ He heard his voice through a semi-transqualia, just enough to feed the thought without sharing the full sensorium that included his painful ankle.

Rynal poised over the personnel chute, arms volant, wide in balance. He looked down the long dark pit to where the cargo bay access was. He could find a quick exit from the airlock port from there. Rynal offered Osmond a readied nod, then descended into the cargo bay.

John Ripley wasted no time. He launched another warhead crashing into the Cereno minutes ahead of his arrival, detonating on impact and shattering what was left of the Cereno's external shielding. When suddenly, his strike-ship's AI sounded, drawing attention to an apparent danger in the area.

Ripley, said the AI, we've got a problem.

'What is it D.W?'

There's a great concentration of dormant condensed Obsiduranium just been detached from the Cereno. If that substance can be catalysed, then we could have a Quanti-magnus on our hands.

'Hold back!' Ripley said on the audio network. 'That's exposed Obsiduranum.'

'Jesus Christ Ripley,' one of the pilots flared, 'nobody mentioned anything about Obsiduranium being on this mission.'

'That's because there isn't supposed to *be* any,' the Commander declared. 'This culture hasn't the means or resources to manufacture such material, it has been stolen. Analyse the Obsiduranium Ripley, we're on the way.'

'Roger,' said Ripley, giving his AI a few seconds to report. 'Analysis complete.'

'What state is it in?' she asked.

'It's dormant ma'am.'

'So make the attack and keep it that way. I don't want them activating that catalyst with a power source. We could have a micro singularity if we're not careful.'

'Orders ma'am...?'

'Engage the target, Ripley.' The commander said obstinately, 'you have back up. Confirm. Our Jackal has her in range. Don't let them wire up a power source to that catalyst.'

'Copy,' he grunted incongruously. 'Resume the assault. We're going in.'

Ace. Said the AI pensively. If that thing has a timer...it'll only take a minute for ZPE conversion rates to...

'I know,' he growled, 'but, we are near an Amorion Lagrange point, confirmed?'

Correct

'Stay on course. We'll be fine.' Ace decided. 'They won't be able to harvest vacuum energy in this locality, not unless they hook up a power source.'

As you wish, the AI responded.

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The nanomes had managed to shift the Cereno's power flow, charging up the actuators once more. No sooner had the systems come online did the Cereno take another battering explosive missile to the shields. Rynal gasped in his suit as the whole ship vibrated. He opened the airlock and faced the glistening vastness of the engulfing nebula. Below him floated the Obsiduranium core, a large black elongated diamond roughly thirty meters in diameter. As the neon flames emerged from the thrusters, he made his leap away from the starnavis, down towards the ejected catalyst.

Sixteen metres his suit informed.

Rynal saw washes and snaps of garish lightning reach from the far vacuum of space. Although he couldn't see them he knew the masers from the approaching Arrowheads had trained their targets on him. But considering the distances, he was still a small and difficult target for now.

Ten metres

His own shallow breaths rasped through the helmet as he kept his arms outreached for the catalyst. Rynal spun into a slow forward roll, catching a glimpse of the Cereno as he did. It was covering a good distance now, leaving a long exhaust stream of radium dust particles in its wake.

Three metres

Rynal planted his feet onto the catalyst's work-path platform, solenoid boots pulled in towards the device's walkways. His motions were gradual, each step a desperate effort as he moved as quickly as possible to the device's power nodes on the other side; a man in slow motion, fighting the stasic pressures of space.

New target, power nodes are six metres his suit updated, the visor now projecting a logical path for him to follow. He saw his own shadow stretch across the surface of the catalyst as a salvo of missiles raced after the Cereno, passing silently overhead until their expanding cloud of vapour streams drifted by and gave their fierce engines something sufficient enough to send their dull vibrations through. He ran across the black spherical device, chasing the walkways, gasping breaths isolated within the dense helmet, the only audibility in the silence of the glistening nebula.

'Rynal...I can't take too many more of these. We're spent on stern chasers.'

'Don't worry Osmond. It's almost over.'

'Our enemy is expeditious. There's a Jackal making a very quick advance. They're arming long range Rail-Velocitas.'

'Calibrate your magnetosphere; break up the concentrated photons of maser-fire. Once the Catalyst is active those Rail-Velocitas won't be able to hit you.'

Rynal reached the power node, opening the device's delicate circuits. Finally he found what he was looking for and stared wistfully at the voltage warning.

Untwisting the glove on his left arm first, he removed it and two jets of air sprayed into the blackness of space from his sleeves as his suit deflated. The pressure leak detection activated an emergency seal, constricting the

intelligent fibres around Rynal's forearms and locking in the air pressure. Rynal removed the other glove, leaving it to spin aimlessly into space, and the suit tightened around his arms to seal off the leak.

Exposed in the vacuum the veins on his pale hands fattened. They were fitted into specialised conversion gloves he'd picked up from the cargo hold, covering his finger tips and parts of his palms. The gauntlets were specific for most nanome to energy conversions, a crucial tool for most nanome engineers, and especially now for him.

Alert. Air pressure loss detected. Radiation breach imminent.

His veins began to glow with a faint opalescence as the molecular nanomes racing through his blood worked to fight against the radiation all around him. He reached through space, and seized the diodes, a positive in the left gauntlet, and a negative in the right. A snap of lightning shot along his arms and fed into the diodes, his veins transforming into rivers of light, his skin glowing like the skirts of luminous jellyfish, the two gauntlets flashing with emissions of dangerous gamma photons as his energy became converted into flows of antimatter. The Catalyst began to move, rotating gradually in space. Rynal's screams were locked in the helmet for his ears alone. Snaps of fire raced from his body and delivered his geobacter over to the catalyst and with one yelping cry it was done. Rynal was reduced to his ancestors, a mere human poised on what would soon become a black hole. Just a milligram of antimatter was all it took, and almost Rynal's entire geobacter life force to produce. He looked to his numb hands and saw the damage. He could hardly believe his eyes. Blackened flesh and bones were exposed. It had not been the pain he was expecting, but sure enough the shock had sent him into a near euphoria.

Rynal gasped and stepped away from the diodes, leaving them to glow like molten rods. He dropped to his knees, brought down by the building macro-gravity of the device's Gravmex-field. Once the Obsiduranum fuel was excited there was no way to pacify or reverse the effects. As the macro-gravity increased, Rynal was on a one way ticket down. Pulled onto his back, his arms dropped under their own weight. But despite his demise he remembered the seed he'd planted on Amora and found time to smile.

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Osmond sealed his eyes shut contritely as Rynal's gasping screams tore through the Cereno's bridge.

'I'm with you Rynal!' he promised, sharing his agony through the transqualia neurophase, sharing in the pains of his aching ribs and bones.

'Fly the ship!' Rynal gasped his order as every bodily fibre was under strenuous gravitational pressure.

'Focus on getting away Osmond! Go!'

'I can share your transqualia.'

'No!' Rynal shouted, blocking him out. *'I will go through this alone. You have to focus Osmond. Get them out of here.'*

And as Rynal's pelvis fractured Osmond retreated fully from the transqualia and screamed in the memory of Rynal's agony. With deep panting breaths the old man focussed on their flight. After sharing in Rynal's physical experience he knew now the pains of his own broken ankle were but a fraction of what his friend was enduring.

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John Ripley could barely believe his eyes. A sudden gravitational shift emanated from the catalyst and his gravest fears were realised.

‘Break formation, the Catalyst is live, repeat, the Catalyst is live!’

Ripley saw the great energy and mass readings through the neurosphere, gazing with the prowess of his eyeless mind as though feeling its ethereal dimensions from the Deathwind's sensors. He gasped incredulously. He'd never seen a manufactured black hole before.

‘Quanti-magnus!’

The Deathwind broached suddenly, firing reverse thrusters and looping into a great arch. The Arrowheads, although sleek and smart in design, lacked the dynamic engine efficiency of the Deathwind, and were unable to escape the inevitable pull of the Obsiduranum locus. One or two were fast enough to use the Gravmex-well as a catapult to spin them back out of its increasing horizon, purging their elements and spare parts as they fired their engines. But the majority were drawn into its crushing epicentre. Ripley saw the man down there, spread out across the surface of the machine, disintegrating in the growing radiation. And as Arrowheads smashed into the catalyst's flanks he lay there still, trapped in a world of agony as the gravity pressed what was left of him against the solidity of the Catalyst surface.

Upon the solid black surface of the alloy, Rynal reached his arm forth with all his might. It felt as though his arm weighed a ton. It pulled back to the black surface as though his skin was magnetic.

‘Osmond!’ he breathed, gasping through the thinning air of his helmet. ‘Tell them I'm with them Osmond. Don't forget me.’

Osmond had heard the transmission and he sent back from the bridge. It crackled over audio as radiation continued to gather over the catalyst.

‘We're with you Rynal!’ He shouted. ‘We love you, son!’

The transmission was breaking up, a scattering plea breeching the Cereno's bridge, segmented by the increasing gravity.

‘Don't foget me Osmond...!’

And as the Catalyst generated its climactic reaction, the surface burst into blinding light. And all at once Rynal's pain was over. Although small, the concentrated radiance beacons ten times brighter than the system's local Suntau star. The light shifted and coiled, creating loop prominences of fire which descended gradually into a pitch black horizon. All the catalyst's solidity had now been either swallowed in the event or atomised. And a disk of devastating radiation began to gather around the glowing quanti-magnus.

The Jackal had been hunting the Cereno when it realised the danger ahead all too late, and started to turn. But their collision now was unavoidable. Mass distortions rippled through space, alerting the crew of the meteoric danger drawing them into orbital eminence at super fast speed.

To the surprise and horror of the Jackal's crew, the micro black hole smashed into the shielding like a hot needle through wax. A great fissure opened along the Jackal, unzipping the hull and shattering the armoured shell, sucking all the fragments into its tiny spore. Blinding radiation flared where metal and iron rushed to the centre of the singularity, compressed into an atomic space beyond the black spherical face of the event horizon.

Slowly, the Jackal Dreadnought tore itself open on its own momentum, billions of tons of material drifting against the immutably dense object like a python sliding over broken glass. The Catalyst smashed through the star-sail beams and nanotube riggings, its position fixed in space; its infernal surface feeding.

The Jackal was forced to a full stop as electrical failures flickered and burned on multiple levels throughout the starnavis where the micro black hole feasted parasitically within. The radioactive light of the Quanti-magnus shone through the darkened windows of the powerless Jackal. The parts of the Dreadnaught that were pulled into the quanti-magnus event vanished forever, and Ripley watched the enormous starnavis implode. He watched it disintegrate into a million fragments as strangely shaped fires burst out of the armour and dropped into reverse, back towards the greedy event horizon. All that lay outside the influence of the gravity collected in the fiery accretion disk, swirling down into infinitesimal nothingness. Like dry sand the Dreadnought fell apart.

The child's lifting wails grew to a crescendo now, distracting John Ripley with agonising intensity, tearing once more through his mind. Distress calls bled out across the network as evacuation capsules vacated the devastated war cruiser.

'Get to the Cereno!' Ripley commanded. 'Don't let her get away!'

'Sir, that device is too powerful; we have to go around the quanti-magnus event until it dissipates...'

'Whatever it takes!' Ripley shouted. 'Whatever it damn-well takes!'

*

Arrowheads streamed quickly towards their target. The Cereno was slowing down as it approached a small field of saltus-carousels, a hundred chrome rings perfectly aligned and awaiting duty. The damaged starnavis flew through the centre, slipping down the tunnel created by the alignment of rings, which shielded the potentially fatal blasts of beams

and throwing off the tracking systems of javelin-missiles in hot pursuit. Osmond activated the starnavis ski couplings, and two parallel skis descended beneath the ship as a third reached out of the Cereno's mount. The starnavis slowed as it approached the end of the aligned tunnel of saltus-carousels and passed through the last one. As it did, the three ski couplings sprung like extending wings from the body of the ship and latched onto the huge torus device. With a blast from the Cereno's thrusters Osmond hauled it from the assembly and drifted towards a velox point.

'Saltus connection established.' He reported to the bridge logs. 'Generating spatial distortions. Moving to the velox point.'

The newly acquired saltus-carousel quickly began generating fields as power feeds from the Cereno pulsed through the ski coupling into the toroid's circuits, spinning the electro-magnetic superfluid into rapid oscillations beneath its thick, platinum shell. Osmond returned thrust to the main aft, and in an instant the Cereno's speed increased dramatically as space distorted around the starnavis.

'Velox in sight!' Osmond shouted. He took a brief moment to look back on Amora and the destruction of his home and silently bade farewell.

'Main engines on!'

Main thrusters blasted from behind the starnavis, and in a magnificent lustre, it vanished through the violate nebula, the sole survivor of a cosmic genocide. As it fled the screams and cries of the Chronomancer child waned and the assailant pilots were left with an uneasy silence, gazing on the remains of their murderous onslaught.

*

'Negative kill, commander,' one of the Arrowheads reported. 'Target's away.'

Ripley took a deep breath and sighed.

'Fuck it all't hell.'

'The singularity distortions from the quanti-magnus are messing up my trackers...shit!' Another Arrowhead squalled. 'SHIT! I can't see a thing...'

'The Nexus interface is down, sir,' said a voice over the audio. 'That Dreadnaught was our main network processor. We're flying solo.'

John Ripley dropped out of the neurosphere interface, changing the Deathwind's cockpit windows limpid to finally observe the disaster with his own two radium green eyes. He watched the black hole shrink and gradually disintegrate in a cloud of molten matter and radiation.

'Sir?' The voice said again. 'This is dead air sir. Do you copy?'

'Start a hunt,' said Ripley despondently. 'Find them before they escape the nebula. I want all wings on this mission. Our cover mustn't be jeopardised. Grab whatever saltus-carousels are compatible with your strike-ship and get after them.'

'Copy sir,' said one of the pilots.

‘What about the commander?’ said another. ‘She was on that Dreadnaught.’

Ripley watched it burn and wheel around the empty space where the black hole had been, now a mist occupied by forks of lightning, pulsing silently within the junkyard strata. With a lugubrious silence he decided to himself that he would resume command, it was only right. He had the experience, after all.

Well, said D.W, I estimate her survival chances to be fewer than zero point three percent.

‘Okay, D.W,’ Ace said curtly, then spoke through the network. ‘Until we get back I will be acting fleet Commander.’

‘Copy sir.’

‘Roger that.’

‘Aye Commander.’

‘Keep to objectives,’ he stated, ‘round up the survivors for processing. Find the Cereno and terminate everyone on board.’