

CHAPTER ONE

MIRA Thorn stared at the hyperspatial clouds as they danced outside the ship's main viewport. Their blue and purple hues were lit by discharges of exotic energy that bloomed and faded leaving only a ghostly imprint on her retinas. Her imagination sought order in the maelstrom. Sometimes she thought she saw faces, tortured lost souls cast adrift on a trans-dimensional highway through hell.

Faster-than-light travel reminded her of an amphetamine high. Light-year after light-year passed so fast the scale of the journey was barely perceptible. Simultaneously, each second slowed to a lifetime. The constant rota of duty became a singularity of existence. An endless blur of time where night and day were arbitrary measures. Every minute the same as the one preceding it, just as the next would continue the monotonous rhythm.

It was an unsustainable cycle. A human body could only be pushed so far. When its limits were exceeded it crashed to a jarring, sudden stop.

Mira had an intimate understanding of 'phet binges and extended hyperspatial runs. She could see her crew had been running for too long. The high was wearing off and the inevitable crash was coming. The more she tried to motivate and bind

them, the more they drifted into their own insular worlds.

“Mira?” Tish said, her soft voice intruding on Mira’s morose thoughts. “Are you okay? You looked light-years away.”

She turned in the seat. Tish gazed at her with deep blue eyes bordered by fiery red hair and fading freckles. The artificial gemstones haphazardly sewn to her flight suit twinkled like stars under the freighter’s running lights.

“Sorry, Tish; it’s been a long trip.”

Tish brushed her cheek.

“Come on, let’s drop. Everything is green. Rich told me Mizarma has beaches and oceans. I want to learn how to swim.”

Mira rested her hand on the ship’s master throttle and checked it was in the neutral position. She returned her hands to the yoke and counted down from five. Tish collapsed the envelope.

Second Chance emerged into normal space. Energy dissipated in a flash of white light and dark radiation.

The ship was a boxy long-range freighter with four glowing ion engines mounted to her stern. Her hull bore scars and dents; one of lower sensor arrays had been torn off and the connection cables dangled in the vacuum.

Mira tapped a command sequence to trim the ship for intra-system cruising. She reached for a datapad and opened the post jump checklist. She glanced at Tish.

“We’re early,” she said.

Tish responded with a smile brighter than the distant star. The girl flicked her hair from her face and activated the comm-system.

“Mizarma traffic, GK-73821, *Second Chance*. We are inbound from the Vale. Please advise.”

A crackle of background radiation was the only response.

“Mizarma traffic, GK-73821. Do you read?” An edge of panic

crept into Tish's voice.

The link continued to crackle.

"Mira, no one is talking to me."

Tish gazed at her with tearful eyes; there was a tremor in her voice. Her hand brushed her sternum, the place where the ancient bullets had pierced her body. It was a nervous unconscious gesture.

Mira released her grip on the yoke and rested a hand on Tish's thigh.

"It's okay, Tish. Run a diagnostic on the comm. We lost a sensor array. It's messing with our systems."

The girl refocused, a subtle flush of colour flared in her cheeks and she turned back to her console.

A chart appeared on one of her holo-screens. The NaviComp overlaid orbit lines on the head-up-display.

"This isn't Mizarma..." she whispered.

She ran a positioning algorithm. It took several seconds to complete its calculations.

"Mira?" Tish asked. "What's wrong? How did we get here? Where is here?"

Mira released her harness and leant forward in her seat. Her breathing quickened.

"We're still in the Vale. A long way from where we started. This is a Lightfoot system, LDC-136."

Tish tapped commands into her console.

"The database lists it as unexplored," Tish reported.

Questions tumbled into Mira's mind.

How could they be so far off course? Why here?

"Tish, we should run a full diagnostic across all systems." She pointed to the viewport. "This could not have happened by accident."

Mira drummed her fingers on her console and bit down on

her lower lip. The ship was in good shape; they had no shortage of fuel or air. Time and distance played on her mind.

Tish swivelled to face her; light from the panel painted her porcelain skin with red and blue hues. The journey had taken its toll on them all. Tish wore it most visibly. Her blue eyes kept their magical sparkle, but with each day she smiled less and slept more.

“Do you think someone has hacked us?”

Mira continued to study the readouts. If the NaviComp had malfunctioned the odds of arriving in a system were negligible, smaller still a Lightfoot system.

“Or someone changed our course.”

“Rosa? Why would she? Why here?” Tish replied.

Rosa Lopez was the only person onboard Mira considered an outsider. In the aftermath of her stay on the Mothernode, Rosa had become fragile and unpredictable.

Mira pushed her seat back and stood.

“We have to consider every possibility. I am certain it was neither you nor I. Alex is a known quantity. Rosa is the only person on the ship we don’t know who has the skills.” She moved behind Tish.

“I’m sorry. I don’t seem to have much luck getting you anywhere safe.” She kissed the top of the girl’s head.

“It’s okay, Mira. You’re here and that’s all that matters.” Tish stuck her tongue out and made a retching noise. “Sorry that was sickly. It sounded *a lot* better in my head. Guess we better tell the others.”

She sent a wake-up call through the ship’s intercom as Mira headed aft.

“I’ll follow you down,” Tish called after her.

A red light blinked on a wall-mounted console in the main corridor. Mira stopped and studied the panel. It was an inter-

face unit for the atmospheric control system. She tapped the reset button, and the light flicked off. She waited for a minute and continued on her way. The ship had been displaying unusual behaviour since they left the Mothernode. Random glitches had been showing up in many subsystems. Alex Kite called them ghosts. Every time they tried to trace the fault, the error codes cleared. Tish suspected it was a side effect of running the Moonlight hackware on the ship's core.

The aroma of fresh coffee filled the air of the crew lounge. This neutral space with its soft furnishings and deep carpet was the beating heart of the ship. This was where her people came together, an oasis of the human spirit in the desert of interstellar space.

Rich Barnes and Monica Garret were waiting. Monica tidied a stack of papers Tish had been scribbling notes and diagrams on. Barnes was brewing coffee.

“Hey,” Barnes said, greeting her with a smile. He gave her an aluminium mug of hot chocolate.

“How long until we land?” Monica asked.

“Wait until everyone is here and I'll bring you up to speed.”

The crew arrived one by one. Alex was dressed in shorts and t-shirt, his blond hair matted with sweat. Shannon Wade followed, similarly attired. She looked more energised than Alex.

“Is Shannon working you too hard, flyboy?” Mira asked with a grin.

Alex sat and drank a litre of water before answering.

“I didn't realise I was this out of shape,” he replied.

“Don't be too hard on him, Mira,” Shannon said. “You have all been in variable gravity for longer than I have.”

Mira put a hand on Alex's shoulder. He flashed his fleet-brat smile.

“Don't forget Mr Kite is also recovering from the injuries he

earned on the *Berlin*. He missed his check-up this morning,” Monica said.

Mira waved a finger at Alex; before he could reply Monica continued.

“You also had an appointment, Thorn. How are the ribs?”

Mira was about to laugh and realised her friend was serious.

“Sorry, Monica. I feel fine.”

Rosalita Lopez lingered in the hatchway before entering. Her face had filled out and she had gained weight. Her hair was longer and had taken on a gentle curl. She moved around the edge of the room to one of the couches. In recent days she had become sullen and introverted, seldom venturing from her cabin.

“Now everyone is here,” Mira said. “I have bad news. We dropped out of FTL a day early. I figured it was a calculation error. When we jumped from the Mothernode, we rushed the solution.”

“Sorry,” Alex said. “I thought I double checked it.”

“You did,” Mira replied. “I checked it too. I can’t account for it, but we are not at Mizarma.”

“So where are we?” Rosa asked.

“We have dropped into a Lightfoot system designated LDC-136. The chances of that being a random event are non-existent.”

“We’ve re-routed? How is that possible?” Alex opened another bottle of water.

“It’s not. Tish is running a diagnostic and checking the logs. It could be an external hack, possibly Blackened or Pharn. Or one of us could have done it...” She let the words hang in the air.

Rosa stood.

“Why are you looking at me, Thorn?” She hissed. Anger

burned in her eyes.

“I am not accusing anyone, Rosa. We are somewhere we should not be and I don’t know how we got here. Calm down.”

Rosa cursed in Spanish.

“Look at yourself and your girlfriend. You both owe *them* your lives. What if they are working through you? Maybe you are working for them. Maybe you are not really you.”

The *Them* were the Pharn and Mira had to concede Rosa had a point. Mira had been reborn into a clone body on Arethon. Tish died on the Mothernode only for the alien known as Zenia to bring her back.

Rich Barnes stood.

“Rosa, that’s unfair. I have known Mira for ten years. She is...”

“What? You’ve known her? Whatever that is? That lesbian witch?”

“Rosa!” Barnes snapped.

Mira took a moment to process Rosa’s words and tried to disguise the hurt.

“It’s okay, Rich. She’s right. None of us are above suspicion.” She turned her gaze to Rosa. “Get frosty, Rosa. I’m sorry you thought I singled you out. You, Alex, Tish and I can change the ship’s course. It could have been one of us or none of us.”

But you singled her out... why? Her subconscious whispered.

Rosa made to say something, but stopped. She sat; a moody scowl creased her elfin features.

Mira sipped her drink and waited for the tension to subside.

“Aside from the routing problem we’re in good shape. There are a couple of issues, but the ship’s running well. Alex and Rosa, you did a good job ironing out the wounds we picked up.

We have enough fuel and air to make it to Miz without a stop-over, so once we work out what went wrong we can re-route.”

“What about the ghosts?” Alex asked. “I’m still detecting them and cannot isolate a cause. That would point to someone breaking into our systems.”

Mira had already considered the possibility. Unless someone had figured out how to hack a starship in a hyperspatial envelope, she had to admit it was unlikely.

“Tish is on it, Alex.”

“On what?” Tish appeared in the doorway. She was carrying a datapad.

“The haunting of the *Second Chance*.”

“Ah that, yeah. I have interesting news.”

Mira gestured for Tish to come in. Tish slipped past Rosa and gave her shoulder a squeeze. Rosa glanced up, but did not meet the girl’s eyes.

“We were re-routed after a maintenance dump,” Tish explained.

“Alex didn’t program a dump,” Mira replied. Maintenance dumps were short drops from FTL, conducted under the control of the ship’s autopilot. The main purpose was to dump carbon monoxide generated by the air scrubbers and pick up long-range communications. Dumps were common on smaller vessels, but often unnecessary on large freighters, warships or star liners.

“We didn’t need to,” Alex said. “*Second Chance* is running grade 2A nav software. It will plot the optimum time and location to flush the tanks. I enabled the feature before we jumped. I didn’t think the Miz run was long enough to need one, so I never mentioned it.”

Tish thanked him.

“The ship performed the maintenance cycle six days ago. It

took nine minutes and thirty-two seconds. That's when the course change took effect."

"More than enough time to re-route us," Mira observed.

Rosa did not react.

"There's more." Tish tapped a command into her datapad and the sound of a beacon pinged over the lounge speakers.

"A landing beacon?" Alex asked.

"Yep," Tish replied. "That's the audio carrier. I'm picking up a data feed for a full approach and landing system."

Mira sat and put her mug to one side.

"Tish, any other transmissions? Communication leaks or anything else?"

"Negative," Tish replied. "Do you want me to ping them?"

Mira expected background bleed, stray transmissions on random frequencies. Bleed was common to human comms-systems regardless of the size of the transmitter. She wondered how big the settlement was. The instrument landing system indicated a spaceport. Small outposts were not usually equipped with an ILS. It meant whoever was on the surface was in the business of landing large vessels.

"No, let's head in and keep our ears open. Plot a course to Miz so we can jump when ready."

Tish took a deep breath.

"I have already tried. The NaviComp is locked out. I can't get in."

"What?" Alex asked.

"Whatever changed our course used the admin system code to lock the NaviComp. I can run up a manual solution but it will take time."

Rosa muttered something and stared at the deck.

"Fuck," Mira whispered. "Right, here's what we do. We follow up on the transmission. Alex, I want you to check out the

options of reverting the NaviComp to a backup. If it needs a hard reset then so be it. Let Monica check you out first.” She fixed her gaze on Rosa.

“Rosa, can you help Alex with that?” Despite her best efforts, she detected a flutter in her words.

“Si.”

One by one they left the lounge.

Rosa lingered.

“Thorn,” she said. “I’m sorry. These pills. They make me irrational. I thought you suspected me because you don’t know me.”

“I understand. You’re right. Tish and I have been exposed to them. I’m also sorry; I was suspicious. It was wrong of me. It’s no excuse, but we’ve all been in space too long and seen too much weird shit.”

Rosa looked to the deck.

“I’m sorry for what I called you.”

Mira shrugged.

“I’ve been called worse. I’ve not heard the L-word in years.”

Rosa took a trembling breath. She was taller than Mira, but of similar build. It made her look fragile. Her nervous demeanour exaggerated it.

“I don’t have an issue with you. My home, Viola Prime, there was a stigma around same-sex relationships. It was a start-up colony and big families were desirable. It’s not right. Love is love. I was insensitive and talking shit. I wanted to hurt you. I’m sorry.

“Mira, I like you, you know that right?” Rosa continued, her distress deepening. “You came all that way to rescue me and I...” She started to sob.

Mira, cautiously, hugged her.

“I miss, Jack,” Rosa said through tears.

Now Mira understood.

“It’s okay, Rosa.” She pulled her close. Rosa remained tense. “Don’t worry, I’m not trying to convert you.”

Rosa managed a laugh and relaxed. Eventually, her sobs subsided.

Mira broke the embrace and walked to a cabinet on the far side of the lounge. She tapped in an access code and removed a half full bottle of Lightfoot brandy.

“I hid this from Monica,” she explained. “You want one?”

“My medication; the doctor said...”

Mira gave a dismissive wave.

“Yeah, she used to tell me the same thing, never stopped me.” Mira poured two glasses and sat opposite Rosa.

“Fuck us being off course. Fuck the signal and fuck everything,” Mira said. “Let’s drink and make up.”

Rosa took her glass and sipped. She shuddered. Mira tried not to grin. In Rosa Lopez she had met someone who was worse at drinking liquor than her.

“You cuss a lot. I find it funny,” Rosa said, peering over the rim of her glass.

“It’s my coping mechanism. I do it so people don’t get too close.”

“It didn’t work very well. You have a tight crew; they’re happy too. The ships I served on were miserable places. That’s why I liked Jack. He was such an asshole.”

Silence fell between them.

“You know he might be alive,” Mira said. “I didn’t see his body on the *Torrence*.”

Rosa shrugged.

“Never give up, huh?”

Mira raised her glass.

“Never give up.”

They sat for a while. Rosa stood and straightened her flight suit.

“Thank you for the drink. I won’t tell the doctor,” she said.

Mira hid the bottle and followed her out. Rosa headed aft.

The light on the atmospheric control console was blinking again. Mira reset it.

Tish was working to isolate the signal when Mira returned to the deck. Alex sat alongside her, working with the unresponsive NaviComp.

“How’s it going?” Mira asked.

“Not good,” Alex replied. “Everything is shutting me down... Whoever did this knew how to screw us over.”

“Assuming it was a someone,” Mira said. “What about this signal?”

Tish turned.

“It originates on a rocky moon orbiting the gas giant. It’s a Hot Jupiter and falls in the habitation band. The planet is designated Jura, formerly LDC-136-3. The moon is Jura-C. It’s the only habitable satellite. No more signs of life. The beacon is automated.” She paused. “How is Rosa?”

Mira shrugged.

“Fragile, grieving and just about holding her shit together,” Mira replied.

Tish took her hand. “Don’t be mad with her.”

“I’m not.”

Alex climbed out of the pilot’s seat. “I’ll check the core. I can interface with it with it from engineering.” He did not sound optimistic.

Mira took his place.

“Take Rosa,” she called after him. “She needs a distraction.”

Mira patched into the ship’s landing system and hooked up the beacon. A series of rectangles appeared on the head-up-

display. They cycled toward their destination. She clipped on her earpiece and dialled up an audio channel. The carrier wave was standard human format.

“Civilian,” she said. “Perhaps Lightfoot has an expedition out here. How far are we from Arethon?”

Or at least where Arethon was...

“21 light-years,” Tish replied.

It was insignificant in terms of galactic distances.

“One way to find out what’s happening,” she said. “Tish, let me know if they ping us.”

Mira followed the landing pipe with an aggressive inbound trajectory. The gravitational pull of the gas giant and star combined to accelerate the *Chance* at an ever increasing velocity. She stepped the sublights back and burned the retro thrusters to reduce their speed of closure.

Mira reviewed the data acquired by the sensor array. The planet was twice the size of Jupiter, heading toward brown dwarf territory. Unlike Jupiter it had negligible radiation output, which made for favourable conditions on the moon. The world grew larger until it filled the viewports. Sunlight reflecting off the clouds was bright enough for Mira to lower the first of the glare shields. The gold impregnated shield tempered and polarised the light. Mira marvelled at the detail in the cloud tops. The atmosphere was crème-white and streaked with orange bands. Storms boiled and eddied in the space between the layers, lit from within by flashes of lightning. The scale of the world was vast and the storm clouds moved at several thousand kilometres per hour. From this distance the clouds whirled and eddied in a slow motion ballet of meteorological physics.

Mira pulled the ship into orbit and used the beacon to point the vessel on an intercept course with Jura-C. The moon came

up quickly. She applied a heavy retardation burn to slow the ship. Her restraints tightened as their relative velocity fell away.

“Any activity, Tish?” she asked.

“Negative, just the beacon. Perhaps LDC have not sent their people out here yet.”

“What about pirates?”

Mira had heard stories of pirates on the Frontier using distress beacons to attract passing ships. When the crew stopped to investigate the pirates would attack. If the unfortunate freight jockeys were lucky, they would lose their cargo. Pirates were becoming more ruthless and would often strip the ship of shielding plates, drain the NitOx reserves and take the water. They would leave the unfortunate crew to suffocate in the dark.

“If it were an orbital signal, it would be a possibility. On the surface? Too much effort and risk,” she replied.

Mira stole a glance at Tish. Before the loss of the *Berlin*, she had spent two years hunting down pirates and insurgents. It was likely she had killed people that Tish knew, maybe people she was close to.

“Tish, did you ever lure and strip?”

“We did some stuff that would be considered bad, but we let no one die. We had honour, and what goes around comes around. It wasn’t always that way with Xander. He has past, just like the rest of us.”

Mira turned back to the instruments and studied the readouts. The moon was large, smaller than Earth, but not by a significant margin. It had a dense nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere. The surface was rocky with isolated seas of liquid water. The temperature range at the equator was 6 to 35 Celsius. The ice caps extended into the temperate regions.

“That’s a reasonable world for the Vale,” Tish said, leaning

forward and peering out of the viewport. “No wonder they have a beacon down there. If not a development planet, it’s mineral rich and I have evidence of hydrocarbon deposits.”

The presence of hydrocarbons meant this world had once supported life. She wondered if this had been a Pharn colony.

Movement behind roused her attention.

“What’s the deal then?” Shannon asked. She supported herself on the headrests.

Mira pointed to the viewport.

“Looks like Lightfoot’s people have been prospecting.”

Jura-C grew in the viewport. White clouds swathed the crescent of the moon. The star’s light reflected from the gas giant’s cloud tops and cast the dark half of the moon with an ephemeral silver light.

Shannon stared through the viewport, transfixed. She had changed into a regular flight suit and tied her steel-blond hair into a braid. Her skin had lost some of its Cali-girl tint, but it was still a long way from spacefarer pale. She was slowly taking on the look of a seasoned traveller.

Mira always felt a sense of awe around the former J1 racer. It wasn’t just that she was her hero. She was physically big and stood almost as tall as Rich Barnes. Broad shoulders and a toned physique enhanced her presence, yet it was tempered with grace and poise. Mira figured it was the perfect combination for winning more J1 titles than anyone else.

“Are you and Rosa okay?” Shannon asked.

“Yeah, we’re good. She’s hurting and just lashing out,” Mira replied.

“We’re coming up on the source of the signal. Starting the orbital scan,” Tish interrupted.

Mira focused her attention to her console. The *Chance’s* sensor suite lacked the resolution of the military systems she

was used to, but it could still burn through the dense cloud and resolve a three-dimensional image of the terrain.

Jura-C's surface comprised rock strewn plains, deep valleys and rugged mountain ranges. Wind erosion rather than water had been the dominant force in shaping the land. Mira noticed there were conspicuous flat plains carved into the surface. They seemed too regular to be natural features, and she wondered if the boulder-strewn expanses were the footprint of long-lost cities.

A settlement came into view, a single story hexagonal structure. The scaling system showed it occupied an area of three square kilometres. It was surrounded by prefabricated out-buildings, linked by covered walkways. A large landing pad lay three kilometres to the west. Stacks of containers were lined up on the dock. Some bore the letters LDC on their upward face. Most were anonymous multicoloured cuboids.

To the north, the base was being extended. Cranes and earth moving machinery were visible. To the south was a giant cylindrical tower.

"Looks big," Shannon observed.

"Ten square kilometres," Mira said as the base-camp slipped behind them. "The lights are on, but no one is transmitting."

"Tish, can you send them a wake-up call?"

Tish opened a channel and announced their presence.

Mira waited.

Only static came back.

Tish tried again, then again.

"Look!" Tish pointed to the screen. An elongated crater had been torn into the surface. The rock was burned black and wreckage was strewn in every direction.

"Something big came down there," Mira said.

Second Chance slipped below the horizon and they lost contact.

“Keep scanning, Tish. I want to build a full map of the planet. People must be here for a reason.”

“What are you planning, Mira?” Shannon asked.

Mira did not want to set down on the planetoid to investigate further, but there was nothing to stop them documenting their findings from orbit. The crash site and the silence of the base bothered her.

“All we have is an auto beacon, and a deserted base. It could be the people just shipped out and went somewhere else. I say we log it and then head to Miz. Damien Lightfoot might find the information useful.”

“I’ll plot us a course,” Tish said. “It’ll take me an hour, maybe two.”

“Take all the time you need.”

Mira stood and walked aft; Shannon followed.

“I checked the ship logs,” Shannon said. “During the maintenance dump the flight deck was unattended. We were in the night cycle.”

“So it means it must have been a random event?” Mira asked.

“I cross-referenced the door logs. I can’t take credit for that; it was Alex’s idea. Everyone was in their respective berths. That’s the problem.”

“Why? If no one left their cabin, they could not have reprogrammed the course.”

Shannon stopped.

“Mira, the terminal in your cabin can program the ship. It’s the captain’s stateroom, so it has secure access to all systems.”

Mira sighed and closed her eyes. She fought back the anger, telling herself it made sense.

“You think it was me or Tish?” she asked.

“No, but it raises doubts. It means we can’t rule you out. Rosa was correct when she said you have both been under the influence of the Pharn. We know the Pharn were not necessarily the good guys, at least from our perspective.”

Legion’s revelations on the Mothernode had changed Mira’s perception of the ancient war. It seemed to her the Pharn and the Blackened were as bad as each other.

She was in no doubt the Blackened were a lethal threat; they despised life unlike their own. Fear and xenophobia drove them. It was an absolutist view. If you were not Blackened, you were the enemy.

The Pharn viewed humanity as their playthings, intervening when it suited them and treating humans with indifference when it did not. They valued order, their order. The collective was their method of organising the galaxy. They maintained peace at the expense of freedom. In their own way, the Pharn were as absolutist as the Blackened.

Mira brought her thoughts back to the more immediate problem and leant against the bulkhead. Shannon was right. She would have made the same call herself. She ran her hand through her hair; she knew what needed to be done.

“We should establish a buddy system to make sure Tish and I are never alone on the flight deck.”

“I’m sorry, Mira, just until we’re certain.” Shannon apologised. Mira squeezed her arm.

“Don’t be sorry. On this ship, we look out for each other.”

The *Second Chance* lurched as an explosion shook the hull. Mira fell into Shannon and they both tumbled into the bulkhead and onto the deck.

Mira cursed. Pain flared in her newly healed ribs.

Shannon sprang to her feet and helped Mira up. They ran to

the flight deck.

“Tish?” Mira said, jumping into the pilot’s seat.

“The starboard water tank has just vented! We’ve lost 80% of our water.” Tish was tearful. Mira did not know if it was her Aspergers taking control or her fragility after the events on the Mothernode.

“What happened?” Shannon asked.

“I was plotting the course. I couldn’t optimise it because the NaviComp is offline, so I worked it manually... I can do that.” She sniffed. “The water just vented. I don’t know how!”

Alex rushed forward followed by Rosa. Mira explained the chain of events.

“Do we have enough water to get to Miz?” Alex asked.

Tish tapped into the environmental controls.

“No. Even with bottled supplies, re-cyc can’t produce enough to replace what we have lost. There are too many of us on board.”

Mira thumped the console.

“What did you do?” Rosa asked Tish. She fixed Tish with a cold, stony glare.

“I did nothing... I was plotting a course.”

“Bullshit, no one can plot a complex course without the computer,” Rosa snapped.

Mira rounded on her.

“Tish can, it’s what she does. Leave her alone, Rosa. You are on dodgy ground right now.”

Rosa snorted.

“She was alone and had access to the venting controls. You’ll defend her no matter what. Open your damn eyes.” She mumbled something in Spanish.

“Rosa,” Alex said, his calm aloofness cracking. “Chill out.”

Rosa stormed from the deck, only to return a few seconds

later. Her face red.

“I’m frosty,” she said.

They stood in silence for several seconds.

“Shannon told me what she found in the logs.” Mira gestured for Shannon to explain her investigation.

“It puts the Tish and I in the frame. Neither of us should be alone around crucial systems until we are sure...”

Tish stood, threw her headset across the flight deck and stormed aft. There was a crash as she kicked a transit case.

“You should go after her,” Shannon said.

“In a minute. I know how we can fix the water problem and reboot the core,” Mira said.

“How? We need a spaceport,” Alex asked.

Mira pointed to LDC-136C.

“We have one.”

She called up the scan data and imagery.

Alex studied the holo-display.

“I concur, everything looks good. I say we go for it.”

Mira stood.

“I’ll take us down with Tish.” She pushed past Rosa.

“No, Alex and I will fly it. Just to be certain,” Rosa said.

Mira stopped by the open blast door and stared at Rosa.

“No one put you in charge, and this is not a fucking democracy.”

She strode off the deck.

Tish sat on a ledge in the ship’s engineering section. She stared through a thick plexiglass window into the infinite expanse of interstellar space. Her knees were drawn up and tears streaked her face.

Mira stood in the hatchway. Tish did not react to her presence.

“I knew I would find you here,” she said.

Mira took a step forward, followed by another.

When the world got too much for Tish, she would come to this quiet space at the bottom of the ship. She had told Mira she liked how the walls felt close and how listening to the throb of the reactor was like listening to the ship’s heartbeat.

Her eyes were ringed with red. She brushed a strand of hair from her face.

“I didn’t dump the water, Mira. I wasn’t even in the same subsystem.”

“I know,” Mira took another step forward. “Can I come in?” Mira was not referring to the compartment. When Tish crashed she needed space to protect and insulate her. Mira was the only person she would allow into the bubble.

Tish beckoned her with outstretched arms.

“Why did you side with Rosa?”

Mira put her hand on Tish’s cheek. Her skin was cool to the touch.

“I didn’t. I know you didn’t do it, just as I know I didn’t reroute us.”

“Why then?”

“Until we know what happened we have to doubt everything. Us included. Just as a precaution.”

“What about Rosa? She was on the node longer than we were.”

“Rosa too. Whoever is flying will have to buddy up with Alex.”

Tish moved closer.

“Rosa should be grateful; we rescued her. I died for the ungrateful bitch.”

Mira shivered at the memory of holding Tish in her arms as the girl’s life leaked onto the cold floor. Mira had known grief

before, but that was no match the raw pain she had felt that day.

“Rosa’s grieving for Jack. She told me it was a space thing, but I think it was more. At least on her part.” Mira paused. “Her daughter died three years ago.”

She told Tish the story of how six-year-old Esmae Lopez died when the family’s ground car hit a rut on a rural road and overturned.

“Rosa was driving,” Mira said. “It broke her.”

“I guess we all have secrets. Poor Rosa.”

Mira took Tish’s hand, and they headed forward.

“What about you?” Mira said, her voice hushed.

Tish blinked. A single tear ran down her cheek.

“I’m okay,” she replied. “Sometimes that dark place, that nothing place, creeps into my mind. It’s cold and lonely.”

Mira knew; she had experienced the same emptiness before her rebirth. She had entered it knowingly, but Tish had been thrust into it when two ancient bullets pierced her chest.

Mira pulled her close.

“I’ll protect you, Tish. I’ll never put us in a situation like that again. I will kill Legion, just to be sure.”

“Mira... I think of the people who died. Eden, Zoe, Reece... all of them.” She sniffed. “They are just the first. Any one of us could be next. I don’t want to think about it, but I can’t help it.”

Mira understood. There were times she lay awake, staring into dark. The human war had taken lives, the ancient war had taken more. She had been far from innocent. She fooled herself that the ships she destroyed in the Battle of Mizarma had been just *targets*. It was how the Navy legitimised taking lives.

Mira rested her forehead against Tish’s.

“I think of their faces and that’s what drives me forward. We couldn’t save them, but we can make their sacrifice count.”

Mira's voice trembled. "We have to do our best for everyone who will come after us. You, me, Rich, Alex, Monica... none of us asked for this, but we won't run from it."

The tension slipped from Tish's body.

Mira took her hand and Tish hopped off the ledge. She gave a slight smile.

"I had a dream," Tish said. "I dreamt this was all over and we were living on a remote planet. All of us. We built a village by a lake and lived a simple life. No Federation, no Pharn and, best of all, no Blackened."

Mira squeezed her hand.

"It's a good dream; let's make it real."

They walked in easy silence back to the flight deck.

"We're bringing the ship in," Mira said as they entered the deck. "Our ship, our rules."

Alex climbed out the pilot's chair. Rosa remained seated at the copilot's station.

"Do you mind?" Mira asked.

Rosa vacated the seat. She glared at Tish and walked aft.

Tish took her place.

"Kite!" Mira said. "Don't go anywhere. Strap in at the engineering console and make sure we behave ourselves."

"You got it, Thorny," he replied. "You've toughened up since the Mothernode. I like the new you."

Tish turned.

"Despite her size, she can be dominant."

Alex laughed and turned his attention to the controls.

"That I don't doubt," he said.

Mira tapped into the internal comm.

"Rich, can you come up and act as a spotter on the approach? I could do with your tactical assessment of the landing zone."

Barnes acknowledged. Mira started to work through the pre-landing checklist.

Second Chance completed her second descending orbit and bit into the high stratosphere. The external temperature rose as the atmosphere decreased their relative velocity.

“All systems nominal,” Mira reported. “The atmosphere is thick and we’re in for a bumpy ride. Alex, make sure everyone straps in. That includes Monica. If anyone pukes, they’re cleaning it up.”

Alex made the call; she barely heard him. Her world was limited to the outside, the viewport and her flight instruments.

“Mira,” Tish said. “I am detecting thunderstorms in the area, scattered and moving fast. They are intense. The atmosphere is turbulent. Keep your eyes open.”

“Affirm,” Mira acknowledged. She switched one of her holoscreens to the weather radar.

Red and yellow blobs tracked across the screen. Each one was a storm cell running in an arc on their approach vector. Their closing speed meant Mira would have to react to them rather than trying to plot a course around them.

The ship lurched as they entered the troposphere. Mira fought the controls to keep the unwieldy vessel in straight-and-level flight.

“This atmosphere is like soup,” Mira remarked.

The *Second Chance* vibrated as they descended through a pocket of turbulence. Eventually the ship settled, her course only disrupted by changes in the high velocity winds. Mira pinched her nose to restore her hearing. Alex and Tish mirrored the action.

Mira rolled the throttles back and deployed the ship’s atmospheric stabilisers. The tiny winglets did not generate lift,

instead they redirected airflow over the hull. Like most haulers, Kobo class vessels relied on a combination of reverse gravity and vertical lift rockets to maintain altitude. Right now the *Chance* was falling through the clouds like a stone.

“Temperature is five degrees; no danger of icing. There is dust in the atmosphere but nothing ship breaking,” Alex reported.

The yoke went light in Mira’s hands. Warning lights flickered on the console as they entered a column of high pressure. *Second Chance* dropped almost vertically. Mira held her breath and fought the fluid bubbling up through her throat. She swallowed hard and prepared herself for the inevitable bump.

“Brace!” she yelled over the public channel.

Seconds later the ship slammed into a storm cell.

The force pushed Mira into her seat. She tasted blood as her teeth sank into her tongue.

Tish’s head flew forward and snapped back. She lay motionless.

“Tish!” Mira screamed.

Tish groaned and sat up. Blood trickled from her nose.

“I’m okay.” Her voice was groggy. She wiped the blood away with the back of her hand.

“Intense,” she muttered as she turned her attention back to her console.

They broke through the clouds and rain lashed against the viewports. Mira activated the fluid dispersal system. Hot air pushed water to the side of the ports. Lightning flashed around them. Mira spotted a line of thunderheads ahead of the ship. They arced across their flight path.

This will be challenging...

“I’ve lost the ILS beacon.”

The instrument landing system should have lit up as soon as

they broke the cloud base. Mira swapped nav-modes; still nothing. ILS system used a high-powered radio transmitter, backed up with an infra-red data feed. Double redundancy was supposed to allow operation in all conditions. It seemed Jura-C had other ideas.

“I’m on it,” Tish said, tapping on her console.

The landing system pinged and a glide scope appeared on the Holo-HUD.

“I have it, loud and proud. Thanks, Tish.”

Mira pulled *Second Chance* hard to port, navigating them around a storm. She banked hard to starboard to avoid another. It was like threading a needle. The storms were dense, full of energy and moisture. Mira assumed the rainfall evaporated during the day and fell again at night. What little remained pooled in the moon’s shallow lakes.

The ship shook. An alarm honked insistently. Tish reached up and silenced it.

“Lightning strike,” Alex reported.

The ship shook twice more under further strikes.

“We’ve blown a lifter, but we’re still good,” Alex said. Mira hardly heard him.

The yoke was sluggish in her slick palms. The worst of the weather was above them and the wind shear less intense.

Ahead of them the xenon lights of the Lightfoot base appeared on the horizon. The facility was built on a plateau and surrounded by deep canyons. It appeared more permanent than Mira expected.

“I’ll take us in a wide circle. Rich, you’re up,” she said.

Barnes moved forward. He glanced at Tish.

“You okay, kiddo? It’s been a rough ride.”

Tish flashed him a smile as he turned his attention to the viewport. Mira knew Barnes was referring to more than the

descent.

“Lights are on, so they have power, externally at least,” he said.

Mira slowed and banked the ship.

The reactor cooling tower was emitting clouds of steam into the air.

“The reactor is venting. That means it’s generating more power than the facility needs,” Barnes observed.

“Dangerous?” Mira asked.

Tish answered. “Not in the short term. It’s an automatic safety feature. The reactor generates steam to drive turbines. As long as the system remains pressurised, it will be fine.”

“What she said,” Barnes added, with a chuckle.

“Down there.” He pointed.

One of the habitation units had a large, jagged hole torn in it. Debris littered the rock outside. Many smaller holes surrounded the large gash.

“Explosion... not well targeted. Looks like industrial blasting caps,” he said. “Tish can you zoom in for me?”

Tish zoomed her holoscreen in.

“Yeah, look small arms fire. There’s evidence of it everywhere.”

“There was an attack?” Mira asked.

“Looks that way...” His voice trailed off. He reached over and panned the camera back. “Wait, the explosion is outward. That means the charge was on the inside.”

“Someone was trying to get out?” Mira asked.

“Maybe we’re seeing collateral damage caused by whatever happened inside.”

“You want another rotation, Gunny?” she asked.

Barnes declined.

“Okay, I’ll bring her in.”

Mira reached up, flicked on the landing lights and turned the ship toward the pad. She reduced speed and altitude.

“Struts, Tish.”

Tish pulled the landing gear lever. The yoke vibrated. Mira tightened her grip.

“Down and locked,” Tish confirmed.

Mira acknowledged and set the ship onto the pad. Her stomach lurched as the struts took the weight and the ship bounced.

Mira reached for the engine master switch. Before her fingers connected with it, the engines stopped. The ship fell silent.

The only light on the deck came from the floodlights surrounding the pad.