

Omniscience

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Chapter One

Tara hated space. She always had. It wasn't just the night sky, it was the truly vast darkness, emptier and greater than she could possibly imagine. Yet here she was, seated aboard a shuttle as it ferried her up through the atmosphere to the EON-1, travelling up into that desolate place. Her mind continued to drift. *Anything could be out there when you really thought about it.*

"Care for some sweets?" came a sudden, warm voice.

She looked to the man seated to her left, his warm smile out of place against the crisp white EON Corporation uniform. He was a middle-aged Asian man with dark, piercing green eyes, a round, youthful face with a warm smile. He had a slight belly, but carried himself well.

"I'm sorry?" she asked.

"Sweets?" the man held out a bag of Jelly Babies. "I find they ease the stomach during the climb up the gravity well. They help with the transition."

There was a heartbeat of hesitation before she reached into the bag and took a candy, putting it into her mouth. "Thank you" she said quickly.

"Better?" the man asked when she started sucking on it. The taste was sweet, and satisfied her whole tongue, and then she relaxed. To her surprise, it was helping her feel better. "I'm Gabriel Sen, Medical Officer on the trip."

"Tara Dean, Engineer," she said, looking at the man sceptically.

"What is the mission, anyway? The boys upstairs didn't tell me much when they reassigned me onto it. Just said they needed a medical officer assigned as soon as possible."

The ship tumbled beneath them as they at last broke free of the atmosphere. “It’s an FTL engine test, a prototype of the new Mark 4 engines,” Tara said, the Jelly Baby dissolving away in her mouth.

“Ah,” Gabriel nodded. “Those projects. Travelling to other galaxies...and here I thought our own galaxy was big enough,” he chortled. Then he looked at her curiously, “So how does it work?”

With an eager laugh, Tara almost forgot her dread of space. “How much time do you have?” ‘Approaching EON-1 docking facility’ announced the ship’s AI, ‘Estimated time of arrival, ten minutes.’”

Gabriel smiled. “I guess that’s your answer.”

“When a conventional faster-than-light ship travels faster-than-light, it bends space time around it, creating a bubble that lets it bypass the speed of light.” Gabriel seemed like a smart man, but she tried to avoid any deeply-technical terms as it wasn’t the field. “The Mark 4 engine is a step in a different direction; by stimulating exotic matter at the right time, you can open a hole in the fabric of our universe, and move the object in question, in this case The Infinitum, across dimensions in the form of pure atoms, which...”

“Allows for nearly instantaneous travel between one point and another anywhere in the universe,” Gabriel nodded, surprising Tara. He smiled placatingly. “I minored in relativistic physics. Oh, and I’ve seen films, I guess. It’s a fascinating theory, but it would mean a large number of our accepted physics models would have to be wrong in order for it to work.”

“Believe me, it works,” Tara narrowed her eyes. *We tested this, and tested this.* “Now all we need to do is a field test. EON has decided to use the Mark 4 on a regular deep space mission to prove its applicability to the company’s processes.”

“A lot riding on this for you, then?”

“Well, yes, but I’m only an FTL engine specialist engineer,” Tara responded, “The representative from the Mark 4 development team is Dr. Asif Calabash, he’s the Science Officer with us on this specific trip, he’s the one whose livelihood truly rides on this.” She had worked closely on the FTL project, alongside several other great minds, to understand the effects on a transport ship such as theirs.

‘PREPARE FOR LANDING,’ the AI pilot announced, the ship shuddering as thrusters manoeuvred into the EON-1 docking facility. The space station acted as the corporate headquarters for the Meridian Corporation, allowing them to oversee every aspect of their operations with keen eyes.

The shuttle settled onto the hangar floor. As the rear ramp opened with a hiss, Tara instinctively held her breath in case they accidentally vented into space.

“Another sweet?” Gabriel offered. She took one gladly.

“Tara!” someone cried, and Tara was barely out of her seat when someone pounded up the ramp and practically tackled her. There was a woman on top of her, a woman she knew well.

“Ela,” Tara grunted, struggling to stay on her feet. “Too tight, you’re going to kill me.”

“Oh, don’t be so serious,” Ela laughed, loosening a little but still holding onto Tara. “It’s been years since I’ve seen you, I think I’ve earned the right to be excited.” She glanced at Gabriel and gave Tara a not-so subtle nudge. “Look at you, getting back into the dating game. Who’s the handsome older man?”

Gabriel cleared his throat, “Gabriel Sen, medical officer assigned to Mission 104. I’m assuming you’re Ela Treen?”

The small woman nodded and let go of Tara, much to the engineer’s relief. “That’s right. I’m Co-Pilot and Navigation Officer of The Infinitum.”

“Nice to meet you,” Gabriel said, smiling.

“Nice to meet you too,” Ela responded, shaking his hand. “This way, you two. Captain is just finishing pre-flight.”

They followed Ela across the hangar deck and over towards The Infinitum. Tara turned her head and took in the sights and smells of the place, knowing it might be the last time she would be anywhere resembling normality for some time.

The Infinitum stood alone across the hangar from the other ships: large, brown, and streamlined, with small cockpit windows at the front and large rocket exhausts at the rear. The main deck sat at the front in an almost spherical shape, and with small windows in the top, where the living quarters were located. It looked important when first glancing at it, but lost one’s interest soon after, so that no one else in the hanger paid it the blindest bit of attention. Few people knew what it was, to be fair.

As the three of them approached the ship, Captain Clare Peters stepped down off its gangway to greet them. She wore a faded maroon jumper over her captains’ uniform that brought out the paleness of her skin and her observant dark eyes.

“I don’t believe we’ve formally met,” she said, her eyes falling on Gabriel, who walked at the front. “You must be the new medical officer.”

“That’s correct, Gabriel Sen,” Gabriel said, his large face sporting a broad smile, and stepped forward and shook his new commanding officer’s hand.

Peters turned to Ela. “Show Officer Sen to his quarters, please.”

Ela followed Gabriel up the gangway and up into The Infinitum, leaving Tara alone with Captain Peters, though she didn’t quite know what to say. *Captain Peters doesn’t seem like someone you can easily make small talk with.*

“Tara, engineer,” she stuck an awkward hand out and shared a short, firm handshake. “I worked on the first FTL prototypes myself.”

“I started in engineering,” Captain Peters nodded with approval, “It’s good work. Welcome aboard, Tara.”

Tara had met the rest of the crew after unpacking: first, Ela had led her down to the main deck, where she was instantly greeted by a fresh-faced young man, who quickly rose up from his chair, and placed his hand in hers.

“Troy Marven” he stated

Tara blinked.

“Pilot. You must be Ela’s ex. I can see why she kept you quiet.” He added

“Tara,” Tara responded. “Engineer.”

Troy moved away, and Tara turned, bemused, to Ela.

“Yep,” her friend stated, “He has that effect on everyone.”

Tara stepped forward and took in the view: the main deck was a huge, open area, with blinking white lights. A huge spire ran through the middle of the deck, and down onto the engine deck below: the Mark 4 FTL engine. It was built through the rest of the ship.

Around the engine, two men scurried about, one small, one large. The large man was the first to notice them. He came over towards Tara and shook her hand firmly. He was bearded and

broad-shouldered, with kind eyes and comically small glasses that perched on the end of his long nose.

“Simon Holme,” he beamed. “First Officer and support for Dr. Calabash...you must be Tara Dean?”

“That’s correct.”

“That’s Dr. Calabash,” Simon gestured to the man still standing at the machine, “he tends to keep to himself for the most part.”

“Only to strangers,” Dr. Calabash stated, speaking over Simon. “This isn’t a stranger, it’s the engineer: Tara.”

“He’s a little bit eccentric,” Simon winced, “But he’s the best in his field.”

“I can hear you!” Dr. Calabash exclaimed.

“That’s a good sign,” Simon chuckled. “He doesn’t even respond to people he doesn’t like.”

“I see,” Tara nodded, and took a step back. She stumbled into a body behind her, and quickly turned. Behind her stood a tall, strong-looking woman with thick brown hair and very pale skin. The woman blinked and slowly smiled. She seemed strangely honest and open compared to some of the other crew members. *Tara liked that.*

“Tara,” she held her hand out to the towering woman nervously.

“Nicola Trench,” stated the brunette, shaking her hand. “Security Officer.”

“Don’t scare our engineer, please,” Captain Peters stated, walking onto the deck without really looking at anyone in particular. “she’ll think we’re all mad onboard this ship.”

“We are, aren’t we?” Ela asked playfully.

“Not always – Ela, you have duties to take, don’t you? Tara – get some rest and have something to eat. With you onboard, we will launch in the morning.”

After diner, Captain Peters retired to her quarters. Tara and Ela went up to the mess room, where Troy and Gabriel were sitting together, drinking and playing some convoluted card game called ‘Space Pilot’s Gamble’. Both men turned and smiled at the them when they

walked in, which reassured Tara; for a moment, the atmosphere had seemed thick; there had been public scepticism about this new FTL method. Both men were dressed down in t-shirts and casual trousers, with Troy playing something that passed as music back on his home planet. Gabriel pulled a bottle from his coat and passed it to Tara, who took it in both hands.

“Careful,” Gabriel warned, “Sip it first. Then you’ll get used to it, trust me.”

Tara took a sip, and let the liquid lie on her tongue. It was spicier than any curry she’d ever eaten. She spat it out into her sleeve almost instantly.

“Hell,” she muttered, and the others started laughing.

“It takes a little getting used to,” Gabriel smiled, taking the bottle back off her before passing it across to Ela.

“So” Ela said loudly, taking a swig, “What do you think of the rest of the crew?” She was noticeably more accustomed to Gabriel’s spicy brew.

“Damn...” Tara replied. “No small take at all, then? Straight to it...”

“You know me too well,” Ela responded.

“Well...Captain Peters seems like she knows what she’s about. I understand why she’s been put in charge of this mission,” Tara began.

“True,” Ela nodded. “Simon and Dr. Calabash, I haven’t really got to know yet...they seem to go off by themselves quite a lot? Are they...up to something?”

“No” Troy responded quickly, “They just don’t have any other friends,” and gave a quick and awkward guffaw.

Ela shook her head. “No” she stated. “They’re just old friends, like me and you. Meridian needs people who can trust each other on this mission.”

“Very selective, I guess,” Troy stated. “I suppose they’d have to be for a mission like this.”

“What about you?” Tara asked, turning quickly towards Troy, and Ela gave a gentle smile, out of the pilot’s line of sight. “How did you manage to get yourself here?”

“Well...” Troy hummed thoughtfully. “Where to start...I, well my parents, sent me to the best piloting school in this quarter of the galaxy. But I don’t like space, I don’t like science, fuck, I don’t even like piloting all that much. I just want my name in the history books.”

“Your fifteen minutes of fame,” Gabriel said, smiling, and handed the younger man the spiced drink.

“Exactly,” Troy nodded, and took the drink off Gabriel, taking a quick swig. His face convulsed for a moment, and then he spat the drink out all over his lap, and wiped his mouth his spare sleeve. “Fucking disgusting,” he stated, and they all started laughing. The game continued late into the evening, before they each, in turn, slowly turned towards bed.

Not long after Tara had awoken from her second sleep, Captain Peters called all of them onto the main deck, where she stood in the middle of the room. Simon Holme stood around the machine, perusing it over the end of his tiny glasses, while Dr. Calabash moved around it quickly, brandishing a clipboard. Nicola stood silently at one side of the room, just off Captain Peters’ left shoulder. Ela and Troy remained facing away, looking out into the vastness, keeping the ship moving. Both of them seemed completely engaged, clearly loving their job.

“We are to prepare to make the jump in ten minutes – I would suggest you all take a seat,” Captain Peters commanded. “Dr. Calabash will fire up the machine that runs through the middle of deck, and then we will be ready to make the jump immediately.

Tara moved over to a seat as the ship began to increase in speed, and just across from her was the ever-amiable Gabriel, who smiled and nodded at her.

“Exciting, huh?” he asked absently, more to himself than to her.

Dr. Calabash and Simon disappeared below the command deck via a set of stairs to programme the hyper speed engine. Trench took a seat next to Captain Peters in Holme’s chair. The two very serious women exchanged a quick glance, and began to plug themselves in to their seats and then Gabriel, Tara and the two pilots quickly followed suite. The ship continued to pick up speed, and before long Calabash and Simon returned from below deck, and slipped into seats behind Tara and Gabriel.

“And launch,” Captain Peters stated. “In...three...two...one”.

“We’re starting our acceleration process, Captain,” Troy stated loudly, turning to look at his superior officer “We’re going to need to reach three times the speed of sound in order to make the jump”

“Understood,”

“We’re approaching the speed of sound,” Troy smiled.

How can he be smiling right now, Tara started to feel goosebumps on her skin, and the g-force pressed up against her face as if she was in a fighter plane.

“Understood.”

“We’re approaching twice the speed of sound.”

“Understood.”

I can’t take much more of this, Tara thought.

“We’re approaching three times the speed of sound.”

“Initialize the hyper-speed engine,” Dr. Calabash stated.

The whirring hum began quietly, then got louder and louder, until Tara felt the noise inside her head. The ship began to shake, and the room began to stretch, pulling one way and another. Tara’s hand clamped down onto the seat she was sat on, feeling her breakfast rising up in her stomach, pressing against her oesophagus.

Tara’s head moved all around the room, unable to focus on any one thing. Then her eyes met Gabriel’s.

“Now you see why I drink the spicy brew,” she heard him say, but his mouth did not seem to move. Tara could barely keep conscious, and then they hit hyperspeed. The following moment lasted forever and no time at all. Tara felt nothing; no g-force, no feeling of sickness. No light, no dark, no cold, no hot, no happy, no sad. Nothing.

The ship pulled out of hyperspeed, and light filled Tara’s eyes once again. Everyone still sat where they had been sitting where they took off, and looked exactly how they had appeared before the engine started.

“Is that it?” Troy asked.

“So it would seem,” Captain Peters snapped. She unclipped her seatbelt first, and moved over to stand by the ships’ control panel.

“Ela, where are we?” Simon followed after the Captain. “We’re not at our original destination point. The sun out there is dying...it can’t be our sun.”

“It’s not. There’s no brown dwarf star within the entire sector,” Ela responded, quickly unclipping her safety belt and scrambling over the monitor in front of her. She sat back down into her chair, and quickly brought up a map. “This a unique system, there isn’t one that matches it on our records.”

“Broaden that to the ISA’s wider records,” Captain Peters ordered.

“Still nothing.”

“I suggest we open comms,” Simon said, and Troy quickly got out of his seat, moving over to the main control panel in front of the hyperspeed engine.

“Any line?” Captain Peters asked urgently. “We need to locate where we are, and quickly!”

Troy moved over and held down a large button, which gathered no reaction. “No initial response,” he said looking between Simon and Captain Peters.

Tara looked sheepishly at Gabriel, who returned that same look to her. *Shit*, she thought.

“No response” Troy stated again. “But if we-” The young pilot stumbled as the entire ship shook, thrust off his feet and slammed down onto the ground as loose elements rattled and echoing throughout the control room.

“What was that?” Simon demanded, scrambling towards his chair.

“Possibly turbulence.” Captain Peters moved over towards the main control panel to pick the young pilot up off the floor. As the two were part-way up, there was another smash that shook the ship, and they both went over. Tara gripped the arms of her chair, and grimaced. That was no turbulence.

“I know what that was,” Tara admitted, as Nicola picked up both Captain Peters and Troy, one on each arm. Captain Peters and Simon turned to look at her in unison. “It’s an asteroid impact. I’ve experienced it before.”

“Tara’s right,” Ela confirmed, “I’m picking up multiple small unidentified objects moving around on the scanner.”

Captain Peters nodded, and looked around the control room. “Okay. Everyone back to their seats.” The crew returned to their seats, and just as Captain Peters closed her seatbelt, the ship shook again, setting off a loud alarm.

“WARNING! CRITICAL DAMAGE!” cried the ship’s computer.

“I think we ought to land,” Simon cried.

“I don’t think we’ll get much choice,” said Dr. Calabash, “That hit took out our left thruster. I can’t imagine we’ll be able to get back to jump speed without it!”

“Then we’re in agreement,” Captain Peters commanded, “Head down to the planet, quickly and steadily.”

Troy nodded, and chartered a course. The ship creaked and teetered as it began to change angle, moving down towards the barren, fiery planet.

“Looks lovely,” Gabriel muttered to Tara as he buckled himself down, “I might take the wife her for our anniversary.” Tara said nothing, still gripping the arms of her chair for dear life.

“We’re clear of the asteroid belt now!” Ela exclaimed as they began to approach the planet.

“Good.” replied Captain Peters. “Now, bring us in slowly.”

“I’m trying my best,” Troy responded. “With that thruster gone, the other two thrusters are burning through their fuel at a dangerously fast rate!”

“That’s fine, we’ll siphon it through when we land,” said Captain Peters.

“Slow it down *now!*” Simon ordered. “We’re coming in too fast!”

“That might be easier said than done!” Troy shouted back.

“Ok, deploy brake wings,” Captain Peters ordered, and Troy hit a large blue button. As the ship drew closer to the planet, the wings on the side pivoted, increasing their surface area to slow their descent.

“Brake wings deployed. Killing speed,” Troy hit a button cutting the ship’s two remaining thrusters. “Speed is at approximately three hundred miles per hour and declining. Ten miles until impact with planet.”

“It’s still too fast!” Captain Peters cried. “Deploy parachute.”

“Deploying parachute,” Troy hit another large button, this one pink, which fired a large EON-branded parachute out of the back of the ship, just above the central thruster.

“Nine miles,” Simon announced, “We’re still going too fast!”

“Employ emergency brake thrusters,” Captain Peters shouted. “Get that speed down!”

Troy swivelled in his chair and hit a large yellow button...which proceeded to do nothing.

“No response, Captain, First Officer,” his voice shook.

The ship continued to plummet through the atmosphere.

Tara swivelled in her chair to look down at her own monitor screen, and she saw it. “They’re, erm, the brake thrusters are down,” she stated nervously, turning back to the rest of the room to address the others. “That asteroid must have hit them, too.”

“Ok,” Captain Peters responded, “then we’re going to have an entertaining landing. Troy, I’m going to need you to skim it.”

Troy looked at Captain Peters, then over at Simon, exchanging nods with both. He pulled on the ship’s steering to flatten their descent as much as he could. The ship was now almost parallel with the planet’s surface. Slowly, he pressed down on the steering as the ship began to slow ever so slightly. He pressed a little more, gripping tightly to the steering stick. The bottom of the ship slid against the planet’s surface, rocks and stones banging and clanging beneath them.

“Gently,” Simon told Troy, “Nicely done.”

Troy sweated as he waggled the steering stick, pulling the fast-moving ship between towers of stone that littered the planet’s surface. The ship hit a boulder and twisted within its trajectory, but kept moving further down towards the surface, riding along the top of the gravel. Then it happened: the parachute caught on one of the stone towers, pulling the whole ship to pivot to the left, before the strings snapped and the ship was flung hard into the base of another stone tower. It flopped to the ground, and then was still. They had landed.

Chapter Two

Initially, it was darkness. Tara was the first to wake up. Her eyes looked all around, she breathed out. *It's so cold.* The shock, the horror of the descent left Tara bewildered. *Where are we. I need to know.* As soon as she moved, the lights switched on in the main deck, and Gabriel quickly blinked awake next to her.

Slowly, the others began to rouse, and unclipped their seatbelts. Nicola walked over to Gabriel and Tara as they brushed themselves off.

“Any serious damage?” She put a hand on Tara’s shoulder.

“Couple of bruises,” Gabriel smiled in thanks.

“Walk it off,” Nicola nodded, before she went to check on Captain Peters.

Simon walked over to the pair of them, nursing a wound on his balding head. He nodded at both of them. “It’s not too bad.”

“It looks bad,” Gabriel added, raising an eyebrow.

“It could be bad,” Simon admitted hesitantly. “Maybe. I’m not a doctor.”

“I am,” Gabriel reminded him, “I’d run keep it under an icepack and keep from any strenuous activities. Keep yourself in the medi-bay once the ship is up and running, but right now we might need you.”

“Guys!” Ela cried from across the room. “It’s Troy...I think he might be dead. He’s not breathing!”

Troy lay on the floor already, his body curled up into a ball. Captain Peters and Gabriel ran over to join Ela, by his side, Gabriel quickly going for a pulse. *Nothing*. They unfurled his body, and found a huge bruise on his forehead, and bleeding coming from the top of his head. Once Gabriel took his hands away, he noticed that they were slightly bloodied.

“Severe blunt force trauma to the head” Gabriel stated “his seatbelt must have been faulty. I’m so sorry”

Ela looked over at Tara and shook her head, shedding a tear from her left eye. He was gone, nothing they could do. Ela walked away from the commotion around Troy’s body and slowly walked over towards Tara. The two women embraced in a hug, slowly and tightly putting their arms around each other. Tara held that hug for a while, longer than she had expected. Tara had never experienced a crew member’s death before; it was rare, even in deep space travel.

“I don’t think we’ll be laughing about this one when we get out of it,” Ela said in her ear.

Tara didn’t respond, she merely blinked the tears from her eyes. In her field of vision was Dr Calabash, who unlike the others was tinkering with the hyper-speed engine which ran through the centre of the control room. After a moment’s tinkering, he stepped away, and the lights of the room came on a once.

‘SHIP’S COMPUTER ONLINE. LOCATION: UNRECOGNISABLE PLANET. BREATHABLE ATMOSPHERE. REGONISED LIFE SIGNATURES: ONE’ came the ship’s computer.

Tara and Ela broke apart from their hug, and Simon moved over to stand next to Dr. Calabash, whipping across the main deck in a second. Tara looked over at Ela, and then at Gabriel, tears in their eyes.

“Fuck” Simon whispered, peering over the console. “A breathable atmosphere. That can’t be right. What are the chances?”

“What are the chances?” Dr Calabash shook his head. “I don’t really know. Mathematically, very unlikely.”

“Computer,” Simon stated, “What is the make-up of this planet’s atmosphere?”

“INFORMATION: THIS PLANET’S ATMOSPHERE IS 78% NITROGEN, 21% OXYGEN, 1% ARGON AND LESS THAN 1% CARBON DIOXIDE AND OTHER GASES’

“That’s like Earth. A lot like Earth,” Simon said, looking at Dr. Calabash.

“That’s exactly like Earth,” Tara stated as she walked over the engine to join them. *Maybe it was the shock of Troy’s death. Perhaps they were all imagining this.*

“Then we might have found Earth’s twin?” Calabash asked.

“It didn’t look like Earth from the window,” Ela joined them.

“One life form...” Simon wondered, looking between them. “One. On the whole planet.”

“We need to find it,” Tara said. “We need it’s help.”

“I hope to god you’re right,” Captain Peters said, stepping between her and Ela. Nicola and Gabriel joined them on the opposite side of the hyper-speed engine. “That computer will only count sentient life on its scan-which means it’s a person. That person could represent a threat, even to the seven of us.”

“Seven?” Tara asked.

“Troy’s gone,” Peters snapped. “And since we have no idea how long we’re going to be here, I suggest that we give him a proper burial, here, on this planet. I won’t lie to you – this is a bad situation. But we didn’t get this far as people to give up in the face of despair. We are officers of Meridian Corps, and we are better than that. Tara’s right, we need to find this life form, as soon as possible, and see what they know. Force them to help us if we really have to. We also need to make repairs to this ship, using whatever parts we can. There’s the materials to fix the damaged thruster in the mechanic’s bay – and a spade to dig a grave for Officer Marven. Let’s hope this life form, this person, could lead us to fuel and we could bring that back to the ship. At the moment, I reckon we could get back off planet with what we have a repaired thruster, but not enough to get to hyperspeed. The issue with that is we, and the ship’s computer, have no idea where we are”

“Could we not send a signal out for help?” Ela asked.

“Yes, we could,” Captain Peters responded, and she turned towards Simon Holme. “First Officer, will you do the honours?”

Simon leant forward and pressed a couple of buttons in a precise arrangement on the hyper-speed engine. "Opening comms now" he added quietly.

"COMMS OPEN" The ship's computer reported.

"Hello" Simon stated clearly, "This is First Officer Simon Holme of The Infinitum, a deep space exploration and transportation ship commissioned by the Meridian Corps. We have crash landed on an unidentified planet with a breathable atmosphere. Please send help if possible. We have a small crew with rations, spare parts, and a prototype faster-than-light engine onboard. One casualty upon landing. Over and out."

They headed outside the spaceship, and Gabriel, Nicola and Simon began digging a grave, turning up dirt with a set of spades from the ship. Tara stood at the back, behind the others, watching this slow process. Slowly and carefully, the three diggers, led by Captain Peters, lowered Troy's body into the hole, then stepped away. For a moment, the seven of them stood around the body, saying nothing.

"Flight Officer Troy Marven." Captain Peters began. "Troy was a young man, taken before his time, through no fault of his own. He was a sound man, a brave man, who despite stepped up to the mark when his superior officers needed him to."

"Here, here," Simon added.

"He will be remembered fondly by his last crew, who now wish Troy a gentle ride into whatever life there is after this," Captain Peters finished.

"To Troy," Gabriel stated, and the rest of the crew repeated him. Gabriel then filled a shovel with dirt, and threw into onto Troy's body. Nicola and Simon quickly followed suit.

While the others went back inside, Tara remained. She took in the planet: breathable air, and soft, crumbly soil, but grey, rather than brown. The sky was bright and barren, no clouds as far as the horizon. That could mean there were no, or very few, water sources. The air was still, no wind to tell of or even discernible weather of any kind. The air was warm, a little warmer than earth, and there were no birds, no insects. It all felt remarkably calm, and still. *Not how you imagined a wild unexplored planet.* This was clearly not a terraformed planet,

and had no obvious human visitations here, and yet, there was a person here, somewhere.

Tara headed back inside, when suddenly Ela grabbed her by the jumper.

“Tara!” she exclaimed. “We’ve got a message from the lifeform!”

Tara moved over to the join the others, who stood around a console that Simon had managed to lower.

‘Hello. I have received your message. Welcome. I will be found at the source of this signal’ it read.

“Shit,” Captain Peters gasped. “Computer, can you trace this signal?”

‘SIGNAL IS BEING EMITTED TWELVE MILES FROM OUR CURRENT LOCATION,’ the computer informed them. “DOWNLOADING TO YOUR HAND-HELD DEVICES NOW.’

“This is excellent,” Captain Peters smiled from ear to ear. She turned to look at the rest of the crew. “First, we need to track down this individual—this could take a day maybe—and make sure they lead us to fuel. And we need to fix the ship. I suggest that we split into two teams, an A team of myself, Security Officer Trench, Medical Officer Sen, Navigation Officer Treen and Engineering Officer Bainbridge will accompany me across this planet’s surface. Science Officer Calabash and First Officer Holme will remain here to fix this ship to the best of their ability.

“Shouldn’t I remain here?” Tara asked. “Broken thrusters are well within my job description. First Officer Peters is stronger than I am and the most experienced in field expeditions.”

“True,” Captain Peters replied, “But if we obtain fuel I need as many fit and able people with me as possible. First Officer Holme has received a head injury and it would do him best to stay here.”

Simon grimaced slightly, clearly keen to join them on the adventure, but then nodded at Peters.

“Ok,” Tara responded, “Let’s do this, then.”

Their journey was long, but not exhausting. The planet was hot, and before too long they had removed jumpers and coats. The air of this planet felt safe, almost nice. Like Earth’s

atmosphere, but without the clogging of Methane, Carbon Dioxide, and what Tara's dad had liked to call 'human stink.' While the planet was not home to humans, it certainly could accommodate them with the right terraforming equipment. Perhaps she would tell them all about it when they got home. Or perhaps she would keep quiet and hope the human race left this planet well alone. *God knows what they would do to this place.*

It was several hours later of walking, when Tara noticed Captain Peters and Nicola Trench walking up in front, out of earshot of everyone else. Tara walked up between Ela and Gabriel, who were engaged in a boring conversation about echo location devices.

"How's it going?" Ela asked. "You've been at the back for a little while."

"It's going fine," Tara responded. "I'm just taking in the planet. Isn't it fascinating?"

"It's ok," Gabriel responded. "I've seen better. I grew up on Proxima Centauri C."

"The Super-Earth?" Tara asked.

"That's the one," Gabriel replied. "An amazing place to live."

"I prefer Earth myself," Ela responded quickly.

"You're a homechild?" Gabriel raised an eyebrow.

"No, Mars. But I never liked Mars, there was never anything there for me."

"I must admit, I don't meet many Martians who like Mars," Gabriel stated. "You should ask my wife about Martians after a couple of drinks, and she's off, let me tell you."

"You'll find we're the same as anyone else really," Ela stated.

"What about you, Tara?" Gabriel asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"What do you mean?" Gabriel inquired.

"I was adopted. I don't know what planet I was born on." *That sounds so sullen*, she thought.

"I'm sorry" Gabriel replied, "Have you ever tried to find your birth parents?"

"No, I haven't" Tara responded "I think...if they wanted to be in my life, they would have been by now. I'm happy in the Meridian Corps these days"

Ela and Gabriel continued to walk and talk as they crossed the planet, but Tara's mind began to stray. *Maybe I do have something to do when we get back from this mission. Some kind of real purpose.*

It was another few hours later when Captain Peters stopped them all, and huddled the five of them together, just before a large dune. “According to the readings on this chart, the life form that sent that message should be just over the crest of this next soil dune,” she stated.

“Got it,” Tara nodded.

“Nicola and I have pistols in our packs. That should help with the...persuasion. But let’s hope this individual is co-operative and can help us.”

“Understood,” Ela responded, and she exchanged a worried look with Tara. *I have an increasingly bad feeling about all this*, Tara thought.

“Now listen,” Captain Peters stated, the tone of her voice becoming blunter. “We don’t know who this individual is, their background, how they came to be on this planet alone, or how much they can help up. We don’t even know if they’ll be able to understand us. So we need to treat them with extreme caution. They might not have seen another person for quite some time. Let’s show them we can be trusted. Follow me.” And with that, Peters stepped up onto the dune and headed up, followed by Nicola, then Gabriel, then Ela, and finally Tara.

One by one, step by step, they moved towards the brow of the dune. What they saw when they reached the top stopped them dead in their tracks.

It was an old, ruined cathedral, smoke billowing from every door and every window, yet they could not see any fire within the ruins. The smoke trailed off and disappeared into the empty sky, as if it were not natural. As if it were not meant to be. The building itself was ancient and enormous, greater than any church Tara had seen in her life. And yet it looked old, as if it had sat abandoned on this planet for hundreds of years.

Gabriel sidled up between Tara and Captain Peters and frowned, taking in the sight that lay before them.

“I guess you’re going to give me the bad news,” he said, his voice quivering.

“We’re going in, Gabriel,” Captain Peters responded.

As they approached the Cathedral, the air began to get colder, as if they had stepped inside a fridge, and before long, a freezer. The smoke around them began to billow and move, and it appeared to Tara as if it was forming arms. Tara stopped, aghast, but when she looked again, they were gone. She turned to Ela, and saw in her eyes the same fear and confusion, and then recognition of what they were seeing. The two of them nodded, and then carried on forward. They entered what was left of the cathedral's main doorway when Captain Peters announced, "We're right on top of the signal." She did not turn around.

As they stood in the main chapel of the cathedral, the smoke around them started to funnel between them: their arms, their legs, even through their hair. Almost as if it was driven by wind. *But there is no wind*, Tara thought. Slowly the smoke moved out from amongst them, and started to encircle the five of them, moving faster and faster, acting like a hurricane, but again no wind. No atmosphere, of course.

Slowly, the smoke began to come together, filling into a large pillar of dark mist, coalescing into a solid shape that eventually became a figure. The billowing and moving of the smoke stopped, and in front of them stood a slim faceless figure neither male nor female; tall, but no taller than the tallest of them, Nicola.

"So," it said. "**I believe you've been looking for me.**"

Chapter Three

No one moved or said anything, for what felt like an eternity to Tara. This figure, whatever it was, must have been the human race's first ever recorded extra-terrestrial life. The first non-human sentient life in the known universe. And it was terrifying.

Captain Peters stepped forward slowly, moving towards the figure. "M-m- my name is Captain Clare Peters of The Infinitum. I come from the moon Titan, in the Primary Sol system, a moon of Sol 6, Saturn. My crew and I have crash-landed here, and we need help. We don't have the necessary fuel required to leave this planet and get home. We were wondering if you would be able to help us find the necessary materials to leave your planet in peace?"

The figure said nothing for quite some time. It did not look specifically at Captain Peters, nor at any of them in particular. Instead it continued to stare straight ahead, to the back of the main chapel.

Eventually it spoke. **"What material do you require?"**

"Ah um..." Captain Peters began, "Some kind of liquid hydrogen? Is there anything like that on this planet? Kerosene, maybe?"

The figure was quiet again.

"There is plentiful Kerosene on this planet," it stated.

"Fantastic," Captain Peters responded, clearly nervous. "If you could just tell us where it is, and then we could be on our way."

"You do not need to find it. I already have it. I anticipated your arrival here from the moment you crashed"

“Well, erm...that’s excellent – are you willing to give us the Kerosene we need?”

“**Of course**” the figure replied, “**But it will cost you**”

“We don’t have money” Captain Peters replied sternly.

“**No**” stated the figure, before pausing “**It will cost you two lives**”

“What?” Captain Peters asked, “What do you mean?”

The figure didn’t move, but it began to laugh. The unearthly cackle echoed through the Cathedral, shaking right through Tara, and she felt herself moving towards the back of the group. *I want to go home now*, she thought.

“We are Officers of the Meridian Corps!” Nicola Trench exclaimed, “You will not threaten us in this way!” She drew her pistol from her bag, holding it to the figure’s head. The figure’s head moved for the very first time, turning to lock eyes with Nicola. Suddenly, faster than anyone could react—faster than anyone could blink—a stream of smoke shot out from the figure and grabbed the arm that held the pistol. Nicola screamed and fell back onto the ground in front of them.

When she sat up, she looked down at her left arm in astonishment. Her hand was gone. The end of her wrist was now just a stump, with no marks at all, as if it always had been.

“How—” she exclaimed, “how is that possible?”

“**As you can see,**” the figure stated, “**my power is far beyond yours. I need lives to sustain myself. You can either give two of you willingly...or I’ll kill all five of you.**”

“You!” Ela exclaimed, charging forward, moving to punch the smoky figure, when Captain Peters placed a firm hand on the younger woman’s chest, and pushed her back gently.

“Stop, Ela,” Captain Peters stated. “I’ll do it, if someone must.”

“But Captain,” Gabriel began, “We need you!”

“You!” Ela shouted, charging forward to attack, but Captain Peters placed a firm hand on the younger woman’s chest, and pushed her back.

“Stop, Ela!” Captain Peters stated. “I’ll do it, if someone must.”

“But Captain,” Gabriel protested. “We need you.”

“No you don’t.” Captain Peters responded. “I joined Meridian twenty-four years ago to better myself. To make something of myself. I would say, and I’d hope you agree, that I’ve done that.”

“Your leader shows great courage,” The figure stated, **“I respect that.”**

“Just get this nonsense over with,” Captain Peters stated, dropping her pistol to the ground next to her.

“I need two,” The figure replied.

Captain Peters grimaced, when suddenly she found Nicola Trench stood at her side.

“Nic,” Captain Peters said, her eyes locked on Nicola’s. “I’m glad th-” the figure snapped his fingers, and both women dropped to the floor dead, their necks broken.

The other three stared down at the two dead bodies, failing to comprehend what was really happening.

The figure said nothing but just snapped its fingers again, and the remaining crew felt their bags fill with weight.

“The jugs in your bags,” it said, **“are now filled with the fuel that you require.”**

Gabriel stared down at the dead bodies of Nicola and Captain Peters. His eyes were teary, and his body was tense. “You!” He looked up at the figure. “You didn’t need to do that! They were good people!”

“I did,” the figure stated, motionless, **“I need lives, or I will eventually die. While I understand your plight, you must understand that I must place my own needs over anyone else. Would you not do the same?”**

“I would let myself die rather than remain as whatever the fuck you are!” Gabriel exclaimed.

His foot is extremely close to Peters’ pistol, Tara noticed. She quickly stepped in front of Gabriel, putting herself between the figure and the older man. She turned and nodded at Ela.

“Come on Gabriel,” Ela said “Let’s go now. Don’t aggravate it any further.”

“Can I ask a question?” Tara asked.

“Yes,” the figure replied. **“It won’t cost any extra lives. Your colleagues are more than enough to sustain me for now.”**

“Who are you?” Tara asked.

The figure went quiet again, almost waiting as it didn’t quite know the answer to the question Tara had just asked.

“My name,” It said eventually, **“Is The Omniscience.”**

“The Omniscience?” Tara asked. “As in you are omniscient? All-seeing, and all-knowing?”

“That’s right” it replied.

“Then that’s why you knew we crashed. You knew why we were coming to you,” Tara realised.

“That’s right again,” it said. **“I can see everything on this planet. And everything in the wider universe in which it exists.”**

“So you know where we’re from?”

“No” it said **“And that’s why I find you so intriguing. I do not know where you are from before you came to this planet. I thought I’d consumed all the humans. In fact, I know I had”**

“What...do you...mean?” Tara asked, her brain thinking fast but her mouth moving slowly.

“Come on Tara, let’s just go” Ela said. Tara ignored her.

“As in humans are extinct. Right across the universe” It stated.

“You know?”

“I assured it. I consumed their lives” The Omniscience replied.

“That can’t be” Tara responded, moving towards the figure “We’ve all come from a world teeming with humans, we’d know if there was none. According to the ship’s readings, it’s still the year 2949.”

“That’s the current year on this world too” The Omniscience stated.

“But that’s not possible, we would know if there were no people” Tara argued “It’s simply not possible”.

“Tara,” Gabriel said, putting his hand on her shoulder, and confused, she turned to look at him, looking at his deep brown eyes, and his kindly, reassuring face. “I’ve feared the worst since I first saw this planet, Tara, and The Omniscience is confirming my theory. We jumped much further than just across space on our test run, Tara. That’s why the ship’s computer doesn’t know where we are in the universe yet this planet is so familiar. There’s a reason why this planet’s atmosphere is perfectly breathable. There’s a reason why The Omniscience knows we’re human but doesn’t know why we’re here, on this planet.”

“Say it,” Tara growled.

“This is Earth,” Gabriel said. “This planet is Earth.”

Fuck, Tara thought. *We're in a different universe.*

“There’s another universe?” The Omniscience asked.

“You read my thoughts?” Tara asked.

“This universe you come from?” The Omniscience asked. **“Does it have life? Does it have sentient life?”**

“It’s teeming with both,” Tara replied, moving away from The Omniscience.

“Then I would very much like to visit it,” The Omniscience responded, and began laughing again. “After I consumed all the life in this universe, I hauled up here, on Earth, where humanity began, living off the energy from all those lives that I had consumed. And oh, I had not seen a human in ever such a long time. You have no idea how happy I was to see you when you landed. Your universe sounds like such an interesting place, I would like to visit it ever so much.”

“I cannot allow that,” Tara responded. “I must protect my universe.”

“Tara Dean,” The Omniscience said. **“I must admit, I quite like you.”**

“The feeling’s not mutual, cunt,” Tara growled.

Ela was the first to move in the commotion that happened next. She dived for the pistol on the floor, and picked up, rolling up into a crouching position, firing rapidly into The Omniscience. The bullets had no effect, firing off into the figure, before being reflected back, one cutting straight through Ela’s throat.

Tara jumped and caught Ela as she fell to the ground.

“Come on” Tara said “Stay with me,” but to her dismay, Ela was already dead. Tara began to shake, her friend dead in her arms, and slowly placed the other woman’s body onto the ground. Ela, her oldest friend, once her lover within Meridian, and the main reason she had ever agreed to this mission, was gone.

Slowly, Tara stood, and locked eyes with Gabriel, who stood across from her. “We cannot allow this creature to leave its universe.” Tara stated, “Our ship must be destroyed.”

Gabriel quickly grabbed his radio from his bag-pack, but The Omniscience grabbed him with smoke tendrils, holding him aloft, some twelve feet above the ground. **“I need that ship to fly, dear humans.”**

Smoke began to fill Gabriel’s skull, and his face reddened, and reddened, until his skull blew into a thousand pieces, and his body fell limply to floor. Tara looked down at what was left of her new friend, Gabriel Sen.

The Omniscience turned and looked at Tara, who looked back at him.

“You need me,” she realized. “You turn up at The Infinitum without any of us, Holme and Calabash are going to self-destruct that ship, keeping you here!”

“You’re absolutely right,” The Omniscience responded. **“My, Tara, you are a clever one.”**

Time slowed as she ran and jumped for the pistol that lay on the ground. The Omniscience made no move, but grimaced as she grabbed the gun and began to raise it towards her head. An eternity passed before the nozzle touched the bottom of her chin—she used her right index finger to pull down on the trigger, and just as the weapon clicked...it was gone. It dissolved into small black atoms in her hand, as if it had never existed.

Tara gaped in shock, unsure what to do next, and the figure of The Omniscience dissolved into smoke. It rushed towards her as she stood transfixed and poured down her throat. In a last-ditch attempt to fight off The Omniscience taking over, she did the only thing she felt she could; she held her breath. An incredible heat rose up inside of her, followed by intense cold. She thought of her friends and crewmates who had given their lives for this mission, Troy, Ela, Gabriel, Nicola and Captain Peters. She used their bravery, their strength to hold in the burning now spreading across the inside of her body. Then she felt that heat rise up towards her head—

—And then she felt nothing at all.

Some hours later, Dr. Calabash responded to a knock on The Infinitum’s door. It was Tara; battered, bruised, and alone. Her eyes were sunken with dark bags and her skin was pale.

“Hello,” Dr. Calabash said slowly. “We’ve managed to make temporary fixes to the ship’s damages. Are you...are you alone?”

“It was the lifeform,” Tara said. “He laid a trap. The others, they, the others...they all died. Their bodies, there’s nothing we could recover I only just managed to get away myself. But I...I got the fuel we needed.”

Suddenly Simon Holme joined Calabash at the door. “Christ, Tara, you look a right state. Get yourself sat down. Robert, get the young lady something from the kitchen.” He took Tara’s

backpack off her and the three of them headed inside, the door to The Infinitum closing behind them.

Tara slumped in her seat in the control room, as Simon headed down the engine room to refill the thrusters with the Vertosem. Calabash returned with a hot drink in a large mug which read ‘galaxy’s No. 1 pilot’. Tara smiled. *That had been Troy’s.*

Simon quickly returned from the engine room, and sat down opposite Tara. Hesitantly, he took her hand, and held it for some time.

“It’s ok, Tara,” he stated. “It’s over, I promise you. And we’re going to get home. Our friends haven’t died in vain.”

Simon stood up and walked over to the pilot’s seat, and the ship fired into life. Tara buckled in, and Dr. Calabash joined them, buckling into his usual seat.

“Computer,” Simon stated. “Take us back to hyperspeed as soon as we’re out of orbit, I think we ought to get home.”

‘PLOTTING COURSE. SPECIFIC DESTINATION REQUIRED,’ the ship’s computer stated.

“EON-1,” Simon announced proudly. “Let’s get this baby home and fixed up.”

Tara felt the ship beneath her quiver and strain as it began to take off, and then the jet engines kicked in. The ship picked up speed, and launched into the atmosphere, then into space. Tara felt her arms naturally assume their position of being clamped onto the arms of her chair.

‘LEAVING PLANET ORBIT.’

“Ok, taking her up to light speed,” Simon stated.

Slowly, The Infinitum increased in speed, and Tara felt her body go all weird once again, taking in the effects of a hyper-speed jump.

An

‘9’

‘8’

‘7’

‘6’

‘5’

‘4’

‘3’

‘2’

Black smoke began to billow from Tara’s ear, and she smiled. *A new universe*, she thought, *how lovely. So many humans.*

‘1’

And then the ship jumped, and was gone from that universe.