

# **THE STELLAR WIND**

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Dedication to be placed here

# Skye

Skye scrolled through the list of her contacts again, arriving at the same conclusion as before, *no one left except him*. In the middle of nowhere she was told to wait, at a small diner far from the city limits in an area that felt isolated and alone. Larrun had insisted on being far from prying eyes and ears, but she was out of choices. Slumming it in the under city streets was not a lifestyle she was ready to consider.

Skye sat there in one of the empty booths for more than forty minutes, growing restless by the second as dusk gave way to darkness.

She was about to step out of the booth when lights flickered into view, moving down the dark highway before pulling onto the gravel outside. The wait was over but her chest tightened as the headlights went dark and the entrance to the diner hissed. Larrun's eyes met hers and a smile stretched across his face, a smile laced with mal-intent.

"It's been a long while since you've come to me for a job," he said, taking a seat in the booth, making sure to reach into his jacket and place the shock pistol

slowly on the table for effect.

Larrun seemed tired. He hadn't shaven for what seemed like a week, his hair had a greasy sheen to it and the bags under his eyes held a weight of insomnia. For all she knew, he could have just finished an all-nighter in a steel factory.

He waved off the drone that flew over before it could utter a word. Skye said nothing, glancing out the window in an attempt to hurry him up, but a part of her wanted to forget the whole idea, leave and have nothing more to do with him.

"I've been busy," she said. It was all she could think of saying in response.

"You could have a better attitude. This is a big favour I'm doing you. Plenty of other errand runners out there," he said, throwing a hand in the air, "but you're more trustworthy than some, I'll give you that."

"What do I have to do?"

Larrun reached into his pocket for his communicator.

"Well, the word is that there's some power cells need finding. A *colleague*," he said with a pause, "stumbled on some signs a few days ago."

He tapped on his communicator and slid it across the table.

Skye took a look at the bright map on the screen, wondering what he meant by *colleague*. He didn't like to have colleagues. He was known for it.

"Neviin Forest?" she asked, flicking the map on the screen across to where Ta'em City was located. "That's a long way."

"And?" he said. "That bike of yours is fast enough."

Larrun stared at it, imagining himself as the owner.

"Anyway, take a look around for a small ship near the wreckage," he continued, before noticing she was also staring at the bike through the diner window. "What's the matter with you?"

Skye let out a sigh. The bike was low on charge and it would cost everything

she had in her wallet. She knew Larrun wasn't the type to give advances, especially not to charge her bike.

"Nothing," Skye lied, unsure if she would make it all the way. "How much for the cells?"

"Just bring 'em to me and you'll get your share."

"Larrun, I need to know."

He stared at her for a long moment then made sure to sigh before checking his surroundings and leaning over, filling her space with the choking smell of an ash pit. Skye felt like throwing up.

"Five hundred and twenty each," he almost whispered. "Probably four of them."

Her eyes widened and for a moment she forgot her desire to be sick.

"That's your share," he said. "Said I was doing you a favour, didn't I?"

He leaned back and the air that followed felt like a fresh mountain breeze in comparison.

"What kind of cells are they?"

"You'll see when you get them. You gonna take it or what? Don't get skittish on me. I know you're up to the task."

*Skittish?* Skye glanced at the weapon on the table. Larrun was gaming his 'colleagues' at the best of times, but with that kind of return she could move far away from the under city and from ever seeing him again.

*Two thousand*, she repeated in her head, knowing there had to be a catch somewhere.

"Sure, I'll do it," she said, trying to appear less concerned than she was.

"Good girl."

He stared at her as she transferred the details from his communicator and slid it back over.

“I’ll meet you here in three days then, precious,” he said without delay.

“Always a pleasure, and don’t be long, yeah?”

*Wouldn’t dream of it*, she thought.

She heard him say something in a low voice as he walked away.

"Zinté fayescá une patho."

She knew very little Safrén but she knew part of it meant “don’t mess up”.

Skye stared at him as he pushed the door open and left with a grin on his face.

A few minutes later his transporter powered up and sped off down the highway, leaving her there alone, deep in thought.

“Your order?” the serving drone asked in a monotone voice. Skye jumped in fright and glared at it.

She shook her head, not expecting it to give her the courtesy of an apology. It didn’t.

“Suit yourself,” it said instead, before flying off into the kitchen. Some store owners dialled up the *attitude* setting on their machine servants and this must have been one.

Her mind fixated again on the job and its potential reward. *520 units each*. It felt like a lure and she couldn’t resist.

Over half an hour passed in that quiet booth. Somehow she had ended up cycling through old message conversations, photos and endless news cycle thumbnails on her communicator, a habit she realised was becoming more and more frequent over the last several months.

The evening was dragging on when the serving drone flew out and demanded she leave, even going so far as to push her out the doorway. Maybe its *patience* setting was dialled down too.

“Settle down!” Skye shouted at it.

As soon as she had placed a foot on the gravel, it sped back inside, locked the

door and turned off all of the lights, forcing her to fumble for her bike in the quiet darkness.

She rode over to the highway out from behind the diner and dense looming trees, switching the bike off to silence the engine. In the distance the glow of her city, almost hidden below the horizon save for the tips of the highest towers, extended far into the night sky. Could this job change her fortunes?

The pinpoint lights from hundreds of moving shuttles and ships in the sky above it held her attention for a few minutes until she switched on the engine again and sped off into the night.

Skye took the extensive freeways that twisted around the under city and straight up to the precinct where her apartment block stood. A faint blueish glow from the city centre above filtered down onto the street along with the noise of rail and hover transports, but the streets of her precinct felt deserted in comparison.

She pulled the grav bike up to the side of the street and jumped off, leaving it there outside the building to return to.

At the entrance to the apartment building, an android watched and waited for her. She knew what it was going to say and prepared herself.

“You are *late* for your tenancy payment.”

Skye sighed as it raised its arm to bar the entrance.

“I know, I know. I’ll have it in time, I promise,” she said.

“This is the second time you’ve told me that, Miss Wilderan” it said, attempting to express human frustration with its arms up in the air. This machine wasn’t as sophisticated as some of the androids up in the city core and would have almost seemed comical if not for the stress she was under.

“I can’t deal with this right now.”

“If you don’t provide —” it halted at her pleading expression and its cold eyes



calculated her for more than a few seconds.

“I’m going to do a job which will more than cover it, Lentoo, and then you won’t ever need to see me again.”

Using its human name seemed to help persuade it. To her relief, the android threw its arms down and let her pass. Its leniency algorithms took over for a short time before it would take more drastic measures.

“Thank you, Lentoo. I’ll be back with the credit,” she said and rushed up to her apartment. However dangerous or deceptive the job might be, she was determined now to get it over and done with and attempt to change the situation she called her life. Skye threw some tools she may need for the job into her backpack along with some food for the road and her warp pistol, always a smart choice when working for Larrun.

On her way out through the small dining area of her apartment, a grin caught her gaze. The subject of the grin sat there on the bench, printed onto poly-glass.

She picked it up. *Why do you have to be away so long?*

Skye lingered there with the photograph in her hands, trying to remember what it would be like to have one of her last remaining friends back in town. That was a dream at this time, so she tore herself away and left the apartment. The android at the entrance stared at her and tapped a finger to its head to send her a hint as she passed. It was an old model and a bucket of bolts, but it still knew how to manipulate its subjects.

She scoffed at the gesture just as the voices of two kids caught her attention out on the street.

“Hey! What are you doing?” she shouted.

The kids looked up and bolted, dropping something metallic as Skye ran up to the bike. They huddled near the corner, silent. She knew them both, having explained to them one afternoon about the inner workings of the particle

regulator that now sat on the ground detached from where it was meant to be.  
*Why!?*

There was nothing left to do except to try and repair it.

With her delicate hands, the three port wires bent back into shape and the small port accepted it with a twist and a click, but after tapping the remote on her belt, nothing happened.

Whispers broke out between the two youths. Skye cursed in frustration. She felt the overwhelming stress on her build almost to tears, but she held them back. It would cost a fortune for a new one if it was damaged, and a fortune didn't exist in her wallet.

She double checked everything, removed and reinstalled it again with a tweak to the wires.

With another tap, the engine sputtered to life for a few moments before the bike rose off the ground, lopsided then stabilising after an automatic recalibration.

“Yes!” she said, checking the sensors on the heads up display for a minute to be sure it was going to remain stable.

The kids sighed and wandered off, chatting to themselves. It was a small victory at this point, enough to lift her spirits back off the ground as she rode away and up onto the main freeway out of Ta'em City.

Skye had a mission now and the mission would lead to freedom, but not without a limping bike. The charge light on the bike's display started pulsing at her, begging for power, and the safety mechanisms in the bike's firmware capped the top speed to a crawl right up to the last charging station she knew about.

The charging fee drained her wallet. This was it. The bike had just enough charge to get the job done and get paid. She stood there at the charging station alone, admiring the two rising moons in the sky while she waited. They

punctured the darkness like spotlights, the larger of them a pale shade of yellow from its plains of sulphur scattered across the surface, the smaller a grey surface exposed to the vacuum of space. Its atmosphere had been blown away over two billion years ago due to its weak magnetic field.

As she waited, a shimmer of light in the sky caught her attention. Its shape resembled a ship, as tiny as it was to her eyes. It hung there in the sky as she rode down the highway again, but at one point she looked up to find it had disappeared.

*That was strange,* she thought.

Wheat and cane farms stretched for hundreds of miles east of the city. The crops shone like silver reeds under the moonlight as Skye sped along the highway towards Neviin Mountain Range and the forests beyond. The journey battled against her strong desire to sleep, taking her close to six hours to reach the edge of Neviin Forest.

She rode her bike through the sparse outer trees in the gathering dawn illuminated by the high beams, and began to slow down as the trees and thick brush became more dense. By then the sun had risen, casting a warm orange light through the canopy to the forest floor.

Skye continued on foot for a short while, yearning for sleep but determined. The notes Larrun had provided told her to search in the area surrounding a large starship wreckage for something that could contain power cells of some kind. A specific electromagnetic signature had been detected in the area then it had ceased, but the precise location hadn't been pinned down in time. Larrun himself had circled a small white patch on the satellite imagery that could indicate a shuttle or craft of some kind as a potential starting point.

Before long, the small white spacecraft revealed itself through the green mess

of the forest. Skye guessed it might have been a transport shuttle for a crew during some war that raged on long before she was born. Here in the timelessness of the deep forest, it sat empty and forgotten, covered in dirt and dust.

The cabinets inside the main cabin were bare, the dashboard and internal wiring had been stripped, and the cargo compartments behind were all empty.

Worry began to set in. She had spent so many hours and the last of her credit waiting for Larrun and flying to this distant forest in hopes of escaping her life, but her search was falling short of the mark. Had the cells already been taken? The shuttle's own power cells were not worth anywhere near this much, even if they were still present.

She double checked the map Larrun had provided, and made a cursory glance out the starboard window. Despite being covered in layers of dust and dirt, the engine pods seemed to be untouched.

She made her way around the side of the shuttle. There were no scratches or marks of any kind near the panel's latches. It seemed odd that they were intact and still closed after inspecting the rest of the craft.

She reached into a port on the side of one of the pods and pulled a release hatch, causing the power couplings to open up and eject the pair of power sources inside. Skye's jaw dropped.

"Hyper capacitors!"

She shut her mouth as soon as she caught herself. The name on the side of each unit read *LT-38HC, Manufactured G12893/4*, the name and manufacturing year of a series of hyper capacitors she read about long ago in passing. They had been banned from production galaxy-wide over two hundred years ago due to a series of six famous catastrophic events in a handful of starships including civilian cruise liners that caused the deaths of over nineteen thousand souls in

total. A galaxy-wide referendum on the discontinued use and decommissioning of them was voted for widely, and starships were reverted over a few decades to more traditional, but far safer and more stable energy storage mechanisms.

She never thought in a million years that she would ever lay eyes on one. All hyper capacitors were supposed to have been decommissioned and dismantled, yet here were two pairs of them, contained in adapter ring modules for the shuttle's engines.

At the top of each unit was a power level indicator, showing almost full. *Did someone place them here?* she wondered.

Skye remembered Larrun's caution and now understood the reason for her payout. She had overheard in the past that hyper capacitors could power a starship for a century, and a small shuttle like this would operate for hundreds of years. She didn't realise how insignificant their size was, which added to her sense of wonder.

She proceeded to remove them from their adapter ring modules and replace the panels, and a giddy feeling came over her as the final cell was nestled safe, but tight in her backpack.

*One last meeting and I'll be out of here,* she mused, closing up the backpack. She stood up and took a final look around when the sharp snapping sound of a broken branch echoed from afar. Two men had been sneaking up to her location and froze when she saw them.

Instinct kicked in and she ran, triggering her pursuers to follow.

Skye sped through the trees and brush as the sound of an energy bolt buzzed past her head and cracked against a boulder, sending fragments of rock in all directions. She threw her arms up to cover her face in reaction. One of the two pursuers shouted something vile sounding, but what it was she didn't hear over the sounds of her boots on the forest floor and her intense breathing.

*Who are these people? Things can never go smoothly!* she thought. *Larrun!*

She gained some distance and had passed a crest in the terrain, losing them from sight for some seconds when she noticed one of many enormous trees looming up ahead. Skye ran past and out of the impending view of her pursuers, rearing back up to flatten herself against a tree's bulk as fast as she could, then shuffling around as she heard their footfalls catch up nearby. Her shaking hand clutched her warp pistol as she struggled to quieten her breathing and remain as still as possible. After some moments, one of the men shouted in frustration some way away and their footsteps became hard to hear.

After a while, she let go of her tension and breathed deep. To her surprise, the tree had not occurred to them after she peeked around the other side of it to double check they had moved on.

Looming even higher than the large trees stood the wreckage of the starship, overgrown and consumed by the forest in many places. The hull had become home to many winged creatures that hung on the metal overhangs of the massive fuselage. She watched them chattering and cleaning themselves and wondered what species they were, but they all flew away in unison as if they had been disturbed by something below.

Skye took that as a cue that she was alone for the time being and pulled off her backpack, opening it up. The capacitors had jostled around in the pack but were otherwise unaffected by the impact of running. *Well.. probably designed to endure more than that I guess.*

She waited there a little longer to be sure they weren't going to return and as she did, her attention wandered to the rest of the forest and the sounds around her. The thick canopy absorbed a lot of the sunlight, but shafts of it were beginning to pierce through. A species of bird she hadn't heard before echoed its trio of high-pitched whistles through the forest.

*Beautiful* was the one word that came to mind as she drank from her water bottle. She breathed in deep, taking in the cool, clean air and letting herself calm down, but something stirred in her peripheral vision.

Skye was on her feet in no time, pistol in the air and aimed square at a man standing several paces away in a suede jacket, grey pants and trekking boots. He held the shoulder strap of a dark green backpack with a phase rifle strapped to its side.

The man threw his other arm into the air and took a step back.

“Who are you?” Skye said after a pause.

“I was going to ask the same thing about you,” he said, eyeing the pistol.

Skye threw him a questioning expression. “You’re the one who snuck up on me!”

She took in his dark brown eyes and rugged, handsome appearance. He must have been in his mid-thirties, she guessed.

“I’m sorry, I wanted to be sure you weren’t going to be hostile,” he explained.

“Going to be hostile?”

“You never know in a place like this.”

Silence filled the air.

“I’m searching for something,” he said, motioning toward the wreckage looming above them.

*Searching for something...* she thought, *or searching for these hypercapacitors?*

Skye became nervous and she tried to appear calm, but she wasn’t sure it was working that well.

“Nothing left in that old thing, or so I heard,” she dismissed, changing the subject. “Who are you?”

“Evren Tomun. And you?”

“Skye,” she said without thinking.

“Great to meet you, Skye,” he said with a smile. “Hey, can you lower that?”

Skye stood there a little distracted.

“Oh, sorry. Uh, I have to go,” she said, securing her pistol and grabbing her backpack in haste. “Be careful if you’re going that way.”

“Thanks for the tip,” he said, adding as she began to walk away. “Are they after you?”

*How do you know?* she wondered.

Evren caught her expression and tapped his ears. He must have heard the commotion of their pursuit.

“I don’t know who they are. All I know is they started chasing me.”

“Are they after what’s in there?” he asked, pointing to the bulging, heavy backpack. He waited a moment before relaxing his querying expression with a laugh. “It’s fine, you don’t have to answer to me.”

Skye relaxed the tension on her face.

“I’m sorry Evren, I really have to go. I hope you find what you’re looking for,” she said, turning back and nodding toward the starship. “There’s two men with bolt weapons over that way.”

Skye gave him a cursory smile as she walked away, but she remained distracted and unsure of what she was doing. *That was strange. Who is he?*

She reached her bike, stowed the pack in the cargo compartment and powered up the bike, ready to leave, but his face wouldn’t leave her mind. She stood there for what seemed like minutes, deliberating back and forth.

*Ugh! What am I doing?*

Down the other side of the ridge, Evren heard the sound of an engine slowing to a halt behind him. He turned, reaching for the rifle on his pack when he saw Skye walking over the hill.



Her face was a pale olive and her brown hair fell in loose waves onto the well worn hooded jacket around her shoulders. Tall hiking boots and slim fitting grey pants accentuated her modest height. If not for the backpack and the holstered pistol, he wouldn't have suspected a thing about her. She seemed embarrassed to be back, holding her gaze down at the ground in front of her feet as she approached.

“So,” she began, “what is it you're looking for?”

“I'm not entirely sure yet, but I believe it's a golden orb, if you will, a sort of beacon,” said Evren. “Some of the locals in Quondrin Port sent me in this direction. They said there had been superstitious rumours of something strange buried here for decades, but no one had seen anything, only felt its presence, whatever that means.”

“A golden orb?”

“I suspect about the size of a boulder,” Evren explained.

“Why are you looking for it?”

She was hoping for a more complete answer, but Evren hesitated, turning back to the ship.

He scanned its bulk above them in thought, then turned back without looking her in the eyes. “I lost my father recently.”

“I'm so sorry,” she said, and felt a pang of guilt at interrogating him. At the same time, something stirred in her that had been buried long. Evren met her gaze and she sensed the pain that lurked beneath the control he was exercising.

“You don't have to—”

“No, it's fine,” he said, turning back to survey the cavernous entrances to the skeleton of the starship. “I think it was one of these beacons that caused it,” he explained. “I've been searching for a few weeks. I've only had a few clues to go off.”

“And it might be here on Peyal?”

“I’m hoping so. It’s the best lead I have so far.”

Skye looked away for a moment, contemplating whether to open up. The silence seemed to allow her.

“I lost my dad too,” she mentioned. “But a long time ago.”

Evren didn’t say anything. She met his gaze again and, unlike most people she had told in the past, his eyes portrayed understanding rather than pity or indifference.

“It happened when I was a teenager,” she paused.

*Why am I telling him this?*

“I guess we now have something in common,” Evren said, regarding her for a moment. “Will you help me find it?”

“Me?” she said.

“You seem like you can handle yourself. Two eyes are better than one. Why did you come back in the first place?”

Skye didn’t have a solid answer to that question, but he made a point. She also was not sure if she could trust a man in a forest she had known for less than ten minutes. If there was any deceit in him, it didn’t show in his eyes nor in his words. She knew there was more than ample time to return to the city with the hyper capacitors. Larrun wasn’t expecting her for another day and a half.

*I could use the company,* she thought.

Skye and Evren made their way down the ridge toward the starship wreckage. She powered up her warp pistol in the holster with her eyes on alert for any sign of her pursuers. Evren on the other hand remained as calm as he had been since they began.

“Do you know where this beacon is?” Skye asked.

“One man said it could be somewhere within the ship’s engine cavities. He said anyone who had gotten close to the area had usually *‘felt really strange and wanted to get out of there’*. No one has ever deliberately gone searching for the cause, which is a good thing.”

“So they don’t even know what’s here?” Skye quizzed. “How do you know it’s this beacon?”

“I can’t be certain, but it’s the best lead I have now.”

“Are they dangerous?” Skye asked with a rising curiosity, suspecting there was something he wasn’t tell her about how his father’s death.

Evren had an air of caution before he spoke. “Extremely dangerous. I don’t know who made them.”

“Extremely dangerous? What are they?” she asked as they stepped over a fallen tree trunk. Evren halted, squinting in the direction of the starship wreckage and raising his arm to stop her.

“What is it?”

“Are those the men that are after you?” he said, pointing.

Following his arm, she became aware of her pursuers standing there near the other end of the starship’s stern. Adrenaline shot through her body. One of them was leaning against the metal hull as the other used his rifle’s scope to search the forest further on. As the rifleman turned, Evren recognised the olive and grey pattern on his coat.

“I think they’re from the Ben’el East Wing,” he said.

*The Ben’el East Wing?* Skye had once heard of them in passing, but never thought they’d be after *her*. She became more nervous.

“The smuggling organisation?” she asked.

“I think so. I’m not about to ask them,” Evren said. “See the olive and grey on

his uniform, and it looks like it might be the insignia but it's too far away to be sure. What do you know of the East Wing?"

"Nothing more than most people," she replied in truth. Despite the line of work she was in, Skye had always tried to stay on the lighter side of grey and avoid organisations like these for obvious reasons. Her moral compass told her to stay away and not become embroiled in dangerous affairs.

"We need to be careful. The East Wing is ruthless," he said, beginning to move forward and away from the direction of the men.

The sounds of the forest softened and the light faded as they wandered down toward the enormous engine cavity on their left. Metal creaked here and there as warmth from the morning sunlight permeated through the hull. Mountains of starship thruster components had been stripped away over decades to leave the huge cylindrical caverns lined with dangling fuel lines, long dead electronics and charred exhaust scars. She wondered about the starship these engines powered long ago and what series of events led to its inevitable crash landing on the planet. The Repository was sure to have a record on it but that would have to wait.

Skye took a closer look at the phase rifle on Evren's pack. "Are you military? I've only ever seen troops with those."

"I was in the Armed Forces back on Kaspen," he said, "but that was a long time ago."

"And you're not anymore?"

Evren's attention wandered to a series of open exhaust ports embedded in the ground and half filled with dirt.

"I was honourably discharged after a shoulder injury and my commander gave me the rifle as a token of his gratitude for my service," he explained, rolling his left shoulder around with a slight grimace on his face. "I think he also knew it

wouldn't end up on the mantelpiece.”

“Is it okay?” Skye asked.

“The shoulder? It's fine. Gives me some pain every now and again. It's partially synthetic,” Evren trailed off, as if suggesting a comment about synthetic body parts.

They reached the first exhaust port and Evren ducked down, peering into the dark with a flashlight for a few moments.

“Not here,” he said, moving to the next. Skye made herself useful and walked over to the third port.

“Not here too,” she said, but to her surprise, a glint caught her eyes as she moved to stand up. “Wait! I think I found something, Evren.”

He made his way over, crouched down and shined the flashlight in. With some movement of the light, they both spied a small patch of a golden bronze material shining through the grease-soaked dirt.

“That must be it, right?” Skye guessed. It was then she became aware of the dizziness swelling inside her head.

“That was easier than I thought it would be,” Evren commented, taking another look inside to solidify his thoughts.

“And it's been here all this time?” Skye shook her head and massaged her temple in an attempt to subdue the feeling, but it did little to help.

“Assuming this is the beacon, then yes. I can't say how long though,” he added. “Do *not* touch it.”

Skye acknowledged his warning, but she stood up and backed away in instinct as anxiety, nausea and fear struck her mind and body.

“We have to ensure it's hidden from sight,” he continued, noticing her shadow move away from his periphery. “Hey, are you okay?”

“That's it? That's all you came to do?” she asked with some difficulty,

continuing to force her way through the internal stress.

“At least until we know what it is and why it resulted in my father’s death,” he said with concern on his face.

Evren saw her reel but regain her composure. “Skye, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she said in her confusion. Skye felt tired but she was not ill and had no allergies or diseases to speak of. She wondered now if it was the beacon causing it.

“What about that panel over there?” she suggested to Evren as she held the side of her head in her palm. He left her and ran over to a large metal panel and began to drag it toward the exhaust port to cover it.

“It’s heavy but I can drag it. Don’t worry,” he said after Skye prompted to help. Evren dragged it along the ground with some effort. The stones and rough dirt being kicked up made a lot of noise that added to Skye’s anxious state of mind.

Just as Evren approached the exhaust port with the panel in tow, something moved in his periphery and he turned his head. The rifleman they had spied earlier on had snuck up to the edge of the starship. In desperation of being seen, the man lifted his rifle and fired a shot as fast as he could.

A bolt of plasma banged against the thick metal hull next to Evren, spraying sparks and small shards of metal in every direction and reverberating noise throughout the engine cavity. Skye fell back in surprise and glanced out of the wreckage for their attacker.

Evren cowered from the debris then in one swift move, threw off his pack, released the phase rifle into his other hand and engaged it. A pulse of percussive energy from the phase rifle slammed into the man’s shoulder a second later, throwing him back onto the hard floor, but it was too late. Not yet shielded by the panel, a bolt from the second man’s weapon buzzed past Evren’s torso and

into the exhaust port, throwing out a flurry of stones, dirt and dust. Two seconds later, the air pulsed back and forth around them then died.

Evren turned and saw the impact behind him, but before he could aim again, the second man hit the ground with a cry of pain. Skye kneeled there with her warp pistol still aimed high.

As the leaves rustled from the pressure waves, the anxiety and nausea she was experiencing ceased. It felt like a breath of fresh, cold air to her mind and she came back to full attention.

All went quiet. Evren stood there with a face full of despair.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” he said, throwing on his pack and rifle in a rush and running toward the light with Skye in tow. They halted outside the engine cavity in the bright forest and watched the exhaust port in the dim light from afar for any sign of change.

“What’s happening?” Skye said.

“That,” said Evren, pointing to a faint blue glow now emanating from it. “Now we *really* have to go, Skye. Where is your bike?”

She had no idea what this glow meant, but she didn’t say a word and turned and ran. The stress in Evren’s voice told her everything she needed to know about impending danger. Did he even know what was happening or was he guessing?

As they reached Skye’s grav-bike some distance back through the forest, a deafening wrenching noise echoed through the air, followed by a blinding beam of light soaring upward into the sky, causing birds to fly off in all directions and animals to scatter like the wind.

Skye’s heart pounded with fright as the noise crashed through the forest. As it dissipated, an enormous thunder rolled across the sky like that of a lightning strike.

“What *was* that?” she said trying to holster her pistol with her shaking hands.

“The beacon. We’re running on borrowed time, Skye. This is *exactly* what I came here to prevent,” he explained in a rush. “I can’t believe I was this stupid!”

Evren’s shock and frustration seemed out of character to the calm and collected man she had met earlier, and it shook her back into action.

“Do you have a transport or ship?”

“Yes,” he said, coming back to his senses and pulling out his communicator. “My ship isn’t far from here at the edge of the forest.”

Skye ran to the bike, powering it up and throwing her pack in the cargo hold.

“The ship is priming,” Evren said as he ran over and jumped on the back and held onto her from the waist. “Go!”

With a flick of her wrist, they sped off through the forest as quick as she could manage, dodging and weaving through the trees and thick brush. Evren glanced back but all he saw were countless leaves shaken from trees falling through the air.

As the trees became more sparse, Evren directed Skye towards an open field where a spacecraft sat waiting for them. Its white surface shone bright in the morning sunlight. Angular lines defined the ship’s hull with wings that were pulled back to form an aerodynamic profile ready for atmospheric flight, adorned by two sleek rail guns on top.

As if it knew they were coming, the cargo ramp opened and inched toward the ground. Skye rode out of the forest’s edge into the sunlight and straight for the ramp into the ship’s small cargo bay. She shut down the bike and stepped off after Evren, stumbling as she stood on the floor. Beneath the ship, the ground had begun to rumble and shift like an earthquake, swaying the ship on its legs.

Evren hurried through into the cockpit, engaging the ship for take off. He



took a look out of the cockpit and found cracks forming in the grass and trees swaying left and right across the other end of the field.

Back in the cargo bay, the ramp closed on its own, sealing it off from the rumbling noises outside as the engines came to life, bringing the ship off the ground. Evren had already strapped himself in when Skye made her way through the ship into the cockpit. She sat down in front of a series of co-pilot displays that flickered to life as the ship rose above the tree tops and swung around to the south.

In the distance, the derelict starship extended high above the forest, revealing the extent of the crash site that Skye had never seen from within the trees. Loose metal beams and pieces of the enormous vessel bent and twisted, released at the cusp and sailed across the air towards the engine ports where the beacon lay buried and disappeared through the forest canopy.

“It’s destroying the ship,” Skye exclaimed. “Why would it do that?”

“No, not the ship,” he said without elaborating any further.

Skye glanced at him for more but he was busy analysing the displays and making adjustments to the flight path. He tapped a button on the display and the horizon rolled down out of view as the ship pitched upward.

“Hold on,” he said. “The inertia lock is active but this will be a bit rough.”

With a push on the silver throttle, the cockpit began to vibrate leaving the grass below charred under the flames of the launch rockets as the ship soared into the air with a trail of billowing smoke. After they gained some altitude, the sub-light drives kicked in, thrusting the ship straight into the upper atmosphere, echoing a sonic boom across the sky.

“I don’t use the launch rockets often but we have to clear the planet’s gravitational well as fast as we can,” Evren said, determined to push the ship as hard as it could go.

Skye watched a video feed from the rear of the ship.

“Why?! What’s happening down there?” she said, unable to comprehend what she saw. Evren took a glance at her display then noticed the pain and confusion on her face.

“Skye,” he began. “A beacon the same as this destroyed the moon my father was working on. That’s how he died. Celleda Minor, did you not hear about it?”

She stared at him in disbelief. “No, I didn’t!”

Evren felt the distress in her eyes. “Peyal,” he broke off.

The ship soared ever higher into space as Skye tried to digest his words, putting two and two together. *Destroyed a moon? How could it destroy a moon?*

As she rattled her mind for answers, an immense crater formed on the continent below, pulling in the planet’s crust and atmosphere surrounding it. Her small human mind couldn’t accept what it was seeing, even as the colour left her face. Her body knew something terrible was in motion.

The planet’s horizon morphed into a crumbling mass of crust, swirling ocean and hot mantle as the ship took them away from the last desperate reaches of the atmosphere and out into deep space. The vision on the display tore at her chest. Nothing she could do would stop its acceleration towards a finale she did not want to consider.

Far behind them, the planet rippled and spiralled with violent flashes before being pulled into the darkness of space along with its four and a half billion inhabitants. Light fell into nothing and the video feed went dark.

Evren performed a check of the ship’s systems then disengaged the sub-light drives when they were out of danger. The cabin became quiet with only the faint noise of the air recyclers filling the silence. He looked over to Skye and found her staring out of the windows in silence.

Her mind felt blank as if all her thoughts, hopes and dreams had been wiped

clean in an instant. Her chest felt like a sunken pit, and after a long moment of silence she stood up and left the cockpit without a word.

“I’ve got someone on the job,” Larrun said. “She’ll be back in two days.”

A woman dressed in a beige jacket and dark grey pants stood opposite a display table littered with various documents on screen, one of which was a topographic map of the Neviin Forest over an area showing the wreck of a starship.

“I didn’t tell her about the others,” he continued, “but she can handle herself. The less she knows, the better.”

Larrun’s voice sounded relaxed as he explained his reasoning but he had always been a little on edge around this woman.

“You’d better hope she’s already on her way back then,” the woman stressed, “or this will be our last job together. The Wing aren’t always in it for profit and I’ve put a lot on the line asking you. Don’t fuck this up.”

Larrun almost reacted to her insult toward his competence but he chose to eat his words. “What else would the East Wing want with hyper capacitors?” Larrun asked in a hushed voice. “And don’t worry about her, she’ll get ‘em.”

The woman stared at him. “You think I’m going to tell *you*?”

Larrun hated how much he felt the need to convince her of everything he promised. He hated that a woman, of all people, could make him feel weak and unimportant like she did. He pulled out his shock pistol, waved it in the air to distract her then pulled the trigger as it crossed her line of sight. She reeled and fell to the ground, staring at him in shock. Lucky for her, this was all in his head, a wild fantasy he’d considered a few too many times.

Before the woman could respond to the fire in his gaze, the entire room shook underneath them, bouncing the heavy display desk an inch off the floor, causing

it to flicker. Larrun snapped out of his daydream and threw his arms out to steady himself.

“What is this?” she said.

“Huh? How do I know?” Larrun said, feeling the floor begin to vibrate beneath his feet as he did.

It seemed to have stopped after ten seconds and silence settled in the room. They stared at each other as if waiting for something else to happen. When it seemed the event was over, she tapped a button on the table’s display and spoke. “What just happened?”

“I’m not sure, mam,” came a voice from the intercom followed by a pause. “Wait, there’s a report on the Broadnet of a seismic wave across the entire continent.”

“A seismic wave?” she said in confusion. “We don’t get seismic waves here.”

“I know mam. It says it’s being investigated,” said the man on the other end, but the connection was cut short when the room shook again with greater intensity. The display’s poly-glass splintered and went dead as a crack sprang across the ceiling and down the wall behind her as if the thick concrete were a thin piece of wood. Larrun’s hand went straight for the shock pistol in his jacket.

“What’s that for?” she said with a scowl, reaching across to place a hand on her own weapon.

“Reflex,” he said without thinking, feeling relieved to have the cool leather handle of the pistol in his hand. Behind him through the doorway, the lone guard glanced left and right as he mumbled something on his communicator.

“What is it, Gare?” the woman shouted.

Larrun turned around to find him running away down the corridor.

“Where are you going?” Larrun shouted, moving to the doorway to find that

it was force shielded. He banged his hand against the invisible barrier. “What are you playing at here, Rischel?”

“I make the rules here, Larrun. I can never trust you.”

Larrun turned to find the large warp pistol now in her hands aimed at him.

“What are you doing? Why are we still here? Let’s go!” he yelled as a heavy chunk of cement cracked and fell from the ceiling, landing on her and the display. The sound of her body crumbling under the weight of it followed by blood-filled final breaths hit deep within his chest and he almost choked on disgust.

Reeling in his horror, he ran for the door and slammed into the invisible shield he’d forgotten about and fell to the ground. As he recovered, it sparked and failed under the stress of the doorway structure being squeezed. He stood as quick as he could, stepped through the doorway with caution, then raced down the corridor toward the elevator.

“Transporter pad,” he said to the voice controls inside. “Come on!”

In a second the doors closed and his feet pressed into the floor as it accelerated toward the roof of the building. Noise from the city flooded in as the doors slid aside. Larrun ran out onto the sunlit roof and glanced around him just as a beam of light rose into space away on the horizon. He brought his hand up to shield his eyes but the beam ceased. All around him, tall spires of the city core’s buildings began to sway. Most had not been designed to withstand tremors of any real significance, being far continental fault lines and any seismic activity on the planet.

He ran to the orbital transporter shuttle and climbed in, starting it up and hovering it off the platform as the landing pad underneath shifted sideways. As the shuttle rose away from the building, he saw ships and transports across the city powering up in an attempt to escape the chaos, a few of which were struck

by falling debris, spinning out of control into towers and other craft.

Larrun slammed the thruster lever to full and aimed for the sky as buildings began to crack and fall, plumes of dust filled the air and distant screams filtered through the shuttle's cabin.

His nerves grew. The ascent felt as slow as a snail's pace, but sixty-seven long seconds later, the shuttle forced its way through maximum dynamic pressure then out of the thin atmosphere into the blackness of low orbit.

Larrun began scanning the continent below for something that would explain the chaos. A gravitational map appeared showing the region surrounding Neviin Forest, but he couldn't make sense of it.

*Neutron star density?* he questioned as he scanned the figures on the display.  
*Huh?*

As the gravitational map lost track of the location of the anomaly, the ship's sensors then picked up a spacecraft souring into orbit from the original coordinates.

*Surely not,* he told himself. *Could that be her?*

He brought up the rear camera feed. Powerful lightning flashed down below. The planet seemed to be collapsing or imploding. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, but he had awareness to push the shuttle in the direction of deeper space beyond geostationary orbit. The small shuttle's engines struggled against the increasing pull of gravity down below but after some time it stabilised.

He glanced at the displays then spun the ship around to see it for himself. Peyal, a massive planet with billions of people on it had been removed from existence, leaving nothing but deep darkness and the stars behind.

Larrun settled the shuttle into an orbiting trajectory and sat there shaken, confused and unable to appreciate the magnitude of the event. As he squinted into the vastness, he was certain he could see a subtle bending of the starry

backdrop around a pinpoint as he drifted through orbit.

*A singularity... or I'm losing my fucking mind.*

Larrun sat there staring at it but after a short while he realised how stuck he was in the orbital transporter. It had a weak sub-light engine and no interstellar drive to speak of. He didn't like the idea of asking for help but there was no other option.

"This is Larrun," he spoke to the cabin's microphones, broadcasting a message wide and far. "I'm stranded near Peyal in the Ben'el System. Need a pickup. Ship identification is TPN-77C. Beacon is armed," he finished, realising his lungs were wheezing and sweat had gathered on his forehead and chest.

After signing off, he resigned to the cabin's couch seating and grabbed an oxygen mask to settle his breathing. It was times like these that his incessant smoking became a burden. The destruction of an entire planet was something he didn't believe possible but worse, he'd lost everything he owned including his ship that had been sitting in a civil hangar not far from the apartment complex he lived in. That was the worst offence. He was wrecked without a ship.

After a few hours Larrun woke from a groggy sleep he didn't remember falling into. The oxygen mask lay beside him and a message beeped, not loud but repetitive in his ears. He was dismayed to find the entire event wasn't just a dream when a large transport vessel sat waiting half a kilometre off port side.

"Finally," he said, checking the scanner once more. The small ship found earlier on the tracker was no longer visible, so he played the message from the transport vessel.

"Pilot of TPN-77C, we heard what happened and are here to render assistance," said the message. "We will leave for Tarvein as soon as we have you onboard. Please respond as soon as possible. We've been trying to reach you after our life scan."

Larrun acknowledged the offer and docked with the ship. The orbital transporter he had escaped in would have to be left behind, a frustrating compromise despite being rescued. He would be forced to start from scratch. Numerous survivors had already been rescued from similar fates, having taken the fastest means necessary for each and every one of them to escape the planet.

A medical officer noticed him amongst the crowd and hurried over with a medical scanner. "Are you okay, sir? Have you been injured?"

"I'm fine."

"You should come with me to the infirmary for a checkup," the officer insisted.

"I can handle myself. Where's the sleeping quarters?"

The officer resigned with a sigh. "Down the corridor and to the right. But if you need anything, we're here for you."

Larrun faked a smile as he escaped the officer's overbearing concern for his wellbeing and went straight for the bunks. He felt exhausted and there was nothing else to do now than to kill the time until he was back to some kind of civilisation.