

CHAPTER THREE

Taylor

“What do you mean – *no*?” the little man screamed in his face.

For the second day in a row this slack-mannered boff had noxxed at him in his own office. Taylor Voicke wasn't putting up with it.

“Exactly what I say, Professor Bai. N O. You're lucky I don't fling you into the brig. Have you any notion of how many station regs you've broken?”

And what would happen if Galaxytrust found out – it didn't bear thinking about.

“Don't you understand? I – have – found – the – antidote – to – Hera's – soil.” Bai was speaking to him as if he were a backward child, curse him.

“Yes, of course I do. I am not a quarkbrain, Professor!” Suffering Universe, here he was shouting as loudly as Bai. This would never do.

Taylor took a calming breath. “What you don't seem to understand, is that there are station procedures for this eventuality. We need to contact Galaxytrust. I have to say, this could have been expedited if you'd only come to me yesterday. A priority message could have gone back with the supply ship.”

Ameliorating the baneful VR figures going down as another black mark on his record.

Bai sank back into his chair, staring at Taylor as if he'd sprouted another head, “Are you telling me that you're going to fiddle with your slates and tabs for the next four months, waiting for Galaxytrust to – maybe – send us a couple of cons?”

Taylor glanced down at the ocean waves crashing into the lonely beach on his deskscreen, momentarily fantasising Bai's head bobbing around in the surf. “Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you.”

Bai's face flushed an ugly shade of purple, “Four whole months! And what if Galaxytrust doesn't send us the cons?” He jumped to his feet, yelling again. “Or they're too sick? Prisoners are often in such crumming physical shape, they're useless for experimentation!”

He jabbed his forefinger at Voicke. “You'd better co-operate, Voicke, I have contacts within Galaxytrust. And they want results.”

How dare Bai threaten him?

Taylor surged to his feet, angrier than he'd been for a very long time. “Galaxytrust also want an existence free from having to pay out damages to valued employees experimented upon by a hypo-happy boff.”

He leaned across his desk, gripping the edges to stop himself punching the nasty little bod's nose. “I cannot prevent you putting yourself at risk with your double-cursed experiment, but I'm not letting you use *Ilex* personnel as labrats.”

“You are being ridiculous!” Bai bawled.

“And you have just over-stepped the boundaries of inter-person protocol. I suggest you leave my office and prone down, before I officially sanction you, Professor Bai.” Taylor was proud of the way he had managed to stop shouting.

The scientist stormed out of his room, nearly knocking Jarka off her feet.

Taylor sank back into his chair, drained and shaky. Bai was brilliant at his job, that was for cert. But *why* did he have to be so unbearable with it?

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Dassin

Dr. Dassin Selmi looked at the slateload of data with awe. She'd known the girl was good, as she'd watched her trance, but this was alpha prima work. No wonder she looked zilched.

Dassin smiled, trying to ease her down. "You've had lunch, er..." Dassin glanced at her namebadge, "...Rexen?"

The girl shook her head, "I had a bit of a reaction to the trance-" she broke off, and Dassin was shocked to see her eyes fill with tears. Rexen blinking rapidly, gave her a damp grin, "It makes me feel sick."

Dassin noticed her shaking hands and pallid colour with mounting concern. Surely the Military briefed their Planters on how to trim the adverse reactions to their implants? "You've been told how to cope with the trances and other neural feedback, haven't you?"

"I-I've been compromised. They want to flush me out of the program. My reactions are too extreme." Rexen sounded shamed.

Dassin stared at her with rising anger. The geneless gapers had one of the best pattern-pullers she'd ever seen and they were set to zilch her! She smiled encouragingly at her. "Firstoff, let's go and get you something to eat. Galley No. 2 does the best salads on *Ilex*. Raw, crispy food shouldn't make you feel too roiled."

"I'd better not. The Captain is... she doesn't like it that I'm a Planter. I should've eaten earlier and if she catches me now..."

Dassin's blood was up. She half hoped that they'd meet the zane-brained captain, just so she could tell her what's what. "But I insist. I fancy something to eat myself. We've got this cresting data to work on. We'll take the dataslate and you can talk me through it."

Dassin had managed to spend a whole morning without once having to wear her eyes out on Bai Xing-hua. Now, she was itching to process such detailed, supra data alongside someone who didn't seem to have a galaxy-sized ego. Maybe this collaboration with Intel would work out well, after all.

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Xing-hua

Bai Xing-hua tried to walk off his fury, but it didn't work. So he went to the VR Bar and bought a half hour session. Then beat Voicke to a bloody pulp till he had the geneless nanofodder squealing for mercy and volunteering to be dosed with the vaccine. He felt a lot better after that, so he returned to the lab feeling a rush of happiness as he walked through the double security doors and looked around. The well-equipped booths containing rows of nanolabs along the straight wall of the semi-circular space were an excellent idea he could incorporate into his own laboratory, once he left *Ilex*. However, Selmi and one of the army bods were occupying the main area, feeding data into a calc prog. He listened to their talk as he straightened up a piece of equipment left untidily.

"Hm. What is Br.Br.Br.? It keeps coming up in clumps and it isn't part of the colour spectrum."

“Oh yes! Patches of brown. I don’t think they were part of the flickering light. It seemed as if they were drifting in front of the light, screening it out. A cloud, or something.” The Intel girl seemed full of herself.

Selmi, unusually, appeared happy. “Really? I haven’t noticed anything like it on the obs before. Let’s have a look at the visuals. Oh yes, how odd! I’ve never recorded anything like that on Hera before. Maybe it’s a duststorm. Could be why I can’t get hold of the maintenance crew down on the planet surface. They’ve probably gone underground till it blows over.”

Xing-hua didn’t want to hear any more. He’d examined Seilsen’s corpse last month after his visor had smashed during a fall, down on Hera. The soil had eaten away his face. Xing-hua shuddered. He’d had enough nightmares about the episode, without it blighting his days as well.

The stack of Heran soil samples was on the bench opposite where the women were sitting. Xing-hua cursed his own stupidity in not moving them to his office last night, after re-sealing them. If he moved them now, Dassin would surely notice and ask questions. After his argument with Voicke – may he take a long suck on hard vacuum – Xing-hua didn’t want to be seen near the soil samples until he figured what he was going to do. It was insupportable that he should wait, as Voicke suggested. The man had the imaginative drive of a floorbot. Xing-hua still couldn’t believe that his perfectly reasonable request for vaccine volunteers had been refused, although he supposed it was cos he’d gotten a little cross yesterday. Voicke was the type to hold a null-brained grudge. Xing-hua was always tripping over petty people of that sort.

He was just heading into his office when the main door slid open. It was a maintenance bod. Xing-hua frowned. He hadn’t recced for any maintenance to be done as the lab techs were capable of keeping all the equipment working and he wasn’t having some crankhappy glooper stomping all over the lab. This one could go right back to servicing those grotting travellers that kept breaking down.

“What do you want?”

The quarkbrain fished around for his data slate. “I’ve been sent to strip down a floorbot. Apparently it’s jammed.”

Banjuk popped out from behind her workstation. “Ah, yes.” She pointed to a floorbot stuck in front of the soil samples. “That one. It won’t move. Something seems to have jammed it solid.”

Xing-hua nodded at the intruder. Much as he disliked the extra distraction, this wasn’t a task suited to the lab techs. Too basic and unskilled. For once, Banjuk had done the correct thing. But surely... he should have known about the faulty ‘bot.

The maintenance man was kneeling down in front of it, removing the fastenings with a zipperdriver. He had just started to pull off the cover when Xing-hua remembered.

“Don’t touch it!” he yelled.

Selmi dropped something behind him with a clatter. The woman needed to take something for her nerves. She was always doing that.

At the same time, the maintenance man yelped and snatched his hand away. There was a red patch on the ball of his thumb.

Xing-hua pushed forward. “I just remembered. Last night when I came out of the Quarantine Quarters, I bumped into the bench and knocked over one of the soil samples from Hera. The seal was faulty and it spilled onto the floor. The bot cleaned it up, then it baned. I was half asleep and forgot all about it. My regrets.”

Truth was, he’d taken great care to thoroughly clean the floor. A couple of hours, in fact. And he had the crawler bots checking the whole lab to ensure that not a

single speck of Heradust had been left lying around. The shoddy floorbot must have gotten overfull without his noticing.

Meantime, Selmi was scampering around after the maintenance bod like a labrat in a foodmaze. She put his hand under running water; cresting relief no one from Recycling was around to see this baneful waste of clean water, then smeared on one of Hanson's weazenwitted creams. What a gape-brained fuss! After all, the maintenance bod had hardly touched the 'bot and only got the mildest form of dust-rash. It hadn't even blistered.

Not that you'd know it, with all the noise he was making. Xing-hua drummed his fingers while the nanowit conducted an overlong, loud conversation with some other pouch-mouth on his com-link.

"My supervisor is putting this whole place under <Decom> notice and reckons we'll need to stay here in the lab's Quarantine Quarters until the cycle has been completed." The gaper glared at Bai as if he was personally responsible for the annihilation of Earth. "After <Decom> has finished, I'll take the floorbot away and seal it up. But I'm warning you now, Professor Bai, I've officially reported this breach of station <Decom> protocols."

Hah! And was he supposed to faint away in fright? "Do what you must, young man. We all have our jobs to perform."

But it was a double-cursed nuisance having to spend yet three more hours in the grotting Quarantine Quarters. Xing-hua's stomach churned with frustration. How was he going to continue with his work? He found himself sitting opposite Dassin Selmi and the army girl. Their worktalk washed around him.

"...there are all sorts of tricks you can use to stop yourself from trancing. I've worked with plenty of Planters in my time. Pattern pullers can be cresting useful on all sorts of projects. You should have been told all this. I reckon you could make a claim against them for negligence."

There was Selmi getting bothered about issues that didn't concern her – again. No wonder she was under-performing. Needed more focus on her work, not side-zipping to wet-nurse some visc-brained Planter.

"...least you're alpha prima fit. I'll download some of these exercises onto your dataslate... there. And if you need any more help, go and see the station meddy. He'll have a lot more experience."

Xing-hua stared sharply at the girl. Selmi was right. As she unclipped her uniform's top tunic-studs in the heat of the overworked Quarantine air system, he could see the wire-taut muscles braiding down the side of her neck. Lean and bright-eyed, she'd have no difficulty with the vaccine. He turned back to the maintenance clod, sitting moodily in the corner, staring at the floor. Tensed like that, Xing-hua could clearly see he, too, was a well-muscled specimen.

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Xing-hua must have dozed off, because when the <Decom> allclear sounded, he snapped his eyes open as everyone slowly started to stand up.

Now. He needed to act now.

He jumped up "Many, many regrets for my mistake. Let me make it up to you. Especially you two people. We, who work here, are used to these little upsets. But I realise it must be difficult for outsiders to deal with the potential hazards of our work."

Xing-hua swallowed his impatience while everyone stared at him as if his brains had just floated out of his ears. He tried to smile at them, but sensed his irritation was spoiling the effect. “Just you wait here and I’ll get us all a little treat.”

He rushed into his office and opened the bottle of whisky that he’d been saving for the successful completion of this contract. Ah well, he could get another. He poured a good measure in each of the sample jars he arranged on a steri-tray. Hygiene was crucial. After checking the monitor to ensure it was on <Receiving> mode, he added 10 ml. of the vaccine to two drinks. As they were taking the draught orally, they’d need a larger dose than he’d taken.

Xing-hua picked up the tray and walked back into the lab. Banjuk, the man and the girl were all there. He looked around, “Where’s Dassin gone?”

“Oh, she says regrets for not waiting but she had an appointment elsewhere.” The Intel girl was staring at the tray as if it would bite her.

But the maintenance bod was grinning. “So it’s true, Professor Bai, you’ve got your own supply of the hard stuff.”

Xing-hua tried to grin back, but his mind was too full of what he needed to do next as he served the drinks. The girl sipped the stuff carefully, while the man gulped it down, a big smile plastered across his stupid face.

Banjuk grabbed her glass and disappeared back behind her screen. Hm. He needed to get rid of her.

“Oh, Banjuk, I think that an in-coming sig has been downloaded for you.”

Her brown face popped from behind her workstation, creased into an ill-tempered frown, “Well, why didn’t you say so earlier?” She tossed back his precious whisky in a way that had Xing-hua wincing, then rushed off.

Xing-hua turned back to the two young people. “Well, this is trim, isn’t it? I don’t often have the chance to meet other station personnel.”

He’d run out of things to say; the man had drunk his dose and was standing up to go. “Oh, look, here’s another glass. Why don’t you finish it up? It’ll only go to waste.” Xing-hua gabbled.

Inspiration struck him. “I’ve got some hand-baked crackers in my office that are supra with this drink. Let me get them.” He rushed off to his office and sealed the door. In the monitor, he watched the quarkbrain drink the extra whisky, as the girl fiddled with her near-empty glass. Now!

He pressed the <Contamination> over-ride alarm for the main lab. As the deafening noise skirled through the room, the girl dropped her glass.

The man jumped up. “What the slotting hells is going on?”

Xing-hua could relax now. The lab was sealed. The securitibots wouldn’t let them leave, even if the doors weren’t autolocked. He killed the audio alarm, although the red flashing lights still lividly strobed around the room.

His voice echoed around the lab through the speakers. “Many, many regrets. It seems that the lab monitors have picked up some sort of contamination. You both need to return to the Quarantine Quarters. The levels require you to stay there for forty-eight hours. I’ll notify your superiors.” He opened up the doors to the Quarantine Quarters, again.

“What kind of grotting contamination?” The maintenance moron yelled. The girl sat still, wide-eyed and mute. Evidently not over-burdened with intelligence, which came as no surprise as she’d agreed to a neural Implant. Hah, now *there* was an experiment he wouldn’t touch with an asteroid probe!

“Er, I’m not sure at present. I’ll run some checks.” He paused for a couple of mins, letting them sweat. “Ah, it looks as though it might be some airborne dust.

Right, in the Quarantine Quarters double-time, please. We don't want that stuff in your lungs longer than is necessary." Xing-hua watched in satisfaction as they reluctantly headed towards two small rooms in the Quarantine Quarters suite. He opened the outer doors, closed them after his subjects had entered, then activated the air recycling system before opening up the inner doors from his office console.

The girl turned to the monitor in the corner of her room, "And what about you, Professor? Don't you need to be in here with us?"

"Oh no. I've checked myself thoroughly with my office scanners." Xing-hua lied cheerfully. "I'll notify your superiors and send you up a menu from both galleys. I'll put it on the lab credbill, so have whatever you want. And if there's a data slate, VR or holo tabs you fancy, let me know." He snickered. "I understand some scorching stuff came in with the supply ship yesterday."

Xing-hua flicked off the monitor and jiggled around his office. He'd done it! He had his two specimens successfully inoculated and isolated. All he had to do was wait. Voicke would be thoroughly noxxed, for cert. But even Voicke wasn't stupid enough to zilch him over this. Xing-hua sighed with happiness and poured himself another glass of whisky. He deserved it.

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Tate

Tate Yarker paced around the tiny room, investigating the adjoining washroom and toilet. He glowered at the Intel bod through the viewing plate and flicked on the two-way switch. "Right – so what's your game?"

She stared at him, with the same noddy-brained look on her face she'd had ever since this whole dance started. But it didn't fool him. None of this had rung right. The way Bai had been carrying on...

Talky talk on the station was that he was one noxxed crummer that'd vex at you for no other reason than you happened to share his air. Firstoff when he'd offered them a drink, Tate had reckoned Bai'd whacked out on alco-juice. But now, Tate was willing to bet a month's credstack that Intel was snagged in with Bai's wierdity. Sitting there blankfaced in that grotting grey uniform!

Tate backed into the corner. His vision hazed as the walls in the small room crowded him. They'd put him in a box like this, all those years ago and stood staring at him as he'd unravelled in front of them.

Sweating heavily, he hurled himself against the viewing plate separating their rooms. "What's going on, you skull-trawling slottie?"

That got to her. She jumped up and stalked towards him plate with such a snarl on her face that Tate involuntarily backed away.

"Watch your mouth! I'm getting majorly rotted off at the manners on this station." She jabbed a finger at him, "You're only gonna be hiding behind that wall for the next two days. After that you'd better stay outta my way, or I'll fix you so your Mama won't know you."

He remembered the threats; the cuffs around the head; the finger painfully stabbing in his chest. He'd been a snot-nosed kid then, who'd cowered and cried. Tate swallowed down the bile-bitter fear that suddenly flooded his mouth,

"Yeah, right. Save your threats for those that haven't seen it all before. I wanna know what's going down!"

She stared at him, “Why should I know? Your station and your homepatch. I reckon you’re all geneless nanofodder, ‘cepting Dr. Selmi.” The viewing plate blanked. She’d switched the curts on from her side.

Late into the night, Tate paced up and down the crumming narrow room while a holo dart-race blared, unnoticed, on his screen. Not his conversation with Rane, or even the supra meal she arranged to be sent up from Galley One, could dispel the flashbacks of being boxed in. Or the roiling fear he felt with slotting Intel so close. What did they want with him? And how long would their mind games last, this time?

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Jacey

Jacey Rexen breathed deeply to prone it down as she paced the length of the room in three steps. The maintenance bod could suck on hard vacuum anytime now. What was it with this noxxing station? Were they all pulling some scam and the guilt was talking? Or was it space fever? She’d understood that it generally hit firsties, or folk boxed into an oversmall ship for entirely too long, but maybe there was a station version she’d not heard of. Whatever it was, they were generally the most baneful slotlickers she’d ever had the misfortune to meet, excepting Dr. Dassin Selmi who announced herself at the entrycom with a trundlebot carrying the most overclass supper Jacey’d ever seen.

She stared up at the monitor, as Dr. Selmi opened the outer door for the trundlebot, closed it, cycled the air and opened the inner door. “Jacey, my mostest regrets for running out on you earlier.” Dr. Selmi shook her head, looking crushed. “If I’d stayed, you probably wouldn’t be here now. But... I find it difficult to work in here sometimes.”

“Hey, with what I’ve seen of this place, I reckon it takes a real stead-head not to flush yourself outta the airlock. Oh thank-you to the ends of the universe. This is a cresting treat.” Jacey pounced on the food as soon as the ‘bot wheeled it in. Chickenmarrow in wine sauce, with onions, fungi and baked sweet potato, followed by cheesecake and strawberry custard.

As she swallowed the last mouthful, Jacey felt a tad embarrassed. That hadn’t exactly been her daintiest table manners. Aunt Ro would’ve rolled her eyes upwards and muttered something about the gods above having to help her cos she’d about given up on teaching her no-good brood manners.

But Dr. Selmi was grinning. “Well that’s a supra sight. Need to tell sheffie that his food’s managed to please one bod this evening.”

Jacey felt a rush of warmth towards this kind lady. “That was the zenith meal of my life. And, I’m obliged majorly for your words earlier; what you said about my trancing. It’ll be ultra help, for cert.”

Dr. Selmi waved her hand, awkwardly. “Just look on the shelf under your food. I made up a data slab from library records on exercises that other pattern pullers have found useful. Try some while you’re holed up here. I’ve smoothed things over with your Captain Farr, so you shouldn’t get any grot over being stuck in here.” She turned to go and then stopped.

“Oh, you know that brown cloud we saw on Hera? Well, the light activity seems to be intensifying so I’ve lined up the coms equipment and I’m pulling an all-

nighter to monitor what's going on. I'll leave a line open for you to tap into, if you're interested."

Jacey felt overwhelmed at her supra thoughtfulness, "That'll be airy, many thank-yous, Dr. Selmi."

She had the kindest smile of anyone, 'cepting Aunt Ro. "Call me Dassin. Sweet Starlight to you and I'll see you in the morning. Mightn't be early, as I'll need to catch some zeds after my night-shift."

And she moved out of the monitor's viewpath. For a few moments after she left, Jacey felt a hollow sense of loss, but snapped out of it. There was plenty of info here to read and digest, as well as exercises to practice. She could hear the nox-brained crummer next door pacing up and down, but didn't say anything. She'd be trim never hearing his voice again.

It wasn't long before Jacey started nodding off over the slab. She'd been up with the moons this morning and it'd been a long, busy day. It took her a while before she figured out that the bedding was kept in a recessed wall locker over the bunk. However she'd have gone through Zeus's Black Swirl before asking Yarker where it was. In fact, with all this to keep her occupied over the next day and a bit, Jacey reckoned she'd never have to speak to the gaper again.

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Dassin

Dassin Selmi was cold. The Receiving Unit wasn't the lastest thing in comfort and Captain Farr had snagged the only stool, and muttered about it getting stuffy when Dassin had zipped the heating up to a reasonable temp. However nothing could blanket her bubbling excitement while working on Jacey REXEN's data. Or her growing conviction that the flashing colours were not just a random display of colliding chemicals. She just needed to access the downloads they'd taken from Zeus in the same timeframe. Yes! There... and there... A definite match. Especially if she factored in the time-lapse for light speed over the distance. She'd have to go through the whole of the three-hour time span that Jacey had captured, of course. But so far there wasn't a single overlap between the flashing lights on Hera and those on Zeus. As if one set of lights was flashing to the other. As if they were communicating...

Again, Dassin tried to raise the crew on Hera's surface to see if they'd monitored anything unusual. Still no reply. Strange. They'd been out of contact for eight hours. A clear breach of protocol. Unless there'd been another double-cursed dust storm. There'd been a worrying number of those, recently. Admin were sending a shuttle down to check up on them at daybreak in five hours time.

Meantime, Dassin might get a chance to finish working through Jacey's data, so long as Captain Farr could monitor the info on the brown cloud she'd spotted on Hera's surface. Dassin glanced at her. Seemed snugged down with the task smoothly enough. Dassin continued scrolling through the pages of Jacey's recorded data and matching it with the Receiving Unit's downloaded material from Zeus. She was three-quarters through it when Farr interrupted her.

"Dr. Selmi, I think you need to look at this."

Dassin glanced across at the Captain impatiently, as she eased her stiff neck and sore shoulders. "I'll be with you as soon as. I'd like to get this finished."

“I need your input, here. Check I’m not making some noddy-brained error.” Something in the Captain’s voice made Dassin pay attention. She was hunched over the scope screens monitoring Zeus and Hera.

Dassin stifled a sigh as she leaned over Farr’s shoulder and peered at the scope screen aimed at Hera.

Farr brought up another image of the cloud, “I took this pic an hour ago. What do you notice?”

Dassin compared the two images of the cloud and pointed at the real-time pic on the scope screen. “This one is on zoom.”

Farr seemed to be having difficulty in speaking, “But it’s not. It’s closer. I’ve checked the figures five times. This cloud is moving away from Hera, towards us. And...” she leaned back on the stool and stared up at Dassin, “it’s moving fast. At least Vel 4.”

“That’s impossible. Let me see!” Dassin all but shoved Farr out of the way to sort this zaned glitch as soon as, mentally cursing all visc-brained military.

A dozen mins later she was staring at the figures with spine crawling incredulity. The double-cursed thing *was* moving! Which meant that the cloud – or whatever it was – had some sort of propulsion. She gnawed her thumbnail. Unheard of. There were records of gas clouds and bacterial life forms moving through space, of course. But to break away from a planet’s gravitational pull and head out into space...

“You’re right. The cloud is moving.” Dassin avoided looking at Captain Farr. She licked her dry lips, “There’s something else. I’ve been examining the light patterns Jacey Rexen detected. I think it’s some form of communication.”

Farr’s head jerked up from her dataslate. “You mean those cloud-things are talking to each other?”

Dassin tried to keep her voice level, “I haven’t completed the whole interchange, but I think so, yes.”

They were talking about an alien intelligence. What Mankind had been fantasising about for three millennia and never yet found. But as she gazed back down the scope, Dassin felt shamed anger, realising that she far preferred a universe in which humans were the only intelligent space-faring species. Where the only alien life they encountered could be scooped up and examined under a scope. Another intelligent species raised all sorts of disturbing questions and scenarios that Dassin didn’t want to address.

What sort of xenologist did that make her? A scared one, came back the answer.

She jabbed at the priority button for Admin. “Where’s Voicke?” she snapped at the drowsy bod who slowly answered her hail.

“In his quarters. Shall I-...”

“Thank-you, no. I’ll contact him.” However, Voicke was a hard man to wake.

Captain Farr was getting twitchy. “This is taking too much time. We need to alert the station.”

Oh, this was cresting, this was. An action-happy phaze-pointer straining to ‘do’ something.

“And say what – that an intelligent cloud is closing on the station? We’ll panic everyone. To what end? Besides, if we do anything without Voicke’s yay-say, he’ll have us zilched in less time than-

“Oh yes, hallo Commander. There’s a situation here in the R.U. that needs your attention, urgently.”

Voicke sounded irritatingly muzzy and slow, "What, right now?"

"Yes—" Farr was frantically gesturing at her. "I'm sorry, I've got to go, but we need you here soonest, sir." Dassin cut him off and joined Farr at the scope screen trained on Zeus.

"There are two of them. Look." Farr pointed at the scope, now zoomed to the max. Dassin felt vaguely comforted to see Farr's hand shaking. And there was, undeniably, a faint brown smudge clearly visible against the swirling backdrop of Zeus, which hadn't been there before.

"This is also headed in our direction, I take it." Dassin was light-headed with terror.

Farr stared back at her and silently nodded. Dassin was aware that she was in the middle of a history-making moment. VR, vids and couchflicks of this event would be made and replayed throughout every corner of the Empire from this time onward. And she'd give anything not to be a part of it - to be anywhere else but here.

Farr cleared her throat. "I've found something else that you ought to see. "Now that the cloud's moved away from the planet, I've been able to crank up the magnification. Look. That's why we haven't heard back from the maintenance crew." Farr pointed to the lit compound on Hera. A dark shadow sprawled on the ground.

Dassin stared at it till her eyes ached. Was it a man? Hard to tell at night with the blurred definition, inevitable over such a distance. She shook her head, slowly. "You may be right, but we can't be ultra cert yet. We'll need to wait until Londae rises before we can confirm whether it is one of our people, or just a dip in the ground."

Farr raised her eyebrows, "Londae?"

"This system's homestar – Upsilon Andromedae. Last three letters of each word; Londae."

Farr turned back to the scope screen, "The speed at which these clouds are accelerating, they'll be here well before morning."

"What'll be here before morning?" Voicke was obviously not a night person, Dassin realised, as he stumbled through the door trying to suppress a yawn.

Farr explained the situation to him in soldiartalk, sounding much more official and definite than Dassin could have managed. Continuing to monitor all the incoming data, she left them to it.

The cloud from Hera was still accelerating and now – horrifyingly – close enough to be fully probed. But the results had Dassin shaking her head and swearing under her breath with fear-fuelled frustration. Either the grotting probe was zilched, or this cloud was truly unlike anything they'd ever encountered before. As she downloaded the data into the library files, she was trembling.

When Dassin announced that the cloud's current E.T.A. was fifty-two minutes, Captain Farr leaned towards Voicke. "So are you going to sound a station-wide alarm?"

No sign of sleepiness in the man now. "Yes. I need to be at my own desk, where I can run the emergency. I'll take the panic-chute to my office, so be primed for the alarm to start up in about five minutes. We'll use coms channel 16 exclusively to keep in touch. Any changes in the situation and I want to know, as soon as."

Dassin didn't acknowledge his departure; too busy trying to gain more data on the aliens. Too busy trying not to panic