

I hope that you will forgive me for saying so," the minarch says, "but this is all a bit . . . underwhelming."

Dalton blinks once, then shakes his head and says, "I'm sorry. Did you say *underwhelming*?" The tiny speaker that hangs from a thin gold chain around his neck doesn't wait for him to finish before repeating his words in the high-pitched clicks and whistles of the minarchs' language.

The minarch raises her two front-most legs and waves the delicate-looking tentacles at their tips in a gesture that Dalton's translation A.I. whispers to him is akin to a human's eye roll. "Perhaps that was badly phrased," she says. "Perhaps *disappointing* would be a better word?"

For the first time in a long while, Dalton finds himself at a loss for words. This is the second time in the past three years that he's been tasked with making first contact on behalf of Unity with a planet-bound sentient species. His primary difficulty the first time was in convincing the locals that he wasn't some sort of deity.

It doesn't seem that will be a problem with the minarchs.

Dalton's counterpart, who has asked to be called Assessor, raises her head and thorax up from the beaten-down grass of the hilltop and spreads her forelimbs. Dalton has to restrain himself from taking a nervous half step back. The minarch is considerably bigger than a human, and seems to Dalton to be purpose-built to tap into every primeval fear his primate ancestors have bequeathed him.

She's jet-black, with a half-dozen armored legs, a segmented, tapering body that ends in a wickedly barbed tail, and an insectile head topped by a predator's forward-facing eyes. Dalton is wearing a skin suit under his clothes that would stop a ten-gram slug, but his face is exposed, and Assessor's mandibles look like they'd cut through plate armor. *This is not an overt threat posture, his translator whispers. It may be analogous to a tight-lipped smile?*

"I suppose this is not entirely your fault," Assessor says. "If the others had not arrived before you, I'm sure we would have been more taken with your display. You must admit that you suffer by comparison."

"Others?"

"Yes," the minarch says. "Tall fellows, with long, stylish mandibles and the decency to keep their bones on the outside of their bodies, where they belong."

"I see," Dalton says. "How long ago did these *others* visit your world?"

Assessor drops back onto her forelegs. "Oh, not long ago. Less than a cycle. They departed in some haste shortly after we first noted the appearance of your star in our sky."

Yeah, Dalton thinks. I'll bet they did.

"Fear not, though," Assessor says. "They promised to return anon."

A stiff, cool breeze pushes Dalton's lank brown hair across his face and into his eyes. The sky above is still a clear light blue, but dark clouds are gathering on the slightly-too-distant horizon. Dalton pushes his hair back with one hand and makes a mental note to have a word with the translation A.I. when he gets back to his lander. The supercilious tone it's dropping into the minarch's speech can't possibly be accurate. "I'm glad to hear that," he says, and hopes that the A.I. has developed a sufficient understanding of the nuances of the minarchs' language to project *false sincerity*. "Did they give you any impression of when we should expect their return?"

The minarch raises her head and spreads her mandibles in a gesture the translator renders as *apology* (*sarcastic?*).

“Sadly, they did not. They did say, however, that they would return as soon as they could prepare an adequate greeting for you. I’m sure you would understand the meaning of this better than I. Perhaps they’ve gone to fetch you a gift?”

“Yes,” Dalton says, and fails to suppress a sigh. “I’m sure that must be it.”

Fear not, the translator whispers in his ear. *I did not render the emotional valence of that exchange.*

“Well,” Assessor says. “I suppose you should be going now. I’m sure you will want to prepare something for them as well, no? After all, one hates to be caught by a gift unawares.”

Wow,” Neera says as Dalton climbs through the air lock from the docked lander. “That was unfortunate.”

Dalton scowls at her as he strips out of his pressure suit. “No shit.”

Spin gravity in the docking bay of the *Good Tidings* has been set to eight meters per second squared since just after orbital insertion. Dalton arches his back, rises up onto his toes, and stretches until he hears his spine crack. Per SOP, the outer ring of the ship should have been kept to 9.8 at all times, but Boreau, who has final say on pretty much everything that happens on the *Good Tidings*, never ventures out to the ring, and so doesn’t particularly care if they’re following protocol or not. Gravitation on the planet below is nearly eleven, and Dalton and Neera, who spend most of their time here, are in full agreement that it doesn’t hurt to give Dalton’s joints a break while he’s in orbit.

“That thing you met with, she’s a real piece of work, huh?”

Dalton shrugs. "Hard to say. The translator sure made it sound that way, but who knows how accurate that was? It probably hasn't gotten enough data on their language yet to render tone."

My rendering was fully accurate, the translator whispers in his ear. I resent the implication that I may have embellished.

"You're saying that tone was real? Come on. You made that monster sound like a snooty British butler."

My mandate is to translate emotional valence as well as words in a form that you will best understand. Also, please bear in mind that my English-language model was developed based primarily on intercepted BBC broadcasts. In any case, you are more than welcome to turn me off and try to learn the minarchs' language yourself if you think you can do better.

Dalton doesn't dignify that with a response as he follows Neera out of the bay and into the outermost ring corridor. This part of the ship was designed for the comfort of the two of them rather than the ship's master, but even so, the corridor is wide and tall enough for an ammie to squeeze through at need, and Dalton can't help but feel like a toddler trying to navigate his way through a world built for grown-ups.

"Boreau has some theories about their psychology," Neera says without looking back. "If you're interested."

"Sure," Dalton says. "Hit me."

She stops at the drop bay ready room, palms the access pad, and pushes through the door. Dalton follows her in. This is the only space on the *Good Tidings* built purely on a human scale. Neera, who's been with Boreau nearly three times as long as Dalton, seems comfortable anywhere on the ship, but Dalton spends as much time here as he can manage.

"First," Neera says, and drops onto the frayed plaid couch that takes up most of the center of the room, "he thinks they probably evolved to be apex predators."

Dalton laughs. "You think? Old Assessor down there looks like the bastard child of a tarantula and a velociraptor. I hope Boreau's come up with more than that." He pulls a water bottle from the cooler at the back of the room, then comes back to sit next to Neera.

"Okay," she says. "Since you know so much about xenopsychology, why don't you tell me what that implies about the way they'd interact with a possibly threatening new species?"

He drains half the bottle in one long pull, then lets loose a gut-rattling belch. "Well," he says, ignoring her scowl, "I'm just the pretty face around here, but based on my recent experience, I'd guess it implies that they'd be supremely unimpressed with said new species' clearly superior technology, and also that they'd be bitchy as hell."

Neera grins, ties her long black hair back in a loose ponytail, and slouches down to rest her head against the back of the couch. Boreau granted Dalton a hundred-kilo allowance when he signed on to the *Good Tidings*. He spent most of it on food and liquor. Neera spent over half of her own allowance on the couch. Three years down the road, Dalton has to admit that she had the right idea. His supplies are long gone, but they're still getting faithful service from the couch. Neera turns her head to look at him. "That's pretty close, actually. For their entire evolutionary history, the minarchs have been the meanest kids on the block. Boreau thinks they may be psychologically incapable of recognizing that something that looks like us could be a potential threat."

"Despite the fact that we've clearly mastered interstellar travel while they're still trying to figure out how electricity works?"

"Actually, their relatively low level of development probably makes it more difficult to appreciate the danger we pose, not less so. They don't have the background they'd need to imagine what an antimatter drive could do to the surface of their planet if we chose to turn it on them."

“No,” Dalton says. “I guess they probably don’t. Still, you’d think that the fact that we descended from the goddamned sky would get us some kind of respect, wouldn’t you?”

Neera closes her eyes and sinks deeper into the couch. “Seems like the Assembly beat us to the punch on that front, no?”

Dalton slouches down beside her, but he’s too tall to really get comfortable that way. His size was a major asset in navigating the social morass of high school, but if he’s being honest with himself, it’s really been nothing but a pain in the ass ever since. “Assessor’s description sounded an awful lot like a stickman, didn’t it?”

“It did,” Neera says without opening her eyes. “And if that’s accurate, that means this isn’t just an Assembly survey ship we’re dealing with. Best-case, it’s a diplomatic boat with a marine contingent. I guess it’s even possible they’re straight-up military—and even if not, that’s probably who they’re hurrying off to fetch.”

“Yeah,” Dalton says. “Seems likely.”

They sit in silence for a while then. Dalton has begun to think Neera’s drifted off when she says, “I can’t remember—were you with us the last time we ran into an Assembly crew?”

“Nope. Honestly, I’ve wondered sometimes whether the Assembly was just a boogeyman Boreau was using to keep us in line.”

“Right,” Neera says. “It must have been just after that that our last ground pounder got eaten, and we had to round you up.”

Dalton shoots her a look. She’s mentioned that his predecessor got himself eaten on the job before. He’d always assumed she was screwing with him, but after standing face-to- . . . whatever . . . with the minarch, he’s suddenly much less sure.

“Anyway,” Neera says, “the Assembly is definitely not a boogeyman. They’re one hundred percent real, and they one hundred percent do not like us. So. What would you suggest we do now?”

“Do?” Dalton says. “What *can* we do? We’ve done our bit here.

This place is clearly a prime target. Now we withdraw and call in the big boys, right?”

“That’s what I’d say.” She opens her eyes then, and gives him a look that he can’t quite interpret. “I dunno, though. I get the impression that maybe Boreau’s got other ideas.”

Over the course of the next hours, then days, then weeks camped in orbit with no attempt at further contact with the minarchs and no preparations for departure, it becomes increasingly clear that Boreau does, in fact, have other ideas. Neera continues her work studying the planet’s biosphere and possible resource base, searching for anything with the appropriate combination of value and easy extractability, but Boreau forbids any further use of active scanning, so she’s limited to what little can be seen with passive sensors. Dalton, whose engineering background is roughly as useful on the *Good Tidings* as a Viking shipwright’s would have been on a nuclear submarine, has nothing to do at all other than to brood over the increasing implausibility of any possible escape.

The fundamental problem is that they’re dangerously deep in the local star’s gravity well. Even if Boreau were to fully open the throttle on the ship’s antimatter torch, which for reasons of both comfort and safety he never did, it would take them a month or more to achieve a safe jump range, and for that entire time they would be vulnerable to attack. Boreau’s ship is a scout, unarmed and armored only well enough to defend against relativistic dust grains, not proton beams and kinetic energy weapons. If the Assembly ship really is military, Dalton can’t imagine that they’d survive more than a few seconds into any confrontation—and even if it isn’t, from what he’s been told about stickmen, a boarding party of one would probably be sufficient to overwhelm the three of them.

On further consideration, Dalton realizes that he has no idea what Boreau would or could do in a fight. He's never seen an ammie do anything remotely aggressive, but Boreau's shell is ten centimeters thick and he masses almost a thousand kilos, so maybe?

He sincerely hopes he won't have to find out.

Six weeks into their vigil, Boreau summons Dalton and Neera to his chambers in the hub. Dalton enters to find Neera already there, clinging to the far wall, while Boreau floats serenely in the center of the hemispherical space, the tip of his great spiral shell nearly touching the ceiling and a single delicate tentacle wrapped around a grip bar set into the floor.

"Welcome, friend Dalton," Boreau rumbles. "We are pleased that you have finally deigned to join us."

"Apologies," Dalton says, "but Boreau, you only summoned us twelve minutes ago."

An eyestalk extends from the opening at the base of Boreau's shell and swings around to focus on Dalton. "This is true, friend Dalton. However, friend Neera arrived in my chambers nine minutes hence. Are you so much slower than she? Or is it simply that your respect for us is so much lower?"

"No," Dalton says. "I certainly meant no disrespect, Boreau. It's just—"

"It's not his fault," Neera says. "He was taking a shit."

"Ah," Boreau says. "Very well, then. Why did you not say this, friend Dalton?"

"I—"

"He's embarrassed," Neera says. "Dalton's a shy pooper."

Boreau's eye swings to Neera, then back to Dalton. "Humans. So clever, and yet so . . . You never cease to surprise me."

"Yes, well," Dalton says, "I'm here now. So? What's the urgency?"

“We’ve got a bogey incoming,” Neera says. “Optical contact only, but it seems pretty likely that our friends have returned.”

“Indeed,” Boreau says. “If the object’s current trajectory is maintained, it will achieve orbit around this planet within the next six hours.”

“Six *hours*?” Dalton says. “Do you mean six *weeks*?”

“If I had meant six weeks, I would have said so. You should know this, friend Dalton.”

“But . . . are you saying Neera somehow missed seeing their torch? If they’re that close, we should have seen them decelerating weeks ago.”

Boreau drifts up from the floor and swings another eye around to focus on Dalton. “The Assembly’s technology differs from ours, friend Dalton. They do not use antimatter drives to maneuver within gravity wells. They consider such devices to be both unreliable and unconscionably dangerous.”

“And you’re just telling us this now?”

“I endeavor to ensure that you know what you need to know, friend Dalton. I saw no need for you to know this previously.”

Dalton scowls, but by now he knows better than to attempt to argue with Boreau. “Fine. The Assembly doesn’t use antimatter. How do they get in and out of jump range?”

One of Boreau’s eyes wags back and forth in a gesture Dalton has come to think of as a shrug. “Unknown. Some type of reactionless drive, but the physics underpinning it are beyond us.”

“So what you’re saying is that in addition to being belligerent and probably heavily armed, they’re also technologically superior to us. Please explain why we’re not running for our lives right now?”

“The Assembly’s technology is different, friend Dalton. Not necessarily superior. It is true that we do not understand their in-system

drive technology. However, it may be so that there are aspects of our systems that they fail to appreciate as well." A third eye emerges, this one focused on Neera. "I suspect that very soon this will all become clear. In the meantime, we must prepare to greet our newly arrived friends. The minarch you treated with believed that the representatives of the Assembly had gone to fetch us a gift, no? A surprise. We must prepare to reciprocate."

"Okay," Dalton says. "What did you have in mind? A cake, maybe? Think the synthesizer can manage eggs and milk?"

"No, friend Dalton. I do not believe a cake will be necessary. You and friend Neera will take the lander now, and return to the surface. I will await the representatives of the Assembly here in orbit."

"That seems like a bad idea," Dalton says. "I feel like we should probably stay together."

Boreau's eyes withdraw in negation. "No. Your presence is not needed here. You will go to treat again with the minarchs. Go armed. It is possible the Assembly will send a delegation to the surface as well."

"Armed?" Dalton says. "We have weapons?"

"Indeed we do."

"Why didn't I know that?"

A single eye snakes back out to focus on Dalton. "Again, friend Dalton—until now, you had no need to know."

"That's interesting," Neera says. "You never told me about any hand weapons either. Seems like you should have, just from a preparedness standpoint. I mean, what about training? I'm sure Dalton is ready to jump out of the lander with guns blazing, but I know jack-all about fighting."

"These weapons are meant to be simple, friend Neera. I have great faith in your ability to decipher their use. My intention is not that you provoke conflict with either our friends on the surface or any representatives of the Assembly who might happen to make landfall.

If you are attacked, however, I wish for you to be able to respond decisively. I have requested aid from any nearby Unity vessels that might be better equipped for this encounter than my humble *Good Tidings*. Your task is to remain alive, and to prevent the Assembly from establishing a foothold on this planet while you await help's arrival."

"That's not our remit," Neera says. "We're scouts, Boreau. We're not trained or equipped to establish a mission here, let alone to fight off a crew of stickmen while we're doing it."

Boreau extends all four of his eyes, a gesture that can mean either *disappointment* or *amusement*. "I am well aware of your shortcomings, friend Neera. However, we have found something precious beyond measure in this place, and it cannot be permitted to fall into the claws of the Assembly. Help will come, by and by. In the meanwhile, I will do what I can to prevent such a thing from happening. If the day goes badly for me, the task will perforce fall to you. When our actions here are judged, I promise you that any lack of training or equipment will not be taken as an excuse for failure."

"Um . . . when you say 'goes badly,' you mean . . ."

"Fear not, friend Neera. If this day goes badly, you will be very well aware of it. Now go, both of you. I have preparations to make."

So," Neera says as the lander slips its moorings and falls away from the *Good Tidings*. "You think Boreau has lost his goddamned mind?"

"No," Dalton says, "but I do think there are probably a bunch more things that he's not telling us."

"Such as?"

He turns to look at her, one eyebrow raised. "I don't know, Neera. He's not telling us."

Neera rolls her eyes. Dalton grins, then grits his teeth and checks his seat's harness as the ship hits atmosphere and deceleration begins to pull at them. He's built up a great deal of faith in Unity technology over his time with Boreau, but he's well aware that if you're going to die during space travel, reentry is the most likely time for it to happen. The g-force builds quickly from trace to three times standard or more. Dalton glances over at Neera. Her eyes are closed, her head pressed back against the cushioned restraints. After what feels like much too long, the pressure in his chest eases as the ship transitions from plunging through the atmosphere to more or less controlled flight.

"Was that worse than normal?" Neera asks. "It's been a long time for me, but that felt a lot worse than I remember."

"Maybe. The gravity here is high, so deceleration is going to hurt a bit more than you remember. That said, I think that was a harder drop than when I came down a few weeks ago. I guess it's possible Boreau had the lander take a more aggressive angle of entry this time?"

"Okay. Why would he do that?"

"Dunno. Less of an opportunity for the Assembly ship to potshot us from orbit?"

Neera scowls and rolls her neck in a slow circle. "Huh. I don't like that."

"Yeah," Dalton says. "Neither do I. Don't like those either." He gestures to the weapons racked on either side of the exit hatch. They're bulky, metallic-silver almost-rifles, though they lack any obvious way to either load or expel projectiles. Boreau said that their operation would be obvious, but the only obvious thing from Dalton's perspective is that they were not designed with human hands in mind.

"Boreau said they were simple. Think we can figure out how to make them work without killing ourselves?"

Dalton shrugs. "I'm assuming we aim the pointy end at whatever we want to kill, and then trip the lever on the underside."

"You know what happens when you assume, right?"

"We accidentally blow ourselves into quarks and gluons?"

"Yeah," Neera says. "That sounds about right."

The lander sets down with a gentle bump on the same hilltop where Dalton first came to the surface, a half klick from the place where he met with Assessor. Dalton unstraps, stands, and stretches. Neera unbuckles, but gives no sign of moving.

"Well?" Dalton says. "You coming?"

She looks up at him. "Coming where? We're sitting tight while Boreau tries to work something out with the Assembly boat. You heard what he said up there. We're strictly his backup plan. Until and unless we get some sign that whatever his primary plan was didn't work, we've got no instructions. What do you think we're supposed to be doing?"

Dalton walks over to the hatch, releases the latches on one of the weapons, and hefts it. It's surprisingly light for its bulk, even with this planet's annoyingly high gravity. His right arm is just able to wrap around the stock and reach the lever on the underside, while his left hand supports the narrower barrel. "Not sure you'll be able to use this," he says. "Unless you rest it on your shoulder or something, I don't think you'll be able to reach the trigger."

Neera laughs. "Are you serious? Dalton, we are not going out there to fight a bunch of stickmen."

"Boreau issued us these weapons for a reason."

She turns to look at him. "Come on, boy. You've heard the same stories I have. The stickmen are the Assembly's shock troops. They're killing machines, right? I'm a scientist. I'm an observer. I'm definitely

not a soldier. I get that you still think you are, but that's not Kazakhstan or Bolivia or wherever the hell you made your bones out there, and there's a hell of a difference between some half-starved tribesman with an AK and a goddamned stickman. If Boreau isn't able to come to some kind of accommodation with whoever is on that incoming ship, we're most likely already dead—and I, for one, am going to face my fate with a little bit of dignity.”

“Meaning?”

She leans back into her seat and closes her eyes. “Meaning, I'm taking a nap. You can go play soldier if you want. Wake me up if Boreau gives us the all clear. If it turns out we're getting murdered, though, just let me sleep through it. Okay?”

Dalton opens his mouth to reply, then lets it fall closed again. Neera raises one hand without opening her eyes and waves good-bye. After another moment's hesitation, Dalton sighs, and pops the hatch, and goes.

Outside the lander, morning is breaking, the sun a fat red ball just above the too-distant horizon. The hilltop has been stripped bare by the wash of their landing thrusters, but beyond that the rolling terrain is covered in chest-high, spiky yellow-green vegetation that he could almost believe is some kind of grass, broken here and there by the occasional boulder or scrub tree. They're only a few dozen kilometers from the largest city on the planet, but the minarchs build underground for the most part, and from Dalton's perspective at the moment this could be an entirely empty world. He turns a full circle, then hefts the weapon and points it at the nearest tree, maybe fifty meters distant.

There are no sights or targeting screen that he can see, and when he trips the trigger the beam of blinding blue-white light that leaps from the tip of the weapon is badly off target, passing two or three meters wide of the tree and then off into infinity. The beam blinks

out almost instantly, leaving behind a painfully intense wash of heat and a sharp crack of thunder as atmosphere rushes back into the vacuum it left in its wake. Dalton staggers back a half step, and barely manages not to drop the thing before regaining his balance.

"Huh," he says, then straightens and looks around. "Yeah. I guess that'll work."

It's an hour or so later that the minarch appears. Dalton sees her coming from the direction of the city when she's still at least a half klick off. He thinks about walking out to meet her, but in the end he just sits on the bare ground of the hilltop with the weapon laid across his knees and watches her come. She stops just at the boundary between stripped soil and live vegetation. Dalton climbs to his feet.

"Greetings," she says. "You are the Dalton, yes? You are the one we treated with before?"

"I am," Dalton says. "You are Assessor?"

"Of course," she says, and waves her tentacles in a gesture his translator interprets as *mild annoyance*. "Who else would I be?"

A number of replies come immediately to mind, mostly more-or-less rude variants on, *You all look alike to me*. In the end, though, diplomacy wins out, and he settles on, "Of course, Assessor. Thank you for making the journey out from the city. I'm pleased to see you again."

"Ah," she says. "This is awkward, is it not?"

"Awkward?"

"Yes," Assessor says, and spreads her forelimbs. "Uncomfortable. Embarrassing. You understand?"

"I understand those words. I don't understand why you're using them."

"Oh," Assessor says. "Apologies. I would have thought this might be clear. I am not here to meet with you."

"You're not . . ."

Oh.

Assessor gestures upward with one forelimb. A glowing plasma trail is visible now, just over the horizon, its tip extending toward them with alarming speed.

"Right," Dalton says. "You're here to see *them*."

Neera emerges from the lander just as the Assembly's drop ship settles gently onto the hilltop, no more than thirty or forty meters away. It's barely a third the size of their suddenly clumsy-looking lander, a sleek silvery teardrop with three delicate-looking landing legs, and it descends silently, without any wash of thrusters, without any visible means of propulsion at all. As its legs flex and lower the body of the craft almost down to the ground, Dalton can't help but compare it to their own hulking, plasma-burned, stub-winged ship.

"Wow," Neera says from close behind him. "I can see why the minarch wasn't so impressed with you."

Dalton shoots her a look, but he can't disagree. As a door irises open on the lander's side, he clutches Boreau's weapon across his chest and runs one finger across the lever.

"So what's the plan?" Neera whispers. "Surprise attack?"

Dalton scowls. "I don't have a plan . . . but you heard what Boreau said as well as I did. I'm not going to be the one to start shooting." He glances back at her. "Speaking of which, though—where's *your* weapon?"

"Right where you left it. I told you I don't know shit about fighting. If these guys are here to kill us, I'd just as soon die without embarrassing myself first."

Dalton starts to argue, then shakes his head and says, "Yeah. Fair enough."

Even before taking up with Boreau, Dalton had heard stories of the stickmen. They were the face the Assembly showed to oxygen breathers, capable of serving as ambassadors or explorers or shock troops, as the situation demanded. It's that last bit that weighs on Dalton's mind as one of them ducks through the hatch and steps out onto the stripped ground of the hilltop.

He'd been told that stickmen stand twice or maybe three times the height of a human. That doesn't appear to be entirely accurate, but this one is at least two and a half meters tall, and maybe a little more. His limbs are nightmare-long and impossibly thin, both arms and legs ending in nests of many-jointed claws. His head is narrow, wolf-like, sporting mandibles to rival those of the minarch. He takes two slow, graceful steps away from the lander and bows, first to Assessor, and then to Dalton and Neera. When he straightens, his thorax begins to vibrate with a sound like the buzzing of a swarm of bees. After a moment, that fades, replaced by the clicks and whistles of the minarchs' language.

"Greetings," Dalton's translator whispers in his ear. "We hope you are well met."

"Well met we are," Assessor says. "As you can see, you have come upon us in the midst of a visit." She turns to face Dalton then, forelimbs spread wide. "However, I believe our guests were preparing to leave."

"No," Neera says. "We weren't."

"Oh!" Assessor says. "Of course! I had nearly forgotten. Our friends had promised you a gift, had they not?" She turns to the stickman. "Good sir, do you have a gift for the Dalton and his impolite companion?"

The stickman contemplates Assessor for what feels like a long

while, then turns to fix his flat black eyes on Dalton. His thorax buzzes. This time there is no translation to the minarchs' language, but the A.I. whispering in Dalton's ear seems not to mind. "Where is your ship?"

"My ship?" Dalton asks. The speaker nestled between his shirt and his skin suit begins to vibrate. Apparently Boreau's tech has no problems with either producing or understanding the stickman's speech.

"Your ship," the stickman says, and gestures toward the lander. "This craft is too small to jump. You must have come here on another, larger ship, as I did. However, we found no energy signatures that would indicate the presence of a jump-capable craft in orbit, or in near space. Was your ship lost to some misfortune, or have you been abandoned here?"

Dalton turns to Neera. She shrugs. He's turned back to the stickman and opened his mouth to reply, still unsure of what he'll say, when a blinding spear of white light splits the sky overhead nearly in two. Four heads snap up. Dalton and Neera have to shield their eyes against the glare, but the stickman and the minarch just stare, dumbfounded.

"The main torch," Neera says. "Dalton? Is Boreau leaving us behind?"

Dalton is still formulating an answer when a new sun appears at the far end of the spear, flaring and swelling and then dying away over the course of a few seconds.

"No," Dalton says, his mouth suddenly almost too dry to form words. "He's not leaving us. I think . . . I think he's using the torch as a weapon."

The spear winks out as the red wound in the sky that Dalton now strongly suspects is the remains of the Assembly ship fades and dissipates. A moment later, though, a light flares where the spear's

origin had been, then a second and a third. After the fourth, another sun bursts into being there, if anything bigger and brighter than the first.

“And that was Boreau,” Neera says.

Dalton swallows, then nods. “Yeah. I’d guess that was the Assembly’s retaliatory strike.” He looks down. Assessor is still staring blankly into the sky, forelimbs loose at her sides. The stickman, though, has turned his attention to Dalton.

“I have lost contact with my people,” he says.

Dalton keeps his weapon pointed up and away, but his fingers rest lightly on the trigger. “I think,” he says, “that it is possible we have both been abandoned.”