

Derelict – Mark All
Prologue – Chapter Three

PROLOGUE

Above the silent planet, the ship lay in wait.

In geosynchronous orbit above KN-793d, it edged from darkness into light every twenty-five hours, half-a-day later returning to night.

Its empty decks, dimly lit, hummed with the low background noise of dormant life support systems that no longer served a purpose. Until the next crew came aboard.

CHAPTER ONE

Star KN-793 appeared in a golden blaze beyond the rim of KN-793d, its fourth planet, as XenoCorp survey ship *Cerberus* eased into orbit.

Captain Janet Hollander studied the forward screens. Against the dazzling crescent of the rising sun, rendered bearable by filters, a dark object was clearly visible.

Geometrically regular.

Manmade.

A ship.

“Mister Li, do you see that?”

“I do, Captain.” John Li, Head of Engineering and Communications, was already making adjustments on the touch screen control panel before him. “*Cerberus*,” he said, addressing the ship’s AI, “hail the vessel.”

“Yes, *Mister Li*.” *Cerberus*’s contralto female voice was programmed to reflect an emotional tone appropriate to the current situation, and its inflection indicated normal operations, nothing of concern.

Hollander sat in the center of Command and Control, the forward compartment on *Cerberus*’s top deck, a long rectangle rounded at the bow. Brightly lit, clean and new, *Cerberus* resembled a corporate office building more than an exploration vessel. The hardware and padded bulkheads were the latest designer shade of off-white, the fixtures sleek and Neo-Modern. The ship’s instrumentation was state-of-the-art, the quantum computer AI and all software advanced to the bleeding edge of science and technology. Some corporate C-Level officers thought Hollander had not earned this command. They considered the dismal results of her first two missions as confirmation of their doubts. Hollander was determined to prove them wrong. She had her father’s example to live up to and she would. Even though he’d never know.

Before her, the C and C officers worked at their stations, seemingly unimpressed by the beauty of their dawn descent into stationary orbit. She found the constant, almost subliminal hum of *Cerberus*’s life support systems comforting, even the sub-bass rumble of contained thunder when the engines fired—an almost unimaginable power under her control, though she was ever aware of their destructive capability. Overloaded engines would not cripple a ship, but obliterate it.

Within the compartment, C and C appeared to be a large, oblong glass bubble, but it was a technological illusion, a composite image from numerous hull cameras displayed on the ceiling, walls, and the deck beneath them, broken only by their seats and workstations, hardware, and padded structural support beams. Around them, the magnificence of space, unfiltered by atmosphere, the myriad stars crisp points of brilliance. Below, the massive globe of KN-793d, flashes of lightning illuminating cloud banks from within for hundreds of miles, fires dotting the equator across the largest continent.

The immersive view was exhilarating—that thrill was why they were all here, she was sure—but it induced vertigo if she stared down too long. As if there were no ship beneath her feet, and she might fall uncounted kilometers, to be incinerated entering the planet’s atmosphere.

At the curved nose of the compartment, four steps led down to the cockpit half-a-level below the deck, a nook just large enough for pilot Marta Kasharyn to fit snugly among the control panels and readouts. Four workstations lined the bow behind and above her, two on either side of the cockpit steps, with an additional station behind them on the starboard bulkhead.

As *Cerberus* continued its smooth approach to the planet and the other vessel, Hollander rose and crossed C and C to the engineer’s station, to the left of the cockpit steps. Li drummed his fingers on his console, which indicated that they were receiving no response from the other ship.

“One klick proximity to unidentified vessel,” Cerberus said.

“Bring us into a matching orbit in front of that ship, Kasharyn. Facing it.”

“Will do,” the pilot said from the cockpit below. Her movements as crisp and efficient as her trace of a Ukrainian accent, she adjusted parameters on the large screen before her. Colorful data arrays refreshed and the intricate network of glowing lines representing trajectories shifted

almost imperceptibly. The vector through the tiny avatar of their ship now intersected the orbital path of the other ship.

The panorama around the C and C crew darkened as *Cerberus* descended into night over the northern hemisphere, the sun retreating nearly beyond the rim of the planet. In a more distant orbit far out to their right, KN-793d's moon provided scant illumination and the mystery ship disappeared against the background of the continent below. Then two pinpoints of light became visible as they closed the distance—the craft's running lights, red on the port side, green to starboard.

"They're in stationary orbit," Li said. "Maybe that means there's something down there..."

"Yeah," Trey Lawrence said. The Science Officer sat at the starboard bulkhead, beside Navigator Carlos Fuentes's station to the right of the cockpit steps. An inveterate optimist, Lawrence had recently changed his hair style to a close-cropped Afro with a smiley face cut into the left side. "Maybe we'll make a profit this trip. Three's a charm."

Hollander put a hand on the back of the Engineering Head's seat, scanning his screen. "Any communication established with that ship yet, Mister Li?"

Li shook his head. "They appear to be dead in space and I can't complete a guest network handshake. They're only broadcasting their identifiers—it's the *Vanguard*, a Prospect, Inc. survey ship."

Something was wrong here. The other ship had beaten them to KN-793d and therefore had First Survey, Mining, and Colonization Option rights. "XenoCorp wouldn't have sent us here if Prospect had already laid claim. So why hasn't *Vanguard* registered their claim?"

"Another thing," Li said. "They haven't put any global surveyor sats in orbit."

If they weren't surveying the planet with an eye to mining or terraforming, what was the *Vanguard* doing here? They should've been looking for volcanoes and other hot spots where geothermal power plants for a colony or mining outpost could be constructed, underground water sources near dormant volcanoes, for steam power.

As they neared the other ship and slowed their descent, the system's sun gradually peeked over the horizon again, painting the rim of the planet a rich blue, KN-793's white light shattering into its component colors, indigo through red. The mystery ship grew larger, its outline limned in the first rays of the sun, and further detail became discernable. The vessel was a long cylinder with two engines at the lower stern, lightless except for the beacons at the tips of her two lateral solar sails, which protruded from amidships on either side of the hull, near the top and canted upward to accommodate docking. Where *Cerberus*'s solar sails were rectangular, the other ships' sails looked like crenellated wings of a vampire bat, giving the vessel the look of a dark dragon, poised to pounce on its prey.

"Maybe they had a run-in with pirates," Alex Garner said from his station between Li and the port bulkhead. Garner was the head of Information Systems and Sys Admin for anything Li didn't run in Engineering. His posture was casual, his jacket open. But for the lively spark of curiosity in his eyes, one might take his demeanor for disinterest. Hollander knew better.

"They're not broadcasting a distress signal," Li said.

"Maybe whatever happened, happened too fast," Garner replied.

Hollander felt this mission going south, like the previous two. And possibly her career along with it. "Search the Perimeter Patrol's public access files for any activity in this sector, Mister Garner."

"On it."

Hollander returned to her station. Finding a derelict in orbit around a planet with marginal likelihood of utility for colonization or mining to begin with was a significant complication. Almost unconsciously, she leaned down and patted her father's knife in its slender scabbard, strapped to her ankle, an annoying but reassuring nervous habit. Admiral Malcolm Hollander, the most decorated Captain in Security Division's Enforcement Fleet, had died killing a terrorist with this knife, saving his crew and the station his ship was docked at. She strove to be worthy of his legacy, and the corporate officers expected that she would—except for a sizable minority who believed she was promoted over more seasoned candidates because of who her father had been.

Just ahead, the *Vanguard* loomed as *Cerberus* moved into position facing it. Hollander felt a mild disconnect between what her eyes told her brain and the near absence of any sensation of deceleration thanks to the inertial dampeners. The dampeners' threshold was set to allow enough sense of motion to keep human consciousness grounded in reality yet prevent everyone from being thrown around from momentum and changes in speed. They were inactive during interstellar warp travel because *Cerberus* was motionless in its bubble of space-time—space-time itself moved.

"Locked into orbit," Cerberus said.

"No hull damage," Eric Matsen observed. "That I can see." The Security Chief hunched forward in concentration at his station on the starboard wall behind Lawrence. Ex-military, he had proved efficient and effective, if broody.

"And no reported incidents involving pirates anywhere near this sector," Garner reported, looking up from a database readout. "No records of anybody in this sector. Pretty much, no one's ever been this far in this direction."

“Except them,” Matsen said, nodding toward the ship on the screen, undoubtedly appraising it for any potential threat. The Security Chief always looked worried to Hollander. She guessed war did that to a person. Especially considering his experience in the Bellerophon Rebellion.

Not for the first time, Hollander reflected that a lot of her crew seemed to be damaged goods. Wondered if her roster had been intentionally infested with people with baggage, by design of the old crony network. Or if she was being paranoid. Probably all people were haunted by ghosts from their past, had failings that came to light under pressure.

“*Cerberus*,” Hollander said, “run a scan on her.”

“*Scanning*,” the ship confirmed. Scanning another company’s ship was prohibited by corporate treaty law—except under extenuating circumstances, spelled out in excruciating detail. That included emergency situations, and this ship appeared, if not dead, then probably in distress. Even so, there were legal limits on the extent of invasive inspection. The parameters allowed a life scan, but beyond that, *Cerberus* knew the regulations better than she. Such as in what situation they could run a more in-depth scan.

None of which might produce actionable information, beyond the presence and condition of life forms. They would not likely learn what the thing’s mission was, with no claim registered. How long had *Vanguard* been here? What had disabled her?

“Garner, double check the exoplanet registry for *any* reference to KN-793d. And search public records for info on the *Vanguard*.”

Garner nodded and started tapping and typing.

Li studied the scan results, drilling down into several folders. “Confirmation on ship and owner corporation ID. She’s registered as a survey vessel, no surprise there.”

Garner turned from his screen to face Hollander. “Prospect, Inc. reported *Vanguard* missing six months ago. Looks like they lost contact and just wrote it off as a failed initiative. Never made a claim on the planet.”

“We didn’t have high expectations for the planet’s potential ourselves,” Hollander said. “But you’d think Prospect would have sent a rescue ship.”

Matsen got up and moved to stand beside her station, arms folded, scowling at the darkened ship on the screen. “So why did they come here in the first place?”

“Why did we?” Garner said.

“Checking off a box, Garner,” Hollander said. “KN-793 is the next system with an Earth type planet in the master expansion grid.”

That was the official strategy. She tried not to dwell on her suspicions that her mission targets were selected to set her up for failure by those executives who believed her rapid rise to the rank of Captain was due to the reputation of her father. The KN-793d mission had as low a prospect of success as her first two. The old crony network couldn’t stop her commission but could influence work assignments so her career would flame out with three spectacular failures. At which point they could replace her with one of their more experienced, “deserving” protégés.

“Captain?” Li said. “The scan shows no living organisms, animal or plant, beyond simple microorganisms—”

“That’s what I expected. We’ll—”

“But!” Li said. “There’s an anomalous reading. Organic life markers—but no vitals ... and not human. Or anything else in the database.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Neither do I, Captain.”

CHAPTER TWO

Hollander strode back to Li's station.

The engineer highlighted a section of the results on his screen. "There."

She squinted at the data. She understood what she was looking at, but not what it meant.

"Send this to Lawrence."

Li made two swift motions.

"Got it," Lawrence said. He studied his screen for a moment. "Hunh."

Garner raised an eyebrow. "Is that your professional opinion, Trey?"

"Any chance it's a sample from the planet?" Hollander asked the Science Officer, ignoring Garner. "Bacteria or something?"

Garner's eyebrows went up. "Life?"

The implications of finding life were murky. Depending on its complexity and nature, any life found on a planet might enhance the revenue potential of the site—or disqualify it from any development at all. So far, only elementary life forms had been discovered in humanity's exploration of the galaxy, but the way her luck was running, she'd be just the one to find higher order life. Get her name in the history records—and lose her commission due to a staggering lack of profitability.

"It almost looks like a holographic representation of life, down to the granularity of molecular structure," Li said. "Although it's like no organism I've ever seen."

Lawrence shook his head. “No way. The scans don’t read holograms.”

High-capacity holographic storage had long since replaced optical data storage. *Data*. Not *life forms*. Complex Artificial Intelligences’ emergent behavior was so robust that they had to be limited by strict parameters that controlled self-organizing and reproduction. So could true digital life exist? No. But a blueprint for life, a template? What would that look like? Like this?

Li shrugged. “Life is basically organized information animated by energy—”

“And matter,” Garner said.

“Yeah,” Li continued, “but I’m seeing a data pattern suggesting the typical systems of a biological organism. Respiratory, circulatory, digestive ... like it’s a digital representation so complete that it’s nearly indistinguishable from life.”

Garner folded his arms. “You’d still need matter. But combine that encoded information with a 3D printer ...”

“There are strict treaties in force regulating development of artificial life and artificial intelligence,” Cerberus pointed out.

“You’d also still need energy,” Hollander said.

“But there’s no actual respiration or circulation. Right?” Lawrence sounded disappointed, or as close to it as the cheerful Lead Researcher could come.

“No,” Li admitted.

“So why is the scanner registering it at all?” Hollander asked.

“Exactly,” Li said.

“Garner, take a look at the scanner readings,” Hollander said. “Do you have any input from a data processing perspective? Could there be data corruption in the scan?”

Garner scrolled through the readings on his screen. “Nothing jumps out at me. No

obvious fails or errors.” He leaned back in his seat. “The only way to know for sure is to go over there and look for it.”

“Bad idea,” Eric Matsen said. “Boarding that ship to identify what happened to her crew could have the unintended consequence of bringing it on ourselves.”

“I agree,” Kasharyn said. “Could be a disease wiped them out.”

“That’s the point,” Hollander said. “We’ve got to determine whether they picked something up on the planet. Something that would not only affect us, but KN-793d’s viability as a resource. Something that needs to be quarantined on this planet.”

“Something like ... whatever the anomalous reading is?” Li asked.

“Space suits meet minimal specs to function as hazmat suits,” Garner said.

“Not adequate,” Matsen said.

“They’re Biosafety Level Four rated,” Hollander said. “Good enough. We need to know if that’s a life form, we need to know what happened to the crew, we need to be aware of any and all pertinent factors affecting our mission. And we’re legally required to offer assistance to any potential survivors.”

“There *are* no survivors,” Matsen pointed out.

“Li, Lawrence, can you assure me that reading is *not* a life form?”

“We don’t know *what* the anomaly—”

“That’s the issue,” Hollander said. “Kasharyn, bring us around. We’re going to dock.”

CHAPTER THREE

Kasharyn engaged the thrusters to ease *Cerberus* to the right, and the *Vanguard* and the star field appeared to rotate around the C and C crew. As they passed *Vanguard's* bow, the pilot straightened *Cerberus* to bring it parallel alongside the derelict.

The anomalous life sign reading was intriguing, but worrisome in the light of an entire crew's unexplained disappearance. Hollander had to ensure that whatever fate had befallen *Vanguard* did not visit itself on her own crew before they proceeded any further. The safety of her crew and ship was paramount. She'd learned that much from her father. Additionally, standard procedure was to eliminate or minimize potential dangers to the personnel, the equipment—meaning *Cerberus*—and the mission. It was her responsibility to interpret and apply policy to novel situations.

“Captain?” Kasharyn called from the cockpit. “Check their dock.”

Hollander peered at the *Vanguard's* port dock as they drew closer. It was dark. “It looks *open.*”

“Worse,” the pilot said, “it looks like the inner airlock door is open as well.”

Garner stood for a better look. “That can't be good.”

“No shit,” Fuentes chimed in unhappily. His OCD made him a superb Navigator, but he did not handle surprises well.

Hollander studied *Vanguard's* docking port as they came even with it and glided past. She could make out a dimly lit compartment through the open outer and inner air lock doors.

Triply redundant software and hardware safeguards would not allow both doors of any airlock on a ship to open at the same time, which would depressurize the vessel. For this to occur, either there had been a massive malfunction—not impossible, but unlikely—or the ship's

Captain had overridden multiple security levels. That was the more probable scenario. So either the Captain had gone crazy ... or had a reason to murder his own crew.

“Up ahead, on her aft end, just above the engines,” Kasharyn said, pointing. “Another hatch, small one, like an emergency exit.”

“Also open,” Fuentes observed.

“Now we know where the crew went,” Li said.

“Out the airlocks,” Garner finished.

A weighty silence followed, the atmosphere thick with tension. Hollander paced to the port side and leaned on the crash suits locker, studying the *Vanguard* as her ship eased ever closer. The panoramic surround video feeds made it feel for all the world as if she were looking through a glass window. The other ship’s hull looked worn and tarnished, as if its battleship gray paint had faded, in stark contrast to *Cerberus*’s gleaming white finish, although *Vanguard* had likely never entered an atmosphere.

As *Cerberus* passed beneath *Vanguard*’s wicked looking sails, Kasharyn fired thrusters to move left and closer, aligning the two ships’ docking ports.

Cerberus smoothly decelerated to a stop.

“*Locked into position,*” *Cerberus* said. She was twenty meters away from *Vanguard*, the standard distance for her jetway to extend to the other ship’s dock. Kasharyn brought up a readout on the monitors showing a 3D rendering of the two vessels nose-to-aft on both ends, like mating earthworms.

Hollander moved to the Science Officer’s station. “Lawrence, go ahead and start preliminary scans of the planet.”

He nodded and began a series of well-practiced motions.

Sensing a presence approaching, Hollander turned to find Matsen standing behind her, arms folded.

“We should message Corporate,” he said.

“By the time we hear back, we could’ve finished checking the situation and be back on-mission.”

“It wouldn’t be that long a delay—”

“We can’t afford *any* delay. Every second we’re out here, we’re burning through non-billable resources in energy and life support, on top of benefit-loaded person-hours.”

Matsen did know that, and she knew he knew. Her Security Chief was inexplicably over-cautious for a veteran who’d earned the highest military honors. A nagging voice in her head reminded her that the man was battle-hardened, experienced, and had good instincts, and maybe she should listen to him. But there was no real choice, they had to confirm that this mission was a good risk, and determine that quickly—or rule it out and move on, cutting their losses. Most importantly, she needed to ascertain what had happened to the *Vanguard* so that it wouldn’t happen to *Cerberus* and its crew. They had a job to do and needed to get on with it.

Besides, she couldn’t rely on Corporate to make the call. They’d tell her to go ahead and board *Vanguard* and think she was unable to make a simple command decision. Matsen surely knew that as well. Facing the Security Chief, she said, “We’ll call Corporate HQ with the results of our investigation when we’re done.”

Matsen remained impassive, only nodded, and returned to his station at the starboard bulkhead.

“Captain?” Lawrence said. “I have some preliminary results from the planet scan.”

Hollander peered over his shoulder. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Jetway connection initiated,” Cerberus said.

The C and C personnel looked back and to their left, where *Cerberus*'s jetway extended toward the derelict, expanding like an accordion until it made contact, silently to them, and locked into place. Mechanical couplings and electromagnetic locks would be engaging, followed by a hard network connection between the ships' information systems—outside the primary firewalls.

Abruptly, red warning messages lit on all workstations and the warning klaxon sounded, piercing Hollander's ears and triggering an instant heightened alertness. The crew tensed as well, Garner and Lawrence gawking at *Vanguard*, the others' heads snapping back to their monitors to search for the problem.

“Intrusion alert.” Cerberus sounded as close to panic as a computer could.

After a pause, she added, *“I'm infected.”*