

PART 1  
THE ANCIENT MARINER

The Ark Age  
Long ago



## 1.1

Not with a whimper, but a bang.

The ship had shot Heorest Holt full of all the right drugs to ensure a peaceful re-entry to life, but he hadn't been ready for what sounded like the end of the world. It had only been a subjective moment since they'd all been gathered in Command, discussing the target, celebrating their success. Esi Arbandir, their chatty classicist, had even brewed up something alcoholic and drinkable from the *Enkidu's* ancient printers.

Their success: being further away than any of their people had ever gone, older than anyone ever was. A fragment of Earth that was, against all odds, going to live on. The ship was still holding together and, although Olf from Engineering had been dolorously tallying the failures and dead systems, the simple fact that he was alive to speak and they to hear seemed to cheat all probabilities; to cheat even certainties, up to and including death itself. They'd survived. They'd made it. Almost two and a half thousand years in silent, cold transit across the void. And now they'd even collected data. Back then, in that previous waking, Holt had been given a wealth of hope. The star system that they'd set their sights on was there, and if that shouldn't have been too much of a surprise, well, the planet was there too, immediately detectable. A system of

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fourteen worlds tugging at their mother the star and one, fifth out from the sun, that the Ancients had chosen as enough like Earth to transform into a paradise.

Or that was what the classicists claimed, and what else did poor, fugitive humanity have to work with? As the drink flowed, the half-dozen of them had speculated about just what might await them there. Olf talked about a pristine world, built for them by their unthinkably distant ancestors and then left, like goods with the wrapping still intact. As though somehow the Ancients had been prescient, knowing of their own upcoming downfall as well as that Holt's people would come to succeed them, aeons later. That they had rebuilt a planet as a Just Reward For Those Who Were To Come, and then quietly left. And, with that drink flowing, the thought hadn't seemed so outrageous. They'd toasted it. Esi the classicist had chattered away about what else the Ancients might have left: the intact machines, the archives of lore, the wonders of their lost age. The Ancients themselves, perhaps, living in some perfectly regulated society which would welcome their penurious relatives. *From Earth?* they'd say. *Why, we thought there was nobody left! Come in, come in and partake of our plenty!*

Science chief, bald old Mazarin Toke – well, they were all hairless as eggs, out of suspension, but he'd been bald before they went under – had come out of sleep blind and with one arm and leg withered. He wasn't taking it well. They'd printed him a mobile chair, and he had his second, Gembel, to act as his hands and eyes, but the drink had made him mean and dour, even as he celebrated with them. The Ancients, he proclaimed, would probably still be there but, having been cut off from wider Earth, they'd have degenerated into

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savages, living like beasts in a world designed to meet all their needs and present no challenges. *We'll probably have to hunt them for meat*, he'd declared with sour joy, and everyone had rolled their eyes, but toasted with him anyway.

Only Halena Garm hadn't appeared at the impromptu table, cheering on the future. She'd been trying to glean more about the planet, their destination. It wasn't her job, they called out to her genially. It was, she said. She was Security head, and what greater challenge did Security have than the planet itself? She wasn't worried about beasts or atavistic Ancients. She was worried about incumbents on the new world who wouldn't take kindly to a failing boat full of their distant relatives pitching up out of the black. *They'll have their own problems*, she'd said. *Of which we'll just be one more.*

And so she'd sat there trying to bootstrap the ship's instruments to full functionality while the rest of them celebrated. Once, just once, she claimed there was a signal. A transmission coming from that distant orb. But the ship hadn't recorded anything but static and she couldn't repeat it and at last she'd given up in disgust.

They'd gone back into suspension, eventually. Olf had forcibly sobered himself up and run through all the proper checks – Engineering's final report had been sobering for the rest of them. The ship was in the red on almost every metric. *We almost didn't make it*, was what they'd told each other. But they were so close now. Just a short step across the icy abyss to their new home. Maybe it had a name, that unseen world, with inhabitants who knew what it was called, and its long and storied history. Perhaps the greatest crisis the cap-in-hand refugees from Earth would face would be one of diplomacy, negotiating for landing sites and living space. But Holt had

felt sanguine about that. It would be his responsibility, and he knew he could do it, no matter what compromises were needed. The fate of the human race was at stake, after all. He would find a way.

But maybe the world had no people on it, to name it and present diplomatic obstacles. Maybe it *was* a paradise, like the classicists promised. No hoary and advanced society of Ancients; no state-of-nature nouveau primitives or barbarous tribes or mystic masters with strange mental powers; no talking animals like something from a child's story. In that case, the honour would fall to them, the Key Crew of the *Enkidu*, the last scions of old Earth. They'd talked round and round the table: names historical and names potent, names brimming with meaning, names that rolled lyrically off the tongue. In the end it came down to Captain Heorest Holt, head of the Command team. He'd looked over each of them with great fondness, his crew, his people, his friends. Esi, life and soul of the party; small, reliable Olf; bitter Mazarin with young Gembel refilling the old man's cup; even stern Halena who'd at last been persuaded to join them. They had trained together – all save Gembel, anyway, who wasn't allowed to get a word in edgeways to make himself known. Unlike so many of the ark-ship crews, they'd been given time to reshape themselves around their colleagues until they fit like puzzle pieces. They were a team. And they'd done it. They'd piloted this gallimaufry of failing systems across actual light years, based on nothing more than fragile maps recovered from millennia-dead orbitals. And the star was there; and the planet was there; and hope was there.

'Imir,' he'd told them all, raising his glass. Honestly, by that point in the proceedings, he couldn't have said exactly

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why. He just looked down his long nose at them and told them it was deep and significant and meaningful, while having the vague idea it was from some old story he'd read once, when he was a child. A story with talking birds and strife, and new life being built upon the ruin of something vast and terrible. And *Imir* seemed good enough to everyone, even to Mazarin Toke, and so they'd toasted that. Then it had been time to get sober again and back into the beds in the suspension chamber. If he'd wanted to sit and wait until their arrival then the grandchildren's children of the children he'd never have would have grown old and died before planetfall.

And now here he was. Moments later. Centuries later. In the middle of waking with grace and composure, about to set the new world to rights, but something had detonated. Abruptly, all the air in the suspension chamber was very keen to be out of the suspension chamber, and he, Holt, sitting up, yawning, was ripped from his pod and spilled across the floor. He felt a dozen hoses and ducts of varying degrees of intimacy yanked out of his body, and he knew he was going to die. Yet he didn't die. The air howled past him into nowhere, and then stopped doing that just as he was sure there was no air left to go anywhere. The deck beneath him shuddered to the thunderous closure of bulkheads.

The lights died. All he could do was lie there, collecting himself, scrabbling for the last rags of that grace and composure he'd felt so full of a moment before. And he was Command. He should be leaping into action, telling everyone what to do. Except he didn't know what to do, he didn't know anything.

There was a light. Just a little red one. He tried to get to it, managed to find his feet, then find the wall the hard way when he misremembered the dimensions of the suspension chamber. Found a bank of switches under his trembling hand. His fingers remembered how to open a channel, which was just as well because the rest of him had nothing useful to contribute.

‘This is Holt,’ he said into the staticky void. ‘This is Command. What’s going on?’

After too long, the jagged, broken-up voice of Olf came through: Engineering, the one department Holt really, really wanted to hear from.

‘Captain,’ from Olf. ‘Heorest. Stable. We’re stable. I think we’re stable.’

And, as if needing Olf’s reassurance before venturing out again, the lights in the suspension chamber came back on. Holt looked around, shrugging out of the open-backed gown he’d slept in, fumbling in the lockers for a shipsuit. Olf’s pod was open, the lid now hanging off at an alarming angle. His own had slapped shut after ejecting him. Bare-footed, he stumbled over to look at the others. Halena’s was empty, the lid almost shut but trailing hoses caught in it. He couldn’t put any good interpretation on that. Oh, perhaps she’d got the jolt at the same time he had, but had just gotten her head together more quickly. It seemed more likely, though, that Olf had felt a stronger need to be Secured than Commanded first off.

Esi and Mazarin were still under. Nothing needed Science done to it, apparently, and everyone knew the classicist would be the last to be woken, unless one of the Ancients was staring them in the face. Except, while Esi’s readouts were

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all within tolerable amber, Mazarin's were either in the red or just out like blown candles. Olf had fitted a new pod for him, after the mess the last one had made of the man, but perhaps the failing systems had been integral to Mazarin, and not part of the ship at all. He was dead, and that was that. And he hadn't been the easiest man to get on with, but he had been One Of Us.

Holt started Esi's wake-up procedure, and sent remotely for Gembel, the new Science chief, too. While they were woken up, he liaised with Olf about how bad things were. Because he didn't want to go do his job without a full Key Crew. Because he didn't want to even think about coming back here to find more red lights and fewer friends.

Olf looked smaller than he had been, shrivelled in on himself by suspension, his shipsuit seeming to pool around him as he perched on his seat. 'Deceleration,' he said. 'Captain. Heo. I did everything I could. I ran all the checks—'

'We know,' Holt said. 'Just tell us.'

The *Enkidu* had survived all those long light years from Earth, coasting across the vast and silent depths of space with minimal system activity, just baseline power and the suspension systems. All the many thousands of pods – keeping alive the tiny crew, plus the vast population in the hold. The minuscule proportion of the population they'd been able to get off Earth. And things had gone wrong along the way, of course. Olf and Holt, and a varying selection of crewmembers, had come out of their long death-sleep to fix them. But overall, everything had proceeded as planned. Because, although space was full of hazards, it was mostly full of nothing, and that nothing didn't push the tolerances of the ship to breaking point.

Then they'd finally reached the system they'd been traveling towards for longer than the recorded history of their civilization, and had been forced to slow down. As the *Enkidu* had fallen into an arc around the sun, using the drag of the star to save on fuel as they decelerated, something in the vast old vessel's vacuum-eroded hull had fractured.

'We . . . we've, we've lost,' Gembel was saying, high emotion and a natural stammer collaborating to choke his words off, 'eeleven thousand and ninety-four units of cargo, sir. Eleven. Eleven thousand. Ninety. Four. Sir.'

'Creator forgive us.' Esi Arbandir, now out of her pod, put a hand on Holt's arm and he touched her fingers.

And he shrugged her off. He shrugged her off because he had to, and asked, 'How are we now? Hull integrity? Can we even make orbit?'

Olf was nodding, working with the *Enkidu* to model the damage and how much worse it would get the moment any more stress was applied to the ship. The stress of slowing down. The stress of altering their trajectory from a line into an orbital curve. The killing certainties of mathematics.

'Going to hurt,' he said. His projections sprang to life on everyone's display. And straight away Halena Garm started tampering with them, conjuring a deployment of their shuttles, their haulers, even the automated drones; how they might act as buffers to keep the battered old *Enkidu* together, spending their own integrity to protect the mothership. Holt slumped in his seat, the pair of them bickering back and forth, as he ran through all the other reports. Before the detonation, Olf had already been trying to evacuate some of the cargo. He'd seen the problems, just not how bad they were about to get. Halena had had a security team woken

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up and mobilized as people-handlers, except the people they'd been about to handle were gone now, along with a whole splinter of the ship a half-kilometre long. Eleven thousand and ninety-four units of cargo. Meaning suspension pods. Meaning people.

Esi had her own models, using the same vessels Halena was positing as structural buttresses. She was trying to save the lost cargo. Except the vast majority of that cargo was already beyond recovery. Shattered, splintered, depowered. Dead in their sleep, with their last memories an embarkation on Earth over twenty-six hundred years before, objectively speaking. Maybe there were worse things. And maybe there would be more, because the ship was all flaws and vulnerabilities now, the hull and all its internal spars and struts and walls riven with weaknesses.

'No,' Holt told her, and she stared at him, betrayed, eyes red but without tears because the suspension dried you out. 'We save what we have,' and he went through Halena's amendments briskly, with a commander's dispassionate efficiency. Yes, yes, no, yes. He authorized the expenditure of resources, when those resources were a finite thing and made up their world. *Keep it together*. And he kept it together, which in turn meant they would keep the ship together. Only later could he let himself fragment, when the single thing under threat of fragmentation was himself.

They lost another seventeen hundred units of cargo to the final deceleration and approach, individual pods and fragments flaking away like the scales of a moth's wing. They also lost three quarters of the fleet that Halena had mobilized, sacrificial offerings for the ship that launched them. They lost and they lost and they lost, and Holt and his Key

Crew stayed awake and did battle against maths and the universe for thirty-seven hours. *Rowing against the wind*, he thought. *Pulling against the tide*. Recasting the jagged claws of hostile physics as dark rocks, and the stuttering instruments as sporadic lightning that simultaneously threatened them and lit their way.

There were specialists and experts in that lost cargo. There were dreamers and poets and musicians. There were genius innovators and charismatic motivators and hard workers who would have made a difference, had they ever been allowed to. Human beings, each and every one of them irreplaceable. It didn't matter that there were over thirty thousand still showing green lights on the board. That didn't mean he hadn't failed. But he remembered his training. They'd been prescient, his teachers. *You will fail*, they'd said, and here he was, failing. *You will fail, and when you do, you must do everything you can to fail as little as possible. Don't let the failure get its teeth into you. You will make decisions that come with a cost. That is Command. Do not let the cost consume you.* He had sat alone, like they all had, all the prospective ark captains, hearing that cold party line. Being told that he could *care* on his own time. But when he became the Commander, then he had to *decide* instead. Decisions that meant lost cargo, dead crew, dead *friends*. Because *Something Must Survive*.

He'd made the decisions, and something had survived. Most of them had woken to see the *Enkidu* claw its way into stable orbit. Most of the cargo was still alive, oblivious, sleeping. Half of the required remotes and automata were intact and, following Olf's repair protocols, triaging the human race as best they could. Most of the rest of the crew were also still alive, ready to be woken and take up the slack.

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Most of Heorest Holt was still a functional human being, and the parts that wanted to scream and beat at the walls were locked away for now.

He told them, *Well done*, even though he knew they didn't believe him and he didn't believe himself either. Even though the scale of their losses was so great – almost thirteen thousand hopeful colonists who had survived two thousand six hundred years of space travel, only to be murdered by the simple act of trying to slow down. But he had to look at what was left and tell himself, *It could have been so much worse*. Back behind them, along that curving course they'd cut, between star and planet, was the very definite possibility that exactly zero per cent of either cargo or crew would have survived. They had rushed towards those rocks and poled away from them as deftly as was humanly possible. And they had lived. For a given proportion and value of 'they'. That would have to be enough because it was all they had.

Every department was waking up a second shift now. He was about to hand off to his own deputy too. Only Esi was still doggedly plodding on with her work, because her role would become relevant now that the actual danger of disintegration in hard vacuum had been staved off. She was preparing for the possibility of contact with the Ancients, revising her lexicon and composing initial greetings in a score of different dead languages, just in case. And that was probably a good thing because it kept her mind off everything she hadn't been able to do in the crisis.

'Well, shit,' said Halena Garm, right out there and loud enough to snag everyone's attention. For a moment Holt thought it was something new and catastrophic about to

happen to the ship, but it turned out there were bigger things that could be broken than the pummelled old ark *Enkidu*.

There was the planet.

Just as with the thirteen thousand lost hopes and dreams, it could have been worse. But these were supposed to be worlds that the Ancients had walked on and remade, with their unthinkable technology of which Holt's own was a mere shadow. An echo. A joke. That was the promise held in the star maps which those intrepid tomb-robbers had recovered – and paid for with their lives, in many cases. These were the homes their common and distant ancestors had prepared for them, all ready for the arrival of whoever actually survived the trip.

It seemed Imir was a drab dustball, however. The poles were icy. The equator was desert. There were seas and the seas were water. The temperate zones, where the climate wasn't inhospitably hot or cold, was rock and a gritty substrate that wasn't soil because it didn't contain enough organics.

'What's alive down there, though?' Holt asked, and for a moment he dreaded the answer. *Nothing*.

There was something, though. The ancient terraformers had got just so far, and no further. There was a kind of phytoplankton in the seas and a kind of lichen forming patchy sheets on the rocks. On the fourth try, Halena was able to get a remote down there without it coming apart during the stress of entry, and that gave them a little more data. Esi said they were engineered organisms. Not even an ecosystem, but the definite fingerprints of a process that would have resulted in one, had it moved on into a variety of other stages. But because the organisms at work were artificial, and had been responsibly designed, they'd never

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evolved beyond their engineered state. Not in all the intervening millennia had these microscopic workers ever thrown off their shackles.

‘What *have* we got down there?’ Holt asked, because this was how you did it. This was Command. You did not mourn. You moved forwards.

‘Breathable atmosphere,’ Halena told him. ‘Seventeen to nineteen per cent oxygen based on sampling to date. And that’s it. There’s nothing down there we can eat. Whatever we want, we have to make it ourselves.’