

PART 1

ESTOC

1.

Andecka

Andecka Tal Mar: Intermediary in a three-crew ship named the *Skipjack*, currently operating with only two because every resource was stretched right now, especially the human kind. At her back sat the world of Assur. A unique ecosystem; agricultural, scientific and mineral prospects. A population of seventy million, mostly humans but a fair number of Castigar and Hanni as well. And every vessel that could get into orbit currently lifting away as many of them as possible. Just like in the old war historiotypes. Because the old war was back.

In front of her, at a distance of several hundred million kilometres, not even visible to the naked eye, the Architect. It was eating up that distance at a steady pace and Andecka's pilot, Staven, had plotted the elegant curve of its course. This would bring it in to intercept Assur's orbit with pinpoint accuracy, slinging it around the world, and then . . .

Unmake it. Remake it. Turn the living world into dead art.

Estimates gleaned from Assur's kybernet were that around sixty-seven million people would still be planetside when that happened, best-case scenario.

‘Any word on our backup?’ Andeck’s scars were itching. The ones that ranged like lightning over her scalp, from the surgery. There had only ever been one Intermediary born naturally, and that was Saint Xavienne, who’d been killed right next to Andeck defending Berlenhof. Back then, they’d been in a hell of a bigger ship than the *Skipjack*, a full-on Partheni battle cruiser and it hadn’t helped a damn.

Staven just grunted, and when she asked the question again he snapped, ‘If we’d *had* it, then don’t you *think* I’d have *told* you?’ in that sarcastic tone he used when he was frightened almost to death.

The help hadn’t come. Which was a problem when your whole plan of attack was based on there being someone to play off.

‘We’ll improvise,’ Andeck said.

‘We’re *dead*,’ Staven decided, though he wasn’t turning the *Skipjack* around.

The kybernet’s cheery casualty estimate was based on someone actually buying time for the evacuation to happen, and that *someone* apparently meant Andeck Tal Mar. Back in the old war, it had been fleets of warships, drones, every damn thing that was more useful as a momentary distraction than a refugee transport. At least this had changed for the better. Now it meant Intermediaries like Andeck. Because, of all the universe, she could try and talk to the Architect. Contact that vast and alien mind to shriek out, *We’re here*, like in that old kids’ mediotype story. To give it a moment’s pause.

Perhaps even more . . . except with her one feeble voice she didn’t see that happening. Instead, it would get tired of her, and then turn her and Staven and the *Skipjack* into an

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interesting filigree of molecules, before going on to do the same to the planet.

‘Wait, something *big* came through.’ Staven’s voice was briefly on fire with hope, then dropped. ‘Not them. It’s not them.’

Andeckka fought over her instruments, even as Assur receded behind them. Staven had put them on their intercept course, ready to go shout their infinitesimal complaints in the Architect’s crystal ear. ‘Then who . . . ?’ The worst-case scenario was *another Architect*, which had happened a couple of times. Apparently there were some planets the monsters wanted extra-dead. Whatever chance Andeckka had against *one*, she wouldn’t even be a speedbump for two.

‘Transport. Sod me.’ Staven sounded as if he was having a heart attack already, hyperventilating around the words. ‘Transport. Castigar.’

She dragged the data over to her own screen. Not what she should be focusing on right now but she had to know. ‘Damn, that’s big,’ she admitted. Not Architect sized, certainly, but she hadn’t realized the Castigar were just throwing mega-freighters like that around. She was still linked to the Assur kybernet and hopped into the conversation there, getting a full-on view of the tentacle-fringed mouth that was a Castigar head, each writhing tendril capped with a pearl-like eye and a claw.

‘They’re saying . . .’ Andeckka blinked. ‘They can take two and a half million people. How can they fit . . . ?’

Staven passed over the ship’s specs. She really hadn’t appreciated *how* big the freighter was. She’d lived in smaller cities. The human Colonies relied a lot on small transports, a relic of the days when every cubic metre of hold space had been

needed to shift a rapidly disintegrating civilization. The Castigar, however, believed in bulk shipping between their worlds, and here was one of their largest vessels, over a human world perhaps for the first time. And it was coming in at the sort of pace that made Andecka hope Castigar gravitic braking was superior to human tech, or else the Architect might not get the chance to rework the planet after all.

The kybernet started hailing them. Because the space to get an extra two and a half million people off-planet was no use unless you had the time to embark them.

‘Tell them we’ll do what we can, of course,’ Andecka said. *Where the hell is our backup?* She then took the helm of the ship, just because the illusion of control helped with her own mental prep. Arrowing in towards that distant pinprick of reflected light she could now make out. A monster the size of a moon, and inside it, a mind. Her target.

‘Makes you wonder, though,’ Staven said, breaking into her careful concentration.

‘What, Staven? What makes me wonder?’

‘I saw the ’type footage from that Hegemony place. Where the Architect got attacked. Two more just jumped in, practically straight into *orbit*. I mean, they can do that. So why all this long *lead-in*?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe they need some quiet time to *think*?’ Andecka hissed at him, but her mindset was well and truly shot now. Because he was right. There was a weird politeness to the way Architects approached their murderous business. They plainly *could* just emerge from unspace right in a planet’s gravity well. Even if it was difficult or costly, that was a capability they had. No reason for this slow advance, to give people all this time to get offworld. It was as if they were

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savouring the terror of their victims, the anticipation of the end. *Or as if they're giving us every chance to escape.*

It was safe to say people's opinions were divided over what the Architects actually wanted. The majority said they were genocidal monsters, and a fair few of a more scientific bent just said they were unknowable and didn't care about people. Then there were the people who actually *knew* because they'd touched the minds of the entities. People like Andecka. People like her semi-mentor, Idris Telemmier, the oldest living Intermediary. The man who'd gone further than anyone, and right now was going further still.

They were slaves, he'd said. Most people – even within the current joint Intermediary effort at the Eye – didn't quite believe him. Andecka did, though. There wasn't much Andecka wouldn't believe, if Idris Telemmier said it. It was a hero worship he was profoundly uncomfortable with, but she'd seen him at work close-up in all his wretched glory. He was the human candle that somehow burned twice as brightly, but never burned out. And burning hurt, she knew that. She'd felt the heat of it, but she reckoned Idris was on fire all the time.

It was at least partly through Idris that she'd been scrambled out here to Assur, arriving *before* the other Intermediary, in time to tell the kybernet to begin its evacuation. That was something else they'd never had in the first war. An early-warning system.

Now if we only had the Hegemony's magic tech that lets them just teleport everyone off a planet. Apparently that was a thing, except the Essiel Hegemony wouldn't even admit to its existence, let alone share it.

Ahead, the Architect was a bright spot the size of a thumb-

nail now. If she squinted she could make out some detail on the jagged face it presented towards Assur and the system's star.

There's something at home in there, she told herself. *I can reach it*. Without going mad. Without suffering fatal biological feedback. She could slip her Intermediary consciousness into the vast labyrinth of the Architect's inner world until she reached that focal point, where a modified human and an inconceivable giant could sit and talk. Almost. She'd never done it unassisted before. *First time for everything*.

'You'll need to keep us steady.' Speaking too fast and jittery. 'Keep us wide of whatever it throws—'

'*I know, I know.*' Staven's voice cattier than ever in his terror.

She focused in towards the reflected light of the Architect, already feeling her mind unpacking, extending into the nameless direction that would bring her into contact with the utterly *alien*.

Feeling the fear reach up from her guts to claw at her mind, and not knowing in that moment whether to fight or embrace it. Neither seemed much use. They were human-level responses and she was going after a profoundly inhuman thing.

And then:

'Contact!' from Staven, as though he was the Intermediary, not her. His next words came out in a confused babble and she had to separate them out in retrospect. 'It's them. Thank God. Thank *fuck*. It's them!'

Her own instruments were already dominated by sensor bounce-back from the Architect, but she registered another ship in-system, erupting from unspace between Assur and

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the Architect. Not another gift from the Castigar. A warship, and a big one.

‘How come,’ Staven complained, ‘we get this tin can and they get *that*?’

‘*Skipjack*, this is the *Gran Brigitte*,’ came a voice over comms, speaking in clipped Colvul with a Partheni accent. ‘Situation report.’

‘You had better have a goddamn *Int* with you,’ Andecka snapped at them, protocols and rank be damned.

A strained pause, which served to emphasize just how many *Skipjacks* would fit inside the *Gran Brigitte*’s shadow, and then, ‘*Skipjack*, Cognosciente Intermediary Grave speaking. Is that Andecka I hear?’

‘God and his prophet save and protect us, yes it is,’ Andecka said. Way back before volunteering, she’d been brought up by religious types, and some of that tended to come back when she was under stress. As well as a stab of envy, to be sure. Not only because Grave got a personal war cruiser to gad about in, but also because Andecka’s Partheni counterpart didn’t have the same lattice of scars and internal trauma to go with her Intermediary abilities. *They cheat*, was the uncharitable assessment of most Colonial Ints, but right now Andecka reckoned help from a cheater was better than no help at all.

She had worked ‘combined operations’ like this three times before. She knew the drill. In the end it didn’t actually matter how big a ship, or how many weapons, the Parthenon had brought. The war wasn’t being fought with guns, after all. It was Andecka’s mind and Cognosciente Grave’s mind, and the Architect’s mind.

Staven flung the *Skipjack* into a looping course, buying

time without losing speed as the *Gran Brigitte* caught up with them, then matched their pace and trajectory with the larger ship. The Architect had grown from a thumbnail, to a hand, to what it was: a moon-sized monster that screamed out at all Andeck's Intermediary senses. Displacing far more mass than its vast proportions could account for, casting a huge shadow in unspace. Death; destroyer of worlds. Except it wasn't even something as comprehensible as that. Remaker, artist, artisan. The planets they left behind moulded into exacting sculpture. Not all the Intermediary contact in the universe could account for it. If the Architects did what they did because their masters compelled them to, nobody knew why the masters directed it. Why they would want every inhabited planet in the entire universe to become their gallery of twisted exhibits, one by one.

'How much closer?' Staven breathed. The jagged crystal mountain range that was the forward face of the Architect now filled their screens.

Andeck passed the decision tree she'd prepared over to Grave. Within moments the Partheni had modified it, then thrown it back to her again. In the seconds of their approach, this plan went back and forth between them a half-dozen times. It was a procedure hammered out between Ints in the first few combined ops encounters. Because most of the time it took more than one mind to triumph over an Architect. Unless you were lucky, or you were Idris Telemmier.

The last tree Grave sent over was close enough to something Andeck could work with. *Agreed*, she sent back. Every Intermediary was different, and every one had a play they could make and one they couldn't. It was all about fitting the circles together and seeing where the overlap came up.

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There'd been lots of talk back at base about training dedicated pairs of Ints who knew how to work together, and probably that'd happen sooner or later. But right now there was too much universe, and too few Ints. So the Colonial Liaison Board had come up with the trees – a mutable plan of attack that each thrown-together pair could customize to fit their strengths.

And then the Architect was there. Not *physically* because that had been a fact for a while. There in her head, almost reaching forwards to meet her, as though it was just as much a part of the game as they were.

Andecka made a sound and felt the pain distantly as she slammed back in her seat, neck whiplashed, joints twisted, tongue bitten. The faintest echo of Staven's cry of concern came through. And then the vast convoluted city of the Architect's mind enveloped her. Its maze of spaces and narrows merely what her Int mind showed her in place of the true alien complexity of it. She remembered her first time, when she'd stood with Telemmier and tried this. He'd almost died, and the others with them really had. She was going somewhere the human mind was not fit for, just as she could never have endured the vacuum of space. And the mind took it out on the body. Her heart, her brain, each part of her, twisting and rupturing to try and escape where she was leading them. All the while she continued to hunt that spark, the soul within the cenotaph which was where she and the Architect could touch.

And she wasn't alone.

The tree was intact. She could feel Grave out there too, making choice after choice, following the plan. As though they were a left and right hand which just about knew what

each other was doing. Complementing each other, even though their tickets to this mind-destroying show had come by very different means. They'd carved up Andeck's brain, shot her full of chemicals, implanted cybernetics and killed a hundred of her fellow subjects just to make her what she was. Grave was one of the new class, emerging from the Parthenon without the scars, just a genetic predisposition and a vast hanging garden of tech. For a moment the sheer *envy* Andeck felt almost tore the bond between them apart, but she mastered herself again. *Be bitter on your own time.*

They were closing. Nobody could understand an Architect mind, not truly, but repeated contact and Hiver data analysis had shown common patterns and pathways. Techniques and mental gymnastics that brought the fragile human mind closer and closer to unravelling it, and which informed the nodes and branches of the decision tree they were following. As though they were fencers or game players moving through one particular standard set of openings and responses. The trees worked so well they actually *had* made a game of it. Something the Ints could practise when there weren't Architects around. Andeck had even heard civilians were playing it now, pretending they understood what it was like.

Try playing it during brain surgery in a hurricane, she thought uncharitably.

The Architect was becoming aware of her, trying to shut her out. She wanted Grave to know, and in that instant Grave adjusted her own approach, coming closer to support. Andeck's mind's eye showed her vast white stone slabs crashing down on all sides, entombing her. The temptation was to grow, to match strength for strength, hold the doors open, beat them down. But you could never win doing that.

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Whatever strength you had as an Int, be you Idris Telemmier or Saint Xavienne herself, you'd never be stronger than an Architect. So, be swifter, be smaller. Play off your human advantages and make yourself insignificant. A dust mote. A bad dream. She slipped under, between and through the atoms of the Architect's gates, Grave drawn with her, hunting, hunting . . .

She'd done this before. Four times she'd succeeded at reaching the seat of an Architect's cognition. And twice before she'd failed and a world had died because of it. That was a better hit rate than most.

She had a clearer sense of Grave now, the Partheni woman off in her fancy big ship with all her gleaming new tech. Except the woman herself wasn't shiny or even complete. Wounded, hurting. She had scars too; they were just on the inside. And as they homed in on the Architect, they grew closer, more inside each other, converging as a single blade, prising at the hairline cracks and joins of the Architect's inner mind until—

It had them. They had it. Fingertip touching fingertip. Save that their side of this exchange was all they ever were, and the Architect's was just the least iota of its being. But it was enough.

Why? they asked, and *Please*, they said, then summoned forth the millions on-planet. The people, the biosphere, the life. The sheer irreplaceable variety of forms and species unique to Assur. The individual dreams of its people, the vast majority of whom could never be evacuated in time. All that would be lost.

The Architect – vast, inhuman, twisted – shook them and assaulted their minds with its very being. Not even trying to

obliterate them, because if it so much as had an idle thought in that direction they would be dust, atoms, mindless husks in their respective ships. But it wasn't trying, not yet. It might. Sometimes they did. But the Architects were a lot like ancient conceptions of God. Too vast for comprehension, and yet they could note the fall of a sparrow. They were powerful enough to appreciate the universe at every level all the way down to the atomic. And that included, somewhere along the chain, the human.

Andecka and Grave were not warriors, in that moment. They were petitioners. All they had was begging. Their only weapon was empathy. While extreme military resistance had, on two known occasions, resulted in an Architect's physical destruction, empathy had saved more worlds by far.

Its response tore through Andecka, and she had a ghost-sense of her body jerking and flailing in its restraints as Staven administered medical support to keep her heart regular and her blood flowing.

Don't make me, the Architect was saying. The sense came through, no matter how alien the originating intelligence. She didn't know if it, in turn, was begging them, or begging its masters.

Grave set in motion a new assault, regurgitating the information the Assur kybernet had been feeding them. The children's pictures and the demographic information, the plans for new homes and families, the half-created mediotypes, the ecological studies. The weaponized zeitgeist of a world.

It pushed back. Desperation bled through, and she didn't know if it was hers or Grave's or the Architect's. Until it grew and grew and she knew no mere human mind could contain such grief and loss.

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It's going to do it anyway, she thought, sensing Grave's kindred conclusion. They had laid out all they had at its feet, and it was very, very sorry for their loss. Thoughts and prayers from the godlike destroyer for the worlds it crushed beneath its crystal feet.

Then.

A moment of brutal disconnection. She was screaming, but that was something her body was doing. For a lost second, her mind was caught between unspace and the real, trapped on the boundary, in imminent danger of ceasing to exist. Grave had her, though. Grave was her beacon, her lifeline, her anchor. She climbed hand over hand up Grave's focus on her, until she was Andecka Tal Mar once more and fully in existence, praying thanks to a god she didn't really believe in. And the Architect . . .

Was gone. Submerged back into the unspace which had birthed it. Leaving only a bitter understanding. *Pain. Loss. Price.* The nameless things its masters would exact from it, somehow. However that worked. Nobody knew.

She came back into her body amidst a symphony of medical alarms, and it felt like returning home. The awareness she had of Cognosciente Grave faded, dwindling until the woman was no more than a voice on the comms, who had a moment before been somewhere between a sister and a self.

The Assur kybernet – and quite a lot of the rest of the planet – was trying to talk to them. They probably wanted to say thank you, but Andecka was recovering from a serial cardiac arrest right then, with only the ship's medical suite keeping her going, and she wasn't really in the mood for well-wishers.

‘What now?’ she asked Staven. There would have been a packet ship stop at Assur recently, dropping off the next batch of finger-in-the-air predictions from Foresight at the Eye: the early-warning system they’d never had in the first war, and that had saved so many worlds in this one. But still failed to save so many others. There was sure to be another assignment for her, and precious little time to get there. Andecka knew she wasn’t dead enough to be taken out of active rotation yet.

‘Good work,’ she sent to the *Gran Brigitte*. ‘For a Patho.’ The jab was practically *de rigueur*.

‘Likewise, refugenik,’ came Grave’s instant response. And then, before the *Brigitte*’s commander could clamp down on comms, ‘But really, sister. A pleasure.’

‘Three unclaimed,’ Staven reported. Meaning worlds that were under imminent death sentence and no other Int had flagged as covering them yet. Maybe there would already be someone by the time they arrived, and they’d be able to move on. Or maybe they’d be truly alone for the next encounter, and most likely doomed. They never knew, what with the intermittent nature of communications between stars. ‘Are you ready for unspace? How much time do you need?’

Unspace. Where the Architects came from. The unreal void beneath the real. Staven could go into suspension for the trip, but Andecka would have to stay awake to pilot them. Awake, but not alone. The other joy of being an Int, above and beyond shredding your mind against the jagged face of the Architects.

‘Pick one,’ she told him. ‘Let’s go.’