

Saving Earth-2: The Third Body

Chapter 1 Redraft

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Chapter 1: The Dark Point

22 years, 184 days until keyhole crossing

At 3:17 in the morning, Dr. Hana Sayegh noticed a black dot where no black dot should have been.

She leaned closer to her screen and forgot about the tea cooling beside her hand.

The night operations room of the Planetary Defense Directorate was almost empty. Blue light from the displays washed over rows of desks. Cooling fans hummed behind the walls. Outside the long eastern window, the Atacama Desert lay under a moonless sky. The land looked pale and lifeless, but the stars above it seemed close enough to touch.

Huge telescope dishes turned slowly in the dark. They moved without sound, collecting light that had traveled for years before reaching Earth.

Hana had worked in this room for eleven years. She knew every normal sound. She also knew that most strange discoveries were not discoveries at all. A bad sensor could create a new planet. A software error could invent a comet. A grain of dust on a lens could waste three weeks of work.

Her rule was simple: doubt the exciting answer first.

She was fifty-two, with short gray hair and a narrow face that made her look more severe than she felt. Younger scientists sometimes thought she disliked wonder. The truth was the opposite. Hana loved the universe too much to lie about it.

Across the room, Ludo Reyes was fighting sleep at the night operator's desk. He was twenty-six and had been on the job for six months. An empty packet of salted nuts lay beside his keyboard. He had promised Hana that he would stop eating over the equipment. He had made that promise while eating over the equipment.

Hana enlarged the image.

"Ludo."

He sat up at once. "I'm awake."

"I didn't ask."

"You were about to."

"Frame seventeen. Put it on the wall."

The main screen changed. Thousands of stars appeared against deep black. To most people, the image would have looked like white dust scattered across glass. Hana saw something else. Near the lower edge, one point of light was weaker than it should have been.

Ludo rubbed his eyes. "Which one?"

Hana marked it with a yellow circle.

He studied the spot. "That could be noise."

"Yes."

"Or a damaged pixel."

"Yes."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I am hoping you will convince me."

Ludo pulled up the raw telescope data. The image on the wall was a deep stack, made by combining many hours of observation. Stacking helped faint objects appear more clearly, but it could also combine small errors into one large mistake.

"Run it again," Hana said. "Start from the raw files. Use the independent system."

"That will take eleven minutes."

"Then we wait eleven minutes."

"Can I name it while we wait?"

"No."

"The Black Dot of Doom?"

"Especially not that."

Ludo smiled and began the new calculation.

Hana stood and walked to the window. The room was warm, but the desert beyond the glass looked cold enough to freeze time. A row of red lights blinked on the distant telescope towers.

There had been a time when she enjoyed waiting for results. As a student, every unfinished calculation had felt like a door that might open. Age had changed that. Now she understood that some doors opened onto fires, floods, and evacuation maps.

Planetary defense was built around unlikely disasters. Most days, Hana measured objects that would pass millions of kilometers from Earth. She checked the numbers, filed the report, and went home. The public imagined her team saving the planet every week. In reality, their greatest success was proving that nothing needed to be done.

She wanted this to be another such night.

The computer chimed.

"New result," Ludo said.

Hana returned to her desk.

The black dot was still there.

More important, it had moved.

Only a tiny distance separated its positions in the images. A human eye could have missed it. The computer did not. Over sixty-one hours, the object had crossed the stars in a smooth line.

Noise did not move like that. Dust did not follow gravity.

Ludo stopped smiling. "It's real."

"Probably."

"Probably?"

"Confidence is not the same as proof. Search the old surveys."

He entered the request. The system began checking years of stored images from telescopes on Earth, the Moon, and three deep-space observatories.

"What do you think it is?" he asked.

"Something dark. Something far away."

"That is not very helpful."

"It is more helpful than a wrong answer."

The search returned four possible matches. Two were too weak to use. One was clearly a sensor error. The last showed the same dark object seven years earlier.

That old image changed everything. With two points separated by years, the computer could begin to estimate an orbit.

"Fit the widest honest path," Hana said.

Ludo hesitated. "We still don't know its mass."

"Use a range."

"We don't know its shape."

"Use a range."

"We hardly know anything."

Hana looked at him. "That is why the range will be wide."

The model appeared as a blue fan across the wall. Each line was one possible future. Most pointed back into empty space. Then the computer added the old image and narrowed the fan.

The possible paths became a long blue spear.

Ludo stared at the end of it.

"That crosses the E2 system," he said.

Hana felt her stomach tighten.

E2 was the short name for a planet orbiting another star. Eight years earlier, astronomers had found oxygen, oceans, and green seasonal changes there. The planet had one sun and a large moon. It had seemed important, but not unique. Earth had found many worlds that might support life.

Then, one month ago, a new telescope had shown lights on E2's night side.

They were not electric lights. The people there had no satellites and sent no radio signals into space. But fires appeared in patterns along rivers and coasts. Kilns burned near cities. Boats carried lamps across dark water. Roads glowed with small moving points after sunset.

Nature could make fire. It could not build a harbor.

The discovery was still secret. Governments wanted more proof before telling eight billion people that humanity was no longer alone. Only a small group inside the Directorate had access to the images.

Hana had seen them for the first time twenty-six days earlier.

One image had stayed with her. It showed a line of warm lights moving through a river city. Perhaps it was a festival. Perhaps it was a funeral. Hana did not know. She had watched the lights for an hour and wondered who was carrying them. She had imagined tired workers, excited children, old people standing in doorways, and someone hurrying home with bread.

She had never told anyone about that thought. Scientists were expected to separate evidence from imagination.

Now a dark object was moving toward those lights.

"Show E2's orbit," she said.

A white line appeared around the distant sun. A smaller line marked the path of E2's moon. The object's blue path passed near both.

It did not hit the planet.

Ludo released a breath. "It misses."

"A miss can still kill them."

He looked at her.

Hana enlarged the meeting point. "Gravity bends every path. Usually the change is tiny. But there are narrow places where a tiny change sends an object into a much more dangerous orbit. We call one of those places a gravitational keyhole."

She drew a small red circle where the lines came close.

"If the object passes here," she continued, "E2's moon pulls it one way, and it pulls the moon the other way. Think of two people running past each other while holding a rope. Neither one has to collide for both paths to change."

"How much could the moon move?"

"I don't know yet."

"Enough to matter?"

"Run the interaction model."

Ludo's hands moved across the controls. His earlier tiredness was gone.

The computer produced hundreds of possible futures. On the wall, E2 became a blue sphere surrounded by thin lines. Some lines showed a safe passage. Others showed the moon pulled into a wider orbit. In several models, ocean tides grew high enough to drown coastal cities. In another, the moon later struck the dark object and broke apart. A cloud of rock spread through the system. The worst models changed E2's orbit around its sun.

The images were clean and silent. That made them harder to watch.

No one screamed in a model. No child ran from rising water. A red line simply crossed a blue one, and a number changed from millions to billions.

Ludo leaned back. "How long do they have?"

Hana found the date.

She checked it again.

"Twenty-two years."

"That sounds like a long time."

"For a person, yes. For moving a body this large across another star system, no."

Ludo looked again at the future where the moon broke apart. "Do they know?"

"They may not even have telescopes strong enough to see it."

"So we warn them."

The answer came easily to him. Hana envied that.

Warning a world was not like calling a city before a storm. The people of E2 did not know Earth existed. They had never heard a human language. Their best technology appeared to be about a thousand years behind Earth's. Contact could save them, but it could also destroy governments, religions, and ways of life that had lasted for centuries.

Hana thought of the moving lights beside the river.

Then she thought of water covering them.

"First," she said, "we make sure we are right."

She pressed the emergency key on her console.

The room lights changed from blue to white.

The Directorate did not use alarms unless an impact was close. It used silent messages that reached the correct people wherever they were. Within seven minutes, scientists began entering the room.

Dr. Menon arrived with his sweater inside out. Two orbit specialists joined by secure video.

Security sealed the floor. Coffee appeared, though no one remembered ordering it.

At 3:46, Director Elena Alvarez walked in.

She was sixty-three, small, and calm in a way that made other people lower their voices. Her gray hair was untidy, and she had put on two different shoes. Hana had never seen her make a mistake in public. The shoes frightened her more than panic would have.

"Show me from the beginning," Alvarez said.

Hana did.

She explained the weak point of light, the second calculation, the old survey image, and the possible orbit. She used plain words. A crisis was not the time to prove that you knew long ones.

More telescope data arrived while she spoke. Each new result made the object's path clearer.

The system gave it a temporary name: Object E2-X1.

Names, Hana thought, made fear easier to carry.

Alvarez studied the threat map. "Can we destroy it?"

"No," Hana said. "And we should not try. Breaking it could send many large pieces through the system instead of one."

"Can we move it?"

"A little. That may be enough if we start early."

Hana changed the display. "First, we strike it with heavy unmanned ships. Each impact gives it a small push. Later, machines on its surface could throw mined rock into space. The rock goes one

way, and the object moves slightly the other way. It is the same idea as a rocket."

Menon pointed at the numbers. "Surface machines would take years to build."

"Yes."

"Shipping an industrial base from Earth would take longer than we have."

"Yes."

"Then this plan does not work."

Hana brought up the night image of E2.

Fires glowed along the fork of a river. Another image showed furnaces in a mountain valley. A third showed ships entering a harbor.

"The industrial base does not all have to come from Earth," she said.

Menon frowned. "They do not have one."

"They have mines. They have metalworkers. They have builders. They have scholars. Most important, they have people who can learn."

"You are suggesting that we teach a pre-industrial world to build space equipment in twenty-two years."

"I am saying that the equipment has to be built in their system."

"That means contact."

"Yes."

Silence spread through the room.

No one there believed the people of E2 were less intelligent. Technology was not intelligence. Every machine on Earth rested on thousands of earlier discoveries, shared across generations. The people under those distant lights had begun from the same darkness. They had simply taken a different path and had less time.

Alvarez looked at the images for a long while.

"Put their world on the full wall," she said.

The room darkened.

E2 appeared above them, blue and white and green. Clouds turned over its oceans. Sunlight touched one edge while night covered the other. It looked so much like Earth that several people shifted in their seats.

The view moved closer to the dark side.

Thousands of small fires appeared.

Hana tried to imagine the lives below them. Markets opening at dawn. Farmers worrying about rain. Families arguing over money. Young people falling in love and believing their problems were the largest in the world. Kings planning wars. Healers sitting beside beds. Children learning the names of stars that could not warn them.

For those people, the sky was still a place of stories.

For Hana, it had become a clock.

Someone near the back said, "Could the lights be natural?"

It was a weak question, but no one laughed. Fear often asked for one last escape.

Hana enlarged the river city. Straight roads joined groups of buildings. Boats crossed the water. Furnace heat rose and fell with working hours.

"No," she said. "They are people."

Alvarez turned from the wall. "How certain is the danger?"

"Certain enough to begin preparing. Not certain enough to know the final method."

"And if we wait for complete certainty?"

"Then the small push we need becomes a larger push. Later, it may become impossible."

Alvarez nodded once. "First threat report in six hours. Contact options in twelve. Mission design in forty-eight. Keep this inside the highest security seal."

She faced Ludo. "Put up a countdown."

His fingers paused above the keyboard. "To the possible collision?"

"To the keyhole. That is the moment we must prevent."

The planet moved to one side of the wall. Large white numbers appeared beside it.

22 years, 184 days, 03 hours

Ludo stared at the clock. "What happens now?"

Alvarez looked toward the distant lights on E2.

"Now we ask people to give up part of their lives for a world that has never heard of us."

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Two thousand kilometers away, Captain Mira Anik woke to a hard vibration against her wrist.

For several seconds, she did not know why she was sleeping on the floor.

Then a small foot pressed against her shoulder.

Her five-year-old daughter, Elian, lay inside a blanket fort that covered half the living room. The fort had begun as a rainy-night project. By midnight, it had become a spaceship with a kitchen, a control room, and a special area for dragons. Mira had been ordered to sleep beside the entrance because every ship needed a captain.

A green toy dragon rested on her chest.

The wrist alert vibrated again.

Mira lifted the toy carefully and sat up. The apartment was dark except for the city lights beyond the windows. Her neck hurt. One of Elian's paper stars was stuck in her hair.

The message on her wrist display had no sound and only two words.

PRIORITY BLACK

Mira became fully awake.

She had seen that level of alert only twice. Once, a station carrying twelve thousand people had lost its main shield. The other time, a military navigation failure had nearly started a war.

She opened the secure details.

**Report to Atacama Directorate. Immediate departure. Off-world civilizational threat.
Mission command review.**

Off-world.

Mira read the line again.

Her first feeling was relief. Earth was safe.

Her second feeling was shame.

If the threat was not aimed at her world, then it was aimed at someone else's.

Behind her, Jonas appeared in the hallway. Her husband was barefoot and half asleep, but one look at her face ended that.

"What happened?"

Mira held up her wrist.

He read the message. "Civilizational threat to whom?"

"It doesn't say."

His own wrist began to vibrate.

Jonas closed his eyes for a moment before looking at it. He designed systems used in planetary defense. If they were calling both of them, this was not a short meeting.

"They want me in Atacama too," he said.

Mira looked into the blanket fort.

Elian had one hand curled around a silver flashlight. Her dark hair covered her face. She had fallen asleep believing her parents were guarding the entrance to a make-believe spaceship.

"We should wake her," Jonas whispered.

Mira almost agreed.

Then she imagined trying to explain a Priority Black alert to a five-year-old when they did not understand it themselves. She imagined Elian hearing fear in their voices and carrying it all morning.

"Let her sleep," Mira said. "We'll call your mother on the way."

Jonas did not move. "What if this is not a one-day meeting?"

That was the question inside the question.

Mira looked at the words mission command review. She had spent her adult life entering dangerous places after other people had lost control of them. She knew how official language hid the size of a request. Review could mean advice. It could also mean that someone had already placed her name beside a mission no one else wanted.

"Then we tell her when we know the truth," she said.

Mira reached into the fort and pulled the blanket higher over Elian's shoulder. The child's hand opened, searching in her sleep. Mira offered one finger. Elian held it.

For a moment, Mira stayed there.

On her wrist, a new file arrived from Atacama. Its security warning filled the screen. Beneath it was a single image: a blue planet turning under white clouds. Small fires marked the night side.

The next image showed a dark object's path.

Then came the countdown.

22 years, 184 days

Mira looked from the distant planet to her sleeping daughter.

Twenty-two years from now, Elian would be twenty-seven.

The number no longer felt large.

It felt like a childhood.