

Saving Earth-2: The Third Body

Chapter 2: Someone's Children

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22 years, 181 days until keyhole crossing

Three days after the dark object was found, Captain Mira Anik sat in a locked room beneath the Atacama Desert and listened to powerful people argue about whether another world had the right to be saved.

The conference chamber was smaller than she expected. A long black table filled most of it. There were no windows, no flags, and no cameras. The air smelled of coffee and the dry dust that entered every building in the desert, no matter how carefully the doors were sealed.

Twenty-two people sat around the table. Ministers, scientists, military officers, legal experts, and three members of Earth's Intervention Ethics Council had flown in under false travel records. More joined as life-sized images from secure rooms across the planet.

No one had gone home since the first alert.

Mira had slept for four hours in three days. She wore the gray service jacket she had last used during the Europa station evacuation. That crisis had given her eighteen minutes to choose which damaged section received the final rescue shuttle. Seven years later, she could still name every person left behind.

She knew what rooms like this did.

They took fear, divided it into numbers, and asked someone to sign at the bottom.

Jonas sat with the technical advisers against the back wall. He had changed shirts since their flight to Atacama, but he looked as tired as Mira felt. Before leaving home, he had made pancakes for Elian while they waited for his mother to arrive. The pancakes had burned. Elian had laughed and said he was not allowed to cook on the rescue ship.

During the flight, Mira and Jonas had talked about the alert, the object, and the mission technology. They had not talked about how long they might be gone.

Neither of them was ready to make that fear real by giving it words.

On the main wall, Earth-2 turned slowly beneath white clouds.

The briefing called it E2. Mira disliked the name. It sounded like a spare part stored in a warehouse. Nothing in the image looked like a spare. Oceans covered most of the planet. Green land curved around inland seas. A large moon moved above the bright edge of the atmosphere.

Then the image changed to the night side.

Small fires appeared along rivers, roads, and harbors. They were too faint to see without powerful instruments, but their patterns were clear. Cities. Furnaces. Ships. A whole world going about its life without knowing that Earth was watching.

Director Elena Alvarez stood at the head of the table.

"We have finished the first independent review," she said. "E2-X1 is real. Its projected path crosses the gravitational keyhole near Earth-2 and its moon. The exact damage is uncertain. The danger is not."

She touched the table. The planet moved aside, replaced by several possible futures.

In one, the dark object passed safely.

In another, it pulled the moon into a wider orbit. Red zones spread across coastlines as the tides rose.

In a third, the moon and the object struck each other years later. Debris filled the space around the planet.

The last model showed Earth-2's orbit changing slowly. Its seasons stretched. Ice spread across one half of the world while the other half grew hotter.

No model showed a simple ending.

"How certain?" Deputy Minister Varga asked.

Dr. Hana Sayegh answered from the far end of the table. "Certain enough to act. Not certain enough to know which outcome we must prevent."

Varga frowned. "That sounds convenient."

"It is inconvenient," Hana said. "The universe did not wait for us to have complete data."

Varga ran Earth's pre-contact policy office. Her job was to stop explorers, companies, armies, and religious groups from treating a newly discovered culture as an invitation. She had spent most of

her career writing rules for a day everyone hoped would come. Now that day had arrived carrying a disaster behind it.

"We have a noninterference law," she said. "It forbids direct contact with a civilization that has not detected us."

Admiral Chen leaned forward. "The law was written to prevent exploitation. It was not written to make us watch a preventable catastrophe."

"Laws matter most when breaking them feels useful," Varga replied.

Commissioner Osei raised one hand before the argument could harden. He was the oldest person in the room, a historian and philosopher who had spent forty years studying interventions that began with help and ended with control.

"We should be careful with the word save," he said. "It makes the helper sound innocent."

Chen looked at the threat model. "Would you prefer abandon?"

"I would prefer honesty. If we arrive with aircraft, medicine, machines, and knowledge of the sky, we will change every balance of power on that planet. A ruler who welcomes us may defeat every ruler who does not. A priest may call us gods. A merchant may sell our tools. A frightened army may steal them. We could prevent one disaster and begin ten others."

The room became quiet.

Mira understood why Alvarez had invited him. Osei was not there to stop action. He was there to stop everyone from feeling pure while they acted.

Hana pointed toward the red coastlines. "And if we do nothing, those balances of power still end. They end under water."

"Yes," Osei said. "Doing nothing is also a choice. That does not make every kind of help wise."

Mira looked from one speaker to the other.

They were both right. That was the part no plan could remove.

Alvarez turned to her. "Captain Anik. What would a rescue require?"

Every face shifted toward Mira.

She opened the mission outline on her slate. Most of it was still guesses, but the basic problem was clear.

"We can launch unmanned impactors without contacting Earth-2," she said. "They would hit E2-X1 and push it a little. That gives us time and better data, but Hana's team does not believe impacts alone will be enough."

"Why not send larger ones?" Varga asked.

"Because every kilogram has to cross the distance from Earth. Larger ships need more fuel, more time, and more launches. At some point it becomes easier to build the later equipment inside the E2 system."

Mira changed the display. A simple drawing appeared: a machine fixed to the surface of the dark object, throwing a stream of rock into space.

"This is a mass driver," she said. "It uses magnetic force to throw mined rock in one direction. The object moves slightly in the other direction. If enough machines work for enough years, that small movement carries E2-X1 away from the keyhole."

"And Earth-2 has none of those machines," Varga said.

"They have none of the factories needed to build them," Mira replied. "No electrical grid. No modern engines. No launch system. We would need to help them create selected parts of an industrial society in less than two decades."

An uncomfortable murmur moved around the table.

"Selected parts?" Osei asked.

Jonas answered from the back wall. "Power, measurement standards, modern metalworking, machine tools, medicine, observatories, and heavy transport. Later, rockets and orbital construction."

Varga turned toward him. "Dr. Vale, Earth needed centuries to build those systems."

"Earth also spent centuries taking wrong turns," Jonas said. "They would not need to repeat all of them. We know how to design a generator, prevent an infection, and test a pressure vessel. The people on Earth-2 can learn the same principles we did."

"Can they learn them fast enough?"

"Some can. Not everyone, and not everywhere. We would build around mines, ports, universities, hospitals, and launch sites first. Most of the planet would remain as it is for years."

Osei studied him. "You describe an island of advanced power inside a pre-industrial world. Who controls that island?"

Jonas paused.

It was not a technical question, and engineering could not hide him from it.

"That decision cannot belong to Earth alone," he said.

"Then who receives electricity first? Which kingdom receives medicine? Which language does the translator learn? Which army guards the launch site? Every answer creates winners and losers."

"Yes."

"You understand that this rescue could become a conquest even if no one plans one?"

Jonas looked at the distant planet. "Yes."

"And you still support contact?"

He took a breath before answering.

Mira knew that pause. Jonas used it when he wanted the truth to be more important than sounding clever.

"If we stay silent," he said, "we are still making a decision for them. We are deciding that they should remain ignorant because their ignorance makes our conscience cleaner. I don't think that is respect."

Osei held his gaze. "No. It is not."

The answer surprised several people in the room.

Osei continued. "But respect also means accepting that they may refuse us."

Admiral Chen shook his head. "One ruler cannot be allowed to refuse survival for an entire planet."

"There will not be one ruler," Varga said. "There may be hundreds."

"Then we speak to hundreds."

"In languages we do not know, through customs we do not understand, while a clock runs down."

The argument spread around the table.

Some wanted to launch the impactors and delay contact until there was more data. Others said every lost year would make the final deflection harder. The medical team warned that a careless landing could introduce disease in both directions. Security officers worried that human technology would become weapons. Economists explained that building the rescue industry could destroy local trades and create a new class with access to Earth knowledge.

No one offered an easy answer because there was none.

Mira listened and wrote four words on her slate.

Consent under a deadline.

That was the true mission.

Moving E2-X1 would be difficult, but gravity followed rules. People did not. The rescue would ask strangers to trust visitors from the sky, rebuild parts of their world, and give up land and labor for a danger they could not yet see.

Trust could not be delivered in a cargo ship.

"Captain?" Alvarez said.

Mira realized the room had quieted again.

"What would you recommend?"

Mira looked at the four words.

"Launch the first impactors now," she said. "They do not require contact, and delay only reduces their value. At the same time, prepare a contact mission. No military landing. No claim of authority. We arrive with evidence, translators, medical barriers, and a plan they can question."

Chen frowned. "And if they say no?"

"Then we keep talking."

"Until the clock makes the choice for them?"

"Until we understand who said no and who never had the chance to answer."

Osei gave a small nod.

Mira continued. "We cannot promise that contact will leave their world unchanged. It won't. We can promise that survival is the goal, not control. Then we build rules that make that promise difficult to break."

Varga looked unconvinced, but she was listening now.

For the next two hours, the room turned Mira's recommendation into a decision the Council could vote on. Lawyers added limits. Scientists added conditions. The admiral demanded security authority, and Osei demanded local oversight. No one got everything they wanted.

That was the first sign the plan might be honest.

Near the end of the hearing, a junior analyst loaded the wrong image.

He was supposed to display a map of the largest city detected on Earth-2. Instead, a time-lapse began to play.

The image showed the same river city over several weeks. Its fires grew brighter on certain nights. Lines of light moved along the streets. Boats gathered on the dark water. Thousands of people appeared to carry lamps toward a central square.

The analyst reached for the controls. "Sorry. Wrong file."

"Leave it," Alvarez said.

The sequence played again.

No one knew what the gathering meant. It could have been a festival, a funeral, a market, or a prayer. The reason did not matter as much as the act itself. People had left their homes and carried light into the night together.

Mira thought of Elian's blanket fort. She pictured a child in that distant city asking to hold a lamp and a parent warning them not to drop it.

The planet on the wall stopped being a problem.

It became someone's home.

Someone's children were down there.

The Council approved two actions before sunrise: launch preparation for the first unmanned impactors, and full planning for a contact mission. The final mission vote would follow once the cost, crew, and contact rules were known.

It was not a promise to save Earth-2.

It was a promise to try.

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After the hearing, Alvarez led Mira onto the observation deck above the telescope array.

Dawn was spreading across the desert. The sky near the eastern ridge had turned pale gold. Below them, maintenance workers in orange suits moved between the dishes. They looked very small beside machines built to study distant worlds.

Cold air touched Mira's face. She had spent three days inside sealed rooms, and the open sky felt almost unreal.

Alvarez rested both hands on the rail. "The contact mission needs a commander."

Mira had expected the sentence. Hearing it still made something close inside her.

"No."

Alvarez did not look surprised. "You have not seen the final profile."

"I have seen enough. Interstellar transfer. First contact. Industrial development. Political negotiation. A deployment measured in years, with no safe date for family travel and no reliable return schedule."

"That is accurate."

"Then my answer is no."

For a moment, Alvarez said nothing.

Mira was grateful for that. A weaker leader would have begun selling the mission at once.

"Because of Elian," Alvarez said.

Mira turned toward her. "Because she is five. Because Jonas is already on your technical list. Because our daughter woke up yesterday with both parents gone and a grandmother trying to explain why. Because I have spent my career entering disasters other people created, and this disaster does not even belong to Earth."

"No," Alvarez said quietly. "It does not."

The answer made Mira angrier than an argument would have.

"Ask someone without a child."

"I considered that."

"And?"

"I need a commander who will remember that every engineering target on that world is also a home."

Mira looked away.

"That is manipulation."

"Yes."

"You admit it?"

"Pretending otherwise would be another form of it."

The first sunlight touched the largest telescope dish. Its white surface changed from gray to gold.

Alvarez continued. "You have evacuation command experience. You trained in first-contact law. Scientists trust you because you ask what their numbers leave out. Soldiers trust you because you do not waste their lives. Politicians dislike you just enough to believe you are independent."

"That is not a reason to take a mother from her child."

"No reason will make that clean."

Mira gripped the cold rail.

She wanted Alvarez to promise that the mission would last only a year. She wanted Jonas to be unnecessary. She wanted Earth-2 to be empty. She wanted to go back three days and sleep beside Elian's blanket fort without knowing that another child slept beneath a doomed moon.

Her wrist slate vibrated.

A home recording had been held by the Atacama security seal until the hearing ended. The time stamp showed that Elian had made it on the morning Mira and Jonas left.

Mira opened it.

Elian's face filled the screen. Her hair stood up on one side, and the blanket fort sagged behind her.

"Mom," she whispered at full speaking volume. "Dad says you went to space work, but I think he is lying because he made pancakes and they were bad. Come home before dinner. Also, I fixed the spaceship. It needs a dragon room."

The recording ended.

Mira watched it again.

Alvarez turned toward the desert and gave her the privacy of pretending not to hear.

Mira imagined going home that evening. Elian would run to the door. They would repair the blanket fort and argue about bedtime. Mira could refuse the mission, and for a while their life would continue.

Someone else would take command.

Perhaps that person would be good. Perhaps they would understand the machines, the politics, and the danger. But Mira knew what fear did to rescue missions. It made speed feel more important than consent. It made force look efficient. It turned people into numbers because numbers were easier to move.

She looked at the frozen image of Elian.

Then she remembered the lamps beside the river on Earth-2.

If Earth were the world in danger, Mira would beg anyone who could help to come. She would not ask them to preserve every government or belief. She would ask them to remember that survival did not give them ownership.

"I will not order you," Alvarez said.

"You could."

"I could order Captain Anik to report. I cannot order Elian's mother to believe the order is right."

Mira gave a tired, bitter laugh. "Did you practice that?"

"No. I have simply made enough unforgivable requests."

They stood in silence while the desert warmed.

Mira closed Elian's recording and opened a blank mission page.

"If I accept," she said, "the mission does not belong to any nation on Earth. No flags on first contact. No resource claims. No military government."

"Agreed."

"Consent must be an operating rule, not a line in a speech. Local leaders and ordinary people must see the evidence. We do not choose one king and call that a planet."

"Agreed."

"Jonas reports through technical command, not through me. I will not be his captain and his wife inside the same decision chain."

Alvarez hesitated. "Difficult."

"Required."

"Agreed."

"Every crew member hears the family cost before selection. No posters about destiny. No promise of a quick return. We tell them this mission may take the best years of their lives."

"Agreed."

Mira looked down at her hand. The edge of the slate had pressed a red line into her palm.

"And if the later models show that Earth-2 cannot be saved?"

Alvarez met her eyes.

"Then you come home."

The words sounded kind.

That was why they were dangerous.

Both women knew that after first contact, there might be no clean point at which to stop. Once people on Earth-2 trusted them, leaving could become another way of killing them.

Mira looked up at the brightening sky. The stars had vanished in the sunlight, but they were still there. Somewhere beyond them, a blue planet turned beneath its moon. Its cities were waking. Its children knew nothing about Earth, or E2-X1, or the woman deciding whether to leave her daughter for them.

"Send me the full mission profile," Mira said.

Alvarez let out a slow breath.

Mira did not mistake it for relief.

She opened Elian's message one more time before returning to the locked room.