

# “Target”

## CHAPTER ONE:

SYSTEM STAR CYCLE: 6752.0719 A.T.

PLANETARY DATE: 171/195

LAUNCH TIME: TEE-MINUS 02:32:30

A tranquil sphere hung in Space under a white cloud.

“I don’t know why,” Medical Commander Dara Lidasireess muttered to herself out loud, “but I have a bad feeling about all of this.”

From a vantage point some four hundred kiloretms above, Dara was watching it beyond the thick syntheglass of an observation viewport; the sight was dizzying, fascinating. The cloud-shrouded planet Aidennia. It seemed to lie almost in the trajectory of the *Orbiter 1: Aidennia Station*. The light of a strong, middle-aged sun cataloged as Pintarus 19 fell on the cloud.

“*Count now stands at minus zero two nodes and thirty-two, and counting,*” the station controller announced over the station PA. “*All networks are green and go.*”

Dara smiled nervously, distracting herself by the vista beyond and beneath her view. “Calm yourself,” she said aloud. “Feeling anxious is normal and natural. It is part of the system that evolved to keep us safe and well.” She took a deep breath. Being the only one in the observation lounge, she felt somewhat silly being self-conscious about her anxiousness. “Come on. Give it a chance.”

There was still plenty of time before she would be called. Dara shifted her attention and the room seemed to slip away, walls became gossamer and ethereal.

She was suddenly thinking of other times, and other places...

The public address net hummed again, then the controller was back with another update. “*Minus zero two nodes and fifteen and counting. Technicians, complete final checkouts.*”

Dara’s attention refocused as her peripheral view caught a glimpse of her reflection coming off the window. A tall, powerful slender, fine-boned figure, with high cheekbones and penetrating chocolate eyes that gave a look of great delicacy founded in extraordinary resiliency framed by a neatly cropped mane told that she was no shallow youth, but a fully mature adult.

Saying good-bye had not been easy, especially to her elder sibling, Aspera. A sadness that had kept a small place in her heart now pulsed as Dara viewed Aidennia below.

“*Medical Commander,*” an unexpected, disembodied page intoned over the still airwaves.

“Yes?”

“*There’s a planet to orbit call coming through for you.*”

“Fine. I will take it here.”

The stylized blue-and-white ovals of the Spacecorps logo flashed holographically off a communication set. A dark-haired female holograph, an avatar of the real person making the summons, coalesced into view. The similarities between the two females were undeniable. Broad smiling features caused Dara’s voice to fill with emotion, her features melting into sudden recognition.

“Aspera!” Dara gasped, excitedly.

“I know your life is anything but normal right now, but I just had to say one last farewell.”

Feelings of euphoria swept repeatedly over Dara as she spoke without turning her eyes from the miniaturized figure on the holo-emitter. “I welcome any communication from you.”

“How are you doing?”

“Nervous.”

The female holograph laughed warmly, flashing a set of perfectly formed white teeth. The sound fell on ears that were eager to hear such a resonance.

“You would not be you without being that.” Aspera smiled. “You have much responsibility on your shoulders being part of the vanguard for generations of clans to come. The first settlers on a new world where unlimited food and water will be the birthright for all...”

“You’re quoting incentive simulations.”

“Well, it *is* true. Regardless of the stature you have been elevated to by Spacecorps,” her smile broadened more. “You will always be my little sister.”

“A title I will always be proud to have...”

Dara was cut off as another controller announcement echoed throughout the towering launch apparatus.

*"This is Spacecorps Launch Control," he said. "Complete close-out preparations. Check command-apse switch configurations. Complete inertial measurement unit preflight alignments. Transition onboard computers to launch configuration. Start fuel cell thermal conditioning. Close vent valves. Transition backup flight system to launch configuration."*

"Sounds busy up there," Aspera mused, undeterred.

Dara nodded. "Never-ending."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Where are the others?"

"Capel's attending a mission commanders final briefing. The children are completing their concluding physicals with the other Pod crews, so I am just..."

"Seeking some solace before the launch."

"You know me too well."

Aspera hesitated, wanting to be near her sister, to soothe, to remind, to strengthen familial bonds. Another female would, perhaps, have flushed a little, she did not. Her face grew urgent. Meeting her younger sibling's eyes, she said, steadily, "Then I best let you get to it." She paused, more from emotion than for dramatic effect; she fought back sudden tears. Finally, she added, "Always know you are loved."

"Always."

There was another hesitation. A non-verbal exchange. The secret language between siblings.

"Are you more at peace with your decision?" Aspera asked.

"About the children?"

Aspera simply nodded.

"Capel and I have lived a good part of our lives," Dara waxed. "The children are just starting out. If someone should be apart of this colonization effort, it should be Capel and me..."

"Do you remember when you were discussing your plans for the space flight? You could not decide whether you had the right to bring Moela, Retho, and Lunon along."

"Yes. I remember."

"Do you regret your decision?"

"You want the truth?"

"The truth."

"Well, not knowing how long we can last out there..." Dara stifled a sob. "They deserve something more than that."

"Having them with you ...Is that what you want?"

"Yes." Dara regained her composure, adding, "I suppose so."

"They are degreed and qualified."

The two siblings gazed at each other. Dara closed her eyes to show how she felt. Their bodies yearned across the void to reach each other, but they remained motionless. Aspera clenched her teeth.

"Until we meet again."

Dara drew in her breath. Her voice was cracked with emotion as she replied, "Until then."

Aspera sighed as she and her smile disappeared.