

~ DEATH WAVE CHRONICLES ~

BOOK THREE

# SPHINX

## Chapter One

Tyrone Stradjek moped about his apartment. He had just finished another frustrating vid-com with his grandfather, arguing over the direction Volaris was moving.

“This wasn’t what I had envisaged.”

“Opa. I am not my father. You both had similar tastes and skills; mine are different. I couldn’t possibly continue Volaris with the same zeal as you, simply because I don’t feel the same about art ... It’s what got Father killed.”

Their discussion went downhill from there. He checked his watch, wondering how that redheaded brat — Rhyllien — was faring with the first task he had set her.

“Zera, play news,” Tyrone commanded his personal AI. “Search for Niger.” The TV came to life and after a couple of seconds a report on Global News Network aired. It depicted aerial footage from a drone over the old mine. A couple of bodies could be seen lying in the dirt. The caption *Breaking news — mysterious death wave hits Niger* flashed along the bottom of the screen.

“Finally, some success.” Tyrone smiled. “I didn’t think the girl had the stomach.” Now all he had to do was ensure she still considered her friends were in danger. Still, if he had to arrange for her mother to have an accident ...

In a rare and spontaneous display of trust, he decided to arrange for the next diamond to be sent immediately.

“Williams,” Tyrone called as he opened his safe.

Williams knocked and strode through the door a moment later. “Yes, sir.”

“I’ve got another delivery for Lightning Couriers.” He handed him a small unmarked box, then picked up a document, reading the short list of names. He picked up a stylus and drew a line through Niels Franke. “Get them to send this to Joseph Hart of EpiQ Minerals.”

“Like the previous order, sir? Rush delivery?” Williams pocketed the box, hearing the slight rattle within.

Tyrone considered for a moment; the girl still had to fly to Giza and do whatever she needed to do there first. He still had a while. “No, not the Premium Rush, whatever the next level below is should suffice.”

“Very good, sir.” Williams was about to turn, then hesitated.

“Something else?” Tyrone asked as he closed the safe and slid the picture back into place.

“Sir. These items are far too valuable to be kept here. Surely the Volaris vault would be better suited for such things.”

“These stones are small and easily hidden on a person, and as you say, extremely valuable. I simply don’t trust anyone else with them.”

“I see, sir. As you wish.” Williams noted the brochure on the small table. “Also, I’m pleased to confirm everything is prepared for the displays for the fundraiser this Saturday. I’m certain the auction will be a success.”

“Good work. In fact, I was thinking of displaying the remaining pair of diamonds. No one has ever seen diamonds as large. It could be a huge drawcard.”

“I see. I can arrange security here to be tightened; bring a few more over from Miramar.”

“Excellent. With much of the Volaris vault empty, there’s little point in them all being at HQ.”

“I’ll see to it, sir.” Williams nodded, pivoted and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

Tyrone walked onto the balcony and watched the ocean for a few minutes, swilling the ice in his bourbon. With only a few remaining assets to be sold, the Volaris collection would be the end of the business that had built their reputation. Moving in a completely different direction, in which he’d have even greater control, he would be pinning his hopes in the new off-world mining boom. From the data obtained, he was glad he’d acted when he did, before it became astronomically expensive.

“And if the world’s population is decimated, large scale organisation will be doomed on Earth anyway,” he reminded himself.

“Incoming message.”

Tyrone put the pillow over his head and rolled over, trying in vain to ignore the monitor as it beeped softly.

“Incoming message,” Zera repeated.

He blearily looked at the clock. 02:17.

The pillow sailed across the room at the monitor, which toppled back against the wall. Tyrone sat up in his bed and yelled at the AI. “Damn it, Zera. Do you need an upgrade? What don’t you understand about ‘Do not Disturb’?”

“Emergency call, Tyrone.” Sensing his agitated state, the AI used a softer tone.

“Put it through,” he said eventually. Rubbing his eyes, Tyrone reached for his robe and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr Stradjek. We’ve lost the pod and the girl.”

“What? Speak up man!”

“We’ve lost the pod and the girl,” the voice repeated.

Tyrone stomped over to the monitor and pulled the pillow off the speaker. “Damn it, Simmons. How? Where the fuck has she gone?”

“Sir, we believe the pod has been hacked. We lost contact several hours into the flight. It was travelling east over Niger at the time, heading for the programmed coordinates in Giza, then ... just disappeared.”

“And no trace at all?” Tyrone tossed the pillow back onto the bed.

“Nothing. The transponder signal has been cut completely. If there’s any course change, we don’t know it.”

“So, you can’t track it?” He paced back and forth, flustered at the early morning call, but more irate at the news. “Do we know who could do this? That AI pod was top of the line.”

“Several entities come to mind—”

“And who’s out to get me or knows what I’m up to? The Easterners? Did one of the mining corporations get wind of it? Maybe Franke sabotaged it?”

“If Franke sabotaged it, we’d still have the transponder. Those things don’t simply cut out, there are too many fail-safes and if it crashed, even blew up, the emergency beacon would be pinging. As to who — a few corporations have the ability, but it’s unlikely they’d worry about us. We aren’t that big a concern.”

“Not yet. What about ICON? Would those bastards get involved? They’re not into mining, but we’ve crossed paths recently.”

“If ICON is involved, perhaps they’re merely doing it for a third party — someone who is into off-world mining and using them. Of course, it may have nothing to do with mining. Perhaps a corporation is after a cure. Or someone is simply after the diamonds.”

Tyrone poured a bourbon and sat down, thinking. “You’re certain the pod was hacked? Could this brat have done something?”

“As you say, it’s top-of-the-line AI. I doubt she has the knowledge to override the whole system at once. No, this is definitely from an external source with big money.”

Tyrone cancelled the call, and commed Williams.

“Mr Stradjek? Yes?” There was the ruffling of sheets in the background.

“Williams, have we got a list of ICON interests and their partners?” He switched on the TV to get world news as he waited. There’d be no sleep tonight.

“Umm, I can get a list, sir.”

“Send it. What about our kidnapers in the UK?”

“The kidnapers? Oh ... I just read a message from Simmons about the pod. Interesting—

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“Interesting? It’s a shitfest, that’s what it is! Now, about these kidnapers?”

“Last data I have is they’re still in Reading, or the phone is, but it did move slightly before we lost it.”

“How did we lose the signal? Was that hacked too?”

“Unlikely. I can only assume the battery is dead.”

“Fuck! Can’t anything go right for once? What the hell were they doing in Reading? Weren’t they supposed to rendezvous in Maidenhead?”

“We’ve no information. Reading is on the way to Maidenhead. Maybe they’re too sick to continue, or a double-cross?”

“Send a drone out to check,” Tyrone ordered.

“Sir, we can try. Our influence over there is minimal, and any local assets have either been evacuated or are now dead.”

“I’m sure you’ll do what you can. Keep tabs on the phone at least. If it pings in a safe zone, I want to know. Have you anything at all to report about the pod before we lost contact?”

“Only notes from Simmons; just before arrival in Niger there was an indication of the door opening prior to landing. Could mean anything, perhaps a glitch ... but nothing to do with the hacking. Everything was nominal on departure.”

“Is she after me? Does she know of my location?”

“Unlikely, in both—”

Stradjek cancelled the call when his tablet pinged; the requested list of ICON affiliates had arrived. It was long; some of the listed affiliates were shared between ICON and Volaris and several other organisations with mutual underhanded dealings. Some he couldn’t care less about; others he’d be dealing with in the future, so it would be best to keep inside.

It amazed him how Williams managed to get all this information. “It will be worth keeping him when we transition to the moon,” he decided. “Or maybe not ...” *He’s very efficient ... maybe too efficient ...*

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