

“Like two sides of a flipping coin, the Known Economy reflects first self-awareness, then self-deception. Self-awareness, in the form of love, peace, and lack of attachment, *deflates* the Known Economy. Self-deception, in the form of anger, fear, and forgetfulness, *inflates* the Known Economy. It was the Sentient One who flipped this coin. On the day the coin is caught, the fate of the universe will be revealed: inflation to over-existence, or deflation to non-existence.”

—From *The Book of Ω^64* , of the Swandeen Praxis

CHAPTER ONE

Diana’s eyes flicked left again, to the red countdown timer blinking *T-minus 3 hours 02 minutes*. So, ten minutes since she’d wedged herself behind the podium in this hot cabin of bored science writers. She was here so her anxiety didn’t spread to the team in the launch room. She had hoped that handling reporters would numb her mind, as it often did, but ten minutes at the mic only saw her anxiety increase. And it wasn’t that she was superstitious. But everyone knew; a project as complex as Namaka always had one, last minute, mission critical Problem.

So what would it be—ballast valve? Sonar calibration? The new antenna?

She fingered her collar. The press cabin squeezed her like a coffin full of folding chairs. She eyed the reporters, pointed to one she recognized.

“So *Diana*,” he started, “you and Greg Dantly looked more than a little *starry-eyed* on deck yesterday, and I think what *everybody’s* wondering is are you and Greg romantically involved?”

“Well, here’s the thing *Dan*,” she said, and gestured to the transparent pseudoscreens floating at her sides streaming ocean floor conditions, weather metrics, scientific context, “the subject of this briefing is Namaka’s historic deep water bioprospecting, not my romantic life or my not-romantic life. Those are pictures of the bottom of the ocean. See them? Let’s stay on topic.” The room was feeling smaller and warmer, less filled with air. She resisted pulling her collar again.

“Is it true that you, Greg Dantly, and Liz Mustang all lived together at MIT?” Dan pressed.

“We were in the dorms with everyone else,” she said, “next question. Not Dan? Yes?”

“What are you the most worried will go wrong today,” someone shouted.

“Nothing will go wrong. We won’t have any problems,” she said, a distracting bead of sweat starting down her back.

“Any seasickness for you *Diana*?” a woman called.

“No. Does it feel hot to anyone?”

“*Diana*,” someone asked, “you’re 30 now, and since your father died you’ve been CEO of Roark Pharmaceuticals. So what do you think Atticus Roark would make of the way you’ve run his company?”

“My god, you people,” *Diana* meant to whisper but instead semi-shouted into the mic. She tried smiling, she pointed at the pseudoscreens again where the graphs and mission goals spread. She flicked damp red hair behind her ear and took a breath.

“For one thing what does my age have to do with anything? And look yes, fifteen years ago my father did a great thing for the world and we’re all in his debt, but it’s what we’re doing *now* that matters. Does anyone have—”

The cabin door swung in, interrupting her, and the reporters turned. Diana watched one of Liz's sailor-technicians stumble through. And just from the look in his eyes she knew—here it came. The Problem. Hydraulics? Chip failure? They had spares. It would be fine.

She watched the tech teeter through chairs, reporters craning to watch. When he reached her he leaned in and whispered, "He's..."

"Say it," she urged. "What?"

"It's Marcus, Ms. Roark. His hand is broken."

"His *hand*?"

"Crushed. Caught in the retrieval harness. They're getting him airlifted to the mainland for surgery." The tech was staring at her. Shocked. "The reserve pilot had passport issues... you know... and we lose microsat access in twelve hours... so Liz says... the mission's off. We have to scrub the mission."

Diana shot another look to the timer—now frozen at *2 hours 58 minutes 21 seconds*—and cursed herself for not just building Namaka its own constellation of micro-sats. Instead they'd flown this super-array from fifteen separate providers—efficient, but a very brief access window. Very hard to arrange again. Her eyes strayed from the timer to the stirring reporters, who had been bored with drug bioprospecting, but now sensed a more dramatic shift in the energy. Their eyes had a gleam. She deflected one question and sent the tech back to Liz, confirmed the frozen launch status, mentally unspooling dive data.

The Problem wasn't anything that she'd expected. Marcus was out. And they needed both subs in the trench to synch with the sats, but Greg was the only pilot standing. Diana broke from the podium toward the door, and as she slipped through she heard the reporters behind her, finally shouting better questions.

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