

PANICI HORROR IN SPACE: BOOK 3

DEAD

A 3D rendered skull is shown in profile, facing right. It is set against a background of a planet, likely Earth, with a bright horizon line. The skull is rendered in a realistic, slightly weathered style. The word "DEAD" is written in large, jagged, metallic letters that appear to be floating in the air above the skull. The letters have a dark, metallic texture and sharp, irregular edges, giving them a menacing and industrial appearance.

CHRISTINA ENGELA

A complex, intricate pattern of white lines on a dark background, resembling a circuit board or a digital network. The lines are thin and form a dense, interconnected web of paths, creating a sense of depth and complexity. This pattern serves as a background for the author's name, which is written in a bold, sans-serif font.

Dust by Christina Engela

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Dust

Imagine, if you will:

Starbase 43 was a space station midway between two points on a busy route and as such, it provided a convenient spot for passing traffic to layover, to carry out repairs or have a bit of fun. Passing traffic, whose main purpose in passing by lay in the fields of supply, trade, tourism, business travel, colonization, military patrols – or of course, exploration – was increasing steadily, and had been since before the starbase even existed. The increase in traffic in that direction was the main reason for Starbase 43's inception.

Decades later, aside from being a convenient stop-off for passing ships – mostly loderunners, the starbase also represented both Space Fleet as well as the Terran Empire in the area. As such it was a sort of naval outpost that provided a harbor for a small number of Space Fleet ships, which included some Main Fleet patrol ships, several Pioneer Fleet exploration vessels, and a few resupply vessels. To a lesser degree, Starbase 43 was well equipped to host and entertain the crews of visiting ships – civilian and military – for shore leave and social activities, and as a way-station for colonists moving out to their new homes close to the leading edge of Human civilization. Many people met connecting flights there, changing over from one ship to another on their way inward or outward across the Terran Empire. That being said, most people on the starbase were transient – aside from the personnel assigned there, nobody actually lived on it on a permanent basis.

On the other side of the same coin, many ships of all descriptions traveling close to the starbase often just passed by without stopping – either not needing any of the facilities or services on offer at the starbase on that particular voyage – and didn't bother to drop out of warp speed as they did so. On the other hand, perhaps as many ships *did* stop – and ships of all kinds visited Starbase 43! Cargo-carriers – or loderunners in the vernacular – were the most prevalent since they were multipurpose and could carry a mix of passengers and diverse cargo in any number of

combinations. As many as a hundred ships came and went at Starbase 43 during a twenty four hour span, and this had the consequence that the starbase was constantly busy and its public spaces filled with the bustle of people coming and going round the clock – and for all sorts of reasons.

On this particular day – which happened to be a Wednesday for those who wanted to know – people on Starbase 43 seemed to be bustling about with noticeably more urgency than usual – in fact, a lot of them were running. Audible in most places aboard the station, an alarm had started blaring all over the starbase, which informed all personnel that something was amiss and they were to report to their duty stations immediately. Well-drilled and practiced through training and routine, the long-term residents quickly made their way to where they would either be needed – or where they would be out of the way of those with jobs to do under the conditions of an alert. Civilians and visitors passing through tended to be the ones standing in place looking around in puzzlement – or hurriedly scuttling to their appointed destinations.

Why was the alarm blaring? Ah – now, to answer *that* question, we must visit the starbase’s Traffic Control Center, where only five minutes before, it had been business as usual. During a single day, dozens of ships appeared on the station’s sensors, and the starbase’s traffic controllers were accustomed to all sorts of craft appearing out of nowhere as they exited hyperspace, then tracking them as they slowly cruised towards the docking facility, guided by the automated system at the traffic control center. It was a life of routine, mundanely directing traffic in its comings and its goings. However, it was a very, very rare thing to see a ship actually enter the starbase’s extreme sensor range in normal space at high sub-warp speed, *while heading directly for the starbase!*

A youthful junior officer, one of twenty operators on duty at the banks of monitoring stations that occupied much of the floor-space of the Traffic Control Center raised his hand and turned to look for his supervisor. Lieutenant-Commander James Prothero happened to be standing over one of the Ensign’s colleagues and belly-laughing with her at funny cat videos. “Commander Prothero!” He called.

“Yes, Ensign?” The swarthy mustached Senior Traffic Controller replied, smiling casually.

“Sir, I’ve a bogie on my screen – it’s on a collision course, not responding to hails!”

The Commander quickly appeared beside the operator, took one look at the display on the Ensign’s console – and paled.

“*Collision alert!*” He snapped to the room in general. “Notify Ops!” Someone activated the alarm – which is the point where the aforementioned events were set in motion.

Moments later, when the warning message arrived on the nerve-center of Starbase 43, called the Ops Bridge, the second in command of the starbase was stung into action. Merso Larez, an elderly Commander several decades Commodore Peter’s junior, rose out of the command seat like it was on fire and stood bolt upright!

“*Collision alert!*” He bellowed so that everyone in the Ops Bridge – the nerve center of Starbase 43 – could hear him. “Look lively there – what’s its status?” He demanded of a sensor operator, who jumped in his seat as the old man walked directly up beside him.

“It’s on a collision course, Commander – no sign of veering off! Impact in ...thirty-two minutes!”

Commander Larez had seen a lot of action in his forty year career – and although living on a starbase was supposed to be ‘easy’ wind-down to retirement – even uneventful in comparison to living and working aboard an active-duty starship, it was still hard to forget his years of experience!

A picture of the approaching ship appeared on the Ops main screen – the object was moving towards the starbase, no sign of life, no lights of any kind, including navigation lights! Commander Larez was well aware – as all of them were – that Starbase 43 itself was a space station – a large deep-space structure that had no drive system of its own. Although it had some thrusters to alter its attitude, it couldn’t move out of the way! The starbase – a space station the size of a small city – couldn’t just scoot over a couple of hundred meters to the left to avoid a collision and allow the incoming ship to harmlessly pass by!

Options came to mind – options like blowing it out of the sky while there was still time to do so! After all, if it were an incoming meteorite or an asteroid, he wouldn't even hesitate – but... this was a ship – there might be people aboard – and there was still time to do something else other than to entertain a knee-jerk reaction to reach for the guns!

“Coms!” Commander Larez ordered. “Try to raise that ship!”

The communications operator worked to contact the strange ship as it bore down on them.

“No reply, sir!” The young officer replied tersely.

“Try again!”

“No response, sir!”

“Then keep trying until I tell you to stop!” Larez barked.

“Aye.”

“Sensors! Scan that ship!”

“Aye, sir!” Another relatively young officer replied, jumping into action.

“No life signs – it's unmanned... appears to be traveling on a steady trajectory – no sign of it being under power... It's moving on impetus!”

“Coms?” Larez asked the comtech again, desperation audible in his appeal. The operator silently shook his head in the negative.

“ID beacon?”

“If it has one, it's not transmitting sir!”

“Dammit!” Commander Larez cursed in frustration. It was a godsdamned ghost-ship!

There was no sign that the mysterious ship would veer off course before it hit the station. A disastrous collision appeared imminent...which is exactly why everyone on the Ops Bridge was extremely tense and worried. What else was there to be done, Larez wondered? What were their alternative option? Time was running out fast! He quickly came to a decision.

“Somebody get me the Commodore!” He bellowed.

Meanwhile, some distance away on the only golf course in the quadrant – which happened to be located on the second of the starbase's four large

public main decks, Commodore Druscilla Peters was enjoying a pleasant Wednesday morning playing golf.

The golf course was at the center of a large portion of that deck which had been set aside for natural pursuits, including the cultivation of several orchards of fruit trees, an artificial stream filled with trout, and a petting zoo. The whole deck – lit in natural cycles of 12 hours daylight and 12 night emanating from a simulated sunlight generator in the high domed ceiling, was called ‘The Arboretum’. The projection on the vast domed ceiling even included little fluffy white clouds against the blue sky. A rather pleasant, warm breeze generated by giant silent fans about half a kilometer away, created an atmosphere so pleasant that she could actually almost believe she was on a real Terran golf course back home on Earth.

Druscilla Peters was not a young woman – as a matter of fact, she was well on her way to her 99th birthday – but thanks to the many boons of advanced medical science, was still very healthy, fit and capable, and happened to look quite a bit younger than her age. She’d always been fond of physical activities and sports – and even though she was a little past doing more intensive physical sports as she had in her youth, she still put in a good couple of hours per week in at the gym – and golf was still one of her favorite hobbies.

It had been a pretty enjoyable morning’s golfing thus far, and she was looking forward to another brisk walk to the third hole once she’d taken care of the second. Peters was just bringing back her club in preparation for her first shot at the second hole, when a faint, distant noise caused her to pause. Had someone just called her name, she wondered – or had she imagined it? Peters turned her head round, her body still frozen in mid-swing, and noticed a couple of uniformed figures running towards her from the direction of the club-house in the distance. A tiny electric golf cart appeared to be in hot pursuit behind them, bouncing as it summited each little green grassy rise at high speed. The little running, uniformed figures were frantically waving at her – or were they? She turned to check behind her if there was anyone else they might be waving at – there was no-one. Druscilla Peters brought her club back down steadily and leaned

on it like a walking cane, waiting. She frowned. What the hell was going on now?

“Commodore!” The man in the lead shouted to Peters, panting heavily as he drew up in front of her. Doubtlessly, this circus act would explain itself shortly. “Commodore!” The officer who’d been in the lead panted again and swallowed, pausing to give her something that passed for a salute. She recognized him as Lieutenant Gobel.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” She snapped. “Can’t you see it’s my Wednesday sport period?”

“We’ve been trying to reach you on your comlink, ma’am!” Gobel said, catching his breath.

“Yes, that’s why I left it behind at my office!” She smiled wryly. “It’s Wednesday. Otherwise I’d be fielding calls about every silly thing that could be handled by the people actually on duty!”

“Yes’m!” Gobel panted. “Except this is... *bad!*”

Commodore Peters wondered what could be so ‘bad’ as to warrant a Lieutenant – and a warrant officer who was still approaching, puffing like a steam engine – to run all that way looking for her.

“Well, come on, out with it!” She snapped. “What the hell’s the emergency?”

Just then, the golf cart arrived, actually sliding a short distance until it skidded up to a halt. That earned the driver – a grinning purple-shirt in the starbase’s security marines – a deathly reproachful look from the Commodore. Lt. Gobel and the wheezing warrant from Security ushered her aboard, and drove back to the nearest elevator as quickly as possible. Gobel gave her the abbreviated version – and by the time she was in the elevator, Commodore Peters was in the picture. She received a comlink from Gobel and while still traveling, began issuing instructions – the not inconsiderable defenses of Starbase 43 were put on full readiness.

“Status report!” The Commodore barked as soon as she arrived on the Ops Bridge, and ignored the stares from those present as her golf spikes clicked on the deck-plate. “What’s the matter?” She said sarcastically, “Haven’t you seen a woman wearin’ golf duds before?”

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