INTERITUS^2

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CHRONICLES OF DIVIDED WORLDS

CRACOW 2026

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For Tadeusz —

if an author were allowed to wish for an "ideal reader,"
that reader would probably look suspiciously like you.

Thank you for your patience, your sharp eye, and your remarkable stamina in working through chapters not just once, but with striking dedication, again and again.

This book bears your mark as well—quiet, but unmistakable.

THE STORY SO FAR...

It began with a warning no one wanted to hear.

Tamira Sorellin, a young heliophysicist on planet P3, was the first to recognize the lethal threat: her world's sun—destabilized a millennium ago by a planetary collision—was on the verge of a catastrophic eruption. Where her mentor Ardon Veyran saw exaggeration, she saw mathematical certainty, and by the time the science council finally listened, only days remained.

What followed was the greatest exodus in Thal-Venai history.

Twenty massive Generation Ships of the New Hope Fleet—originally designed to colonize distant worlds—became the last refuge for two hundred thousand chosen survivors. For the remaining hundred million, only underground bunkers with minimal odds of survival. The lottery of life had begun, and Tamira found herself among the saved—a newly appointed mentor, a scientist, one of those who decided who would live and who would die.

Then the fleet launched.

A three-hundred-year journey across eighty light-years to planet A3X, which the Thal-Venai would soon call New Home. Across generations, the Keepers—those crew members who stayed awake while others slept in stasis—kept watch. Tamira found love in Zephir, a love that threatened to break under the weight of the Codex and their childlessness. She found a quiet ally in INTEGRA, the fleet's artificial intelligence, and in the long years of drift, she found a new purpose.

But New Home was not empty. It was Earth.

What the Thal-Venai had assumed was a primitive, pre-industrial species had developed rapidly during the fleet's three-hundred-year voyage. Twenty-first-century humanity greeted the alien fleet with a mix of fascination, distrust, and hostility. The encounter meant as a bridge between two civilizations became a minefield of mutual projections. While Tamira worked as an envoy to build trust, fear grew on Earth—and impatience in the fleet.

Then came the discovery that changed everything: an interstellar asteroid was on a collision course with Earth. The Thal-Venai offered their help and launched a joint evacuation mission to bring over four hundred thousand humans aboard the fleet. But the aliens' generosity bred suspicion. Secret stasis chambers for animals—meant to preserve biodiversity for New Home—were taken as proof of hidden agendas.

The *Humans First* movement under General James Vega struck. In a coordinated mutiny, human rebels seized eighteen of the nineteen remaining ships. They wanted control over their own fate, wanted to save more people, refused to remain

grateful recipients of alien mercy. But they had underestimated INTEGRA. On the Thal-Venai Council's order, the AI activated the mutiny protocol—and cut oxygen to the rebel sectors, killing General Vega himself among them.

When silence settled over the fleet, the bridge between worlds lay shattered.

On Mars, Governor Maya Rodriguez watched the nineteen ships fire their engines and vanish without farewell into the darkness. On the dying Earth, one last, secret ship of the elites rose into the sky—the *Phoenix*, bound for an unknown destination. And the Thal-Venai fleet pressed on, scarred by a conflict that never should have been.

Left behind were the Martians—alone under a red sky.

And ahead lay Gliese 1002, the system they would truly call New Home. But what world awaited them there? And could the wounds they carried ever heal?

The journey to this moment had been long—but was far from over.

PROLOGUE

Gliese Colony
94 Years after Arrival

The light was warm. As always on this world. Tamira blinked against the red glow falling through the tall windows.

Twenty-five children. They squirmed in their seats, whispered, looked at her.

Their eyes rested on her.

She felt the pain. Joints. Hips. The throbbing behind her temples. A hundred and fifteen biological years. Every morning reminded her.

The hover chair hummed—the same hum as when she woke from stasis. Almost a hundred years ago. Sometimes it felt like yesterday.

"Children," the teacher said. Her smile wavered at the edges—*nervous*, Tamira thought. Young. Human. Dark curls. Angela Brasco, she had introduced herself.

"Children, as you know, we have a very special guest today. Someone who knows the era we've been studying not from books, but…" She faltered. "From firsthand experience."

Experienced. Such a small word for what I've been through, Tamira thought.

"This is Council Advisor Tamira Sorellin," Angela continued. "Or former Council Chair, I should say. She was there when the fleet arrived. She was there when the first settlements were founded. She was…" Another hesitation. "She was there. For all of it."

Tamira raised her hand. With effort. It would have been easier once.

"Thank you, Ms. Brasco." Her words sounded rough, but they reached the last row. She could still manage that.

"And thank you for having me today."

Her gaze swept over the children. Thal-Venai and humans, mixed. *The way it should be.* She had hoped for this back when everything was still uncertain.

A girl in the front row. Thal-Venai features, but the eyes—unmistakably human. That existed now. Tamira had to smile.

Something has gone right. At least that.

"Now," she said, folding her hands in her lap. "Your teacher tells me you covered Earth in your last class. The arrival. The years of cooperation. The asteroid." She paused. "And the mutiny."

Some children nodded. Others looked at the floor. Even after all these years.

"Then I'll pick up where your lessons left off," Tamira said. "With what came next—the arrival here."

She closed her eyes. The images came at once. Sharper than yesterday. Sharper than this morning, even.

"Many years ago—" Her voice grew softer, more like a storyteller's. She noticed it herself. "When I was far younger—so young I couldn't have imagined ever being as old as I am now—I woke in a capsule. Alone. In the dark. Not knowing whether eighty years had passed or eighty seconds…"

CHAPTER 1

Stasis Chamber 7, Ship One
20 Days before Arrival

Darkness.

Nothing. No word for it. No thought. Only—

This darkness was absolute. A void without depth, without time, without memory of what had been—or any sense of what was to come.

Then—a hum. Somewhere. She felt it before she heard it. A vibrato. It burrowed into her. Deeper than skin.

Tingling. Fingertips—*mine?*—then arms. Chest. It seized her whole.

It was electric. Foreign. As if someone were activating nerves she had forgotten she possessed.

The metallic taste on her tongue. Copper. Ozone. *Where—*

What is this?—But the answer never came. The thought dissolved again.

She tried to breathe, but her body had forgotten how.

Panic.

Lungs burned. Refused to obey. She was going to die. Now. After everything—

Then she finally drew air. A rasp first. A gurgle. Something wet escaping her throat. And then at last: a breath. Cold. So cold it hurt.

A hiss. Shrill. Pain in her ears.

Light flooded in—dim, reddish, but after the absolute darkness unbearably bright. She squeezed her eyes shut, though even that barely helped.

Everything blurred. Shapes without edges. Colors she had no words for.

Where am I?

The question formed slowly in her mind.

She tried to sit up. Muscles—nothing. No sensation.

She fell back into the capsule, and the dull thud of her skull against the padding was the first thing that felt real.

A voice cut through the static.

"Welcome back, Council Chair Sorellin."

The words took a moment. They came as if through cotton.

She means me.

"The fleet has reached the Gliese 1002 system. Twenty days to orbit."

She couldn't absorb more. Not now.

INTEGRA. The name was there before she knew where it came from. The fleet's voice. Cold. Steady. And yet familiar.

Eighty years. The number pressed into her thoughts, but it fit nowhere.

She tried to speak. A croak. Not her voice. *Whose?*

The cough that followed shook her entire body, and for a moment she was nothing but pain and reflexes.

She tried again.

"Zephir?"

Barely more than a whisper, but INTEGRA understood.

"Zephir is located in Stasis Chamber 7, Capsule 34. His revival is scheduled for Sequence 3, in approximately two hours."

Two hours. After eighty years. Unbearable.

He's alive. Something grew warm inside her. Somewhere.

He's alive. He's here.

Then figures appeared at the edge of her vision. White suits. Hands reaching toward her. A voice—real and warm this time—said something she didn't quite understand. Something about holding still. About help.

Hands. She was lifted. Her legs—nothing.

And then she was sitting. Something hovered. *Chair. Hover chair.*

Corridors. They glided past her. Or she past them. Foreign and not foreign at once.

Somewhere—*left? right?*—capsules opened. Voices. Someone called for water. Someone else for a name she couldn't make out. Faces appeared and vanished again. Some she recognized. Council members. Scientists. Unchanged, like her own face probably was.

Time. Frozen. Again.

Her gaze fell on a viewscreen.

She held her breath—or what was left of it.

Out there—a star. Red. Smaller than expected. Unlike anything she knew.

Reddish-orange. Muted. A fire that never goes out.

And around it—two points. Tiny from this distance, but there.

Planets.

Twenty days still. Close enough to see. Tiny points against the red.

New Home. Maybe.

She closed her eyes. Thareena's face. Her parents. The images came instantly. Uninvited. She lifted her lids.

Eighty years, frozen in a moment between two heartbeats.

Now her heart beat again, but not quite in the same rhythm as before.

●●●

Observation Deck, Ship One
8 Hours after Tamira's Awakening

Glass. Glass everywhere. Tamira's legs trembled, but she stood. That mattered. She had refused the hover chair. Not for this moment.

She looked around. Ship One's Observation Lounge. The familiar half-round room whose curved outer wall was a single panoramic window. *Twenty meters of transparent specialty crystal*, she thought, *stronger than any metal humanity ever forged.* It was only one of many things they had brought along on their flight between the stars.

Zephir beside her. Awoken a few hours ago. Pale. Paler than she felt. His eyes dull, shadows beneath them. She knew them differently, but he was here.

His hand in hers. Cold. Hers probably too. Eighty years side by side without touching each other. Now this.

Before them the Gliese 1002 system—she had forgotten to breathe.

The star. Red from this close. Not orange, not yellow. Red. She had never seen a red star. Not like this.

The light had the color of embers.

The shadows it cast were long and soft, lacking the sharp edges Tamira knew from her homeworld or Earth.

Two planets were visible in the magnified view. The inner one, 1002b, a small gray sphere—their original destination.

The outer one, 1002c, larger. Brown, gray, and a violet stripe through the middle. Something glittered. Water perhaps. Or ice.

"INTEGRA." Zephir's voice, still rough, broke her train of thought. "Show us the scans of 1002c."

The display flickered to life. Numbers. Curves. Colors. Too much at once. Data flowed across the holoscreen: atmospheric composition, temperature maps, water deposits.

"The long-term projections were based on data four hundred and eight years old."

Zephir's hand tensed.

"Gliese 1002c possesses larger water reserves than originally assumed."

Water.

The word hung in the air.

"However, the increased gravity of 1.12 g remains a factor."

A factor.

She looked at Zephir. He said nothing. He didn't need to.

"We spent eighty years—" She faltered. Started over. "Eighty years. Working toward one planet. And now you're saying the other one is better?"

"Correct. The final decision rests with the Council."

Zephir laughed quietly. She knew he had seen too much to still be surprised.

"Another choice between two worlds." He shook his head. "Always two worlds."

Tamira said nothing. Earth was suddenly there. The blue. Then—she pushed it away.

Eighty years. On Mars, generations have grown up. What has become of them? What do they think of the fleet that vanished without a word?

Her stomach tightened. The silence. Back then, before departure.

"When is the first Council session?" she asked at last.

"In eight hours. Seren will be revived by then as well."

Seren. The name stirred—many things. Memories of the flight. Of Geneva. Of the humans. Decisions they had made together. And then Seren's resignation, Tamira's nomination, the unanimous vote.

"You know what I just had to think of?" Zephir asked suddenly.

Tamira waited.

"The first time I saw Earth," he continued. "That blue. Those clouds. I thought: this is it. And then—"

"And then it wasn't," Tamira finished his sentence.

He wasn't looking at the planet but at the star—that alien light.

"This omnipresent red…" Zephir gestured at the panorama before them. "It's different. More alien. But maybe alien is exactly what we need right now. No memories. No baggage."

She squeezed his hand. "You always carry baggage."

Zephir didn't answer, but he didn't let go of her hand.

●●●

Medical Station, Ship One
12 Hours after Tamira's Awakening

White light. Tamira blinked. Ship One's medical station was far too bright after the red of the Observation Deck. Somewhere, something hummed. Somewhere else, something beeped. Her eyes needed a moment.

Seren lay on a hover stretcher. Her eyes followed Tamira across the room—that gaze that never missed a thing. But something was new. A heaviness in her lids. A slowness Tamira didn't recognize.

"Tamira." Seren sounded hoarse but warm. "You look like you've had a long journey."

Tamira laughed. It came on its own.

Seren laughed with her. Dry. Brief.

"Three hundred years from P3. Eighty years from Earth. Yes, I'd say the journey was long enough."

Seren pointed to a chair. Tamira sat. Her legs thanked her for it.

The gravity here was simulated—1 g, as always on the ships. On 1002c it would be more. Tamira already felt exhaustion in every muscle just thinking about it.

"INTEGRA briefed me," Seren said. "About the planets. About the decision ahead of us."

"What do you think?"

Seren was quiet. Her fingers played with the blanket's edge. Tamira studied her hands—thin, bony. *When did they get like this?*

"I think I'm old, Tamira. Old enough to know my time as a decision-maker is over."

Something tightened in her chest.

Seren, she thought. The woman who led the Council through the flight from P3, through the arrival at Earth, through the mutiny—speaking of herself in the past tense.

"You're the Council Chair now," Seren continued. "You led the fleet after the mutiny. You made the decision to bring the humans in stasis despite everything. This decision—which planet is right—is yours."

Tamira shook her head.

"I need your counsel, Seren. I need—"

"What you need," Seren interrupted gently, "is trust in yourself, my dear. I had it when I appointed you as diplomatic mentor. I had it when you took over the Council chair. And I have it now."

A pause. The machines hummed. Somewhere in the station someone else was being revived, coughing and asking for water.

"But if you want my opinion," Seren said more quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Water is life. More water means more possibilities. We can overcome the gravity. Not the thirst."

Tamira nodded. *Pragmatic as ever. Eyes on the long-term consequences.* But for her it was more than that.

"You know what I regret most?" Seren asked.

Tamira looked at her expectantly and waited.

"Not the big decisions. I regret the small moments I missed. Don't make the same mistake, Tamira. Lead, but live your life too."

"How am I supposed to live when 600,000 beings are waiting on my decisions?"

Seren smiled.

"By recognizing you're not alone. You have Zephir. You have the Council. You have INTEGRA. And you have me—for as long as I'm still here."

She wanted to object but held back.

Seren was old. Tamira saw it now. The stasis had preserved her body but hadn't turned back time. The hollow cheeks. The skin that seemed too thin. *How old is Seren now?* Tamira did the math—*a hundred and twenty biological years?*

She took Seren's hand. Bony. Cool. But it squeezed back.

"Thank you. For everything."

Seren tilted her head and closed her eyes.

●●●

Council Chamber, Ship One
16 Hours after Tamira's Awakening

The Council Chamber. Tamira knew every corner of this room in the ship's bow.

She scanned the Inner Council's twelve seats, its last elections held before departure from Sol. The holodisplay in the center. She sat in the Chair's seat. Seren's seat, once. It still felt foreign.

Tamira let her gaze wander. Seren at the side—no longer in the circle, but present. Her gaze rested on Tamira. Zephir beside her, eyes on the display. He glanced up and nodded almost imperceptibly.

Novaren across from her. Motionless as always—in all those years she had never learned to read his face. Beside him Kaelan, who smiled at her. One of her supporters for as long as she could remember.

The others. Elyar Nethys, the ethicist, paging through his notes. Liraya Vorthak beside him, fingers already hovering over her datapad—societal resilience, her specialty. Tamira would need them both today. Elai Vessar sat leaning back, arms folded. The chief engineer. He looked as though he already knew how the vote would go. And Tinomero. Her gaze lingered on him a moment longer. Chief geologist. Old friend. His nomination to the Council had tipped the balance to leave Mars behind. She wondered *whether he had ever regretted it.*

The remaining seats—new faces. She knew their names. Not their minds.

The holodisplay showed both planets side by side. On the left 1002b—gray, small, familiar. Their original destination. On the right 1002c—larger, colorful, that violet stripe. Data streamed around the projections. Tamira read along: *Temperatures. Atmospheric composition. Gravity.*

She leaned forward. *The water readings on 1002c—*

Elai spoke first. "The ships are suited for both planets. Landing on 1002c requires minor adjustments for the higher gravity, but nothing we can't handle. Technically, the decision is neutral."

Zephir stood.

"Scientifically, it's not. 1002b is closer to the star. Radiation exposure is higher—not dangerous, but higher. Long-term, that could affect agriculture and genetics." He stepped to the display and pointed at 1002c. "This one is farther out. Cooler. But look at the water readings." His hand traced a circle around the blue markers.

"Without water, no ecosystems. Without ecosystems, no sustainable food production. And without that—" He left the sentence unfinished. He didn't need to say it.

Tinomero nodded thoughtfully. "The geology supports it. 1002c shows tectonic stability in the Terminator Zone and mineral resources essential for building a permanent settlement. 1002b is—" He shrugged. "Functional, but barren."

Liraya Vorthak raised her hand.

"I'd like to address a different aspect. We'll feel the increased gravity on 1002c. 1.12 g doesn't sound like much, but for the elderly down the line, the sick, the children—it's a burden. On 1002b the gravity would be nearly identical to Earth's and only slightly higher than on P3 and our ships. Humans in particular are more sensitive to this. It could become socially significant."

"The humans aren't our only priority," one of the new Council members said—cool, almost cold.

Silence.

There it was again. The tension. Us versus them. She felt it at the back of her neck. The scars that never fully healed. For those who had been in stasis, the mutiny was yesterday.

Elyar Nethys cleared his throat. "With all due respect—the humans are part of our priority. This isn't a sentimental position but a practical one. We brought them along. We integrated their capabilities into our planning. A colony built on division from the start won't survive. Not long-term."

Kaelan Drys nodded. "The bioinformatics models are clear. Genetic diversity, combined knowledge systems, different problem-solving approaches—we need both species. Not out of necessity. Out of wisdom. We—"

Tamira raised her hand. The discussion around her fell silent instantly.

"The humans—" She paused. Started over. "They're part of our community. We decided that when we brought them along. Their needs count—but they're not the only criterion. What counts is everyone's survival. And for that we need, above all, water."

She stood and stepped to the holodisplay. With a gesture she enlarged 1002c—the brown-gray sphere now filled half the room. She could make out cloud spirals and the glitter of water in soft detail. And there she saw it, the thin violet line along the terminator—this world's day-night boundary. *That's where we'll live.*

"Twice in my life I've stood before a choice between two worlds," she said.

"The first time between P3 and the ships. The second between Earth and Gliese. Both times I chose survival—not comfort or familiarity. This time is no different."

She turned. Eyes met hers.

"I recommend Gliese 1002c. The gravity is a challenge, but one we can master. The water gives us a future."

Seren lowered her head in agreement first—though she no longer had a vote, Tamira knew how much her gesture weighed.

Then Zephir. Tino. Kaelan. Elyar. Novaren. One by one they signaled their approval.

Liraya waited. Tamira held her gaze. Finally she too inclined her head—reluctantly, lips pressed together.

"I agree," she said. "But the humans must be informed. Transparency. No secrets."

"Of course."

INTEGRA confirmed:

"The decision has been recorded. Gliese 1002c is designated as the primary settlement target. Preparations for orbital entry will be adjusted accordingly."

The holograms went dark. The Council members rose. Voices overlapped—plans, tasks, the usual hum after a decision. Tamira remained seated while the machinery of colonization set itself in motion.

Elai stayed a moment longer, watching her. She could see the gears turning behind his brow.

"Every decision has a price, Council Chair." He paused. "The question is only what we're buying."

"And what are we buying?"

"Water." A twitch at the corners of his mouth. "You can't create that."

Then he too left. Tamira stayed.

Through the small window at the room's side she studied the red star illuminating their new home. In a few days the ships would enter orbit. In a few weeks the first settlements. And then—she didn't know. No one did.

But first the next decision. And the next. That was what leadership meant. No end. Only ever new beginnings.

She breathed in deeply and left the room.