

D O P I N E P H R I N E

VEILED EMPYREAN

PART 10

ATHLON rushed through the corridors of *The Daedalus* with his unconscious daughter in his arms. Hiratio led them to the drone laboratory where Harmony was already recalibrating the machinery to analyze the young android's condition. Athlon laid her on an examining table gently, his eyes wild as they darted around the room. The ship hummed as the fleet moved away from Byzantine at top speed. Alethar had ordered them to fall back and regroup after the devastating appearance of Hades.

Harmony was yelling orders at drone scientists as Hiratio rushed back and forth across the room collecting medical equipment, already anticipating potential emergencies. The android was completely unresponsive.

Athlon heard none of it. He stared at nothing as the room around him spun with activity. He could still feel the heat of Yggdrasil, see the fear in Athena's eyes as she was pulled beneath the otherworldly waves of chaos. Shell shocked, he turned and walked slowly out of the room, unnoticed by his allies.

Athlon stumbled through the ship, no specific destination coming to mind. He found himself on the observation deck, and sank to the floor, gazing out at the stars speeding past outside. His head spun, and he began to cry as he tried to stay afloat amidst the rising tide of agony in his mind.

Music poured fourth from the Ares Clef as the champion mourned his companion. Alethar wept on the bridge when he heard the pain of his friend, and the eyes of the drones fell at the sound.

Athlon closed his eyes and poured his loss into the music, losing himself in the melody. His thoughts fell apart as he sang, and he could focus on nothing.

Word of the death of Athena spread quickly. Mary informed Olympus' traditional allies, who sent statements of support and solidarity. Within minutes, half the galaxy was united in sorrow for the lost champion. The Indigo Order turned their heads as one towards the stars and thought of Athena. A thousand worlds declared official days of mourning. Thrace, Mesopotamia and Wulthaire ordered their fleets to Olympus to help in the fight. Athena's death had formed a new alliance against the Byzantine Caliphate almost instantly.

Enison left his lieutenant in charge of the Indigo fleet and took his personal ship through enemy space to join Alethar. The Caliphate forces could hear Athlon's song; no one dared fire on Enison as he crossed their territory.

Harmony knew more about android development than anyone, with intimate access to Athlon's memories during his birth, as well as having witnessed Athena's emergence. She had watched every step of the baby's growth, and possessed extraordinary mechanical and engineering skills. Nevertheless, Harmony's efforts had done little to stabilize the young android's systems. Her brain was still mostly fluidic, and so connections were still forming, which made it hard for Harmony to access many of the android's components.

A scan of the young girl's brain made Harmony's eyes widen. She calmly told the drones to evacuate, and asked Hiratio to move *The Daedalus* away from the rest of the fleet. Swirling with the slowly-firming brain was nearly an ounce of Yggdrasil energy. If the android's skull failed to contain it, Harmony knew the leaking energy could pose a hazard to the entire ship. She sealed herself in the lab with her patient.

The android's body had not stopped growing; she had nearly doubled in size, appearing now as a child approaching her preteen years. Harmony took a moment to center herself. She was ignoring the emotional storm brewing in her over the loss of Athena, focusing instead on the life hanging in the balance before her.

The energy from Yggdrasil must have entered the android's brain during her birth on the cusp of the Titan's realm. Harmony assumed it's time-bending nature was speeding up her

development, and another scan revealed that her brain was beginning to form. Athlon's brain had taken years to firm up, but the accelerated growth of the child was allowing it to occur in minutes.

An hour after coming on board, the young Android had tripled in size and had stabilized. Her brain had become solid, and neural pathways had formed. The ball of Yggdrasil energy remained in constant movement, swirling and blending in a spherical space that had formed in the center of her brain. It seemed incapable of harming the delicate components it touched, and Harmony hypothesized the android would be able to move through Yggdrasil like her father.

A final systems check showed little brain activity, but solid connections had woven themselves throughout her body. Harmony grinned as her scans began listing the android's hardware and structure; in the middle of her chest was a heavily fortified command center with a Nereid-sized seat. The rungs of a tiny ladder lined a narrow pathway leading to the android's shoulder where Harmony traditionally entered Athlon's chest. Athlon's time with his small friend had influenced the creation of his daughter.

Harmony unsealed the lab and the drones relieved her. The android simply needed time now to continue growing. They would know nothing more until she became conscious. Enison came on board, and *The Daedalus* moved back into formation with Alethar's fleet. Harmony hurried across the ship towards the observation deck, meeting Enison in the corridor. He let her step onto his hand and looked at her with all four of his eyes, sadness decorating his stoic face. Harmony finally began crying, and Enison touched her head with his thumb, wishing he could ease her pain. After a moment, she composed herself and asked Enison to take her to Athlon.

The observation deck was dark and icy. Harmony felt incredible anger from Athlon as the nanobots that connected them found each other. The champion emitted such sorrow that Harmony gasped; she barely recognized him emotionally. She had not realized how bad things were in his mind. He opened his eyes as he heard them approach, and Harmony was intimidated by the sharp look in them. Athlon was dangerous.

Enison knelt by the Android, and Harmony scampered over to her friend's shoulder. She reached through the link, directing the nanobots to touch Athlon's emotional centers. She spoke to him

soothingly, increasingly aware that she was here to rescue him more than soothe him. Athlon was offended by her attempt, and shocked her by pushing her off his shoulder into Enison's quick hand. The music surged with anger as Athlon stood up. Harmony called to him as she covered her ears; Athlon was screaming from the Ares Clef, making *The Daedalus* shake with its force. The Android stepped to the observation window, and seemed to be searching for something on the other side. His limbs tensed; convinced he would blast through the window any second, Enison began backing out of the room, feeling he needed to at least get Harmony to safety. She leapt from his hand and rushed back towards Athlon, working to direct her thoughts into his mind. Enison stumbled as the ship creaked and trembled under the force of Athlon's rage.

Harmony stood before the Android, barely taller than his ankle and demanded he look at her. Athlon met her gaze, and for a moment, utter fear filled his eyes as he realized he would have killed her if he had torn a hole in the ship. Then he blinked and it was gone, uncharacteristic rage returning to every inch of his face. He turned away from the window and moved to an emergency airlock. Harmony screamed after him to stop, and Enison ran across the room to intercept him. He didn't know what Athlon planned to do, but it was obvious that Harmony thought it was bad. The Rakonian put one hand on Athlon's shoulder and felt the Android stiffen. Athlon turned his head slowly to look at Enison with a glare that made Enison's words catch in his throat. Athlon hit him in the face, and Enison flew across the room, denting the wall where he landed.

Harmony focused with everything she had on the nanobots in Athlon's head. She moved them expertly through the Android's brain, directing them along his neurons with purpose. She had to stop him any way she could, but she could only shut his systems down from within. She knew she only had seconds before he would be out of her reach. Athlon opened the inner airlock door and stepped in.

She was out of time.