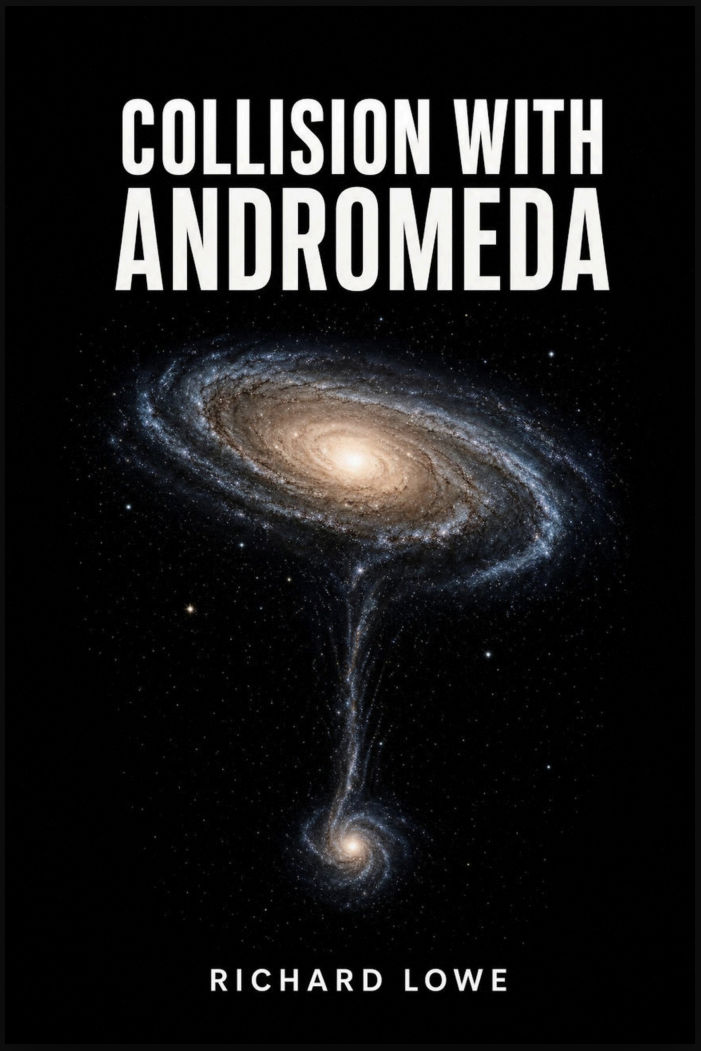
A FREE COMPANION TO COLLISION WITH ANDROMEDA

Waypoint

A bartender's daughter has a berth on a colony ship, sixteen days to boarding, and a mother whose hands have started to shake.



RICHARD LOWE

Waypoint

Waypoint Station. Colonial Transit Office. Berth confirmation.

Vessel: Corvina. Destination: the charter world Kestrel's Reach. Projected transit: eight hundred and eighty years, cryogenic.

Revival rate on the class: ninety-seven percent.

Passenger: Kira Oyelaran, age twenty-three, hydroponic systems technician. Berth 2,114.

Boarding closes in sixteen days. Releases accepted until forty-eight hours before departure, deposit refunded in full.

* * *

Her mother dropped the glass at ten past one, after the last customer had gone.

It did not break. The glasses on Waypoint were printed from the same polymer as the bulkheads, and they bounced. This one hit the deck behind the counter, rolled under the ice machine, and sat there making a small hollow sound while the ice machine made its own noise, the grinding one that meant the auger was going again.

“Leave it,” Bisola said.

Kira was already on her knees with the broom handle. The deck under the machine was sticky with thirty years of spilled syrup. She fished the glass out, and a bottle cap came with it, and a coin from some world that still used coins, stamped with a bird she did not recognize.

“That's the second one tonight.”

“The machine's wet. Everything's wet back here.” Her mother took the glass and dropped it in the wash rack without looking. “You going to sweep or you going to count my glasses?”

Kira swept. The bar had twelve seats: eleven stools, and a crate at the end where Marchetti had broken the last stool sixteen years ago in a fight over cards.

The counter was synthetic wood. It looked almost real if you did not touch it, and everybody touched it.

Above the bottles the screens ran the late feeds from a hundred worlds with the sound off.

A harvest on one of the Delancey moons. A court case somewhere. A woman on a beach Kira would never see, holding up a fish as long as her arm.

Her mother wiped the taps. She did it the same way every night, left to right, the rag folded in quarters.

At the third tap her hand stopped. The rag hung from her fingers and the fingers shook, a fine fast shake, the way a cup of water shakes on a table near a running engine. Then the hand went on to the fourth tap.

“Sixteen days,” Bisola said, with her back to her. “Have you packed?”

“There's nothing to pack. They give you a bag. Two kilos.”

“Two kilos.” Her mother laughed, the short laugh she used on customers who tipped in promises. “I came out here with forty. Your father came with sixty and most of it was boots.”

Kira did not answer. Nobody in the bar had said the word father in about four years.

* * *

Hydroponics Bay Three smelled of wet roots and the nitrogen feed. The light ran on a fourteen-hour cycle tuned for a sun nobody on the station had ever stood under.

Kira had worked the bay since she was sixteen. She could tell the health of the lettuce racks by the smell before the readouts loaded.

Ines Duarte came in at the start of the shift with two bulbs of coffee and the Corvina's deck plans on her tablet. She had been carrying the plans around for a month and showed them to anybody who stood still.

"They've put us on the same ring," she said. "C ring. You're two thousand one hundred and fourteen and I'm two thousand one hundred and nine. Five pods apart. We could wave."

"We'll be frozen."

"Before. You lie down and they seal the lid, and there's about a minute before the cold takes you, and I'm going to wave at you, and you're going to wave back." Ines put a coffee in Kira's hand and closed her fingers over the bulb. "I'm serious. I'm not doing that minute alone."

Ines had a mother on Waypoint too, and two brothers, and a man in Docking Control who had stopped speaking to her the day she signed. She talked about none of them.

She talked about Kestrel's Reach as though she had already been there. The long valleys in the survey images. The blue-green tint of the grass, which the survey said was probably copper in the soil and Ines said was probably beautiful.

Kira checked the feed lines on the bean racks. One of the emitters had clogged again. She cleared it with a pin and watched the drip come back.

"Your mother's hands," Ines said.

The pin went still.

"Mama saw her at the market on Tuesday. She couldn't get her card out of her pocket, so Mama did it for her." Ines was looking at the bean racks too, and not at Kira. "I'm sorry. You looked like you knew."

"She's tired. She works nights."

"Okay."

"She's been working nights for thirty years."

"Okay, Kira."

They worked down the racks. Somewhere above them the station's main ring turned, and the bay had the faint lean it always had at this end, a fraction of a degree that made a dropped bolt roll toward the aft wall.

Kira had grown up with that lean. On Kestrel's Reach the floor would be the floor. She had spent nights in her bunk trying to imagine how that would feel in the knees.

* * *

She found the pills on the fourth night.

They were behind the good bottles, on the top shelf where nobody reached except to pour the expensive stuff, and nobody ordered the expensive stuff on a Wednesday.

A white case with the clinic's mark on the lid. A dosing card in Dr. Haskett's square printing.

Under the case, folded twice, lay a brochure for the long-care ward on the station's inner ring. On the cover an old man smiled at a plant.

Kira read the dosing card twice. She did not know the name of the drug. She knew the word on the second line, because the station had lost a pump technician to it when she was twelve, and the whole Hydroponics section had gone to the service.

She put the case back where it had been, and the brochure under it, folded the same way. Then she poured herself a measure of the good whiskey, because she was already up there. She drank it standing on the stepladder with her head an arm's length from the ceiling vent, and the cold air ran down the back of her shirt.

“That's eleven a glass,” her mother said from the doorway.

“Put it on my tab.”

“You don't have a tab. You have a debt.” Bisola took the bottle, capped it, and set it back exactly in front of the white case. “Get down off my ladder.”

Her hands were steady. She must have taken a pill before her shift.

Kira got down.

They looked at each other across the narrow space behind the counter. Out front the screens were still running, and the light from them moved across her mother's face, green from somebody's harvest, blue from somebody's sea.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Mama.”

Bisola picked up the rag. She folded it in quarters. She began on the taps, left to right.

“Haskett says it's slow,” she said at the second tap. “Ten years. Fifteen if I do what she says, and I'm going to do what she says, because she's a terrible woman and I'm afraid of her.”

Third tap.

“By the time it gets bad, you'll be ten light-years out and sleeping like a baby.”

“There's a treatment. There's always a treatment. They had one for the pump man.”

“They have one on Halloran. Haskett called them. They were very nice.” Fourth tap. “They sent her the specification and her fabricator can't hold the tolerances. She tried four times.”

“So they send the equipment.”

“On the next supply run that goes that way. They didn't know when. Halloran's three hundred and ten light-years.” Fifth tap. Her mother's voice did not change. “It's a lovely world. I've seen it on the feeds. They have a kind of pear.”

The ice machine started grinding. Neither of them moved to kick the thing.

“I'll release the berth,” Kira said.

Her mother turned around.

Kira had not seen her mother's face do that in years. It did not soften. It closed, the way the pressure doors closed in a drill, all at once and with a sound.

“You will not.”

“I'm not going to lie in a box for nine hundred years while you...”

“While I what? Get old? I'm getting old whether you're here or not, and I'd rather do it without you watching.” Bisola threw the rag on the counter. “I stood right there at that window and watched your father's ship go, with you holding my hand, and I told myself I'd stayed for you. You know how long it took me to stop telling myself that?”

“That isn't the same.”

“It's the same window.”

Kira had no answer. Her mother picked up the rag again and found the sixth tap.

* * *

The boy started coming in on the ninth night.

He was nineteen, maybe. He had the shoulders of somebody who had done heavy work in low gravity, wide and a little rounded, and a jacket with the patch of the Morrow Deep mining habitat sewn on crooked.

He sat on the crate at the end of the counter because it was the farthest seat from the door. He ordered the cheapest thing on the board, which was synth-ginger, and he made one glass last three hours.

“You waiting on somebody?” Kira asked him the second night.

“The Corvina.”

“You're boarding?”

“Standby.” He took a card out of his jacket and laid it on the counter like a man laying down a bad hand. Standby list, Corvina, number six. “There were forty-one of us when I came in. You need a release for every one of us that goes.”

“How long have you been on Waypoint?”

“Seven weeks.” He turned the glass. “I sleep in the concourse by Gate Nine. The heaters are good there, and security's decent about moving you on.”

His name was Teo Rask. He had worked the ore crushers on Morrow Deep from the age of thirteen. He had come here on a hauler in the cargo section, because the passenger section cost more than he had ever made.

He had a sister on Morrow Deep who called him every night through the network to ask whether he had eaten. He took the calls in the corridor outside the bar. Through the door Kira could hear him lying to her: yes, a hot meal, yes, a real bed.

He never asked what was at Kestrel's Reach. Everybody else did. Everybody else wanted the valleys and the copper grass.

Teo looked at the survey images on the screen above the bottles the way her mother looked at the inventory, as a list of what was there and what was missing.

“What did you do on Morrow?” Kira asked him.

“Crushed rock.”

“And on Kestrel's Reach?”

He took a long time thinking about anything, and he took a long time over this.

“Work where I can see the sky while I'm doing it,” he said. “I'm not particular what.”

At the end of that night her mother brought him a bowl of the stew they kept for the staff. She set it in front of him without a word and charged him nothing.

He ate with his head down. Bisola went back to the taps. Her hands were shaking again by then, and she had moved the rag to her left hand without seeming to notice.

* * *

There was a ritual Kira had never told anyone.

Once a year, on the anniversary of the Saffron's departure, she called her father.

The Saffron was a colony ship like the Corvina, bound for a world on the far side of the Delancey cluster, eighteen years into a seven-hundred-year flight. Her father was in a pod on its D ring, cold as a stone.

The network would carry a message to the ship's systems as fast as it carried anything. The message would sit in the ship's memory with all the other messages. When the Saffron woke her father, they

would hand it to him.

She went to the public booth on the concourse, because she did not want her mother to see the call on the bar's account. The booth smelled of somebody's lunch. A mopping drone bumped against the outside of the door twice, gave up, and went away.

The Saffron's systems answered at once. They always did, in a pleasant voice, neither male nor female, the voice of every ship.

“Message for passenger Ansel Rook,” it said. “Recording.”

She had made seventeen of these. They had started with a little girl telling him about a drawing. Somewhere around the tenth they had turned into a woman reading him a list of what he had missed, flat, the way you read a manifest.

“It's me,” she said. “I'm going. The Corvina, to Kestrel's Reach. Eight hundred and eighty years, so I'll be up and walking about two hundred years after you are. You can call me. Mama's sick. It's the slow kind, and she's going to be fine for a long time, and she says hello.”

Her mother had not said hello. Her mother had never once said hello in eighteen years.

“End message,” Kira said.

“Message stored,” the ship said. “Passenger Rook is in good health. Estimated revival in six hundred and eighty-two years. Is there anything else?”

There was not. She sat in the booth after the screen went dark.

Through the glass she could see the long curve of the concourse and the gate lights. The boy from Morrow Deep lay asleep on a bench by Gate Nine under his crooked patch, one arm over his eyes.

* * *

Bisola sold the bar on the twelfth day.

She did not tell Kira. Marchetti told her.

Marchetti was sixty-eight and had worked the loading docks since before Kira was born. He came in at the start of the shift while Kira was cutting limes, sat down heavily on his usual stool, and looked at her with his wet old eyes.

“I'll miss the place,” he said.

“Why? Are you dying?”

“The concession's taking it over. Station Services.” He blinked at her. “She didn't tell you. Hell. She told the whole dock.”

Kira put down the knife.

Station Services was a desk on the admin ring and a man named Pettibone, who wore a tie on a station where nobody had worn a tie in two hundred years. He turned his screen to show her the concession papers without being asked. Pettibone liked to be helpful in a way that made people want to hit him.

The bar's lease transferred back to the station on the Corvina's departure day. Bisola Oyelaran released all fixtures and stock, in consideration of a sum.

Kira read the sum. It was exactly the cost of a private room in the long-care ward for twelve years, with the clinic's rate for a nurse on nights.

“She was very clear,” Pettibone said. “She wanted it to close on that day. Not before, not after. Closing when the ship goes. I thought that was a nice touch.”

“It's not a touch.”

“I'm sorry?”

“She wants the door shut,” Kira said. “So there's nothing to come back to.”

Pettibone did not understand her. She did not explain.

* * *

The long-care ward was on the inner ring, where the spin gravity was lightest. The air was warmer than on the rest of the station. It smelled of the antiseptic the nurses sprayed on everything, and under the antiseptic, faintly, of people who had been lying down a long time.

Kira walked the corridor without telling anyone she was there. The rooms had windows onto the corridor instead of onto space, because the inner ring had no hull to cut a window through.

In one room a man was watching a feed of a waterfall with the sound so loud she could hear it through the glass. In another a woman was asleep with her mouth open beside a tray of food gone cold. A nurse came and took the tray away and did not bring another.

The old man from the brochure was there. He sat in the dayroom at the end of the corridor in front of a potted plant, and he was not smiling.

“Visiting?” a nurse asked her. Young, tired, with a stain on her sleeve.

“Looking.”

“For a parent?”

“For my mother. Next month.”

The nurse's gaze stopped on the berth tag clipped to Kira's collar, the little green tab every boarder had been wearing around the station for two weeks. Her face did a small, ugly thing. Then she smoothed it.

“We get a lot of those,” she said. “Before the big ships.”

“A lot of what?”

“Parents. They come in the week the ship goes.” The nurse picked at the stain on her sleeve. “They're good about it. They tell everybody they're fine, and most of them are fine. We look after them.”

She meant it kindly. Kira thanked her and walked back past the roaring waterfall and the sleeping woman, whose mouth was still open.

She took the lift up to the outer ring, where her body weighed what it was supposed to weigh. In the lift she held the rail with both hands.

* * *

That night she worked the bar beside her mother, and they did not speak about any of it.

It was a busy night. A supply hauler had come in from the Rimward run with nineteen crew, eight months in a hull, and they wanted noise.

They sang. They argued about a sports league on a world none of them had been born on.

One of them, a heavy woman with a shaved head, cried for twenty minutes into a beer. Her son had married somebody on the other side of the galaxy, and she had attended the wedding through a screen, and nobody had passed her any cake.

“You could see the cake,” her friend kept saying. “You saw it, Dorrie.”

“Seeing a cake isn't eating a cake.”

Kira's mother handled them the way she handled everyone. She poured fast and talked slow and remembered every name by the second round.

Twice Kira watched her reach for a bottle and miss by a finger's width, and close her hand on air, and open it and reach again. None of the crew saw. Bisola had always been fast, and she was still faster than anyone watching her.

At the end of the counter Teo sat with his synth-ginger and watched the hauler crew with the patience of a man waiting for a shift change. When Dorrie started crying he pushed his bowl of bar nuts six inches toward her along the counter. She took one without looking up.

Ines came in near midnight, flushed, still in her work coveralls.

"They posted the boarding order," she said. "C ring goes first shift on day one. Five pods. We could wave."

"I know."

"You're doing the face."

"What face?"

"The face your mother does when somebody orders a cocktail." Ines looked past her, to where Bisola was pulling three beers at once and laughing at a joke the crying woman had made. "Kira. If you're not coming, you tell me now. Not in the boarding line, and not by message while I'm lying in the box."

Kira looked at her friend's hand on hers. There was a burn scar on Ines's thumb from the nutrient heater in Bay Two, from the summer they were sixteen and had both been stupid on purpose to get a day off.

"I'm coming," she said.

Ines kept hold of her hand a little longer. Then she let go and went to find a seat.

* * *

The release office opened at eight. Releases accepted until forty-eight hours before departure, and the forty-eight hours ran out at eight the next morning.

Kira did not sleep. She lay in the little cabin behind the storeroom, the cabin she had slept in since she was old enough to climb into a bunk, and listened to her mother breathing through the wall.

Bisola had always snored. Tonight she did not. Twice Kira heard her get up, and the water run, and the rattle of the white case.

At four Kira went out into the bar and did not turn the lights on. The screens were dark. The bottles were dark shapes against the dark, except the low red glow of the ice machine's panel, which was telling anybody who cared that the auger needed service.

She sat on the crate at the end. From Teo's seat you could see the whole room in the mirror behind the bottles, and the door, and the strip of concourse where the gate lights stayed on all night.

She tried to picture the frontier. She had been picturing it for two years: the valleys, the copper in the grass, a floor that did not lean, and a sky over her with weather in it.

She had built the place in her head the way you build a room, plank by plank. She had lived there.

Then she tried to picture this room in eight hundred and eighty years.

There would be no room. There would be a newer bar, maybe, with another name over the door, or a storage bay, or no station at all once the colony traffic moved to another route, as it always did.

And in a records archive nobody would ever open, a woman named Bisola Oyelaran would have died in a room with a window onto a corridor. She would have died watching a waterfall with the sound turned up, telling a tired nurse she was fine.

Kira sat there until the gate lights changed to day cycle. Then she took the berth tag off her collar and held it in her palm.

It weighed nothing. A green polymer tab with a chip in the middle. She had worn it every day for two weeks, and the clip had left a mark on the collar of every shirt she owned.

* * *

The clerk at the release office had seen it all before. He did not ask why.

He scanned the tag and read the screen.

“Berth two thousand one hundred and fourteen, released. Deposit refund to your account within the hour. The berth goes to the standby list in order.”

“Who's first on the list?”

“I can't tell you that.”

“Is it a kid from Morrow Deep? Big shoulders. Crooked patch.”

The clerk looked at her. Then he looked at his screen, which faced away from her.

“I can't tell you that,” he said again, in a different voice. “But he's going to have a very good morning.”

Kira did not go back to the bar. She went to the admin ring.

Pettibone was at his desk with his tie on and a bulb of tea beside his screen. He smiled at her the way he smiled at everyone.

“Miss Oyelaran. Shouldn't you be packing? Two kilos goes faster than you think.”

“The bar lease,” she said. “My mother's contract with Station Services.”

“Closing on departure day. Yes.”

“I want to take the lease.”

He blinked. Pettibone had a way of blinking that involved his whole face.

“Personally?”

“The station's paying her a sum for fixtures and stock. Keep paying her. I'll take over the lease and the debt on the place, and you get rent from me instead of a dead room on your books.” She laid her hand flat on his desk. It was not quite steady, and she did not take it away. “You'd have to rent the place to somebody, and I already know where the auger's broken.”

“The terms would be...”

“I read the terms on your screen four days ago. I've got the deposit from my berth. It covers the first year and the stock.”

Pettibone looked at his screen, and at her, and at the mark on her collar where the green tab had been.

“Your mother is going to be very unhappy with me,” he said.

“Yes,” Kira said. “Draw it up.”

* * *

Her mother did not shout. Kira had braced for shouting all the way down the spoke and around the concourse, and the shouting did not come.

Bisola was sitting on the customer side of the counter, on Marchetti's stool, with the transfer notice on the tablet in front of her. The bar was not open yet.

The screens were on with the sound off.

One of them showed the Corvina in her dock, three kilometers long, lit along her whole length for boarding. Her mother was not looking at the screen. She was looking at a scratch in the synthetic wood that had been there as long as Kira could remember.

“I didn't ask you,” Bisola said.

“I know.”

“I didn't ask you for one thing. I made sure.”

“I know, Mama.”

“Do you know what I did when your father left?” Her mother still did not look up. “He released one of our two berths before he went. Mine. They gave the deposit back, and I stood in that same office with you holding my hand and signed for a bar.”

Kira had not known. Nobody had ever told her. She stood in the doorway with her hand on the frame.

“So don't stand there,” her mother said, “and think you invented something.”

The ice machine started grinding. Bisola got off the stool, went around the counter, and kicked the machine hard, low on the left, in the place you had to kick it. The grinding stopped.

Then she stood with her hands flat on the counter and her head down. Her hands were shaking, and she did not hide them. Kira had never seen her not hide them.

“Haskett says I'll lose the fine work first,” she said to the counter. “Pouring. Cutting. Making change. The big muscles go last.”

“I can pour.”

“You pour like a hydroponics tech. You measure everything.” Bisola looked up at last, her eyes dry and furious and red at the rims. “I'm not going to thank you. Understand me? I'm never going to thank you for this.”

“I didn't ask you to.”

Her mother looked at her a long time. Then she reached under the counter for the knife and the cutting board and slid them across the wood.

“The limes,” she said. “Thin. Last time they were coasters.”

* * *

Ines called at the end of the first shift on boarding day, from the queue on C ring.

Kira took the call on the counter screen behind the bar, with the sound low. Ines was in the white boarding suit with her hair tied back and a sticker on her shoulder with her pod number.

Behind her the queue went on and on. People in white with two-kilo bags.

A man holding a little boy who was asleep. An old couple holding hands.

Ines did not say anything for a while. Her mouth worked.

“Number two thousand one hundred and fourteen,” she said at last. “Do you know who's in your pod?”

“A boy from Morrow Deep.”

“He's very tall. He keeps hitting his head on the overhead rail.” Ines wiped her face with the heel of her hand. “He doesn't know who you are. He keeps telling everybody somebody dropped out at the last minute and isn't that lucky.”

“It is lucky.”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

“I'm going to wave at him. He's going to think I'm crazy, and I'm going to be crazy for eight hundred and eighty years.”

“Wave at him,” Kira said. “Nobody's ever waved at him.”

The queue moved. Ines looked back over her shoulder. When she turned around again her face had gone still, the stillness of somebody deciding how to spend the next ten seconds.

“Call me,” she said. “Leave me a message every year, and when I wake up I'll have nine hundred of them and I'll read every one. Tell me about the bar. Tell me who's crying into their beer.”

“Every year.”

“Promise.”

“Every year, Ines.”

The queue moved again. The call ended, and the screen went back to the bar's own drinks board, and the price for synth-ginger that was too low and always had been.

* * *

Teo Rask came in two hours before departure.

He wore the white suit with a coat over it. He looked enormous in it, and ridiculous, with his two kilos over his shoulder in the regulation bag.

He was not supposed to be on the concourse. Boarders were supposed to stay in the boarding section once they had changed. He had walked out past a security post anyway, and the security man had let him.

“I wanted to say goodbye,” he said. “You and your mother were decent to me.”

“Sit down.”

“I can't. They'll seal the section.” But he sat on the crate at the end of the counter, because he had sat there every night for a month. “Somebody released a berth yesterday. I was first. I don't know who.”

“Lucky.”

“I keep thinking about them.” He looked at his own big hands on the counter. “Somebody had a reason. I'm lying down in their pod. I ought to leave them a message, but I don't know where to send one.”

Kira took down the good bottle from the top shelf, the one that was eleven a glass. The white case was not behind it anymore. Her mother kept the case in her pocket now.

She poured two fingers and slid the glass down the counter.

“I can't pay for that,” Teo said.

“It's on the house.”

He drank. He made a face, and then a different face, and then he held the glass and looked at the amber in the bottom.

“Where's it from?”

“A world called Varga's Hollow. Fourteen hundred light-years.” She capped the bottle. “Two hundred years old. The people who made it are dead.”

“That's a hell of a thing to put in a glass.”

“Everything in here is a hell of a thing. We're between stars. Nothing's local.” She took the empty glass from him. “What are you going to do when you get there? Have you decided?”

He took his time, the way he took his time with everything.

“There's a valley in the survey,” he said. “The third image, with the river. I'm going to stand in the river. Then I'll see.”

He stood up and hit his head on the hanging lamp over the end seat. The lamp swung. He put a hand up to stop it, and the shadows went back and forth across the bottles.

“Thank your mother for the stew,” he said.

“She won't want you to.”

“Thank her anyway.”

He went. Kira watched him in the mirror until he was through the door and past the gate lights. Then she watched the place where he had been.

* * *

The Corvina left at half past six, on the evening shift.

The bar was full. It always was for a big departure. People came in to watch on the screens who had nobody aboard, and people came in who had everybody aboard and did not want to watch alone.

Marchetti was on his stool. Dorrie from the supply hauler was back with three of her crew. Ines's mother sat at a table in the corner by herself with a glass of water, and Bisola went over and sat with her, and put a hand on her arm, and kept it there.

On every screen the great ship eased out of her dock. Thrusters flickered at her waist. Then the main drive lit, a long pale flame brighter than anything else in that sky, and she began to move the way the big ships always moved, so slowly at first you could not tell, and then you could.

Nobody in the bar spoke. Dorrie stopped in the middle of a sentence.

Kira wiped the counter, left to right. The rag was folded in quarters, and she noticed only when she was halfway down.

At the end of the counter she stopped at the crate. She wiped the place where the boy from Morrow Deep had rested his glass for a month, though there was nothing there to wipe.

On the screens the Corvina was a bright point, then a dimmer point. Somewhere on her C ring two thousand people were already cold. One of them had waved at a stranger five pods down, and the stranger had waved back without knowing why.

Her mother came back behind the counter and stood beside her and looked at the screens. Kira watched her hands. They were steady, because she had taken a pill at five.

“The auger,” her mother said.

“I know.”

“You don't know. You think you know.” Bisola took the rag out of her hand, refolded it the same way, and gave it back. “Tomorrow I'll show you the service panel. There's a screw on it that strips if you look at it wrong. I stripped it myself the first week, and I've been meaning to fix the thing for eighteen years.”

Kira took the rag.

On the screens the Corvina was gone. The feeds moved on to the harvest on the Delancey moon and the court case and the woman on the beach with her fish.

The people at the tables began to talk again, low at first and then louder. Somebody ordered a round, and somebody else asked for the sound to be turned up on the sports.

Kira poured. She measured everything.

The World of Collision with Andromeda

Who's Who

The people of the novel, as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Yuki Tanaka	The physicist who runs the Cygnus test. Seventeen dead worlds have convinced her humanity needs a weapon. She keeps touching the pale line on her ring finger where a wedding band used to be.
Okonkwo	Keeps the records and keeps his objections on the record. Quotes the elders and rolls an unlit cigarette between his fingers. He has not spoken to his daughter in three years.
Dr. Yusuf	Flown in from Geneva by the ethics board to object. She pushes her glasses up when nothing has slipped, and she will become the person who listens.
Reyes	The test physicist. He taps his pen when he is nervous, which is most of the time, and his models keep missing by orders of magnitude.
Director Carvalho	The regional authority who turns one test into a production line: ten thousand devices within twenty years.
Director Soren Cray	Coalition High Command. He owns the stations, the factories and the bombs, and he never needs to raise his voice.
Amara Osei	Okonkwo's daughter, who carries her mother's name. She organizes protests against the weapon program and leads the Refusers.
The galaxy	The Milky Way, a mind spread across four hundred billion stars, thirteen billion years old. It has never had to notice anything as small as life.
Andromeda	The sister. A trillion stars, two and a half million light-years off, falling closer every rotation, dreaming of the day the two of them will meet.
General Yuki Tanaka IV	Commander of the Combined Fleet, nearly two hundred years after the test. She has her great-grandmother's eyes.
Captain Yemisi Balogun	Commands the seed ship Amaranth on its arrival at HD 40307. Two hundred and nine years old.
Korede	The Amaranth's crewman who stayed awake for the whole six-hundred-year flight. More machine than man now. He carries the dead with him.
Kira Oyelaran	Runs a twelve-seat bar on a station called Waypoint, in the space between stars, and serves drinks to travelers who will never see her again.

In this story only: Bisola Oyelaran, Kira's mother; Ines Duarte, her friend; Teo Rask, from Morrow Deep; Marchetti, Dr. Haskett and Pettibone, of Waypoint; Ansel Rook, asleep aboard the Saffron.

Timeline

Years are counted from the Cygnus test. This runs to the middle of the novel and stops there.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Before the test	Probes find seventeen worlds with complex life sterilized at the same moment across four hundred light-years.
The Cygnus test	One device, smaller than a grape, makes a sphere of nothing one million miles across. The models said three miles. In the Cygnus arm, something enormous feels a wrongness.
Three months later	The void is not moving. Everything else is. The Coalition approves production.
Eight months after the first test	Two bombs fired together make a void six hundred and ten million miles across. A ripple spreads outward at full strength and does not fade.
Soon after	Objects thrown from the direction of the core start arriving at the void. Director Cray orders three bombs fired toward the core. The void is ten light-days across.
Year One	An alliance with the galaxy is a year old. Nineteen thousand warheads sit finished in the asteroid belt.
About two hundred years on	General Yuki Tanaka IV commands the Combined Fleet from the flagship Absolute.
Year 350	On a dead world, surveyor Amelia Okonkwo-Balogun walks through a city that has waited eighty thousand years.
Year 8,247	The Meridian, the last carrier, leaves. The fleet is 47,812 ships. Arrival at Andromeda: two and a half million years. Four people watch the launch.
Year 20,000	The Amaranth reaches HD 40307 after six hundred and twelve years and starts growing children from templates.
About Year 24,239	*Waypoint* takes place. The Corvina leaves for Kestrel's Reach.
Year 24,279	An engineer named Alexei Morozov tells the bartender on Waypoint that six hundred years in a pod sounds like a beginning.
Year 24,891	Humanity covers seventeen thousand light-years and three hundred and forty-seven thousand worlds. You can call anyone, anywhere, instantly. You can't touch them.

Places

PLACE	WHAT IT IS
The Cygnus arm	The region of the galaxy where humanity lives and where the first void sits, nailed to the floor of the universe.
Ceres	Hollowed out and filled with machines that build the weapons.
Titan Station	The orbital yards and offices in the outer solar system.
The core	Sagittarius A*, the galaxy's oldest part, where its mind first pooled.

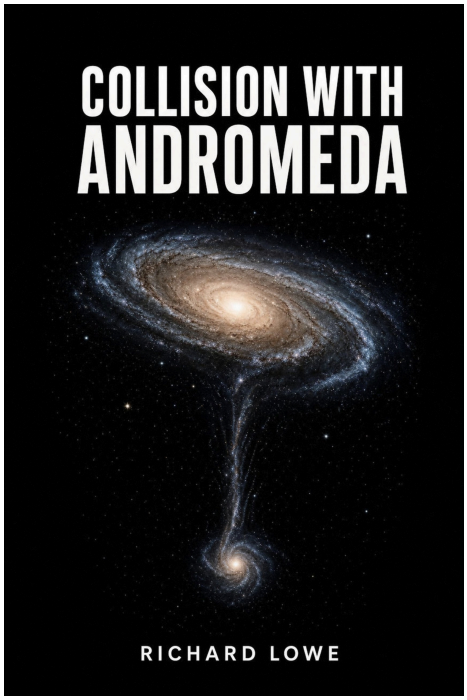
HD 40307	The world the Amaranth seeds in Year 20,000. The colony counts its years from the day she arrived.
Aurelia's Grace	Shallow seas, endless archipelagos, three moons.
Mbeki's Landing	Binary suns. The Festival of First Light comes every forty-seven local days.
New Volga	Named optimistically by its founders, before they saw it.
Waypoint	A station in the space between stars, where colony ships board. Nothing there is local.
Kestrel's Reach and Morrow Deep	In this story only: the Corvina's charter world, with copper in the grass, and the mining habitat Teo Rask comes from.

Glossary

TERM	MEANING
The void	A sphere where there is no space, no time and no gravity. Whatever crosses the boundary stops existing. It does not drift with the galaxy. It is fixed, and it is permanent.
Void bomb	The device that makes a void. Fired together, bombs make voids far larger than the sum of their parts: the interaction effect.
The ripple	The wave that spreads from a multiple-bomb void at lightspeed and arrives everywhere at the same strength.
Flickers	The galaxy's word for life. Small, bright, brief.
Communication paths	The structures the galaxy thinks through, spanning a hundred thousand light-years.
The network	The instant communication system that ties human space together. It is not wholly human technology.
The Coalition	Earth's governing military and political authority when the story begins.
The Refusers	The movement that opposes the weapon program and the alliance.
The Church of the Sister Galaxy	A forbidden church that meets in basements, noodle shops and cargo holds.
The Combined Fleet	The carriers built to cross to Andromeda, fifty thousand warheads aboard each.
Cryo-pods	Early cryogenic sleep for the long flights. Revival rate on the Corvina's class: ninety-seven percent.
Templates and growing tanks	Seed ships carry human genetic templates and grow children from them in tanks at each new world.
Crew-children	Children grown and raised aboard ship to crew the next voyage. Each one chooses whether to go.
Berth release	On Waypoint, giving up a colony berth before departure. The deposit comes back, and the berth goes to the standby list.

Read the Novel

Kira Oyelaran gave up her berth on a colony ship to stay behind a bar on a station between stars. Collision with Andromeda tells the rest of the scattering, seventeen million years of it: a weapon that tears holes in space, a galaxy that wakes up and notices, and what humanity becomes when it learns what it has been used for.



Collision with Andromeda

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