PROLOGUE

The rock was old.

It was nowhere near the oldest rock in the Solar System, but it had been around for billions and billions of years. Technically speaking, it was a common carbonaceous asteroid, probably formed when molten materials were cooling down during the early days of the universe.

The rock was, by and large, unremarkable. It was mostly stone, containing no so-called precious metals or exotic materials, was not of a size large enough to be useful for human habitation, and did not travel in an orbit that presented any danger of interfering with modern spacelane traffic.

For most of its many billion years of existence, the rock had gone around and around the star named Sol, following the course set by gravity, simply existing. But recently, it had come to the notice of a small group of humans who happened to be looking for otherwise unremarkable rocks that orbited the Sun on certain trajectories that could be easily altered to intersect with the aforementioned spacelane traffic, if these humans decided such an intersection event would serve their own purposes.

And so it was that this rock was one of several changed forever by human intervention through technology. The humans carefully mapped out the orbits of the rocks they were targeting, double- and

triple-checking to make sure that they could predict each trajectory precisely, and then sent a specially programmed mining robot to meet each rock.

When the robot landed on this rock, it drilled through the carbonaceous crust and hollowed out the center of the rock until there was a cavity large enough for the robot to fit inside. Then the robot nestled itself into the rock, recalculated its thrust parameters, and performed a brief test burn to confirm that it had navigational control of the rock. Telemetry communicated this result back to the humans who had sent the robot.

After that, the rock-robot powered down and waited.

It waited for a long time. Not billions of years, but a few.

Now, a radio signal sent by the humans who had sent the robot reached the rock's position, and the antenna array that the robot had embedded into the rock's surface picked up and decoded the instructions therein.

The robot woke up, did some math as instructed, and fired its compact ionwell engine to start pushing the rock closer toward the Sun, down in the ecliptic plane, following a pre-calculated solution that sent it hurtling faster and faster toward one specific target.

Within a few short hours, the rock would reach that target. Their meeting would be short, and sudden, and irrevocable.

The rock would mostly survive the forthcoming impact.

The target, a small spacecraft carrying four unsuspecting human passengers, would not.