



FASTER THAN LIGHT

BABEL AMONG THE STARS

MALCOLM PIERCE



Faster Than Light: Babel Among the Stars

Malcolm Pierce

Published: 2012

Tag(s): "science fiction" "space travel" "distant future" adventure starship spaceship diaspora

Other entries in the Faster Than Light Series available via
Feedbooks:

Faster Than Light: The Fallen Goddess

Faster Than Light: Dobhriathar

First the wheel, the horse, and the carriage conquered the land. Then longships, frigates, and cruisers tamed the sea. Planes and helicopters lifted man into the clouds. For centuries, there seemed to be one horizon that could not be crossed. The stars were so vast and so empty that no vessel, no matter how fast, could traverse them.

The Heilmann Drive changed everything. Any distance, no matter how great, could be leapt in a matter of seconds. In the blink of an eye, a ship carrying hundreds could move from one end of the galaxy to the other.

Man spread out across the stars, laying claim to planet after planet. In 2192, there were exactly two planets in the universe known to support human life. In 2195, there were humans living on twenty planets, with at least three dozen more colonizations planned.

Not a single complex alien life form was found in all of the worlds settled by man. Earth was the only planet which fostered multicellular organisms. But as time passed, it did not matter. Civilization splintered as isolated cultures developed on every new world. Within a thousand years, each planet seemed quite alien to the others.

One thing held them together. One thing kept them united as the single human race. The Heilmann Drive. Ships leapt between the planets every hour, carrying goods, passengers, and information. At the apex of interstellar travel, there were over three thousand

starships operating at any given moment.

Soon there will be only one.

*

Seth Garland blinked through the pain searing through his head. He tried to rub his eyes but he couldn't pull his hand up to his face. His wrists were bound behind his back.

As his vision adjusted to the darkness, Seth realized that he was in some sort of jail cell. It was a small room with a bed and only one entrance. The door was enveloped by a shimmering energy field. There was a man standing on the other side of the field. Seth could see his legs. One of them looked larger than the other. That was odd.

How did he get here? His memory was hazy. The last thing he could remember was the public assembly. He was standing in the crowd, watching Chairman Stephens speak. But he couldn't hear him. It wasn't the Chairman's fault. His voice was certainly loud enough. Seth just couldn't bear to listen to him anymore. But what happened next?

"Look at me!" the man on the other side of the energy field yelled. Seth glanced up at him. In the dim light, he looked old. He had white hair and an unsteady posture. The only clearly visible part of his body was the insignia on his chest. He was a commissar, one of the highest ranks in the Republic. It was a designation usually only given to senior military officers. But as the man leaned down to stare into Seth's eyes, Seth realized that he was much younger than he thought. His face was smooth. His blue eyes shined even in the dark jail cell.

"Who are you?" Seth asked. "Where am I?"

The man took a deep breath. His leg twitched and he grimaced. He extended his arm and leaned against the metal wall of the jail cell. "I am Commissar Phaer Absalom and you are in the custody of the People's Interstellar Republic."

"Custody? What is this about?"

Absalom clenched his teeth and growled as he spoke. "How can you hate the Republic?" he asked. "I don't understand."

Seth wasn't sure what to tell him. He didn't know where to start. Still, as he tried to formulate a coherent answer, his head cleared. Everything was starting to come back to him.

A few hours ago, at the Assembly, Seth had grown tired of listening to the endless litany of platitudes spilling from the mouth of Chairman Stephens. Seth didn't attend the assembly to hear a bureaucrat congratulate himself and his government for an hour. He'd hoped to ask a question, a very simple question, that everyone seemed to be ignoring in this time of crisis. It wasn't anything inflammatory. It was an entirely reasonable inquiry.

But that wasn't going to happen. The Chairman wasn't taking questions and he wasn't giving answers. He was simply content to spend his time talking about the amazing efforts of the Republic and its valiant efforts to protect its citizens. It was all bullshit and Seth decided to take matters into his own hands.

Seth bolted through the crowd, pushing people down, and climbed up on stage. He thought about trying to grab the microphone away from the Chairman but the guards were closing in. There wasn't time. Instead, he yelled at the top of his lungs. He wasn't sure if the cameras picked up his voice, or if any of the reporters near the front heard him. If he made it through to just one of them, it would be worth it. He could still remember what he asked, because it was the only thing he'd been thinking about for the last three months.

"They're going to take the stars away from us," he shouted. "Do you understand that?" Then the stun prods hit him.

On the other side of the energy field, Absalom snorted. He took a few steps back and grabbed a folding chair that was leaning up against the far wall. He placed it in front of the energy field and awkwardly tried to sit. There was something wrong with his left leg. He couldn't bend it. Even as he sat, he kept it extended to his side.

"This is all quite a sin-blooded shame, Mr. Garland," Absalom said. "I've looked over your records. You could have been a valuable asset for the Republic. Under better circumstances we could have been

friends." He shrugged. "But that was not meant to be."

Seth glared at him and struggled with the bonds tying his wrists. "Think about what is happening," he said. "They are undoing thousands of years of human progress! They are dividing resources, not to mention families and friends and... and the entire human species! How can you just let them do it?"

"I'm not letting anyone do anything," Absalom spat. "I am the one doing it." He gritted his teeth together, as if the very sight of Seth made him sick. "The Chairman and the High Council have entrusted *me* with the enforcement of the Spatial Preservation Act."

Seth could tell that Absalom expected this would make him angry. It didn't. In fact, a smile broke out across Seth's face. He tried to repress a laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"I thought I failed," Seth replied. "I thought no one even noticed me. But if you're here... If they really sent the man in charge of this travesty to see me, then I must have gotten someone's attention."

*

It all began ten weeks before Seth Garland would find himself in a jail cell, face-to-face with one of the most powerful men in the Republic. It was before he could even fathom such a thing was possible. His life was insufferably boring. Every day was just like the last.

Seth was a student at the prestigious Republic School of Interplanetary Relations. For most people, that would be enough. RSIR only accepted the best and brightest. It was usually the culmination of years of higher education, since admission required knowledge in multiple fields and proficiencies in several disciplines. At RSIR, students learned how to mediate conflicts on every planet in the galaxy.

The People's Interstellar Republic, which was comprised of Earth and two other nearby worlds, controlled all interplanetary transportation in the galaxy. There was only one for a ship to travel

faster than light: an engine known as the Heilmann Drive. Very few people knew how to operate a Heilmann Drive and even fewer knew how to build one. Every single one of those people was a citizen of the PIR and kept under heavy guard.

The dozens of other planets were allowed to transport goods and people on these ships in exchange for a single concession: they had to submit to PIR mediation in the event of any armed conflict. If a planet refused or rejected the decision of the mediator, the PIR would suspend trade routes to that world. Since there were no two colonized planets less than fifteen lightyears apart, this left the punished world abandoned, unable to even communicate with the rest of humanity.

In this way, the PIR enforced peace across the galaxy, and it did so with RSIR trained diplomats. These diplomats wielded extraordinary power, essentially able to control the destiny of entire planets under threat of exile.

Seth hoped to be one of those diplomats, but he was different from his classmates. They were patriots at heart. They were motivated by their love for the PIR. Many people believed that diplomacy was the highest form of service to the Republic. Seth didn't care for such thoughts. He didn't attend RSIR to learn how to serve his government. He was there because he wanted the power. It was that simple. He never did a very good job of hiding his motivations and this worried the faculty.

"I don't think you understand the purpose of the School," Dr. Hammond said. He was one of the resident psychotherapists at RSIR. There were three other doctors just like him, and they counseled the staff and students on a regular basis.

"Okay," Seth said. His dark hair hung around his almond-shaped eyes as he looked at the doctor. He leaned back in his chair, trying to act comfortable. He hated every moment he spent with the psychotherapist. "How about you tell me what the purpose of the school is?"

Dr. Hammond sighed. Of the four doctors at RSIR, he was the only one who refused to give up on Seth Garland. The other three wouldn't even speak to him.

Seth liked to think that he'd broken them.

This one was different. A large, jovial man, Dr. Hammond seemed fascinated by Seth. He didn't grow tired of his games or tricks, and Seth had thrown everything in the book at him. Seth had tried to avoid his mandatory therapy sessions ever since admission to RSIR. When the school forced him to attend or drop out, he decided to make a mockery of the process. He made up stories, he rambled incoherently, he pretended to have symptoms of various diseases of the mind... He did whatever it took to make the psychologists realize that these sessions were a waste of time. And it would have worked, if not for Dr. Hammond.

"Peace," the therapist said. "You are being trained to bring peace to all the planets in the galaxy."

Seth laughed. That was what he thought the doctor might say. "Ridiculous. You think they have peace on Caustria? How about Arya? And Vangelia?"

Dr. Hammond hesitated. The three planets Seth named were well-known for their brutal internal policies and human rights violations. Caustria employed a peculiar form of slavery that required their young to survive a period of indentured servitude before gaining the right to free employment or the ownership of property. Arya prevented the immigration of anyone without certified ancestral records that proved they were descended from certain parts of Earth. Vangelia was controlled by a ruthless theocracy that oppressed and tortured women, as well as branding dissidents as heretics.

The People's Interstellar Republic refused to revoke the travel privileges of any of those worlds. This was only one of the reasons Seth hated the PIR.

"What you are talking about is their culture," Dr. Hammond said eventually. "And we have no right to interfere in that. I thought you

were a fan of self-determination.”

Seth glared at the doctor. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. Just like every other stupid Republic shill, you can’t distinguish between the will of the people and the will of their government.”

Dr. Hammond’s eyes went wide and he stared at Seth. Seth froze, realizing that for the first time he’d told the therapist what was really bothering him. What he said wasn’t a lie. It wasn’t a game or a joke. It was the very thing that haunted him constantly.

“I think we’ve reached a breakthrough, Seth,” the doctor said. “It’s clear that your problems stem from some misconceptions about the Republic. Let’s talk about that.”

Misconceptions? Seth had to keep from laughing. He had no misconceptions about the PIR. He knew exactly what they were.

The PIR began as a provisional government cooperative between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China shortly after the invention of faster-than-light travel. Two huge issues faced the world once the Heilmann Drive was invented:

First, dozens of habitable planets were discovered, and almost every alienated group on Earth wanted to claim one for itself. Second, the Heilmann Drive was dangerous. The Heilmann Drive allowed a starship to fold and compress the space in front of it, then leap across the compressed space to anywhere within the galaxy. Any matter caught in the folded space was converted to energy. This made the Heilmann Drive a powerful weapon, capable of destroying planets or even stars.

The two most powerful governments on Earth cooperated to secure the exclusivity of the dangerous Heilmann Drive, as well as apportion the habitable planets to colonists. The nations of the world pooled their military resources behind the new cooperative. They prepared for the possibility of hostile alien life in the galaxy.

Before too long, the boundaries between the nations of Earth began to dissolve. Governments and armies fraternized together, forming personal and political alliances. Anyone who didn’t like this

sudden globalization left Earth for another world. Before long, the legislatures of the Earth's governments voted to consolidate. Two nearby worlds requested to join in the alliance and the PIR was formed.

In the hundreds of years since the PIR came into existence, it did nothing but hold back humanity. To their credit, they provided for the prosperity of all their citizens. No one starved in the PIR. In fact, most people in the Republic struggled with health issues related to obesity or over-consumption. Very few people were discontent. Even those who held the most menial of jobs, or no job at all, were well-supported by the government and had access to all varieties of entertainment.

But that was only one side of it. This prosperity was achieved by force. Scientists and engineers who knew anything about the technology that made the Republic such a paradise were kept on Earth by the military. Anyone who spoke out about this policy was charged with treason and sedition if they were lucky. If they weren't lucky, they simply disappeared.

"I'd tell you what I think about the Republic," Seth said. "But I would be taking my life into my own hands. That's all I need to say."

Dr. Hammond smiled in a feeble attempt to seem inviting. "I am your doctor. Nothing you say goes beyond these walls." He gestured around him.

Seth shook his head. "Don't try that with me," he said. "Do the other students believe that shit? Because that's a shame."

"I don't understand."

"You are employed by RSIR," Seth said. He crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair. "RSIR is funded entirely from the discretionary budget of the Republic Military. Anyone who is employed, directly or indirectly, through the military serves at the discretion of the High Council. That means that you are forbidden from entering into any private contract or covenant relating to your job—explicit or implied."

Dr. Hammond stared at him, stunned. Seth realized that he didn't

understand the nature of his job. Maybe he really thought that he was trying to help the students at RSIR. If so, it was pitiful. Seth was glad to clear things up.

"Basically you're not really acting as a doctor right now and I'm not really acting as your patient. You are a consultant to the Republic Military with a medical background. I am an interview subject. And you are actually obliged to report any treasonous speech to your commanding officer. In this case, that would be the RSIR's Dean of Student Affairs."

"I... I..." The usually jovial man looked despondent. "But that's not what I... I'm a doctor."

Seth shrugged. "Check the regulations. It's there."

Dr. Hammond continued to gape. "But that's not right. They shouldn't be able to do that."

"Careful," Seth replied. He held up a finger, as if to tell the doctor to stop speaking. "My education is paid for through a separate but very similar fund. I am required to report any treasonous speech directly to the nearest Republic Intelligence branch. If I don't, I could be expelled."

The doctor went quiet. Seth thought about elaborating further. The PIR regulations were so byzantine and complex that, at some point, almost every citizen receiving funds allocated by the High Council was required to report treason. It had become a standard rider attached to any spending bill that created new employment, educational grants, or welfare benefits.

"Don't you see, doctor? None of us are doing what we really want to be doing."

The therapist looked up and towards the wall to his right. There was a small window there, looking out on the blue skies outside. Rows of metal girders partially obscured the sun. They were the foundation of the floating hydroponic arrays which fed most of the people of Earth.

"You're wrong. They do all of this for our own good." The doctor

paused, thinking for a moment. “Do you know much about history, Mr. Garland?”

Seth shrugged. “There is a lot of history, doc. You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“Until the formation of the PIR, this world was locked in perpetual conflict. We killed each other, we tortured each other, we starved each other. Now that’s all over. The PIR does what it must to maintain that peace.”

A heavy silence fell over the room as Seth realized the doctor could not be reached. For just a moment, it seemed as if he would listen. No. Instead, he was content to repeat the propaganda of the Republic.

“That world created this one,” Seth said. “What will this world create? Nothing. We haven’t created a single thing in a thousand years.” He stood up and grabbed his black jacket off the back of his chair. “We’ve talked enough. I’m done. Write whatever you want in your report. Tell the Republic authorities what I think. You won’t be the first.”

The therapist didn’t try and stop him. Seth wasn’t surprised. He hoped this would be the end of the charade. Once this doctor gave up on him, there wouldn’t be any more licensed therapists at RSIR to assign him to. Maybe he could finally be free of the weekly sessions.

Seth threw open the doors to the office and stormed into the hall. He pressed the call button to summon the magnetic lift. He started to look forward to going back to his room, getting a little sleep, and even preparing for class. As much as he didn’t like his instructors at RSIR, sometimes he found their lessons amusing.

Before the magnetic lift could arrive, Seth caught something in the corner of his eye. Several people were gathered around a viewscreen near the end of the hall. They were mostly support staff—guards, secretaries, and janitors at RSIR—but even two of the doctors were there. They spoke in hushed whispers to each other, as if they finally realized that the Republic was listening to everything

they said.

At first, Seth figured that this was just another manufactured tragedy. Every so often, there would be an explosion on a freighter or at a Republic facility. It would be blamed on a particular rebel group that opposed the Republic. Invariably, this would be a terrorist organization that Seth had never heard of. The commissars would get on the viewscreens and promise retribution. Within a few weeks, the leaders of the rebel group would be captured and the Republic would be safe again.

Seth had made several attempts to find actual, existing resistance groups on Earth before they made a move and were quickly destroyed by the Republic. He didn't believe they existed at all. All of these tragedies were truly farces, and sometimes Seth wondered if he was the only one who saw it.

This time was different. Something compelled him to approach the viewscreen that day. He approached the huddled group and peered over their shoulders to see what drew their rapt attention.

There was a man in a long beige coat standing behind a podium. He was just finishing up his prepared statement as Seth moved into earshot of the viewscreen.

"...is damaging the very fabric of existence,"

A flurry of noise erupted in front of him as every reporter at the news conference tried to ask a question at once. The man just stepped backwards and held up his hands, as if there was nothing he could do about his findings.

This wasn't what Seth expected at all. If this was another so-called terrorist attack, there wouldn't even be reporters at the conference. It would all be staged.

Seth turned to a large woman next to him. She was the receptionist for the nearby physical therapy office. "What's going on?" he asked. "What is he talking about?"

The woman shook her head sadly. "It's the Heilmann Drive," she said. "They think it's going to cause the end of the world."

The Heilmann Drive was broken. Or if it wasn't broken, it never really worked right at all.

In theory, the Heilmann Drive was a simple device. It operated by folding three dimensional space into a two dimensional envelope. A starship could then move across the folded space, immediately unfold it, and leap across it to any point in the galaxy. The matter within the envelope was compressed and fused to provide the massive amount of energy required to power the drive.

Apparently it wasn't that simple. The Heilmann Drive was doing something else. It was wearing down the fabric of reality, causing it to warp and distort. Almost all of the pundits used the same metaphor to describe what was happening: it was like stretching a rubber band too many times. Reality itself was losing its elasticity.

This danger wasn't just theoretical. It was already happening. The first news reports were accompanied with video taken on one of the space stations near the largest trade route between Earth and Gammaron. Everything aboard the station was slightly distorted and warped. Everything seemed to curve and undulate. The air shimmered as if it was somehow fragile. Light no longer traveled in a straight line, instead wavering and curving even in the vacuum of space. Time passed slower in some rooms of the station and faster in others.

What did this mean? No one knew Not yet. It was too strange, too inconceivable. No one understood how to measure the warping effect. It didn't seem to affect anything except perception. It did not

damage the space station and it did not hurt its occupants. Matter within the warp remained the same as ever. It affected something beyond matter, something deeper that puzzled even the most prominent physicists in the PIR.

Most importantly, the warping effect was not unique to the trade route between Earth and Gammaron. Preliminary studies showed that similar effects appeared along all the major trade routes in the galaxy. The reality of the situation was clear. The warps were caused by the Heilmann Drive. It was somehow damaging the fabric of space-time, wearing away at the foundations of the universe.

In a matter of hours, the PIR halted all Heilmann Leaps across the warped routes. They redirected starships through lesser-used pathways. But this was only a temporary solution. Now a trip between Earth and Gammaron took two Heilmann Leaps instead of one. If the leaps were creating the warps, this would only exacerbate the problem in the long term.

No one knew what would happen if the warping continued. Could continued use of the Heilmann drive wear down space-time to a breaking point? What would happen then? What would that even mean?

There was no way to know, and no one wanted to find out. When every Heilmann Leap could mean the end of the galaxy, there was only one solution. The leaps had to stop.

*

Seth sat alone at the bar, running his finger around the rim of his glass. He wasn't sure how long he'd been there or how many drinks he had. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered any more. If he wasn't absolutely sure that the Republic doctors would pump his stomach, he would have continued drinking until he passed out.

Everything was over. All of his dreams were dashed to pieces and he wasn't even sure how it happened. He'd watched all the news

reports. He'd heard all the theories. He'd listened to the scientists. They said that the fabric of reality was at risk.

Seth wasn't worried about reality. Reality had a way of surviving against all odds. Instead, Seth feared the response to these scientific findings. Already, the Republic had formed a commission to explore the possibility of phasing out the Heilmann Drive. That didn't just mean the end of one particular piece of technology. That meant the end of faster-than-light travel altogether.

Every planet in the galaxy would be cut off. They would all become isolated and would have to become self-sufficient. The idea seemed ridiculous to Seth. It was impossible. So many planets depended upon interstellar trade that there was no way they could survive without it.

But the Republic was seriously considering it. And there was vast public support for it. Everyone in the Republic was so afraid. They were cowards who preferred to run away from the problem of folding space rather than fight it.

"What's got you down?" a woman asked.

Seth looked behind him and found Willa Green, one of his classmates at RSIR. She was almost a foot taller than Seth and probably weighed twice as much as him. Despite that, she was one of his more attractive peers. People on Earth, in general, were overfed and under-motivated. Many of them made it worse by becoming insufferable slobs. At the very least, Willa made some effort to be presentable in public, brushing her wavy brown hair and keeping her black uniform clean.

"What do you think has me down? The end of human progress."

Willa sat down at the bar next to him. "You're overreacting."

Seth's eyes went wide. "No! No, I'm not! The Republic has spent the last millennium keeping us from our potential and now they've figured out how to actually shove us back into the dark ages. Bravo!" Seth clapped his hands together and began to applaud.

"Careful," Willa said. "I might have to report language like that." She

was one of the first people Seth successfully enlightened about the secret riders to PIR funding bills.

“Go right ahead,” Seth replied. “I don’t care anymore. The PIR has plenty of documentation on me and my opinions. It’s only a matter of time before I’m blamed for the next terrorist attack.”

Willa leaned closer to him, lowering her voice to a whisper. “You know they don’t really do that, right? They’re not the monsters you think they are.”

“They’re going to take the stars away from us,” Seth said, his voice slurring as he almost tripped over the words. “Don’t defend them.”

“You should take a break,” Willa told him. She grabbed his glass and pulled it away just as he was about to take another drink. “Besides, I have something better for you. This will really get your mind off of this whole Heilmann Drive mess.”

She reached into her purse and pulled out a small plastic bag. Inside, were two brown colored gelatin capsules. Willa held them up to the light and Seth could see the intricate circuitry inside.

The pills weren’t drugs. They were tiny digestible electronic devices called Gnostins. Once swallowed, they began sending electrical pulses through the nervous system that stimulated the visual, auditory, and pleasure centers of the brain. They could be tailor-made to create specific lifelike hallucinations that lasted for approximately one hour, until the capsules were broken down in the stomach.

“I don’t take those,” Seth said, waving them away. “That’s not the kind of escape I’m looking for.” Then he grabbed his glass away from her and took another sip.

Willa crossed her arms. “Oh, but you’re fine drinking yourself into a rims-damned stupor.”

Seth held up his glass. “This is real. This isn’t just in my head.” He sighed. “Who am I kidding? You wouldn’t understand. You’re just like all the others. You’re just like everyone.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

"Lost," Seth said. "You're lost adrift among the stars. Everyone is. We don't know where we're going. We don't even know where we were. But don't worry. Someday, I'll show you the way. I'll show everyone..."

Willa laughed. "Oh, and how are you going to do that?"

Suddenly, Seth looked up with an intensity he rarely showed to anyone. His slurring voice became focused and crystal clear. He pursed his lips and replied:

"I'm going to bring down the Republic."

A silence fell across the bar. Willa stared at Seth, waiting as if she expected him to tell her it was just a joke. But it wasn't a joke. Seth meant every word. It was something he'd thought about for years, though it was the first time he'd been willing to say it aloud.

The PIR was broken. They did nothing but hold people back. They were the reason no one ever developed a better faster-than-light engine. They were the reason no one ever explored the universe beyond the galactic rim. They were the reason that everyone on Earth was a bloated caricature of humanity.

"You... You can't be serious."

Seth smiled. "Why do you think I enrolled in RSIR?" he asked her.

He knew this was something everyone wondered about him. Typically, RSIR recruits were incredibly patriotic. They were dedicated to spreading the values of the Republic across the galaxy. Not Seth. He just wanted the power that came with being a diplomat. In particular, diplomats were allowed to travel to any planet in the galaxy.

There were dozens of worlds out there that suffered because of the Republic's monopoly on space travel. They could be united. They could be motivated. All it would take is the right person... Seth was sure he was that person.

"I'm not comfortable talking about this," Willa said immediately. "You're my friend, Seth, so I'm going to pretend that none of this happened. But if you ever—"

Seth held up his hand. "Don't worry. It's all meaningless now. The RSIR, my dreams, everything... They've decided that faster-than-light travel is unsafe. If we're smart, we'll all start looking for new jobs."

Willa furrowed her brow. "What are you trying to say? Do you really think they'll ban the Heilmann Drive? That's ridiculous."

"I don't think they'll do it. I know they will. It's only a matter of time now." He took one more drink, then decided that maybe it was time to stop. "After all, I've seen it before."

*

When Seth Garland was five years old, his father lost his job. This was a rather remarkable occurrence in the People's Interstellar Republic. Most occupations were funded at least partially by the government and this gave employees far-reaching protection from termination. A reliable, punctual hard worker was never laid off, even if his job had become redundant.

James Garland, however, had the misfortune of being in the wrong profession at the wrong time. He was a licensed Sensory Stimulation Specialist, commonly referred to as a "stimmer", who owned his own business in the outskirts of New Incorporated Shanghai.

Stimmers were artists and craftsmen who dealt in personalized dreams and memories. They used advanced neural interfaces to create life-like experiences as an escape from the doldrums of modern life. James's specialty was tranquil recreations of pre-industrial Earth. Clients would come into his office, take a mild tranquilizer, and he would take them on a peaceful journey through life before the existence of the steam engine.

Very few stimmers were as skilled as James Garland. He considered himself a master artist, a painter and musician who composed in the fragile medium of fleeting neural impulses. He took great pride in his work, often describing the bucolic scenes he created over dinner. It bored Seth at the time, but he always listened patiently because he knew it made his father happy.

One day, something changed. James didn't come home happy.

Instead, he was worried. PIR security agents visited him at his storefront and asked him several questions about stimming. They wanted to know if it could be used to implant memories into clients, or to brainwash them into particular actions.

According to James, dozens of other stimmers received similar visits from the PIR that day. None of them knew why the Republic was suddenly so interested in their niche business. They'd never cared about stimming before. It was harmless.

Except the PIR didn't think it was harmless. A week after their visit to James's storefront, the High Council passed the Brain Integrity Act of 4173, banning Sensory Stimulation.

They claimed that the Brain Integrity Act was a direct response to a recent freighter crash that killed fifty-one Republic citizens. The captain of the freighter in question was a habitual client of stimmers. One of his stimmers was apparently a well-known opponent of the PIR government who admitted, after interrogation, to planting the idea to destroy the freighter in his head.

Republic scientists recommended that anyone who wanted to experience tailored dreams should use Gnostin pills instead. Gnostins employed similar technology and created a similar effect. However, because they were manufactured by the PIR, there was no danger that they could be tampered with.

Of course, Gnostins were mass-produced while stimmers worked on the fly to manipulate the neural pathways of their clients. It wasn't the same. Even Seth, who was only a child, knew that much. Stimming had existed for centuries. It was an art, a part of human culture, that the Republic had destroyed with one single vote.

James Garland was devastated. It wasn't because he was out of work. His skills were still in demand and he was quickly offered a job designing Gnostins. But that wasn't what he wanted to do. He'd spent his life learning how to manipulate the gossamer connections within the human mind. That was his art. That was his life. And they took it away from him.

The Garland family considered moving to another world, but the Republic acted quickly to outlaw stimming everywhere they could reach. They threatened to discontinue the trade routes to any planet that still licensed stimmers. Before long, stimming was essentially banned everywhere in the galaxy. Meanwhile, far more abhorrent acts were still allowed on the backwater planets without as much as a stern gaze from the PIR.

Seth's father fell into a deep depression. He didn't make any efforts to find another job. He didn't want another job. Stimming was the only thing he'd ever done, and he'd done it all his life. Soon, he began disappearing for days at a time. He never told his family where he went or what he was doing. Seth tried to ask him, but James told him that it was for the best that he remain quiet.

Later that year, James Garland was arrested for violating the provisions of the Brain Integrity Act. He'd been performing sensory stimulations in an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Incorporated New Shanghai. Because the BIA was amended into the Republic Galactic Security Edicts, the minimum punishment was ten years imprisonment. James was sent to the PIR incarceration center on Gammaron two weeks before Seth's seventh birthday. Seth never saw him again.

★

"This has nothing to do with my father!" Seth yelled. Ten weeks after he drunkenly proclaimed he would overthrow the Republic, he was finally sitting in one of their jails. But it wasn't armed rebellion that put him here. It was a dumb publicity stunt. And now he was face-to-face with a commissar who dared to suggest that everything he believed in was caused by some minor childhood trauma.

Phaer Absalom leaned in towards the energy field that separated the two men. He held a tablet in his calloused hands, tapping it against his outstretched leg. "I'm just trying to understand how you could hate the Republic so much. Don't you realize how good you have it?"

Seth grimaced as he realized there was no way he could get to his feet. "In two months, I'm going to be stuck on Earth. You're going to be stuck on Earth. Everyone will be trapped just like us, on planets across the galaxy. And just because a few bureaucrats are scared. That's why I hate the Republic."

Absalom shook his head. "Many people are angry about the Spatial Preservation Act. That is entirely understandable. This is a strange and frightening time for everyone. The galaxy is changing, and not for the better. But this is something that has to happen. Do not be angry with the Republic. They didn't choose this."

"Of course they did!" Seth exclaimed.

"I am not surprised you think that," Absalom replied. "But that is why I think that your hate goes well beyond the Spatial Preservation Act." He sighed and put the tablet down on the ground next to his chair. "I want to understand, Mr. Garland. By Aesu, I want to understand."

Seth laughed. His headache was starting to go away. He was getting his strength back. He almost felt good. Granted, he was trapped in a jail cell. But he always figured he'd end up in a Republic jail eventually. He was almost relieved to get it over with.

"You'll never understand," Seth said. "Just like I'll ever understand why you love the Republic. We live in two different worlds, you and I."

Absalom considered this for a moment. He looked around, as if he was making sure that he was alone with Seth. Then he slowly stood up and grabbed the back of his chair. He pushed it closer to the energy field, sat back down, and spoke in a low voice:

"I do not accept that," he said. "You are a smart man. Top of your class at RSIR, right? Then I believe I *can* make you understand why I love the Republic."

Seth didn't want to hear it. He'd heard so many speeches by so many politicians that he was sick of the inane rhetoric. Unfortunately, there was no way he could reach his ears to cover them. "I guess I don't have a choice, do I?"

The commissar shook his head and quickly began his story. "As

you may have guessed when you heard my name, I was born on the planet Vangelia,” he said.

Seth had not figured as much, since there was very little immigration between Vangelia and other worlds, but now it made sense. When a child was disowned by his father on Vangelia, he was forced to take the surname ‘Absalom’. This let everyone know that he had been disgraced in the eyes of his family and the church.

Vangelia was one of the earliest settled worlds in the galaxy, established less than a decade after the invention of the Heilmann Drive. When humanity spread to the stars, it began a grand age of science and reason on Earth. The mainstream religions of the time quickly fell into disfavor among the public, who saw their tenants as outdated in the face of an entire galaxy of habitable worlds.

Several religious groups chose to leave Earth rather than face discrimination and ridicule. They found planets where they could be alone and practice their faith in peace. These far-off worlds became a new promised land, the true homes of religions long established on Earth.

A number of fundamentalist Christian churches selected Vangelia as their new home. Millions of people traveled to Vangelia to start a new society where they could truly devote themselves to God. Within a few years, the planet was entirely self-sufficient. It was one of the most successful early colonies and many other planetary developments would be patterned after it.

Almost two thousand years later, the insular nature of Vangelian society and their fervent orthodox devotion had warped their society into a terrifying theocracy. Its brand of Christianity no longer resembled the peaceful religion still practiced on Earth. Vangelia was one of the few worlds where women still did not have equal protection under the law. Children were considered the property of their parents. Heresy against clerical doctrine—which changed with each incoming class of priests and ministers—was punishable by death.

"I'm sorry about your planet," Seth said. "But I don't see what this has to do with the Republic."

Absalom just continued as if he didn't even hear Seth. "When I was sixteen, my younger sister was married to one of the church elders. She was only eleven at the time. My parents were promised that we would all transcend to a higher level of heaven in exchange for her hand."

Seth cocked an eyebrow. "A higher level of heaven? There are levels of heaven?" In all his time at RSIR, he'd yet to take a class on Vangelian society. He didn't quite understand what they believed and only had mainstream Christianity to compare it to.

"This will go faster if you do not ask any questions about Vangelian religion. I doubt I could even give you a good answer."

"Fair enough."

A pained look flashed across Absalom's face as he went on. "My sister was terrified. She didn't know what any of this meant. We... They didn't explain these things very well on Vangelia. It was the husband's job to..." He trailed off. "That's not important. I knew what would happen. I knew why she was so scared. And I decided that I couldn't let them go through with it."

"I helped my sister escape before the wedding. And in exchanged, I was disowned and made an Absalom: a prodigal son. My father personally punished me. He crushed my left leg between two grindstones." The commissar let out a heavy sigh. "I would say it is a miracle that I can still walk, but I do not believe in miracles."

Seth gave him a skeptical look. "What does this have to do with the Republic?"

"My parents were just going to let me die. My leg was so badly mangled I probably should have bled to death." Absalom looked up, his eyes burning deep in his brow. "But I didn't. I crawled out of their house at night. I begged and bribed my way to a spaceport and when the next ship came, I dragged my dying body to the commander and I asked for asylum. The Republic took me in. They fixed me up. They

kept me alive and they gave me a chance to serve them. That is why I love the Republic."

No matter how hard he tried to resist it, Seth was moved by the commissar's story. He'd been wrong. He *could* understand why Absalom was so loyal to the PIR. There was only one thing that bugged Seth, that stood out like a sore thumb:

"When this is all over, everyone who is born on Vangelia will be stuck on Vangelia," Seth said. "Forever. No one will be able to escape like you did."

Absalom gritted his teeth together. "Don't you think I know that?" he growled. "Those people, those poor souls... They have every right in the world to be mad at me. We are forcing them to make a sacrifice for all of mankind. But you, Seth Garland? You will spend the rest of your life in paradise. You will always have enough food, a comfortable home, clean air and water. You will never be tortured. You will be able to live where you want, love who you want, and have whatever job you want."

"That's a lie," Seth replied. "I want to travel the galaxy."

The commissar's leg twitched. He clenched his hands into fists and looked down at the ground. Seth could tell he was holding back a great deal of anger. He took a deep breath and started to stand up.

"Your so-called problems make a mockery of true tragedy," he said. He pushed his chair into the wall with a flick of his wrist. It clattered against the metal bulkhead and fell over. "Republic regulations state that I have two days to decide whether to charge you with disrupting the public assembly. I hope that you appreciate that I am going to wait until I've cooled down." The commissar hobbled towards the door leading to the hall. Then he looked back at Seth. "Take this time to consider the depths of your selfishness. Maybe by the end of the day you will realize that living a perfectly comfortable existence, free of strife, is a sacrifice you can make for the human race."

The Relocation began almost as soon as the Spatial Preservation Act was signed by Chairman Harlan Stephens. It was a period of six months, scheduled pursuant to the Act, in which the Republic would slowly decommission its entire fleet of faster-than-light starships. During this period, the remaining starships would run alternate routes between all the habitable planets. They would no longer carry trade goods or supplies, only people. The Spatial Preservation Act gave every person in the galaxy the right to demand a single ticket to any colonized planet. This way, in theory, everyone could choose where they would live out the rest of their lives.

Of course, this wasn't how the Republic spun the situation. They told everyone that the end of faster-than-light travel was temporary. They assured the people that their scientists would work tirelessly on a solution to the reality-warping problem of the Heilmann Drive. Either they would fix the Heilmann Drive or come up with an entirely new engine. The Republic said that the Relocation was designed to allow people to choose where they would spend their "extended planetary residence" until the trade routes could be safely reopened.

Anyone who paid attention knew this was a lie. The Republic was not putting its starships into drydock. They were not sealing them away. They were destroying them. Every time a starship was decommissioned, it was disassembled and melted down into scrap metal. The few engineers and scientists who knew how to build a

Heilmann Drive were sequestered on Earth. They were forbidden to speak to anyone, even to confirm whether or not they were working on a solution to restore faster-than-light travel.

As the Relocation wound down, people began to realize that it was the end of inter-galactic travel. Tickets aboard the remaining ships were sold on the black market at exorbitant prices. Riots consumed the major starports, even forcing some of them to shut down. This cut off several planets before the end of the Relocation. One by one, planets were isolated from the rest of the galaxy. And it seemed like that isolation would last forever.

The end approached, and a name for this new era emerged. They called it the Fall. After almost two thousand years of skipping across the stars, mankind had been struck down and descended back to the confines of the planets.

Not everyone accepted this fate.

*

Seth sat in his cell and stared at the wall. His arms hurt from being bound behind his back for several hours. He was starting to wonder if he'd made a terrible mistake. From what he knew about the Republic legal system, if they decided to charge him with disrupting the public assembly, he wouldn't see freedom for at least a year. He'd be stuck in a cell just like this one. Absalom and the Bureau of Criminal Affairs would be sure of that. By the end of his sentence, every starship in the galaxy would be destroyed. It would all be over and there would be nothing to be saved.

Hours ago, when he was standing at the assembly and listening to Chairman Stephens, he thought that the best thing he could do was cause a scene. No one around him was outraged. No one was protesting. They were all going to take the Fall sitting down. They refused to put up a fight. He thought that if he showed everyone that they could resist, then maybe they would follow suit. If he questioned the chairman, maybe they would question him too.

That was a foolish hope. Most likely, no one even heard him once he was on stage. All everyone saw was a crazy young man get stunned. By now, the Republic had probably picked through his therapists' records for choice quotes, fed them to the media, and made him out to be an unstable loner.

Now there was nothing he could do to stop the Fall. It was inevitable and it was going to all happen while he was stuck in a jail cell.

His mind raced with all the other things he could have done. He should have started small, convinced others to follow him. He should have made someone else charge the stage. It was a good opening gambit, but it was a poor move on its own. Once the patsy was in jail, Seth could have built him up to be a martyr for the cause.

The Republic imprisoned people who opposed their ideology all the time. Unfortunately, the Republic's ideology was incredibly popular on Earth. The Fall wasn't popular. An imprisoned dissenter could be a catalyst for a true opposition movement... but only in the right hands. Seth knew that he could help build a narrative like that. But that meant he had to get out of jail.

Seth struck his head against the bulkhead in frustration. He hated that he had to depend on other people. It was entirely possible that there were others like him on Earth—people who saw his brief moment of rebellion and wanted to follow in his footsteps. But no matter how smart they were, no matter how dedicated, Seth couldn't trust them to continue his fight. He had to do it himself. Now, because of his foolish hastiness, that would be impossible.

The door on the far end of the room slid open. Seth sat up, expecting to see Commissar Absalom. Instead, it was just one of the guards. He wore a red jumpsuit that was fading near the collar and the sleeves. Seth knew that this meant he'd been here for a long time. Most jail employees were young. Their uniforms were bright and freshly pressed. Jail guard was a low-level post in the Bureau of Criminal Affairs and most people were promoted out of it within

months. Not this guard. He was probably starting to think he'd spend his entire career here.

Seth smiled. This meant one of two things. Either he wasn't very good at his job or he wasn't very good at following orders. Either way, it gave him hope.

"Finally dinner time?" Seth asked. He saw the guard was carrying a tray covered in foil. He wasn't sure how long he'd been in jail but it made sense they would eventually have to feed him.

The guard looked down at Seth and gave him a half-hearted grin. "Breakfast," he replied. "It's morning."

Seth marveled at this. The time passed far quicker than he expected. "No wonder I'm starved," he said. The guard set the tray on the ground and pushed it towards the energy field surrounding the door to Seth's cell. "You know you're the first one to come and see me? Other than the commissar, of course."

Almost immediately, the guard straightened up. He smoothed out the front of his uniform and looked left and right. "There... There is a commissar here?" he asked.

This was even better than Seth hoped. The guard knew nothing about the circumstances surrounding his incarceration.

"That's right," Seth said. "His name is Phaer Absalom. I'm surprised you haven't seen him around. He's hard to miss."

The guard started to sweat. Seth could tell that he was thinking. Maybe he had seen Absalom, just never took notice of the rank on his uniform. After all, Absalom was young for his post and it was easy to be distracted by his leg. "Well, I've got your breakfast. Maybe I should go—"

"You wouldn't want to make any mistakes," Seth interrupted him. "Not now, not when there's a commissar snooping around."

"Mistakes?" A brief look of panic flashed across the guard's eyes. "Mistakes like what? Did I do something wrong?"

Seth shrugged. He carefully moved across the ground, towards the plate. Then he wiggled his wrists, still tied behind his back. "How am I

supposed to eat like this?" Seth asked.

"I... I don't know," the guard replied. "That's a good question. We don't usually restrain our prisoners here and... Oh... Maybe I should go ask someone if I'm supposed to untie you."

With a grin, Seth craned his neck to make eye contact with the guard. "You're clearly supposed to untie me. Otherwise, I'm not going to be able to eat. And then I'll pass out and everyone will wonder why I wasn't given any food."

"But to untie you, I'll have to deactivate the energy field. Then you might be able to escape."

"Where would I escape to? This is a jail. I don't think I would make it far." Seth laughed. He pushed himself a few inches closer to the energy field. "What's your name?" he asked.

The guard considered whether or not he should answer. He must have decided there was no harm in it. "Arthur Weller," he said.

Seth nodded. "And how long have you worked here, Arthur?"

"Five years." It was just like Seth suspected. That was a long time for someone to remain a prison guard. Most people within the Bureau were street investigators or military police five years into their career.

"You've never seen a prisoner tied up before? That's a surprise."

"It's not how we do things here. We usually don't need to."

"Where is 'here'?"

Again, Arthur spent a few seconds wondering if he should respond to Seth's inquiry. Again, however, he chose to trust his prisoner. "Central Americas Correctional Facility Six," Arthur said. "East wing."

Seth took a deep breath. This was interesting. He already figured he was in the American Zone. The public assembly where he was arrested was only a few miles from the RSIR campus. RSIR was located on the coast of the Washington Region. That made sense. But Correctional Facility Six was considerably further south in the American Zone, well within the Columbian Region. There were at least fourteen other large jails between RSIR and Correctional

Facility Six.

"Why did they bring me here?" Seth asked aloud.

"It said on the tablet outside that you disrupted a public assembly," Arthur replied. He was trying to be helpful but he just sounded foolish.

Everything started to come together in his head. That was why it was time for breakfast. They had to transport him across the continent. But why? Why couldn't they just take him to one of the many adjacent jails? Why would they take him all the way here?

"It did work," Seth said aloud. A wide smile started to spread across his face. "I made it on camera. They heard me. And now... Someone thinks that I need to be hidden."

Arthur was puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"It's almost fifteen hours later," Seth replied. "By now, there are vid clips of me being hit with a stun-prod circulating the planet. Most people probably think I deserved it. Maybe I did. But there are enough people who think I didn't."

"I'm so confused," Arthur said.

Seth took a deep breath. "Don't worry. This is good for you. I was going to try and escape. I'm still not sure how I was going to do that yet, but I would have figured something out. It would have made you look really bad no matter what. But good news, Arthur! I don't have to do that."

"You were going to escape?" Arthur asked. "So that's why you wanted me to untie you."

"No!" Seth exclaimed. He gritted his teeth together. Now that he'd figured everything out, trying to talk with Arthur was just infuriating. "I wanted you to untie me so I could eat breakfast. I was going to figure out how to escape after that."

"What?"

That was it. Seth was done. He didn't even want to deal with the guard long enough to get himself untied anymore. "Just bring me the commissar. Tell him that I'm ready to deal."

"Deal?"

"He'll understand."

*

Seth leaned to the side and reached across his body. After hours of imprisonment, it felt good to stretch. His arms and hands were stiff. Even his back ached. And he was still hungry, but that could wait.

"I wasn't the first protester, was I?" Seth asked. "Just the first to make it on camera. The first to really get noticed by the public."

Commissar Absalom grunted. He leaned against the bulkhead near the door. "I do not know what you're talking about."

"The Republic has done a good job. Or it was doing a good job. When I watched the news, it sounded like everyone was happy about the Fall. They all accepted it. I wondered how that could possibly be the case. But now I know. You just hid it. You covered up all the dissent because you wanted all the dissenters to think they were alone."

The commissar was silent. Seth watched him as he thought. He was worried. That meant Seth was more right than wrong. Maybe some of the details were off, but there was enough there that he'd hit a nerve with Absalom.

"What are you thinking, commissar?" Seth asked.

Absalom glared at Seth through the energy field. "I am wondering how you could be so confident when I control your fate. If I gave the word, you would never see the light of day again."

This sent a chill down Seth's spine. The thought terrified him. If being stuck on Earth forever, was bad, living in a cell for the rest of his life was a hundred times worse. But that wasn't going to happen. Seth was sure of it, so he hid his fear well.

"Are they using my words?" Seth forced a smile. "I thought saying that the Republic was taking the stars away from the people was dramatic. Maybe overdramatic, but I wasn't going for subtlety. Are the new protestors copying me?"

Commissar Absalom clenched his teeth. He was trying to hold back his anger. It didn't work. "How can you know what's going on out

there?" he shouted. Little specks of saliva flew into the air in front of his face. "It's not possible! You're nothing but a hell-bound liar! It's—"

Seth breathed a sigh of relief. He was on the right path. Now he had to drive the point home. He had to scare the commissar even more. "Minutes after I was arrested, video of my outburst spread across the communication networks," he said. "It was too fast for you to control. The media couldn't suppress it, only try and spin it. They called me crazy. They might have even lied and said I was diagnosed with some kind of mental defect. But this just made it worse. The people were primed to turn on the Spatial Preservation Act. The more the media tried to control the narrative, the more they rejected it. Soon there were similar outbursts at smaller assemblies across the globe and—"

"SHUT UP!" Absalom screamed. He reached up and grabbed at his temples. "You are just guessing. You can't possibly understand what I have to deal with."

Quiet settled across the room. Seth knew he shouldn't push Absalom even further. As he'd indicated, the commissar had the power to have him shipped off to a remote prison for the rest of his life. Even if that would be a terrible political move, Absalom might just do it out of anger. If Seth was going to out-wit the commissar, he would have to make sure the commissar kept his wits about him.

"You think you are some sort of freedom fighter," Absalom said. "But with one stupid, fool-hardy outburst, you have undone months of work. It was not easy to get the people to accept the Spatial Preservation Act."

Seth took a deep breath. He still had to proceed carefully. "So you admit that the Fall is unpopular?"

"The Fall? What a ridiculous name."

"We flew among the stars. And now..."

Absalom sighed. "It is apt, but it fails to understand the complexity of the situation."

Seth turned and headed towards the bench near the back of his

cell. He was glad to be free of his bonds, but he didn't want to stand anymore. He thought it might make him seem too confrontational. Even though he was sure he could manipulate the commissar, he wasn't in control.

"You have a problem," Seth said. "I'm that problem. Yes, I've guessed about most of it, but I know that I was transported across the continent for a reason. I know that you're here for a reason. Clearly, I did something. Something... interesting."

"I suppose it does not hurt to tell you," Absalom replied. "That you have guessed correct. The Republic is so benevolent that, for hundreds of years, there has been no reason to protest."

"Wrong," Seth exclaimed.

Absalom held up his hand. "I don't want to hear your theories. I'm talking about the truth. I'm talking about history. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that the people have forgotten how to stand up to the Republic. And now, when it is ever so vital that they fall in line, I fear you may have reminded them of their power."

It took all of Seth's strength to resist celebrating. He wanted to cheer, to run around his cell and shout with joy. The people of Earth were waking up. This was what he always wanted to happen... Unfortunately, it took the end of space travel to do it. No amount of protest was going to wrestle control of the Heilmann Drive away from the Republic in the coming months. This victory was so pyrrhic that it wasn't a victory at all.

For as long as he could remember, all Seth wanted was a revolution. The Republic had finally done something so terrible that the people were willing to fight back. But these means did not justify the ends. Seth now had a more important goal. He had to prevent the Fall. The protests would help, but they wouldn't be enough.

"Time is short, commissar," Seth said. "People are angry. They're going to get angrier. It's been less than a day. You can still spin this to save yourself a lot of trouble."

Absalom stared at Seth, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"For the moment, I am the face of the uprising. I got within a few feet of the Chairman. I asked him the question on everyone's lips. But I'm only the start. By the end of the week, everyone will forget about me. There will be a thousand faces like mine filling the streets. You need to use me while you still can."

"Use you? Mr. Garland, you're not making any sense."

Seth took a deep breath. He hated what he had to do next. "Make me part of your team," he said. "Let me take a look at the plans for enforcing the Spatial Preservation Act. Let me see the data from the scientists about the dangers of the Heilmann Drive. Bring me along when you decommission the starships. It will look like you are taking your criticism to heart. More importantly, it will look like I was proven wrong."

Commissar Absalom was silent. He stared at the ground. Seth wondered if he'd overplayed his hand. Did he move too quickly? Did the commissar see through him? There was no way he could guess what Seth planned, but he could certainly deduce that there was an ulterior motive behind his suggestions.

"Your distaste for the Republic is well-documented, Mr. Garland. In light of that, am I supposed to believe that you staged this entire fiasco just to become part of a Republic task force? What are you playing at? Surely this is all a ruse to sabotage me somehow."

Seth shrugged. "What could I be playing at? I assume that I'll be under military supervision the entire time. What could I do to sabotage you?"

Absalom considered this. As expected, he could think of nothing Seth could do to stop the enforcement of the Spatial Preservation Act right under the noses of the Republic security forces. Still, Seth's suggestion didn't sit right with him. "Why do you want this?"

Now Seth really had to work. It was obvious Absalom wouldn't take his offer at face value. He'd risked prison to stand up against the Fall. Now he was claiming that he would just turn his back on his own cause. Seth had to come up with a reason for getting arrested, for

going through with a charade just to offer this plan.

"You got me," Seth said. "This is really what I wanted. I want inside access to the beginning of the Fall. That's why I charged the stage. I wanted to be noticed, and now I am... You know why?" Absalom shrugged. Seth laughed, as if it was all so simple. "When this is all over, I'm going to write the definitive book about the Fall."

"A book?" Absalom asked, incredulously.

"My education at RSIR is worthless now. I've spent the last couple years learning how to solve disputes on other worlds. Soon, there will be no other worlds. So I decided I would become a writer. What better way to start than by writing the definitive account of the Fall?"

Seth held his breath. He wasn't sure if Absalom would buy it. The story felt ridiculous. But it was the best he could do on short notice. He started a series of protests so that he would be recruited into Absalom's team, where he would get an inside look at the beginning of the Fall.

Finally, Absalom spoke. He didn't even address Seth's cover story. "You are right. If we integrate you into our team, it will show the people that the Republic listens. The Republic is transparent—a true government for its people." A strange glint appeared in Absalom's eye. It was almost like he believed what he was saying. "So, are you be willing to publicly state that you were wrong about the Spatial Preservation Act?"

"Are you asking me to lie?" Seth replied.

"We will give you access to everything you asked for. Once you see it, I am sure you will be convinced that I'm right. But if I'm going to consider your offer, I have to know that you will publicly denounce the dissent against the Act. That is the only way this will work."

Seth felt sick to his stomach. He was about to betray everything he believed in. But it was the only choice. It was the only way he could hope to stop the Fall.

"Yes. Yes, I'll do it."

The Heilmann Drive was not just an engine. It was also the most powerful weapon in the galaxy, capable of destroying entire planets. Any matter within the envelope of compressed space during a Heilmann Leap was fused and destroyed to provide the incredible amount of energy required to power the drive. A leap plotted through a planet would cut a swath straight through the core of the world, destabilizing its orbit. Even worse, a leap plotted through a star would create a chain reaction within the star that would destroy the entire solar system.

Fear concerning the Heilmann Drive pressed the early People's Interstellar Republic to put strict restrictions on access to the engine. Only a handful of scientists and engineers were allowed to study the design documents. Heilmann Drives were constructed in shifts, so that no laborer would ever see the entirety of the device. Everyone who constructed, repaired, and even piloted a starship had to be a PIR citizen, living on Earth, under military surveillance.

This scheme of secrecy was successful in preventing the use of the Heilmann Drive as a weapon. In almost two thousand years, it was never used to destroy a planet or a star. However, the Republic's complete control over the engine bred resentment throughout the galaxy. Many planets attempted to steal the plans for the Heilmann Drive, or bribe scientists to defect. Some even stole ships and tried to reverse-engineer the Drive.

No one was successful. The Republic's stranglehold on the Heilmann Drive was complete. It lasted until the Fall and, in fact,

was what made the Fall possible in the first place. If even one other world had access to the Drive, to the plans, or to a single starship, the Republic would have never been able to successfully stop faster-than-light travel.

*

Seth's heart thundered in his chest as he slowly unrolled fragile paper on the desk in front of him. Even in his wildest dreams, he'd never thought he could make it this far. The document in his hands was one of the rarest and most valuable in the entire galaxy. Only a few dozen people were ever allowed to see it.

He stared at the design specifications for the power cells of the Heilmann Drive. It was one of the least important parts of the device, but it was still protected as a state secret.

Before Seth could even see the first words on the blueprint, he felt a hand on his arm. It was Commissar Absalom. "I don't think I can let you do this," he said. "Why do you need to see this anyway? This won't tell you anything."

The two men were standing in a large starship repair bay near the center of the German Zone. This was the only place in the galaxy that a Heilmann Drive power cell could received maintenance.

It had only been a day since Seth was sitting in a jail cell, wondering if he would ever see freedom again. Now he was part of the operation to enforce the Spatial Preservation act. He'd already been formally introduced to the press, where he was identified as the man who charged the stage during Chairman Stephens's public assembly.

Before the press conference, Chairman Stephens spoke to the reporters. And he lied. He told them that he'd personally spoken to Seth in prison and that Seth had a lot of questions about the Spatial Preservation Act. These were questions everyone was asking, so he decided to appoint Seth as a temporary civilian liaison to the Republic military. Seth would review the work of Phaer Absalom and his team and report directly to the people through weekly bulletins.

Seth had never said anything about weekly bulletins, but it was too late to go back now.

"You promised me access to everything," Seth replied. "You told me I could see whatever I want. Besides, you're right. This won't tell me anything. I took a physics class once in primary school. That's it. This is well over my head."

"Then why?" Absalom growled. "You are wasting our time."

Seth looked over at him and smiled. "People think you're destroying the plans for the Heilmann Drive. If I see them, I can tell everyone that you are doing no such thing."

This confused Absalom. "Why would we destroy the *plans*? The plans are not doing anything to harm the galaxy by themselves."

"I'm just the messenger," Seth replied. His hands were shaking. He wanted to unroll the paper so badly that if Absalom made him wait any longer, he might just go crazy.

Absalom looked up towards a man standing near the back of the room. He was a large figure with neatly-trimmed salt and pepper hair. Seth was introduced to him when they arrived at the repair bay. He was Dr. Kyle Richmond, one of the supervisors of the facility. "You!" Absalom barked. "Tell me, will Mr. Garland be able to understand what these plans say?"

Dr. Richmond laughed. "I have advanced degrees in engineering and physics. I barely understand them. Hell, I'm even the one who transcribed them from the originals. We just do what they say, and it always manages to work."

"Fine. Go ahead, Mr. Garland."

Seth hastily pressed the paper to the ground. He slowly unfurled it, marveling at what he saw. Dr. Richmond was right. It didn't make any sense. He could tell that it was a series of drawings of the power cells, but they were accompanied by numbers and specifications and equations that were so far out of his depth that they might as well have been in a foreign language.

It didn't matter. These plans were part of the Heilmann Drive. He

was actually seeing the design documents for the device that allowed man to spread across the stars. It was almost too exciting for him to concentrate. But he had to concentrate. He had a job to do, and if he failed then the humiliation of joining the Republic military would all be for naught.

“What if he sees all the plans?” Absalom suddenly asked.

Dr. Richmond hesitated. “What do you mean, ‘all of the plans’?”

Absalom sighed. “By the time this whole charade is over, we’re going to let him look at each piece of the drive. I don’t know *why* we are going to do that. But I suppose he has a point. He can tell everyone that we’re not burning the blueprints.”

“Wait... He’s going to see all the design docs?”

Seth gritted his teeth. He wished they would both stop talking. It was distracting him and that was the last thing he needed. He couldn’t tell them that. It would only arouse suspicions.

“Do you think that’s a danger?” Absalom asked. “Like you said, he’s an amateur. And he will always be under my supervision. He’s not going to steal the plans.” The commissar looked over at Seth. “He’s not stupid.”

Dr. Richmond shrugged. “It’s just unprecedented. I... I want to see all the design docs. I’ve always been so curious how the compression modules could work so efficiently without overheating. Their architecture must be so intricate and so perfectly structured...”

Seth was done. He’d seen enough. Now it was time to look like he hadn’t done anything at all. “That’s why you don’t get to see them, doctor,” he said. “Because you could actually do something with them.”

“Are you satisfied?” Commissar Absalom asked.

“These are the real plans,” Seth replied. “I’ll make sure to include the fact that they still exist in my first weekly bulletin.” He let go of the paper stretched out on the table and walked away. He resisted the temptation to look back once again. He had to trust himself.

Absalom shifted his weight to his good leg and started limping

towards the door. "Good. I can't wait to get back to the base." He grimaced, stopped in the middle of the repair bay, and took a deep breath. He was in a lot of pain.

Seth waited patiently at the door for the commissar. Dr. Richardson, however, rushed forward to try and help. "Here," the doctor said, offering his arm. "Let me—"

Before he could even finish speaking, Absalom grabbed his wrist and shoved him away. "Don't touch me!" he growled. "I can make it on my own."

Richardson backed off immediately, creeping towards the far wall. Then he just stood and watched as the commissar slowly made his way to the door.

Seth repressed a grin. He'd only known Phaer Absalom for two days, but already he'd proven to be very different from the Republic officials Seth was used to dealing with. Absalom didn't care for anyone's help. He did everything on his own. He planned all of his team's operations from the top down. This philosophy extended to everything in his life, even his nagging injuries.

Most people in his position would have amputated their leg, replaced it with a bionic limb, and never looked back. Absalom refused. The bones in his leg were shattered, held together with steel screws and miniature gravity wells. It was medical technology that had all but been abandoned since the advent of realistic replacement limbs. His muscles were warped and atrophied, strengthened only by regular physical therapy that Absalom administered himself. It was like he held his body together by sheer will. And even with that to overcome, he became one of the most powerful people in the Republic.

Despite himself, Seth respected the commissar. The Republic was full of people who'd given up on doing something great with their life. Absalom never gave up on anything. That was something worthy of admiration.

And it almost made Seth feel bad for betraying him.

The blank paper was so intimidating. As soon as he saw it, Seth began to question himself. Could he really do this? Or did he overestimate his own talents?

After all, he'd never done anything like this. He used to impress the other kids in school with his ability to recite page after page of their favorite comics, verbatim, after only a glance. But then he started to realize those sorts of talents attracted attention. His teachers recommended him to several advanced schools that funneled promising students into Republic bureaucracies. Seth didn't have any interest in serving the Republic, and soon started to hide his skills. He didn't want the Republic to know about them, because some day they might be useful against them.

This was that day. He'd studied the plans for the Heilmann Drive power cells intently for a few minutes. It was more time than he thought he needed, but he had to be careful. He wouldn't get another chance to look at it, or any other portion of the Heilmann Drive. If he was going to succeed, he would have to be able to reproduce each blueprint perfectly.

Seth closed his eyes. He tried to recall every single line he saw on the plans, every single word and number. Before he could even put it all together, he snatched up the pen near his desk. His hand worked furiously on the page in front of him, reproducing the image he still held in his brain.

It was working. As the picture took form on the paper, Seth realized that he'd been right. He was able to retain enough information to copy most of the plans. His handwriting was awful and his drawing abilities left something to be desired. But the information was there.

No one had ever managed to smuggle design documents for the Heilmann Drive out of the Republic. That was because they tried to take the originals. Or they tried to copy or photograph them. No one had ever attempted to steal the plans by memorizing them. Seth smiled as he completed one of the drawings. He was going to do it.

He was going to save the Heilmann Drive.

Within minutes, he was putting the finishing touches on the blueprint. He took a step back. It wasn't perfect. It lacked the precision of the original. Size and proportion specifications would have to come from the equations on the side of the document, not from the drawing itself. But it would do.

Suddenly, Seth heard the chime of the door behind him. Someone was there. While he was in his personal quarters, and enjoyed a certain amount of privacy, he was still technically in the custody of the Republic military. They could enter his room at any time. Fortunately, whoever came to visit him had the courtesy to alert him to their presence.

Seth moved quickly, folding up his new reproduction of the power cell specifications. He folded them up and tucked them underneath one of the drawers of his desk.

"Come in!" he exclaimed, sitting down on the couch near the door. He picked up his tablet computer from the coffee table, kicked his feet up, and pretended he was reading something.

The door slid open. Before Seth could even look back, he knew who his visitor was. He could hear the sound of the man's foot dragging on the floor as he entered.

"Greetings, Mr. Garland," Commissar Absalom said loudly.

Seth glanced over his shoulder. "Is everything all right, commissar?" he asked.

"Just fine," he replied.

"Then what brings you by?" Seth set down his tablet and stood up. He started mentally preparing himself for an inspection of the room. Most likely, no one would think to look under the drawer. All he had to do was keep from nervously glancing at the spot and revealing the hiding place himself.

Absalom shrugged. "I just wanted to see how you were coming along. The rooms here at the base aren't nearly as nice as the accommodations at RSIR, I'm sure."

Seth furrowed his brow and wondered why Absalom would care about his comfort. He still thought of the commissar as an enemy and assumed that it was mutual. "I've been in worse," Seth replied. "I grew up in worse."

The commissar forced a weak smile, approaching one of the chairs. "May I sit down?" he asked. His stiff leg shook as he tried to stand up straight.

As much as Seth wanted Absalom to leave, he couldn't turn him down. "Sure. Go ahead." The commissar carefully planted his arm on the chair and hobbled into it. He stretched out his leg and breathed a long sigh of relief. "So, what's next on the agenda?" Seth asked.

Absalom folded his hands in his lap. "Tomorrow we head to the observation outpost on Europa for three more decommissions. Many of the scientific records you want to see are stored at the outpost, so you'll get a chance to take a look at those."

Seth felt a surge of excitement. "Would this be the reports from the scientists who examined the warped space station?"

"The very same. And after you take a look at them, I suspect you will understand why we're doing what we're doing."

Very few people had been allowed to see the original reports made by the scientists. Redacted versions were published everywhere, but they were missing so many details that they were practically useless. The true effects of the warped space were removed, as well as any measurements within the warped space. No one knew how bad it was. The photographs and videos from the space station were classified.

The official reason for the secrecy was to prevent panic. Apparently the footage and data taken in the warped space was so disturbing that the Republic feared that people would not be able to handle it. Seth didn't believe any of this, but the prospect of seeing it all still frightened and excited him.

"Just in time for my first public bulletin?" Seth asked. He narrowed his eyes. "You know, I never agreed to speak publicly more than once

when we talked back in jail.”

Seth expected Absalom to lash out at him for challenging the terms of their deal. Instead, the commissar very calmly leaned forward. “I am sorry for that,” he said. “But you have to understand, this was not just my decision. You charged on stage and interrupted the Chairman of the Republic. He had to clear any deal I made with you. When he demanded that you make weekly public appearances... I assumed that you would accept that. It should build anticipation for your book, right?”

For just a second, Seth was stunned. He couldn't believe the commissar was apologizing to him. It seemed wrong.

“You did what you had to do,” Seth said. “I don't blame anyone for that.”

Absalom gripped the armrest of his chair and started to pull himself to his feet. “Oh, I know. But if you are going to be part of my team, I want us to trust each other. I want you to know that I did not betray that trust.” He groaned as he stood. “That is it. That is what I came here to say.”

“Are you sure you don't want something to drink?” Seth asked. He bit his tongue as soon as he spoke. Why was he suggesting that Absalom stay? He wanted to get rid of him. Still, he couldn't stop himself. “I've got an open bottle of Yuanian whisky. Valuable stuff now that the trade routes are shutting down.”

The commissar shook his head. “I should be going.” He began to slowly limp towards the door. “I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning for our flight to Europa.”

As Seth watched Absalom go, he had to remember that he was betraying him. Absalom was the driving force behind the Fall. He was the man responsible for its enforcement.

He was not Seth's friend.

★

Seth watched carefully as the workers disassembled the *I.S.S. Prosperity*, one of the largest faster-than-light vessels in the galaxy.

For centuries, the *Prosperity* ran a triangular route between NewPasTur, Agarion, and Earth. The *Prosperity* was a passenger ship as well as a cargo transport. Over one-third of the food on NewPasTur was imported on the *Prosperity*, and there were already rumblings that the planet would suffer from famine as soon as the vessel was decommissioned.

"This is going to be big," Seth said. "You should not have stopped the trade routes to NewPasTur until near the very end."

Absalom groaned aloud. He was standing a few feet from Seth, near the window out onto the dock. Unlike Seth, he was not watching the slow deconstruction of the *Prosperity*. "And why is that, Mr. Garland?"

"NewPasTur cannot survive on its own. They have no farmland, and are incapable of feeding their own people. They will starve, and cutting them off this early means that everyone will know about it. If you waited until the last minute, until the very beginning of the Fall, their collapse would go unnoticed."

"Those are good points," Absalom replied. "Perhaps you are right. It would not be too difficult to re-route a few of the remaining routes to provide more assistance to NewPasTur."

Seth felt a chill go down his back. Why was he doing this? Why was he helping Absalom with the implementation of the Fall? He decided he had to keep his mouth shut and, instead, silently turned back to the workers in the repair bay.

They were methodically dis-assembling the *Prosperity* piece by piece. Most of the parts that they removed were far too large and far too heavy to be carried, so they used special kinetic gloves to strip them and move them onto large conveyor belts near the back of the bay. The gloves, which were small enough to be comfortably worn, emitted a powerful energy field that could be used to carry thousands of pounds of metal with little effort by the user.

One of the workers pointed his palm at the rear of the massive starship. The hull plating began to shiver and shake. Within seconds,

a tall sheet of metal bent away from the hull. The worker pulled it free with a tug of his arm. The metal floated in the air, just inches from his hand, as he cautiously transferred it to the back of his room.

"They don't even have to strain their muscles to destroy it," Seth muttered. It felt so wrong. The starship they were pulling apart, piece by piece, was the pinnacle of human innovation. Nothing like it existed before. And no matter what the Republic officials said, Seth didn't believe anything like it would exist again.

"What did you say?" Absalom asked.

Seth shook his head. "Nothing. I'm satisfied. I've seen enough. I want to see the records from the warped space. I want to know why we're doing this."

*

The line should have been straight. And the more Seth stared at the picture, the more his mind tried to make it straight. It was starting to give him a headache.

"What am I looking at?" He was sitting at a desk with several tablets in front of him. They were full of photographs very similar to the one in front of Seth. He'd already looked at dozens of images, but there was something about this one that he kept coming back to.

Absalom peered over his shoulder. "I believe that is the corridor leading towards the medical bay aboard the station. There's a magnetized streak to help stabilize stretchers when they float through the hallway."

"So this is definitely supposed to be a straight line? The magnetized streak?" Absalom nodded. Seth narrowed his eyes and tried to focus in on the picture. "But it's... It's..." He couldn't put his thoughts into words. There was something wrong going on, something twisted within the line. But it didn't curve or spiral, waver or turn. It was straight and it wasn't. "It's off."

"In most of the pictures, the distortion is more obvious. That's because the camera is outside of the same warped space as the subject. This photograph is different. The area within the medical

corridor is one of the most distorted areas on board the station. The camera was actually within the warp, so the line still looks straight. But you know it's not, don't you?"

Seth wanted to laugh it all off, to diminish it. He wanted to tell Absalom that he'd exaggerated. There was nothing on the tablets that was particularly scary. It was just a bunch of distorted photos. They were just lines that should be straight but were not.

He couldn't do it. It was horrifying and he couldn't explain it. There was something about the pictures that made him sick to his stomach. And it wasn't just the photographs. The reports from the station were almost as bad.

The warp happened so slowly that the inhabitants of the space station didn't even notice it. It didn't have any apparent physical effects. It was happening on a level of reality so base that it distorted everything seamlessly. Walking into a warped area didn't hurt people, even though it displaced certain parts of their body. They couldn't even feel it, at least not on the surface.

But the warp did something to their minds. It was how the Republic first noticed that there was an issue aboard the station. Violent altercations broke out regularly. Almost everyone on board reported severe insomnia. Their intake of stimulants and anti-depressants skyrocketed, with most crew members using both to stabilize themselves.

Several of the crew kept personal journals during this time. There was nothing obviously amiss within them. They read just like any other journal, dull accounts of day-to-day life that yielded nothing remarkable. Yet Seth could barely stand to read them for very long. Just like the distortion of the medical corridor, Seth couldn't explain why it disturbed him so much.

Seth placed the tablet with the photo and picked up another one. This one contained several journal entries.

"Why does all of this feel so wrong?" Seth asked. "What does this mean? None of this... None of this is that strange at all. But I can't..."

"Now do you see what I mean?" Absalom asked. "This is why we can't release it to the public."

No. Seth didn't see what he meant. It made him feel uneasy. But what he felt didn't make any sense. He started to read over the journal entry in front of him. He made it a paragraph in before he had to stop. This time, it wasn't just that he couldn't continue. He was stuck. There was one line, one seemingly meaningless line, that drew him in. He read it over and over. Each time, he felt a building fear inside of him.

A few seconds later, his heart was racing and his palms were sweating. He wanted to throw down the tablet and look away. But even more, he wanted to understand. He needed to know why it was having this effect on him.

"I don't get it!" Seth exclaimed. "This is all... There's nothing remarkable about any of this. Why is it so terrifying?"

Absalom didn't reply. He just waited and watched as Seth tried to rationalize something that clearly could not be rationalized.

"Can I read this to you? I keep looking at it, over and over again, and I'm not sure I'm going to be able to sleep at night because of this. It's... It's like..." Seth tried to throw down the tablet again, but he couldn't. He had to see what Absalom thought. He needed to know he wasn't crazy. "Let me read this to you."

"Go ahead," Absalom said. And so, with a deep breath, Seth read back the sentence that transfixed him:

"Today I looked in the mirror and for the first time I noticed that the colors have changed. I am not sure if they are better now."

A moment of silence hung in the room. Then Absalom grabbed the tablet in Seth's hands and pulled it away. "So you got to that part," the commissar said. "I hope you get the point now. Do you see what we're up against?"

Seth was puzzled. "That 'one'? Up against? That sentence didn't mean anything. It was just..."

"You can read more, but I wouldn't suggest it. If you're having

trouble with the entry about the colors... " Absalom's voice trailed off, as if he didn't want to go any further.

Before beginning this investigation, Seth would have never turned down access for more information. He wanted to know everything, and he wanted to be able to reproduce everything. After all, he wasn't just building a collection of Heilmann Drive plans. He was also building a case for maintaining faster-than-light travel.

But today, Seth didn't want to see any more. He didn't want to copy anything he'd seen or read. These photos and these words scared and disgusted him in a way he couldn't begin to fathom. He was done.

At first, The Spatial Preservation Act prompted little resistance within the Republic. People were used to trusting their government. If the government said that faster-than-light travel was dangerous, then it could be believed. Soon, however, the reality of the Fall began to set in. Everyone started to see the effects on the less-populated worlds. Then they realized that the images they saw from these planets might be the last ones they would ever see.

Dozens of worlds would become completely isolated from one another. It was the end of an interconnected, galactic human society. And many worlds were not prepared for that. The people of the Republic saw the food riots on NewPasTur, the despondent suicides on Yuan, the religious upheaval on Linaria, and similar disasters across the galaxy. Their government was doing nothing to quell these crises it created with the Spatial Preservation Act. The Republic seemed content to let these other worlds destroy themselves.

To make matters worse, the Republic was not forthcoming about its plans to eventually re-establish faster-than-light travel. Were they studying ways to improve the Heilmann Drive? Were they exploring the possibility of a completely new method? No one knew Republic scientists working on the problem were sequestered from society.

The Republic also refused to provide substantial evidence that the Heilmann Drive posed a threat to the galaxy. They claimed that the reports from the warped space were dangerous and

inflammatory. They acted as if they possessed some dangerous power on their own. And the public had to be protected from this power.

Soon it became clear that the Republic didn't have the answers or solutions everyone wanted. People started to question the Spatial Preservation Act. They wondered if there was really any reason for it, or if it could be some kind of power grab by the Republic.

For the first time in centuries, the people of the Republic began to rise up en masse against their government. They staged protests outside of Republic facilities. They distributed incendiary articles about the Act. They interrupted speeches and disrupted rallies. Rumors began to spread that Republic officials were being attacked by organized resistance groups.

These were not the easily-captured terrorists the Republic demonized after every tragic freighter accident. This new rebellion was real, and it was powerful. It hid in plain sight among the crowd, and it was fairly popular. After all, no one liked the end of faster-than-light travel.

*

"I thought you were supposed to put an end to these riots," Commissar Absalom said, a wry smile on his face. "Sometimes I wonder if we got the raw end of our deal."

A few weeks ago, a comment like this might have worried and annoyed Seth. After all, there was truth in Absalom's words. Seth told the commissar that he would be able to help contain the resistance to the Spatial Preservation Act. Their deal was premised on the idea that he could communicate with his fellow disaffected citizens.

Now, it barely seemed to matter. The resistance had grown beyond anything Absalom anticipated. It seemed like the entire galaxy was rising up. And Seth was obeying the terms of the deal he made with the commissar to the letter. Every week, he went before

the Republic press and gave a detailed summary of his observations. He emphasized that the Spatial Preservation Act was necessary and proper. He took questions from the audience, and handled himself well enough that no one questioned his sincerity. But it wasn't enough.

"You're asking the galaxy to swallow a bitter pill," Seth replied. "I'm doing what I can, but it's never going to go down easy."

The two men sat in the back seat of an ImpulseCar on the highway between the New England Zone and the Mid-Canada Zone. They were on their way to see the design documents for yet another part of the Heilmann Drive. This time, it was one of the most important elements of the engine: the Compressed Envelope Map. The CEM was the computer system which handled the massive amount of data required to fold and subsequently restore the space within the Heilmann Leap.

Seth didn't know what to think about the continued protests. He originally feared that they would hurt his position. If he could not reassure the masses and keep them calm, then the Republic didn't have any need for him. Absalom could cut him loose or, even worse, stick him back in jail. But Seth was thrilled to see the people of Earth standing up to the Republic. When this all played out, he would need them. They would help him.

After all, Seth's plan hadn't changed. Every time he got the chance, he carefully examined the plans for the various parts of the Heilmann Drive. He continued to reproduce them to the best of his ability. So far, he had approximately two-thirds of the design documents required to build a copy of the Heilmann Drive. When he was done, he would end this ridiculous farce of cooperation with Commissar Absalom, defect, and hand the plans over to another world, where the production of ships could start up again. In one fell swoop, he would end the Republic's monopoly on faster-than-light travel *and* prevent the Fall.

"I wish we could show them the reports," Absalom said. "Then they

would understand."

Seth shuddered. He tried not to think about the photographs he saw and the journals he read at the Europa observation outpost. It had been almost a month since he first laid eyes on them and he still had nightmares.

Ever since that day, Seth fought the temptation of doubt. He could still remember the terror in his heart when he looked upon the photographs and station journals. It was almost enough to make him agree with Absalom that the Heilmann Drive was a danger to the galaxy.

But Seth would never agree to that. No matter how terrifying the warped space was, it was not worth destroying human society. Outside of the reports from the distorted space station, everything Seth saw only convinced him that he was right.

Trade routes could be changed, re-routed through undamaged space. After all, it took two thousand years to see any effect from repeated Heilmann Leaps. A smaller number of leaps across new routes was all that was really necessary, at least until a solution could be found.

Suddenly, Seth felt his stomach lurch as the ImpulseCar made a sharp left turn. His hands gripped the seat, but he was still pushed up against the car door by the inertia. His head spun. They were going so fast that such a quick maneuver was dizzying.

"What was that?" Seth asked.

Absalom furrowed his brow. "I don't know. This isn't my usual driver. He knows not to take sharp turns on the exits like that. I'm going to have to—"

Seth's heart skipped a beat. "This isn't your usual driver?" he exclaimed. "Are you kidding me?" He grabbed the sleeve of Absalom's jacket. "We need to get out of this car. Now."

"We're going two hundred miles an hour," Absalom replied. "And I don't understand what's got you so worried."

Worried was an understatement. Seth was terrified, and he

couldn't understand how Absalom could be so naïve. He was one of the highest ranking members of the military. He'd grown up on a brutal planet, tormented by his own family. Had so long in the Republic made him complacent? Of course it did. He didn't realize that Seth was betraying him, either.

"Think about it, commissar," Seth said. "Every week, I go on television and tell the public that the Spatial Preservation Act is in the best interest of the public. You are the head of the military unit charged with enforcing the Act. A lot of people are afraid of what this means, and they are rising up against it. They're rising up against us. Don't you see?"

Absalom stared at Seth as he realized the seriousness of their situation. "You think we are being kidnapped? Why would you say that?"

"Because it's what I would do."

The hum of the ImpulseCar engines began to fade. Seth could feel the car slowing down. "We're stopping," Absalom said. "We're at least a hundred miles outside of the Mid-Canada zone."

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Seth replied. "Please tell me that you're armed."

Absalom nodded. "I've got a laser pistol and a utility knife."

Seth thought about this for a second. He considered the commissar's disability, as well as his own inexperience with energy weapons. "What kind of knife?"

The commissar reached into his jacket and pulled out a small blade. He looked at the handle. "Looks like a Berkshire Industries v-500. What does it matter?"

"That's a good knife. High frequency vibration, over a thousand oscillations per second. You can't get that kind of craftsmanship on Earth." He narrowed his eyes as he looked at the commissar. "I'll take the knife."

"How do you know so much about—"

Seth put his finger to his lips, silencing the commissar. He grabbed

the blade from Absalom's hand and tucked it inside his sleeve.

The car crept to a stop. "Act like you don't know what's going on," Seth said. "You're surprised. Where are we? Why are we stopping?"

Absalom's eyes went wide as he realized that Seth had some sort of plan, and that he had a role to play. He quickly recomposed himself and tried to sound genuinely angry.

"Where are we?" The commissar yelled. "Why are we stopping?"

The doors unlocked on either side of the back seat. "Keep the outrage up," Seth whispered. "Make a scene. Make them restrain you.

"I don't have time for this!" Absalom growled. "I have a very busy schedule. —"

Click! The door on Seth's side of the vehicle swung open. Thick hands grabbed him and puled him to his feet outside the ImpulseCar.

Brilliant white light blinded Seth as he stumbled out of the vehicle. Thick sheets of snow and ice covered the ground. The sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky, reflecting off the frozen drifts.

His eyes struggled to adjust, to see where he was. There were no buildings in sight. He was correct. They were in the middle of nowhere, a few miles from the main highway.

This wasn't a kidnapping. They were going to be killed.

The irony of all of this was not lost on Seth. These men who captured them were opponents of the Spatial Preservation Act. They should have been Seth's allies. They wanted the same thing, they were after the same goal. There was only one difference: Seth's plan was going to work.

Killing Commissar Absalom wouldn't stop the Fall. It wouldn't make the Republic reconsider the Spatial Preservation Act. It would just make them turn on their citizens. The Republic would increase security and they would impose harsher punishments on protestors. At the end of the relocation, the Republic would still decommission all of the Heilmann Drive starships.

But Seth could preserve faster-than-light travel. He'd already

copied the designs of several critical parts of the Heilmann Drive, and was prepared to pass them along to a more friendly government for reproduction. If these men killed him, along with the commissar, he could never complete his plan.

In order to save the Heilmann Drive, he was going to have to stop these men, no matter what side they were on.

Seth tried to look around and survey the situation. He could see six attackers. They were all male, and every one of them was larger than Seth. This wasn't unusual. It didn't worry him. It just meant that he would have to act quickly. He would have to surprise them. Once the real fighting began, they would immediately have the upper hand.

As he regained his balance, Seth's eyes darted around, looking at the faces of the six men. He wondered if he knew any of them, if he'd ever encountered them back when he was searching for like-minded enemies of the Republic. These were all strangers.

None of the attackers were dressed in military uniforms, not even the driver of the ImpulseCar. How did Absalom fail to notice this? It didn't matter. It was too late to do anything about it. There was no going back, only forward.

"I am a commissar of the Republican Military!" Absalom yelled as one of the men yanked him from the car. "Do you know what they will do to you when they find out about this? They will ship you off to the dankest hell-bound jail on the planet!"

Absalom began to thrash about, flailing at the men who assaulted him. He was much more agile than Seth imagined. He even swung his shattered leg side to side, trying to trip one of the attackers on his left.

Before long, all six of their captors were focused on the commissar. His spastic movement frustrated them, and even the man restraining Seth was distracted.

It was just like Seth hoped. They weren't worried about him. He was small, a tick under 5'6", and as thin as a rail. They probably thought he was sickly, or harbored a stimulant addiction. He was

about to show them that he could not be underestimated.

Seth watched the man holding onto his shirt. He was the only one who wasn't moving to restrain Absalom. Still, he was paying more attention to the fracas with the commissar than he was to Seth. That was about to change.

With a quick jerk of his forearm, Seth broke free from the hefty man.. He thrust his arm down, dropping Absalom's knife from his sleeve and into his palm. His finger found the button near the back of the hilt. The soft hum of the vibrating blade filled the air, but it was too late for his captor to react. Seth swung his hand around and buried the serrated edge in the man's neck.

As Seth felt the blade cut into flesh, he realized that this was a first for him. A born diplomat, he'd avoided fights as a child and a teenager. He'd never even thrown a punch and meant it. Now he was about to kill someone. All it took was a single swipe of a knife. It worried him how easy it was. He didn't even feel any regrets. This was what had to happen. The man he killed was probably his ally. He was probably another freedom fighter, struggling against the tyranny of the Republic. But he was in Seth's way.

Seth spun away and pulled the knife from the man's neck. Blood spurted from the wound, flying at least a foot into the air . The man collapsed on his knees and his eyes rolled up into his head.

The other attackers looked back, momentarily stunned. They didn't expect resistance. More than that, they didn't anticipate that Seth would be the one fighting back.

They were caught off guard by his visceral attack. They were just like any other Republic citizens in that they were not accustomed to violence. If anything, they'd seen the action/adventure programs on the viewscreens. They were clean and sanitary. The heroes and villains used laser guns, which barely left a wound even on a deadly shot.

They didn't know what real combat was. They didn't understand real danger. And that was how Seth would defeat them.

"Now!" Seth shouted, rushing towards the men holding Absalom. "Shoot them now!" He grabbed the first one he saw and sliced his wrist with the knife. Another geyser of blood erupted through the air.

Absalom didn't have to be told twice. The men surrounding him were in shock, watching their companions bleed out onto the snow. He reached down to his ankle and grabbed his laser pistol.

It only took a few shots. The air lit up with the shimmering light of the deadly weapon. Then they were all down.

The only ones left standing were Seth and Absalom.

"Holy shit," the commissar said. "We're alive."

Seth nodded. "We're alive."

"You're pretty good with a knife."

"And your leg isn't as bad as you want people to think."

Absalom glared at Seth, but there was a smile on his face. "It just hurts, that's all. It's there when I need it."

The two men took a second to catch their breath. Seth looked around. All of their attackers were defeated. Most of them were dead. A couple of them were still breathing, but bleeding so badly that they would never recover. It looked so much like a massacre that no one would have ever believed that it was originally a trap.

"We're going to have to report this, aren't we?" Seth asked. He flipped the knife around in his hand and presented it to Absalom. The commissar took it, wiped it on the snow at his feet, and returned it to a pocket inside his jacket. "Is this going to get us in trouble?"

"Don't worry," Absalom said. "These were sin-blooded terrorists. They deserved everything they got." He tucked away his laser pistol in a holster around his ankle, leaned back, and laughed. "You know what, Mr. Garland? This is probably the best thing that could have happened. In hindsight, of course."

Seth was confused. "We were almost killed," he replied. "You... You can't mean—"

"But we weren't killed," the commissar interrupted. "This was a cowardly move by the resistance. They can't win the hearts and

minds of the public, so they tried to murder us. How pathetic. This failed assassination will do more to discredit them than your weekly bulletins ever will."

The world had turned on its side. Seth slumped over and sat in the bloodied snow, cradling his head in his hands as he tried to make sense of it. Five weeks ago, he was the first Republic citizen to challenge the Spatial Preservation Act on public television. He bullied his way on stage, interrupted the Chairman, and dared to ask the question on everyone's mind. He was a brief sensation and the spark that instigated the only significant rebellion in the history of the Republic.

Now he'd killed several men who followed in his footsteps. They wouldn't be martyrs. They would be terrorists. Their deaths would weaken the efforts of people everywhere to stand up to the Spatial Preservation Act.

"You may have saved my life today," Absalom said, patting Seth on the back. "You're a true friend to the Republic."

Seth felt like he was going to be sick.

*

"I have reviewed the plans for the next wave of starship decommissions," Seth said, leaning forward closer to the microphone. "And I can confirm that they will only minimally disrupt the next month of relocation. Most of the trade routes affected by these decommissions are redundant or unnecessary at this time, such as the path between Virgiad and Yuan."

This was his fifth televised bulletin to the people of the Republic. He didn't even care what he was saying anymore. This time, he asked Absalom to write his bulletin for him. Absalom refused. He wanted everything to be in Seth's words. And he didn't want Seth to lie. How ridiculous was that? He still didn't know that this was all an act.

But it was almost over. He'd gone over most of the events of the last week in dull, monotonous detail. Seth endorsed every single

action of the Republic in a laundry list that would have bored even the most fervent patriot. He wondered if his lack of enthusiasm would play to any other potential freedom fighter out in the Republic listening to him. He doubted it.

"And finally, I looked over the surviving design documents for the Compressed Envelope Map. The plans still exist, and Republic scientists are hard at work modifying them to try and build a safer engine." He took a breath, glad to be finished with yet another set of lies. "That is all. Thank you."

Normally, the group of reporters would file out of the room immediately. They didn't really care much about Seth, only the reports from inside Commissar Absalom's team. This time, however, was different. This time they exploded into a flurry of questions. They were so fast and so loud that Seth could barely understand any of it.

Seth wanted to just walk away, get all of this over with, but he knew that he should keep up appearances. He held up his hand. "One at a time," he said, then pointed at one of the reporters near the front, an older woman in a long yellow coat.

"Tell us a little about the attack outside the Mid-Canada zone. What happened?"

"I can't talk about that," Seth replied. Like everything else he told the reporters, it wasn't true. He just didn't want to talk about it. "Commissar Phaer Absalom filed a report about the incident. The Republic military made that report public two days ago. Everything I can say is listed in that report."

Another woman stepped to the front of the group and held up a small recording device. "It seems to me like the Republic army could use someone like you. Any thoughts about enlisting when all of this is over?"

Seth couldn't believe that anyone would ever ask him that question. It was like the reporter walked up to him and slapped him in the face. And there was nothing he could do to defend himself. "I have no particular plans about my future at this time," he replied.

“How about politics?”

That was all he could take. “I’m done,” Seth said, turned around, and headed backstage before they could ask any more questions. He knew that Absalom wouldn’t like it. Seth was supposed to be friendly and welcoming in his bulletins. But he couldn’t stand there and listen to their idiotic suggestions. He wasn’t going to let them make him the face of the Spatial Preservation Act.

Seth could hear the reporters clamoring behind him as he pushed through the door out of the briefing room and into the hall of the military base. He leaned up against the wall and took a deep breath. His hand reached up to his forehead and he realized he was sweating profusely.

What was going on? Was this what happened to everyone who served the Republic? Did they all start out with good intentions? Maybe they didn’t want to become part of the stifling bureaucracy. Maybe they wanted to bring it down, too. But it was too strong. It was turning an enemy like Seth into a hero, and there was nothing he could do to stop it from happening. Either he had to go along with it or give up on everything he’d worked for.

A group of Republic soldiers turned the corner into the hall and approached Seth. He tried to stand up straight, to look like nothing was bothering him. He wanted to fit in. That was bad enough, and it made him feel awful.

“Hey!” One of them exclaimed. “You’re that guy who’s always hanging around with the commissar! Good work on that rebel scum. Wish I could have been there.” The soldier made a few stabbing motions with his hand and smiled.

Seth pointed at him. “We could have used you there,” he said. Even though it made him sick, he couldn’t stop himself. He had to maintain the act.

“Next time!” The soldier shouted as he walked away. “Next time.”

That was it. Seth couldn’t take it anymore. He pushed himself away from the wall and stormed down the hall towards his room. It didn’t

matter that he didn't have all of the Heilmann Drive plans yet. He had to do something to get the ball rolling. Enough of the design documents were in his possession that he could begin notifying scientists on other worlds of his intentions.

With every round of decommissions, interplanetary communications would take longer to reach their recipients. Even a simple text message still needed to be loaded onto a starship, then broadcast to the destination planet after the leap. With fewer ships, there were fewer ways to communicate. Seth had to start now, even if he wasn't quite ready yet.

As he walked to his room, he started to think of a code he could use. He would need to be able to send a letter that seemed completely innocuous to anyone who might read it, but would be sufficient to inform an offworld scientist of his plan. Any code would have to be tailored to the particular recipient planet. And it would have to be hard to crack, just in case anyone from the Republic tried. That was fine. Seth didn't want to work with a scientist who couldn't crack an encrypted letter.

Already, Seth started to feel better. This was what he was born to do. He was sick of bulletins and ceremonies and inspections. Even worse, since the incident outside of the Mid-Canada Zone, he'd felt lost. Between the soldiers calling him a hero and the doctors asking about how he "felt" about the attack, between the debriefings and the psychological tests, he thought he would never regain his balance.

Now it was all coming together. With his mind puzzling over codes and cyphers, he was at ease again. As he approached his room, he was sure that everything would work out in the end. The act he was putting on for the Republic would not consume him. It would save him.

Seth pressed the small button near the door and it slid open. He stopped in the doorway. It was dark inside. He was sure he'd left the light on. Cautiously, he stepped into the room. Before he could even react, he felt a sharp pain in the small of his back.

It was a knee. Someone was waiting for him. Someone got the

drop on him.

Seth flailed back and hit the light switch near the door. The ceiling panels blinked to life, illuminating the room. The first thing Seth noticed, before he could even get his bearings, was that nothing was out of place. His desk was in one piece. Whoever was attacking him didn't search the room and, most importantly, didn't find the copied plans.

That would all be moot if Seth couldn't fight him off. He spun around to face the intruder but only saw a glimpse of him as he dodged to the side. The man appeared to be dressed in a Republic military uniform. But if he hadn't found the plans, why would someone from the Republic attack him? More importantly, why was he acting on his own?

"Who are you?" Seth asked.

The man didn't respond, at least not at first. He grabbed Seth's arm and pulled him towards the wall. Unlike the attackers outside of the Mid-Canada Zone, it was too late to try and surprise him. He was much larger than Seth and there was really nothing Seth could do but hope.

"Be very quiet," the man growled, then flung Seth against the wall. He pinned Seth's body to the bulkhead and stared into his eyes. Up close, the strange man didn't look like a Republic soldier. His skin was dark and weathered, like he'd lived a rough life on a world with a particularly hot sun. The uniform was a few years out of date. It wasn't something most people would notice. Seth wasn't most people. This man didn't work for the Republic. He'd disguised himself to get into the base. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Seth could feel a dull pain up his arm and in his back, so he wanted to disagree with the man. He didn't have the opportunity. The attacker placed his hand on Seth's mouth so he couldn't speak.

"We know what you're doing and we sympathize," he said. "But there's something you have to know: those aren't the real plans for the Heilmann Drive."

Suddenly, Seth's immediate situation was the last thing on his mind. He never even considered that the Republic might show him fake plans, knowing he wouldn't be able to tell the difference. He figured they would let him see the real ones because there wouldn't be any harm. After all, they didn't know he had a photographic memory.

"Last week in your bulletin you said that you saw the design documents for the combustion module," the man continued. "Those plans don't exist any more. They were destroyed in a freighter accident fifteen years ago. Everyone has just been repairing the current combustion modules since. How do I know? I was on that freighter when it happened."

Of course. They were showing him fake plans because the real ones were gone. It made perfect sense. But it was also horrifying. Every week, he saw Heilmann Drives pulled apart and destroyed. If the plans were gone and they destroyed every single combustion module... They might never be able to build a starship again.

"What do I do?" Seth tried to say, but it just came out as muffled sound.

Suddenly, the room lit up with a brilliant, flashing red light. A shrill klaxon cut through the air. "They know I'm here," the man replied. He let go of Seth's mouth and backed away. "We need you right now. Take this. You know what to do."

The man in the outdated Republic uniform handed him a small bottle. Then he ran from the room before Seth could ask him anything else.

Seth stumbled back and sat on the ground, leaning against the wall. He ignored the alarm that continued to scream in the air. It didn't matter. It was just white noise compared to the sudden wave of dead he felt consume him.

He couldn't believe he'd been duped. All along, he thought he'd been playing Absalom. It was really the other way around. Maybe they even knew about the copies and they didn't care. They were getting

his endorsement every week. And he was getting nothing.

The alarm stopped ringing a few minutes later. Maybe they caught the strange man. Maybe he escaped. It didn't really matter anymore.

Seth looked at the bottle in his hands and unscrewed the top. Inside, there was a single brown gelatin capsule. He held it up to the light. Inside, he could see tiny circuits running from one end to the other. It was a gnostin. A pill full of dreams.

Someone had a message for him.

The outrage over the Spatial Preservation Act was not limited to Earth, or even the three planets under Republic control. Riots and protests broke out everywhere, especially at ports and docks where seats on departing starships grew rarer and more expensive.

Not all of the resistance was underground. Several worlds were unprepared for isolation from the rest of the galaxy. They did not have infrastructure in place to be self-sufficient. Interplanetary corporations depended on the trade routes for their very existence. Their shareholders would be bankrupted by the Fall. These planets and companies organized opposition around the galaxy, and attempted to pressure the Republic into altering its plans.

There were reports that a few groups attempted to seize departing starships to prevent the Republic from closing the trading routes. This led the Republic to station military officers and troops on all the ships in the galaxy. The soldiers meant less room for people wishing to relocate one last time before the Fall.

Resentment increased across the galaxy, but there was nothing anyone could do to force the hand of the Republic. They controlled the starships, they controlled the trade routes, and they decided that it all had to end.

*

Seth sat in his bed and stared at the pill bottle. It was empty. He'd swallowed the gnostin inside just a few seconds before, and was already starting to regret it. There was a chance, however unlikely, that the pill was a fake. Maybe it was poison, and he'd just finished

the job of his assassin. Maybe it was a tracking device, and he was going to lure himself into a trap. Maybe it was all just a complicated scheme overseen by Commissar Absalom to reveal Seth's duplicity.

All of these options were entirely realistic to Seth. But the alternative was far more interesting. After all, there were very few people or organizations capable of producing a custom gnostin containing a hidden message. It didn't just require the ability to manufacture complex electronics so small that they fit in a pill, though that was a significant hurdle.

Gnostins were programmed by biochemical engineers and artists who were paid a fortune for their work. They created pleasant and controlled dreams using only electrical signals transmitted to the brain through the upper digestive track. It was a difficult job. Even the simplest gnostins, which only tapped into small portions of the nervous system to create vague pleasurable sensations, had to sell hundreds of thousands to turn a profit. Tailoring an individual gnostin for a single message would cost so much money, regardless of other concerns, that the possibility was too intriguing to ignore.

Seth didn't like gnostins. He hated to lose control of his own mind. He hated that the technology was used to deprive his father of his craft. But he had to see this through to the end. So what if it was poison? So what if it was a trap? If the images he'd been copying were not the real Heilmann Drive plans, Seth had nothing to lose.

More importantly, it was too late to go back. His lips were numb. He was already starting to feel the tranquilizers within the capsule. They would lull him to sleep, and then he would experience whatever dream was hidden within the intricate circuitry.

A brief moment of panic surged through his body as he felt his muscles relax. What if Commissar Absalom or one of his guards decided to check on him? They would find him unconscious, clearly under the influence of drugs. Absalom would want to know more, maybe he would discover the gnostin and...

Heavy fog rolled into Seth's consciousness and calmed his mind.

There was nothing he could do but go with it. He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Darkness overwhelmed Seth in seconds. It was the kind of darkness that could only come with a chemical sleep, sudden and absolute, but he remained conscious. The gnostin was taking effect immediately, broadcasting signals to his brain, hijacking his dreams for its own purposes.

Little pinpricks of light broke through the black air around Seth. They were stars, flaming to life in front of him, illuminating the night sky. One after another broke the darkness, until Seth was staring at the vast expanse of space.

At first, Seth felt giddy. It was like he was flying through the void himself, unencumbered by massive starship around him. He did not have to glimpse the stars through jaundiced lens of a camera, or through the thick protective sheen of hardened windows. His eyes darted around, picking out the constellations and clusters, trying to recall their names through the haze of sleep. The gnostin gave him only a measure of control within the dream. It still disrupted his concentration and Seth struggled to connect the stars he saw with the stars in his mind.

Before long, the excitement faded and Seth was overcome by a profound sense of awe. He was a proud man, and was sure that nothing could humble him. But here in this vision, he was forced to realize just how small he was. No matter what he did with his life, no matter how great he became, he would never rival the sheer scale and power of the celestial bodies that surrounded him. They burned for millions of years, eternal forges that fused the elements that made up every atom of every simple and complex system in the galaxy.

This feeling frightened Seth. He didn't understand it. It threatened to engulf him and swallow up his ego. It wanted to destroy him, to remake him into something else.

Was this what the religious zealots of Vangelia experienced in the throws of their passion? Was it this reverence for God that made

them commit atrocities? Was this how the true believers of the Republic felt? Was this dedication, this all-consuming trust and reverence, what drove him to follow their orders?

It didn't feel so bad. Faith in the galaxy was not faith in some god or some government. Faith in the stars was not mindless. It was respectful of the forces which truly created him. It made sense to submit to it, to give in, to see what they desired of him and—

No.

Seth shook his head. None of this was real. He wasn't hovering in space, surrounded by the stars. He was lying in a bed in a Republic military base, under the influence of a very dangerous pill.

It was trying to brainwash him. It was trying to control him.

Seth remembered all the rumors about sensory stimulation. The Republic feared that it could be used to program someone's mind, to convince them to do something they would never do on their own. It was blamed for terrorist attacks and summarily banned.

Someone was trying to do it to him. This wasn't an ordinary gnostin. It did not pass through Republic regulation. It was not tested or inspected. It was manufactured off-world, by someone who thought they could make Seth into their puppet.

They were wrong. He was stronger than that.

This was all a dream, and a hostile one at that. It would be easy enough to wake up, to force his body to remember the bed beneath him. But it wasn't enough for Seth to simply fight off the influence of the gnostin. He had to understand what it wanted him to do, and who wanted him to do it.

The galaxy around him was just an illusion. Seth focused his vision to look past it. Unlike a sensory stimmer, the pill could not react to him. It could not adjust to compensate for his realization that it was trying to hypnotize him. The gnostin would continue to try and program his mind, and he could use that to his advantage. He had to see past the deception, to the core purpose of the vision.

One by one, the stars blinked out of existence. Seth pushed off

from his position in the dreamscape, forcing himself towards the darkness. He needed to see what was behind all of this. To do that, he had to face it.

The clicking sound of clockwork mechanisms filled the air. Behind the stars, behind the darkness, Seth saw massive metal gears turning within large, intricate scaffolding. It was like the galaxy that seduced him was nothing more than a mechanical illusion projected onto a screen.

"What do you want?" Seth yelled, as if the gnostin inside of him could hear his cries. "Just tell me!"

Suddenly, the gears stopped moving. The strange mechanisms surrounding the galaxy slammed to a halt. What did this mean? Even though Seth was pushing past the intended effects of the pill, everything he experienced was still coded within the device.

Was this just some extended metaphor for what was happening to the galaxy with the end of faster-than-light travel? Was it a subliminal message meant to reinforce his brainwashing? Or did it go beyond that?

Seth closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was somewhere completely different.

He was standing in a large room full of computers and electronic panels. After a few seconds, he recognized the various fixtures. One was a navigation interface. Another was a communication console. This was the command center for a faster-than-light starship.

"Where am I?" Seth asked. "Why are you showing me this?"

A blinking light caught his attention near the back of the room. One of the buttons on one of the panels was flashing. Almost as soon as Seth saw it, another button flashed. Then another. Then the panel shut down, and another console lit up on the other side of the command center.

It took Seth a few seconds to realize what he was seeing. When it all came together, it was like someone kicked him in the stomach. This was the start-up sequence for a Heilmann Drive.

Usually, the command center on a starship was manned by several people. They all had their own role in preparing for takeoff. Working together, they calibrated the systems and allocated power to the proper parts of the ship.

This vision was showing him everything. It was preparing him to do it himself, with no help. It was showing him how to steal a starship.

It all made sense to him now. Whoever gave him the gnostin was trying to brainwash him into hijacking one of the remaining Heilmann Drives.

Almost as soon as Seth realized this, the viewscreen at the front of the command center flared to life. He turned to face it. There was a map projected onto the screen. He approached it, squinting, trying to make out what it said.

EUROPA OBSERVATION BASE

Seth's heart skipped a beat. The Europa station was where all of the starships were being decommissioned and scrapped. It was the last stop for every faster-than-light vessel in the galaxy. Seth had been there a few times, but he'd never been allowed to see much of the base. It was top secret.

This map showed every hall, every life support duct, every closet, every room, every passageway... It was everything Seth needed to get to any part of the station at any time. This included the repair bay, where the ships were being scrapped.

It was clearer than anything else in the dream. Seth focused on it and tried to remember it, just like he would memorize anything in real life. Whoever made the gnostin knew that he had an incredible memory, since they knew of his plan to copy the Heilmann Drive plans. This was here so he could take it out of the dream, into the real world, brainwashed or not.

Just as he was about to commit it to memory, the dream began to collapse. The panels in the command center flickered and faded away. Seth could feel his bed around him. The light in his room back on the base pricked his eyes. He could hear soldiers outside his

door, marching down the hall.

Seth panicked. It was too early. There was still so much that he didn't understand. Why was he supposed to steal a starship? Where was he supposed to take it? He knew he could get the answer from the gnostin if he just had time. But its message was over.

He fought against the end of the dream. He tried to stay asleep. And as he struggled to pull out everything about the pill, everything about the plan he was supposed to undertake, he could find only one little nugget of information. It was a name. It was a company, a corporation that Seth had never heard of before, but he was sure they were the ones who manufactured the gnostin.

Lachesis Technologies.

*

"So, what were you able to find out?" Seth asked. He swirled his drink in front of his face. It was a strong Linarian gin mixed with lime juice, and he had to keep himself from sipping it too quickly. He didn't want to get drunk. He was afraid he might let something slip.

Willa Green shrugged. "About Lachesis?" she asked. "Not that much. Why didn't you just ask your new military friends? I'm sure they've got better data than I'm able to dig up."

"Because I don't want them to know I'm poking around," Seth replied. He set down his glass. "That's why I came to you."

Seth and Willa sat at a quiet bar near RSIR. It was the first time Seth had seen anyone from the school since he charged the stage at the Chairman's assembly. For weeks, he'd been sequestered from the public. He was practically property of the Republic Military. As the de facto spokesman and civilian voice within the enforcement of the Spatial Preservation Act, they wanted to control him.

That was then. This was now, after the attack near the Mid-Canada zone. Absalom was beginning to trust Seth, and when he told him that he had a date with a former classmate, the commissar didn't question him. He didn't even send along a military escort.

"It's an interplanetary corporation operating mostly on Yuan and

Quantron," Willa finally said. "They started as a mineral outfit a couple centuries ago, buying up a few established mines and stripping uninhabited star systems. They were a second-rate operation, and didn't have much influence until about fifty years ago. Then they began to expand aggressively, forcing their way into several other industries. They sold off their mines fairly recently, and now deal in less tangible goods."

Seth raised an eyebrow. "Pharmaceuticals? Recreational drugs?"

"They have a chemical productions subsidiary, but that's hardly where they get most of their profits. Mostly they buy struggling businesses, rehabilitate them, and spin them off to investors. Its a very profitable operation."

"That all goes away after the Fall," Seth replied. He looked off towards the back of the bar. Was that what this was all about? Were they just after money? It didn't feel right. As much as he hated the Spatial Preservation Act, opposing it because it would hurt profits was just despicable. Brainwashing someone to steal a starship for money wasn't much better.

It couldn't be that simple. Seth refused to believe it. If they were trying to get the Heilmann Drive plans from him, it made sense. If Lachesis could produce its own faster-than-light starships, then it would be able to prevent the Fall. In fact, they'd be able to profit from it. But what could they do with a single vessel? The theft of a lone starship would not re-open the trade routes. It would not allow them to continue their interplanetary business. A galaxy full of ships, zipping between worlds, was the only thing that kept them afloat. One wasn't enough.

They couldn't be haughty enough to believe they could reverse-engineer the Heilmann Drive. Hundreds of scientists had tried over the last two thousand years. It was impossible. The only way to build one was to follow the plans exactly. It was all so intricate that once it was put together, there was no good way to figure out how to take it apart without detailed instructions.

So why did they want him to steal a ship?

"You could have found all of this yourself," Willa said. "All it took me was a records search and some time on the net. Why did you need me?"

"Because I'm sure they're watching everything I do on the net," Seth replied. "I can't let them find out that I'm interested in Lachesis."

Willa sighed. "Oh Seth, you're always up to something. What is it this time? Do you think you can somehow leverage your job with the military into a way off of Earth before the Fall? Maybe you think you can swing a job with Lachesis? Good luck with that. They're probably going to collapse after all is said and done."

Seth glared at her. "At least I'm doing something," he said. He wasn't sure why he was so angry. He should have been glad that she was missing the point of his questions. There was just something about her tone that frustrated him. It was like she disliked him for his ambition. Why was that such a bad thing? "How about you? What are you doing? The Fall is going to make RSIR obsolete. They don't need diplomats anymore."

"I... I am trying to figure that out," Willa replied. "But I'm sure that the Republic has some plan for us. They've spent so much time training us, they won't throw us by the wayside."

"It wouldn't be the first time they destroyed an entire profession," Seth said. "But if you have faith in them, who am I to argue with you?"

Willa turned to look him straight in the eye. "What's going on with you, Seth?" she asked. There was something strange and unfamiliar in her gaze. She often teased Seth about his plans, and about his distaste for the Republic. But now it was like she was finally taking him seriously. "A few months ago, you were talking about bringing down the Republic. You wanted to start a revolution. Now... You're working for them. You're making speeches in support of the Fall. Everywhere you go, you're side-to-side with a commissar, like he's your best friend."

Seth laughed. He put his hand on Willa's shoulder. "*You're* my best

friend," he said. "You know that."

"That's why I'm worried."

An awkward silence set in between them as Seth tried to figure out what to tell her. He wasn't even sure what he was doing anymore. His plan to steal the Heilmann Drive design documents fell through. Now he was just a shill for the government, the last thing he wanted in his life. The most hopeful facet of his life was that a corporation he'd never heard of wanted to brainwash him into stealing a starship. At least that was something. At least it was interesting.

"What if I have the only starship in the galaxy?" Seth asked.

Willa laughed. "Ah! Another crazy scheme. This actually makes me feel better."

Seth looked at her, his eyes wide. "But lets just say, theoretically... What happens if there's only one starship? And one person in control of that starship? Think about what that would mean."

"Someone would kill you. If not the Republic for stealing the ship, the first government that wanted to take the ship from you. It's crazy, and like all of your plans, it's just a fantasy. People have tried to steal ships before. It never works." Willa smiled. "But it's good that the real Seth is back."

The more Seth thought about it, though, it wasn't just a crazy plan. It made perfect sense. As Civilian Liaison to Absalom's team, Seth had access to every ship that was decommissioned. Thanks to the Lachesis brainwashing attempt, he knew the exact layout of the Europa Station. That was where all the ships were stored prior to being taken apart. He also understood how to power up a starship.

Time was running out. If he didn't do something, the Republic would destroy the last Heilmann Drive in existence. If the original plans were truly lost, it could never be rebuilt. The dozens of planets across the galaxy would be forever stranded, forever alone, and it would be the end of human society.

If just one thread could be preserved, if just one ship could survive, there would still be hope. And if Seth was in control of that hope...

He could rebuild the system the way he saw fit.

*

Seth and Absalom stood at the window facing the stardock at Europa station, watching the mechanics outside take apart yet another starship. They were fairly far along. The Heilmann Drive had been stripped from the chassis. The shielding modules were being removed next. Working in teams of two, the crew carefully withdrew the power cells from the side of the ship with their kinetic gloves.

"We're getting close," the commissar said. "I'm afraid that the resistance is only going to grow. I'm afraid of what might happen as we approach the end. Did you hear about the riots on Linaria?"

"That should have been expected," Seth replied. "After all, we're killing their god."

The state religion of Linaria was premised on the worship of Alena Heilmann, the inventor of the Heilmann Drive. They believed that she was a goddess who descended to the Earth to give humanity the power to travel between the stars. The Spatial Preservation Act was decried as heresy only days after it was passed. The Republic had to close its embassy and withdraw all of its citizens out of fear of reprisal.

"You are a diplomat," Absalom said. "You've spent years studying how to deal with other cultures. Maybe you can talk some sense into them."

Seth laughed. "Are you kidding me? They execute people there for defaming Alena Heilmann. If I try and explain to them that her engine is causing some kind of physical erosion of the galaxy... "

Absalom's face twisted into a look of sheer revulsion. "They still have executions on Linaria? They're no better than rims-damned Vangelia."

This piqued Seth's interest. He was surprised that Absalom was so disgusted by capital punishment. "You telling me the Republic doesn't kill prisoners? Come on..."

"No!" Absalom exclaimed. "Of course they don't. Sometimes, Mr.

Garland, I wonder where you grew up."

Seth leaned down and rubbed his temples. There was no official death penalty in the Republic, but Seth was certain that it was used all the time. Political opponents disappeared, the supposed terrorists arrested across Earth were detained and never heard from. Prisoners just faded into oblivion. It seemed unlikely that, even with the massive bureaucracy, they were simply lost. But why would Absalom lie to him now? After all the classified information he'd shown Seth, he wouldn't just toe the party line on this subject.

"I still don't know what happened to my father," Seth said. "His prison sentence should have been up seven years ago. He never came home, not that any of us expected him to. He never wrote. He might as well have disappeared the day he was arrested." He glared at Absalom. "Pardon me for thinking that he never made it out of that prison. Maybe he never made it in."

"Well, I could look into that for you," Commissar Absalom said. "I have access to all manner of databases. Maybe I can figure out where he is now."

Seth felt his hands start to sweat. He wasn't even sure why. "That... That would be great. But what if he's alive? And what if he isn't on Earth?"

"What of it?" Absalom replied. "You would know that no one killed him. And maybe you could learn to trust your government a little."

"But it will be too late to see him," Seth motioned towards the window, where the workers continued to pick apart the carcass of the starship outside. "What if I find out he's still on Gammaron the day after the trade routes close? What good is that?"

Absalom shrugged. "You'll still know."

"Not sure what that's worth," Seth said. "I barely remember him. That means I barely knew him."

"Those aren't the same thing," Absalom replied.

Seth didn't reply. He wanted to end the conversation. He didn't want to have to tell the commissar to look, or not to look. He wasn't

sure whether he wanted to know. No matter what he discovered, it wouldn't change anything. The Republic still took him away, as far as Seth was concerned.

"We're really getting close, aren't we," Seth said, changing the subject. "How many more ships remain?"

"Twenty-three," Absalom replied.

Wheels began to turn in Seth's head. He already had the basic structure of a plan to steal one of the remaining ships. Even with all of the information he gained from the Lachesis gnostin, it would be difficult. He needed everything to go just right. And he needed to be able to convince Absalom of a particular course of action. He just hoped that he'd done enough to earn his trust.

"The riots and protests are only going to increase," Seth said. "It's going to get ugly."

Absalom nodded. "I know. It doesn't seem like they're listening to you."

"This is a big change in everyone's life. It's going to take more than a RSIR student to convince them that it's a change for the better. We need to re-evaluate how we're presenting this to them."

"Presenting it?"

Seth took a deep breath. He really hoped he could sound sincere. "We need to stop worrying about the other planets. They can't do anything to us anymore. With twenty-three starships running three routes a day... The only people who can meaningfully affect Earth are people who are already here."

"What do you mean?"

"We need to convince the people of Earth that when the last ship is decommissioned, we've done something good," Seth said. "It should not be a somber moment, it should be a grand celebration."

The Republic shocked everyone when it revealed that March 9, 4192 would be the last day of faster-than-light travel. It should not have come as a surprise. It has been months since the Spatial Preservation Act was passed. Every week, representatives from the Republic military briefed the people of Earth on the progress of the enforcement of the Act. They were quite candid about how many starships were decommissioned, the scientists who were isolated, the trade routes that were discontinued, and the steps the military was taking to secure all of these efforts.

But many people still refused to believe it was happening. Faster-than-light travel wasn't just a method of transportation. It was woven into human society, and had been for almost two thousand years. People believed that Chairman Stevens and the High Council would change their minds. It wasn't until the date was set that the truth began to set in. There were less than two dozen starships left. Soon there would be none.

Even more surprising was the Republic's sudden shift in attitude about the Spatial Preservation Act. For months, every press release and conference had a very somber tone. It was like a slow, methodical funeral procession. But when they finally announced the date that the full provisions of the Act would take effect, everything changed.

The tone of the announcement and subsequent assembly was jubilant. Instead of dwelling on the sacrifices that the people of the galaxy would make, it celebrated them. It treated the end of faster-

than-light travel as an accomplishment.

“No other society in the history of mankind would ever be able to give up this much to save its citizens.”

“This is an unprecedented act of restraint that should be applauded, not dreaded.”

“We give up interplanetary travel so that our children’s children can live, and that must be regaled.”

March 9 was declared to be “Forbearance Day” throughout the Republic. The civilian arm of the government set up huge rallies and parties across the Earth to celebrate the nobility of the sacrifice everyone was making.

There would even be a central party, on the Europa Observation Outpost, where the last three ships would be decommissioned at the end of Forbearance Day. The removal of the final Heilmann Drive would be broadcast across the Earth, as if it was a moment to rejoice.

No one knew quite how to react to the Republic’s attempt to re-brand the Spatial Preservation Act as a triumph over human nature rather than a concession to a very real danger. Either way, tickets to the celebrations across the planet were claimed quickly—so quickly that the Republic had to plan more and more as the date grew closer.

Even though the idea of a rally to support the final steps of the Spatial Preservation Act seemed strange, people wanted to see the end. They wanted to say they were part of the of the end of faster-than-light travel.

*

The last days of the Heilmann Drive were a chaotic storm of relocation. The trade routes were winnowed down and, one-by-one, the planets were cut off from the rest of human society. They were on their own, perhaps forever. The last Heilmann Leap, between Earth and Rogovia, occurred with little fanfare. The celebration was saved

for the decommissioning ceremony, which would occur when the final three starships were destroyed aboard the Europa Station.

Seth tried to quell the churning in his stomach as he watched the workmen move about the large warehouse of the station. They were converting it into a dance hall. One of the men was resurfacing the metal floor, running a large motorized device over it to give it a glossy sheen. Several others were installing makeshift bars and tables near the edges of the room. An engineer, rappelling from the roof, measured spots where windows could be installed to look out on the brilliant glow of the Europa sky.

He had to remind himself that he did all of this. It was his idea to spin the last days before the Fall as a jubilee rather than a death march. He proposed all of this, and had to convince Commissar Absalom that it was a good idea.

It wasn't easy. At first, Absalom called the idea "bread and circuses". He claimed this was a Vangelian phrase used to describe the hedonistic Republic lifestyle. Seth couldn't bring himself to correct the commissar about the origin of the term, since he agreed with him in principle. Celebrating the end of faster-than-light travel, and the dark age it brought, was in poor taste. Still, he convinced Absalom that it was the right thing to do and the way to win the support of the people on Earth.

At the moment, it just made Seth uneasy. He still had trouble wrapping his mind around just how much he'd helped the Republic over the last couple of months. First he became their unofficial spokesman for the Fall, issuing a speech every week in support of the Spatial Preservation Act. Then he saved the life of Commissar Absalom. Now he was advising the commissar how turn the tide of public support in favor of the SPA.

This was all part of his plan. Everything he did, he did for a reason. He was the only person in the galaxy who could prevent the Fall. He thought he could do it by copying the Heilmann Drive design documents, but that failed. Now, the only hope he had was to hijack

one of the few remaining starships before they could all be decommissioned.

To steal a ship right out from under the nose of the Republic, he needed two things. First, he needed their trust. Months of supporting the Republic agenda and schilling for the Spatial Preservation Act put him in Absalom's good graces. He wasn't sure if Chairman Stevens or the High Council trusted him, but that wasn't important. Absalom had jurisdiction over all aspects of the SPA. He was the one Seth needed to convince, and that was all but done.

Second, Seth needed chaos. The Europa Station was heavily guarded. Soldiers were stationed at every doorway, in every storage bay, and patrolled every hallway with clockwork vigilance. If Seth tried to enter one of the repair bays, or leave the airlock and head out onto the dock, he wouldn't make it five feet. Even with the trust of the Republic, approaching the starships was out of the question. He needed to pull the guards off the ships. He needed to give them a reason to panic and abandon their duties.

That's where the parties came in.

Seth had spent the last few years studying the quirks of offworld societies, but he knew more about the Republic than any of them. The people on Earth were weak-willed, coddled by centuries of prosperity and indulgence. They embraced fads and new experiences, and they followed the lead of their government to a fault. He knew as soon as the Republic began to advertise massive parties, they would become the hottest ticket on the planet.

And the most exclusive party would be on the Europa station, where the last ship would actually be decommissioned. Everyone who was anyone would beg and barter their way inside. On the last night of faster-than-light travel, the Europa Station would be full of some of the most important people in the Republic. High Council members, commissars, celebrities, and their children would fill the dance hall that was now being constructed.

They would be Seth's key to success. But if he didn't succeed? If

he didn't manage to steal one of the last starships? Then he would do nothing but help sell the Fall to the people of Earth.

"What a bizarre sight this all is."

Seth felt his heart leap in his chest. He glanced behind him to see Commissar Absalom standing near the doorway. He was leaning against the bulkhead, watching the workers re-fit the cargo bay. A disgusted look was twisted upon his face. He looked even more unhappy than Seth.

The commissar pushed himself away from the wall and started to limp towards the middle of the bay. "I never thought I'd see the day we turned the Europa Station into a hell-bound dance hall. What have you done, Mr. Garland?"

"Approval for the Spatial Preservation Act is up ten percent on Earth. I think I made your life a little easier."

Absalom clapped him on the back. "That you did. I guess I should count myself lucky that you're on my side." Seth forced a smile. "Now come on, there's no reason to sit around watching these men tear down a cargo bay. Let's go get a drink. The best part of your ridiculous scheme is that it gave me an excuse to requisition some quality spirits for this station."

Seth furrowed his brow. It was the first time Absalom had invited him to anything outside of their work with the Spatial Preservation Act. The commissar's life was his job. Seth had never seen him do anything but work and sleep. He didn't quite know how to react, and ended up saying the first thing that came to mind. "I thought Vangelians didn't drink."

The commissar leaned towards him. "And I thought you weren't stupid enough to ever call me a Vangelian." A moment of pained silence passed between them as Seth started to wonder if he'd committed an unthinkable faux pas. But then the commissar smiled. "Do not worry about it, Mr. Garland," he said. "You can make it up to me by buying the first round."

Nervous laughter bubbled up from Seth's chest as he realized that

the commissar was just joking with him. Absalom's sense of humor was almost as surprising as Absalom's invitation to go drinking. "Sure. Let's go."

★

"You don't believe in any of this, do you?"

Seth felt his heart leap in his chest as he looked over at the commissar. They were sitting on two stools at a half-finished bar on the observation deck of the Europa Station. The two men had been there for almost half an hour, sampling the various Earth whiskeys, but they'd been mostly silent. With all the chaos on the station, it had been nice to have a little peace and quiet. Now, out of nowhere, Absalom broke the silence with an accusation that cut to the heart of Seth's plan.

"Why... Why would you say that?" Seth asked, downing another gulp from his glass. It barely burned in his throat, which made him wonder just how many drinks he'd had. Was he so intoxicated that he might let something slip to the commissar? Would he even know?

Absalom had kept up with him, glass-to-glass, and the effects were clearly showing on his face. His pale cheeks were flush and his eyes wandered to the corners of the room a bit more than usual. Still, he spoke clearly and directly as he explained himself:

"A couple months ago, you risked your freedom to try and convince the people of this Republic that we were doing an evil thing. And now you instigate a grand plan to win their hearts and minds with empty celebration. What do you believe in?"

Seth took a deep breath and considered his answer. "Is it so hard to think that you managed to convince me that you're right about all of this?" Seth asked, turning the question around on him.

Absalom considered this. "No, I don't think I convinced you of anything," he said with a smile. "But you have been a great ally to the Republic, so I want to understand what motivates you. You said that you were writing a book about the Spatial Preservation Act, but I never see you even taking notes."

"I don't need to take notes," Seth answered, though he didn't elaborate further. He came close to revealing his photographic memory, but he decided that it was best to keep that from the commissar. Even though he'd long abandoned his plot to memorize and reproduce the Heilmann Drive design documents, he still felt it was a valuable tool to keep hidden.

"Interesting," Absalom replied. He put his glass on the bar and picked up one of the bottles. He awkwardly poured himself another drink. Unlike Seth, who had realized he should start pacing himself, it didn't appear that the commissar had any intention of slowing down. "I cannot wait to read this book when it comes out. I will be so fascinated to hear what you think of all of this."

Seth nodded and decided to elaborate on the lie. "I'll let you read it first, if you like, but don't think you'll be able to edit me." He wasn't sure if that made it more or less convincing. Absalom didn't seem to notice either way.

"I don't care what you write in your damned book," Absalom said. "What you say about me next year won't matter."

"You think history will redeem you?" Seth asked, then quickly corrected himself. "You think it will redeem **us**?"

Absalom grinned. He liked that Seth was including himself. "No. It doesn't matter what they say about us in the future, either. There wouldn't be a future without us. Because of us, these moments will become history instead of the end of everything."

"You really believe that, don't you?"

"Of course I do!" Absalom took another drink, then slammed his glass down on the table. "How can you question it? You have seen the pictures. You've read the reports." He leaned back on his seat and laughed. It filled the air, echoing through the empty room, and set Seth ill-at-ease. The commissar's tone became manic as he continued. "And you didn't even see all of them. You stopped looking. You stopped reading. I never did. I went through every page, I looked at every picture, and I gazed at the collapse of reality as we know it."

He grabbed Seth's shoulders. "We are stopping that, Mr. Garland!"

Looking into Absalom's eyes, Seth almost started to believe him. He remembered the way he felt when he looked over the photographs and journals from the station in the warped space. It made him sick to his stomach and scared. He couldn't even put into words why it had that effect on him. It was just so mystifying and horrifying that it overwhelmed his common sense and forced those feelings on him.

For just a moment, Seth wondered if he was doing the right thing. Maybe Absalom was right. Maybe the threat from the warped space was enough to justify the end of faster-than-light travel. The thought of spending his entire life on Earth scared Seth, but it was nothing compared to the possibility that the warped space would expand, perhaps engulfing the entire galaxy.

Seth was about to start questioning his plan, and his motivations, but then Absalom kept talking. The commissar would never know the chance he ruined that night, as he continued to opine on his beliefs about the Fall.

"I want to tell you something I have never told anyone before," Absalom whispered. "Because I am afraid of what they would say about me. You are right about one thing, Mr. Garland. The Republic is very inflexible about certain beliefs."

Seth didn't know how to respond. He didn't really want the commissar to open up to him. That was only going to make it more difficult to eventually betray him. Still... He was curious. "Sure. We're off the record now. Nothing you say will show up in my book."

"The old stories tell us of the first time that man attempted to reach the stars," Absalom said. "This was long before we even knew what the stars were, let alone how to traverse them. Still, man was prideful, and saw fit to build a tower which would stretch to the heavens. The audacity of this act displeased God, and God punished man. God split the land of the Earth into many continents, scattering man across the globe. And God confounded the language of man, so that he

would never be able to unite and work with such purpose again. Why? Because mankind had grasped beyond its reach. Does any of this sound familiar?"

A long silence filled the room as Seth tried to wrap his mind around what he was hearing. "You think that God is doing this to us?" he asked finally.

Absalom sighed. "I only know what our stories tell us, and certain stories tend to repeat themselves throughout history. Think about it, Mr. Garland. We sit here, tonight, on the eve of a new diaspora. The Heilmann Drive was our Tower of Babel. It is about to be struck down from the heavens once again, and we are about to become a nomadic people once more."

Seth had to restrain the anger inside of him. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He took a deep breath, hoping that he would catch his outrage before it came bursting forth. "But God isn't the one scattering us among the stars. We are."

The commissar pursed his lips as he thought about this. "The metaphor is not perfect," he said. "But the point still stands. Perhaps we have grasped beyond our reach. Our arrogance is destroying the galaxy, and we are about to be punished for it."

Suddenly, it was like everything made sense to Seth. He understood why Commissar Absalom was so dedicated to the Spatial Preservation Act. This was why he was so zealous. Despite everything that happened on Vangelia, he was still stuck with the teachings of his homeworld.

Absalom's role with the Republic wasn't a coincidence. He was handpicked by the High Council to enforce the Spatial Preservation Act. He was given an unprecedented amount of power for someone so young, and especially someone who was not born on Earth. Seth had always wondered how Absalom managed to get such a high profile job. Now he knew. His background gave him some special quality that set him apart from the other commissars and high-ranking officers.

Ever since Seth started working with Absalom, he'd been researching Vangelian religion. He'd never learned about their beliefs during his time at RSIR. The class that covered Vangelia was reserved for upperclassmen so Seth was a few months away from being able to join. These days he took his education into his own hands, scouring the net and old news bulletins for information about Absalom's home.

One of the core concepts of Homeworld Christianity, which was the basis for Vangelian Theology, was original sin. The concept, as Seth understood it, was that all humanity was stained with the sin of the first man and woman on Earth, who betrayed God by choosing knowledge over faith. Like many religious tenants throughout the galaxy, Seth couldn't wrap his mind around the idea. Why would anyone see the pursuit of knowledge as a sinful thing? Fortunately, he'd learned long ago that there was no point in questioning the logic of religion.

All of mankind was sinful, and the only way to be absolved of this sin was through accepting the sacrifice of the messiah. Most offshoots of Homeworld Christianity called this man Jesus, or Christ, but over time the Vangelians adopted the name Aesu, because they believed he needed to be differentiated from the meek philosopher of other sects.

Aesu was a violent man who, according to the Vangelians, was torn apart by his enemies on the field of battle when he led a small band of his followers against the mighty Roman Empire thousands of years before the age of space travel. As Seth understood it, this made a mess of both theology and history, but it was the fundamental story of the Vangelian faith. The martyrdom of Aesu allowed future generations to absolve themselves of their original sin. Anyone who lived according to Aesu's principles and died serving his name would be allowed into heaven despite the sin of a mortal existence.

The brutal structure of Vangelian society was built on the supposed principles of Aesu. Seth knew that these "teachings" were arbitrary

and so attenuated from Homeworld Christianity that they had no legitimate philosophical basis. That didn't matter any more. Vangelian Theology was over a thousand years old, it was now as legitimate as anything in the galaxy that survived for so long.

This was where Commissar Absalom was raised. Even though he escaped, and even though he had every reason to hate his former world, he could not strip its influence from him. He still believed in original sin. He still believed that there was something fundamentally wrong with humanity, and that it was within God's power to punish the entire galaxy for it.

Seth wanted to be angry with the commissar. He wanted to throw his glass against the wall and scream at him. It was all so ridiculous to think that disruption of space-time was some divine punishment rather than a quirk of physics or an easily fixable flaw in an otherwise incredible human invention. But Seth couldn't be angry. He knew that none of this was Absalom's fault. He'd done as much as anyone to rise above the repressive culture he was born into.

Besides, the High Council was using Absalom, just like they used everyone.

"You know I can't believe what you believe," Seth said. "And if you're making any decision about the Spatial Preservation Act because of your religion—"

Suddenly, Absalom looked up at Seth and fixed him with a furious stare. "It is **not** my religion," he insisted. "And you are being foolish if you discount everything I say. Think about it, Mr. Garland. Why is it that we cannot leap outside of the galaxy? Why does every ship that attempts it disappear? Perhaps we there are places we are simply not meant to go."

Seth stood up. He was done drinking and talking with the commissar. He put his glass on the bar and leaned over to stare into his eyes. "If God constrains us, then he should not be worshipped. If God punishes us for building a better galaxy, then God is our enemy."

Absalom stared at Seth, stunned. "How prideful can you be?" he

shouted. "It was one thing when you were judging the Republic. Now you dare judge even God?" Seth realized as he heard the passion in the commissar's voice that he'd crossed a line.

Under different conditions, he might have jeopardized the relationship he built with the commissar. But Absalom was so drunk that he probably wouldn't remember much of anything in the morning.

"I think we've both had enough," Seth said. "We should get some sleep."

Absalom laughed. "You are right, Mr. Garland. Tomorrow is a big day. Tomorrow we will save humanity from itself. Together, we will usher in a new era of sacrifice. Maybe we will be remembered as heroes. Maybe not. What is important is that there will be people to remember us."

Seth felt his heart leap in his chest. He'd forgotten how close they were. The remodeling of the station would be done in the afternoon. The party would begin in the evening. And at midnight, the Republic would decommission the last starship in the galaxy.

There were hundreds of official and unofficial events planned for the first Forbearance Day in 4192. Some of them were somber ceremonies, held in quite remembrance of the end of an era. Others were raucous parties, full of drinks and drugs. All of them had one thing in common: they were all tuned in to the live feed from Europa.

The Republic was storing the final three starships in the galaxy at the observation station on Europa. It was also the site of the biggest party of them all. Politicians, viewscreen stars, and high ranking military personnel were invited to celebrate on the station. Naturally, everyone else in the Republic wanted to see what was happening on the Europa station, so cameras were deployed at all of the critical spots.

There was a main video feed from the dance hall on Europa, but that was only the beginning of the production. There were cameras everywhere. Some were in orbit above Europa, to give everyone back on Earth a sense of perspective. Others were planted at the bars, so that observers could find out what drinks their favorite celebrity or politician ordered at such a monumental event. But the most important cameras were set up inside the repair bays.

At midnight, the workers aboard the Europa Station would remove the critical components from the last Heilmann Drive in the galaxy. When they did this, it would end faster-than-light travel forever. Everyone wanted to see this. They wanted to know when to cheer... or when to riot.

Everything was going as planned, until the final hour of the night. Then the video feeds began to cut out. It started with *the main dance hall. In one minute, music and images were streaming from the cameras. In the next, everything went black. Then, one by one, the other video feeds disappeared. The last one to cut out was the camera inside the main repair bay. That was where the final ceremony was to take place. That was where the last Heilmann Drive was to be removed from the last starship in the galaxy.*

The Republic announced that everything went as planned, and that interference from the atmosphere of Jupiter was to blame for the loss of video from the station. People who were there told a different story—one of chaos and panic—but no one was willing to say what really happened aboard the station that night.

*

Even in Seth's worst nightmares, he never thought he would wear a Republic military uniform. He almost couldn't believe his eyes as he stared at the mirror in his room. It looked wrong on him, like it didn't fit, even though he had it specially tailored.

The Republic's formal dress uniform consisted of a form-fitting high-collared red jacket and slacks, a white sash displaying the medals earned by the officer, and black boots that reached nearly to the knee. Seth's was no different, except he had no pins on his collar to indicate rank, and the only medal on his sash was a civilian service pin. It looked silly, but Commissar Absalom and the members of his squad insisted.

Just as Seth expected, Absalom didn't remember anything about their discussion the night before. He greeted Seth as a friend in the morning, and was excited to put the finishing touches on the last day of the biggest project of his life.

The last three starships in the galaxy were now docked at the Europa Station. One was the *I.S.S. Jefferson*, a large passenger liner. The second was the *I.S.S. Illustrious*, a military craft that

doubled as a cargo vessel. When it was needed to enforce Republic edicts, it served as a warship. Most of the time, though, it ran ore from various mining stations to Earth. The final ship was the *I.S.S. Monitor*, a science vessel which explored uninhabitable worlds to find mineral deposits.

Because it was the smallest of the three craft, the *Monitor* was scheduled to be the final ship decommissioned. It was the only ship that could fit in the main repair bay, where the cameras were mounted. The *Illustrious* was crammed into one of the warehouses. The *Jefferson* was docked at the space port outside of the station. Both of them were scheduled to be disassembled during the festivities leading up to the midnight deadline. Then, the workers would take apart the *Monitor* in front of the entire world.

Seth told himself that those three ships were the reason he was wearing a Republic uniform. Even though it felt wrong to him, even though it was a betrayal of everything that he believed in, he was doing this to save one of them.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small laser pistol. Absalom gave it to him after the incident outside of the Mid-Canada zone. It was supposed to be the only weapon he had aboard the Europa Station. It wasn't. He'd managed to smuggle a ballistic firearm—a small handgun—onto the station a few days prior.

This was it. This was the moment where he would set everything into motion. Seth closed his eyes. He could still remember everything he saw on the map of the Europa Station. He knew every corridor, every service hallway, and every duct. He could get anywhere on the station, hopefully under the nose of most of the guards. And there were a lot of guards. It felt like the entire Republic Military was mobilized on the station.

But, at least for right now, Seth looked like one of them.

Taking a deep breath, Seth raised the laser pistol in the air. Then he slammed it against the wall next to the mirror. With a loud *crack* the hilt of the gun shattered against the metal surface.

Seth walked over to his desk on the other side of the room. He put the gun down and looked at the machinery inside. Republic-issue laser pistols were powered by a stable kinetic energy core. When worn in a holster, they could be recharged by movement—walking, running, or vibration.

All Seth had to do was make a few modifications to the power structure of the pistol. It was a delicate process, but nothing beyond his skill. He rerouted a few of the wires back into the energy core. This caused the core to vibrate on its own, attempting to recharge itself in a feedback loop. Eventually, the heat sinks within the weapon would fail and it would explode.

That would take approximately two hours. Seth checked the time. It was seven-thirty. The timing wasn't perfect, but it would do.

Seth placed the laser pistol back into his jacket. He stood up straight, looked back to the mirror, and smiled. Knowing that he was about to betray the Republic made him feel a lot better about the uniform.

*

"Why do you keep checking your tablet?" Absalom asked "The countdown clock at the front of the room should tell you everything you need to know."

The commissar's voice barely rose above the pounding music in the dance hall. Even when he yelled, he wasn't particularly loud.

Seth quickly put his tablet back into his coat. He didn't even realize how often he was pulling it out to check the time. It was probably every thirty seconds or so. It made him look suspicious. He didn't want to look suspicious. As it was, he only had to keep up the charade a little longer.

Why? Because the countdown clock **didn't** tell him everything. It didn't let him know when his makeshift bomb would detonate. Seth had placed the hacked laser pistol at a junction near the rear of the observation station. It was one of the weakest structural walls in the entire building. When the pistol finally overheated and detonated, it

would create a large enough explosion to blow a hole in the junction. This wouldn't just create a vacuum, it would also create a panic.

Seth smiled. He would only have to pretend to be friends with the commissar for a few more minutes.

"I'm just excited," Seth said. "That's all."

The two men stood near the back of the hall, watching the dozens of men and women dance away the last hours of faster-than-light travel. As Seth eyed the crowd, he realized that he recognized most of them. They were the elite of the elite in the Republic. After all, it wasn't easy to get a ticket to the central Forbearance Day celebration.

"Garland!" Seth turned to look for a familiar voice. At first he didn't believe what he heard. But then he saw her. Willa Green, his classmate from RSIR, was standing in front of him. "Look at you, suddenly the paragon of the Republic. Whatever happened to—"

Seth held up his hand, stopping her mid-sentence. He knew what she was going to say. She was probably the one person in the galaxy who could reveal his secret. He wouldn't let that happen. "That's all in the past. A long, long time ago." He smiled. "How did you get here? I mean, tickets were hard to come by. I didn't think that I'd see many RSIR students here"

Willa laughed. "Didn't you know, Seth? My father is on the High Council."

"No. No I didn't know that." Seth steadied himself in his chair. He thought back to all of the subversive things he told to Willa. And she never reported him? She never turned him in, to her father or the military? It was really rather remarkable. "Please, Willa, let me introduce you to Commissar Phaer Absalom. He's the one behind all of this. He set the timetables, arranged the teams... everything."

Absalom thrust out his arm and they shook hands. "Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Same here," Willa replied. "And I have to say, while your military record is exemplary, I am most impressed with your ability to turn

Seth into a model citizen for a few months.”

Seth laughed nervously, but didn’t say anything. He was afraid of slipping up and incriminating himself somehow.

“Don’t worry,” Absalom said. “He’s been great.”

Willa turned to look at Seth and smiled. “So... Do you want to dance? Or are you only here on business?”

“I... Uh...” Seth pulled out his tablet again to look at the time. The pistol should have exploded by now. He would have heard it. The detonation of a kinetic energy core would not go unnoticed... and if it did, it would be useless to him. “Maybe later. I don’t think I’ve had enough to drink to start dancing.”

“Suit yourself,” Willa said, rolling her eyes. She headed for the dance floor. “Maybe I’ll be available later. Maybe I won’t.”

Once she was gone, Absalom looked over at Seth. “What was that about?” he asked. “She seemed nice. When this is all over, you and I are going to have a lot of free time on our hands. I would not mind spending time with one like her.”

Seth sighed. “She’s not my type.”

“You are so strange sometimes, Mr. Garland,” Absalom replied, then went back to sipping on his drink and scanning the crowd.

“If you say so.” A sense of dread was beginning to set in for Seth. If his makeshift bomb didn’t explode, he had no idea what to do. He needed to pull the guards away from the ships and it was the only hope he had. He couldn’t hope to fight past all of them on his own.

After a few more seconds of silence between the two men as they listened to the pounding music around them, Absalom struck up another conversation. “I should apologize for last night,” he said. “You were right. I should never let my personal beliefs inform how I do my job. Or even why I do my job.”

Seth looked over at him, stunned. He’d figured that the commissar simply didn’t remember what they discussed. Instead, he felt bad about it. He actually listened to Seth. “Wow, I—”

Suddenly, a deafening *crack!* split the air. It was so loud that it cut

through the drumbeat of the music on the dance floor. It rattled the walls and shook the rows of glasses on the bar nearby.

Everyone in the dance hall stopped. They started to look around, as if they could find the source of the mysterious sound. The DJ near the front of the room turned off the music.

"What is happening?" Absalom said, an almost palatable sense of despair in his voice. Seth didn't dare respond. If he spoke, he feared that he could not stop himself from gloating. A deathly silence filled the hall. And then the sirens started up.

Red light flashed through the room, bathing everyone in crimson. Blaring klaxons droned from the speakers on the ceiling. Everyone began to panic, moving back and forth across the hall. Some of them hit the ground, covering their heads as if the base was under attack.

It was, but they had no way of knowing that.

A loud voice followed the klaxons. "EMERGENCY," it said. "EMERGENCY, STATION HULL BREACH DETECTED ON LEVEL TWO. PLEASE REMAIN CALM. IN THE EVENT OF DEPRESSURIZATION, SECURITY AIRLOCKS WILL BE CLOSED. PLEASE REMAIN CALM." Despite the reassurances, this automated message only made the chaos worse.

"Shit!" Commissar Absalom yelled, pushing himself up. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small earpiece. As he limped towards the center of the room, he pressed it into his ear and started yelling. "What is going on? Someone get me a status report."

Seth calmly followed him. For just a second, as the commissar was distracted, he closed his eyes. He pictured the map of the Europa Station in his mind and considered the distance between the site of the explosion and the guards posted near the remaining starships. How long would it take them to abandon their posts?

"Get everyone down there!" Absalom yelled. "Make sure that this station is secure!"

The commissar tapped the receiver in his ear and looked back at Seth. He was panicking. He didn't expect this.

It was just like Seth thought. The reason he'd been put in charge of the enforcement of the Spatial Preservation Act was because he believed in it. He was one of the few people in the galaxy outside of the High Council who thought that it was the right thing to do. But he was young, and he was inexperienced, and he didn't know how to handle a real crisis.

"Is someone trying to board the station?" Seth asked, feigning naivete.

Absalom shook his head. "I do not know. I have no rims-damned idea."

"Where's the breach? Is it anywhere near the ships?"

"No, thank Aesu," Absalom said. "It will take at least five minutes for anyone trying to enter the station via the breach to get close to the ships." Seth nodded. That was pretty close to his estimation as well. "And if anyone tries it, the guards are already on their way."

So far, everyone was playing into Seth's hands. The military was pulling their men off of the repair bays where the ships were docked. They were moving towards the site of the hull breach, where they would find nothing but the scattered pieces of a laser pistol. The dance hall was in disarray. Lockdowns were about to begin across the station, but Seth knew how to circumvent every emergency door that would stand in his way.

Seth closed his eyes and began to count down in his head. He had to time everything just right. He wanted the guards far enough away from the repair bays to be able to get out in front of them, but not close enough to realize that the explosion was a ruse.

Absalom looked up at Seth. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm thinking," Seth replied.

"About what?"

Rather than answer, Seth started to walk towards the commissar. His heart was racing. He was really going to do this. With each step, he moved closer to the point of no return. He would either leave this station on a starship or as a corpse. His eyes flew open as he

approached Absalom.

Seth reached up and he grabbed the commissar's earpiece from the side of his head. There was no turning back.

"Hey!" Absalom shouted, but Seth just walked past him, into the cowering crowd on the dance floor. "What was that about? Mr. Garland! I need my earpiece!"

Seth placed the device in his own ear and tapped the button on the side, connecting him to the guards positioned around the station. He took a deep breath. "Help!" Seth shouted. He didn't even have to sound panicked; that was coming quite naturally to him. "Anyone who can hear me! This is Civilian Liaison Seth Garland! The commissar is down! We need backup in the command center!"

Then, before anyone could respond or ask for details, Seth threw the earpiece to the ground and stepped on it. The delicate electronics crumbled beneath his shoe.

Absalom stared at Seth from the back of the room. Seth could see a horrible realization wash over the commissar. His shoulders slumped and his face transformed into a scowl. He was being betrayed. For just a second, Seth thought he might give up. He might not fight back. His pained expression was filled with disappointment and defeat.

But it wasn't going to be that easy. The commissar's despair turned into anger. He gritted his teeth together and reached into his jacket, where he kept his laser pistol.

Before the commissar could open fire on him, Seth dashed further into the crowd within the dance hall. Most of them were already on the floor. The sight of the commissar readying his weapon caused even more people to dive to the ground. This didn't leave Seth with much cover.

Seth looked off to the side. Willa Green was nearby, glaring up at him. She was the only one in the room who expected this. He'd even told her that he planned on stealing a starship. She did nothing to stop him, telling no one, protecting his secret. Seth was grateful for

this, but not grateful enough to keep him from doing what he did next.

He moved closer to Willa, then reached towards her. Before she could react, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her up to her feet. Catching her by surprise, he twisted her around and pushed her in front of him. Seth thrust his gun over her shoulder and pointed it at the commissar. Willa was larger than him. This made aiming difficult, but it also made her an ideal human shield.

"Seth!" Willa yelled. "Hey!" He twisted her arm harder, silencing her.

"I'm sorry," Seth said. "Don't worry. He won't shoot you to get to me." Seth looked up at Absalom. "Will you, commissar?"

Absalom stared at Seth and Willa across the dance hall. "Stand down, Mr. Garland," he hissed. "You cannot possibly think you can accomplish anything here."

"I can prevent the Fall!" Seth proclaimed. "I can save civilization."

"Don't be so overdramatic," Absalom replied. "Put down the gun. Don't do anything to make this worse."

Seth's eyes glanced around the room at the dozens of men and women surrounding him. "I lied to everyone," he announced. "The plans you showed me weren't the real plans. There aren't any complete plans of the Heilmann Drive anymore. When the Republic takes apart the last one tonight—"

"Lies!" Absalom shouted and, for a second, Seth wondered if the commissar knew the truth. It was entirely possible that even he wasn't aware that the plans were fake. "Don't listen to him! Someone stop him!"

The men and women in the dance hall were the elite of the Republic. They were all here, on the Europa Station, to celebrate the end of faster-than-light travel. If there was any group of people who legitimately supported the Fall, it would be these people. And all it would take to stop Seth was one of them. Just one had to stand up, get behind him, and disarm him. Even Willa could probably pull away from him if she really tried.

But none of them would. Either they were too afraid... or somehow they knew he was right.

Seth began to back towards the door on the other side of the room. His right arm was getting tired already. It wouldn't be long before he would have to let go of Willa and give Absalom a straight shot at him. He would have to be quick.

The crowd parted as Seth pushed through them. No one tried to trip him, or grab his gun, or free Willa. It didn't matter why. Maybe they were secretly on his side. Maybe they were just cowards. He made it to the door without a single person getting in his way.

Commissar Absalom didn't chase after him. It wouldn't have done any good. His bad leg made him slower than Seth and his hostage combined. He just looked around, at all the people in the hall, and shouted, "Someone stop him! Anyone! Don't you see? He's mad!"

He looked like a broken man. It wasn't just Seth who betrayed him, but everyone in the room. No one else truly believed in the Fall. He was alone.

"You were right about one thing," Seth shouted before he left the large room. "You will never be on the right side of history."

Once Seth and Willa were in the hallway, Seth pointed his gun at the control panel next to the door. He squeezed the trigger and looked away. *BANG!* Sparks flew from the panel. Just as Seth hoped, this activated the security airlocks. The station computers believed that depressurization caused the damage to the panel. Thick metal doors descended from the ceiling and sealed off the dance hall.

Seth didn't know how long that would trap the commissar. Undoubtedly, someone had the override codes for the security airlock doors. And it would only be a matter of time before the guards who went to check on him in the command center realized that they were duped. By then, Seth hoped he would be far, far away from Europa.

Before Seth could appreciate the first taste of his victory, he felt a

sharp pain in his gut. Willa slammed her elbow into his stomach and pulled away from him. She grabbed for his wrist and tried to knock his gun from his hand.

Winded, Seth could only stumbled away from Willa. But it was just enough, and he was out of range of her clumsy fists. He recovered quick enough to steady his grip on the pistol. His hands shaking, he pulled it upward and pointed it at her. Almost immediately, Willa stopped trying to fight him. She stood very still, but expressed her anger in another way.

"How dare you do that to me?" Willa screamed. "I thought we were friends!"

Seth nodded. "We are friends. You're stronger than me. You could have overpowered me any time you wanted, but you waited until we were out."

Willa gaped at him. "You... You think I just let you do that? I was scared! You have a gun!"

"Everyone is scared," Seth replied. "Not me. I'm sick of it. The future is no place for fear."

"I don't even know what that means!" Willa exclaimed.

Seth started to lower his gun. "You should come with me. RSIR is done for. I could use your help."

While he wasn't willing to admit it, Seth didn't know what he would do once he'd taken the starship. If he had someone along with him, he could at least discuss it with her.

"Are you crazy?" Willa said. "No! I'm not going to hijack a starship with you! Why would you even—"

"Fine," Seth replied, and tried to tell himself that he didn't want her to come along anyway. "Then get going. I'd appreciate it if you don't raise an alarm, but I guess I can't keep you from anything once you're out of sight."

"That's it?"

Seth rolled his eyes. "What? Do you want me to try and convince you to come along? Or shoot you? Because I don't have time for

either.”

That was all Willa needed to hear. She turned around and fled down the hall. Seth didn't watch Willa go. He'd already spent too much time bothering with her. He had more important things to do.

Seth took a deep breath. He looked at the metal warehouse door in front of him. The *I.S.S. Illustrious* was inside. He was so close he could almost taste freedom.

The plan worked just as he hoped. He didn't see a single Republic soldier between the makeshift dance hall and the warehouse. They were all dispersed throughout the station, either investigating the hull breach or the fake distress call from the commissar's earpiece.

No matter how elite the guards were, they simply weren't prepared. Like everyone else in the Republic, they lived a relaxed life. There were no wars, few skirmishes, and very little crime. All of their experience was training. For years, they ran through simulations and exercises. They prepared for invasions that would never happen. They memorized routines and procedures until they could perform them in their sleep.

When an explosion rocked the exterior wall at the station, they knew exactly what to do. They knew how to contain the damage and prevent intruders from boarding. When Seth told them that the commissar was hurt, they fell back on their training. They'd performed hundreds of simulated extraction missions. Undoubtedly, they descended on the command center in perfect formation, ready to retake it and rescue their leader.

But they were never ready for an attack from within. They were taught from childhood that the Republic was perfect, and that anyone who opposed it was unstable or insane. They could have never expected that anyone on board the station for the Forbearance Day celebration would turn against them, use their own training to foil

them and betray the Republic.

Seth reached out and pressed the button next to the warehouse door. He readied his gun in front of him. There would still be people inside. Even if all of the guards abandoned the ship, there were still engineers and workmen. They were preparing the *Illustrious* for decommission.

He doubted if they would put up a fight. Just like the men and women in the dance hall, they were not invested in the outcome of the Spatial Preservation Act. They wouldn't risk their lives to enforce it. Hopefully they would just let him board the *Illustrious* and leave. While he wasn't going to let anyone stand in his way, he also didn't want to have to hurt anyone.

As the door slid open, Seth peered inside. The *Illustrious* took up most of the floor space of the warehouse. There weren't any soldiers in sight. Even the guards inside the warehouse must have responded to one of the emergencies elsewhere on the station. For just a moment, Seth was sure he'd won. But then he stepped into the warehouse.

Three workmen surrounded the *Illustrious*. At first, Seth thought they were just cleaning the ship. Then he saw one of them raise his hand towards the ship. He was wearing a kinetic glove.

Seth felt his heart bottom out as he saw a long sliver of shimmering metal float from the side of the vessel. They were already taking it apart. He recognized the part they were removing. It was the heat isolation coil, which modulated the temperature on the ship during the massive energy surge during a Heilmann Leap. To even reach the heat isolation coil, the workmen would need to disassemble some of the most complex parts of the faster-than-light engine.

He was too late. Even if he could convince them to try and put it back together, they probably wouldn't know how. The few people who could assemble a Heilmann Drive were already isolated in Republic facilities on Earth. None of them would be on the Europa station, and none of them would be tasked with the destruction of the ships.

Was this it? Was this the end? Anger flooded over Seth. Without thinking, he slammed his hand into the bulkhead.

The three engineers stopped moving. They looked up at him. The one holding the isolation coil flinched, causing his kinetic glove to give out. The thin piece of metal fell to the ground and shattered, rendering the ship even more useless.

Seth stared at the engineers. They were stunned. They didn't expect anyone to interrupt them. In just a few seconds, they would signal the guards. All of the other operations would be called off. Every soldier on the Europa Station would turn against Seth. It would all be over. He would be lucky to make it out of this with his life.

No. He couldn't give up. Not now. There was still hope. There was still one more starship aboard the station. The *I.S.S. Monitor*. It would still be intact. After all, the Republic planned on televising the first steps of its destruction at midnight.

With the *Illustrious* halfway to scrap metal, the *Monitor* was the last starship in the galaxy. It was the only one left. If Seth didn't take it, it would be decommissioned. And faster-than-light travel would end forever.

Seth raised his gun as he charged into the warehouse bay. "Nobody move!" he shouted. "Everyone, put your hands up. If you even **think** about calling for help, I will blow your rims-damned head off!"

The three engineers were still. Just as Seth hoped, danger paralyzed them. They were no better than the Republic soldiers, accustomed to their training patterns. A slight disruption in their routine existence was enough to send them into shock.

"What... What do you want?" One of them asked as Seth approached. "What is going on?"

Seth took a deep breath. He wasn't even sure what he wanted, other than time. The repair bay that housed the *Monitor* was on the other side of the Europa Station. "Earpieces!" Seth shouted. "Earpieces and tablets, put them on the ground."

The engineers didn't object. One by one, they took out their earpieces. They removed their tablets from their pockets. And they put the devices at their feet.

Seth waved his gun between the three men. "Now step on them. Break them, so I know you can't call for help."

Timidly, the engineers placed their feet on the electronics and smashed them into obsolescence. Without tablets or earpieces, the engineers would be unable to contact the guards for a few minutes. Unless, of course, they used the control panel near the door.

With a flick of his wrist, Seth pointed the gun at the first engineer's leg. *BANG!* He collapsed, grabbing at his thigh. The other two broke for the door, realizing that they were going to be shot no matter what. Seth steadied his aim. *BANG!* He took down the second man. *BANG!* The third fell to the ground.

This wasn't what Seth wanted to happen. He wanted it to be easy. He didn't want to hurt anyone. But all three engineers would live, as long as they didn't try anything foolish.

Seth placed his gun in his jacket and approached the nearest man, the one who'd been holding the isolation coil. He reached down and grabbed the engineer's arm. With a quick motion, he ripped the kinetic glove from his hand.

"I'm sorry about this," Seth said. He sighed, strapping the glove across his own fingers. "I hope you understand someday." A tingle of electricity tickled across his palm. Seth had used a kinetic glove before, when he was a shooter on his primary school forceball team. But that was a low power model, intended for recreational use. This was strong enough to take apart a starship, and he hoped he could control it.

Seth walked towards the control panel near the door of the warehouse. He thrust out his hand and twitched his index finger. A wave of energy flew from the glove and latched onto the front end of the wall. Seth yanked his arm backwards and ripped the entire panel from the surrounding bulkhead. Sparks flew everywhere as Seth

dropped it on the ground next to the door.

If the glove could pick apart a Heilmann Drive or tear a wall to pieces, it was strong enough to be a weapon. And Seth knew that he needed every weapon he could get if he was going to make his way to the *I.S.S. Monitor*.

★

By now, the guards would be returning to their posts. They'd sealed off the hull breach and figured out that no one boarded the station. They'd reached the command center and discovered that Seth's call for help was a ruse. Commissar Absalom may have even re-established communications with them and informed them that Seth was the real threat. At best, they would be securing the other parts of the station. At worst, they would be after him *en masse*.

Seth moved through the hall slowly. He held his pistol in his left hand, extended towards the nearby door. His right hand, wrapped in the kinetic glove, hovered near the barrel of the weapon. He was ready to react at the first sign of trouble, though he wasn't sure what that would mean.

The guards were just doing their job. They weren't responsible for any of this. They served the Republic, but that didn't mean they deserved to die. Seth hoped he wouldn't have to kill any of them. But if they got in his way, he wouldn't hesitate to take the necessary measures. The fate of humanity itself was at stake.

Seth was sure he would fail. The repair bay housing the *I.S.S. Monitor* was too far away. But it didn't matter any more. Even if he stopped now, he would spend the rest of his life in prison for treason. He had to keep going, even if he was marching to his own death.

A soft swishing noise alerted Seth to a door near the left end of the hall. He turned just in time to see a heavysset man in a dark red uniform step from the adjacent passage. He was carrying a laser rifle. Seth didn't hesitate. He flung his right arm around and flicked his index finger forward. A blast of energy flew from the kinetic glove and slammed the guard into the wall.

Before the large man could react, Seth rushed forward. He tucked his pistol into his jacket and grabbed the guard's laser rifle. He swung the weapon around and pointed it at its former owner.

For just a second, he considered killing the guard. It would be easy enough. One blast from the laser rifle would take him out in an instant. He probably wouldn't even feel any pain, and he certainly wouldn't be able to do anything to get in Seth's way again.

Seth couldn't do it. Not like this. Not with the man staring up at him, defenseless. Seth lowered the rifle and thrust his right palm towards the guard. He triggered the kinetic glove and slammed the guard's head into the bulkhead behind him.

He'd be knocked unconscious for a few minutes and he might have some minor brain damage, but it was nothing the medics couldn't fix if they got to him in time. And it was better than the alternative.

Now the clock was really ticking. Once the guard woke up, he'd be able to get to a radio and tell every soldier on the station where Seth was headed. Seth couldn't waste any more time. He broke into a run towards the repair bay, still clutching the laser rifle against his body with his left arm.

Seth knew every passageway to take and every checkpoint to avoid. As the adrenaline surged in his veins, he could see everything clearly. It was all coming together... just as long as no one got in his way.

Seth turned the corner and looked down the long hallway towards the doors of the repair bay. This was it. All he had to do was make it to the end of the hall. Then the *I.S.S. Monitor* would be his for the taking.

A door to his left slid open. Seth twisted his arm around and triggered the kinetic glove. Before he even saw the Republic soldier, Seth picked him up off of the ground. He lifted him into the air and pulled him out into the middle of the hall.

The guard froze as he hovered several feet from the floor. He was carrying a laser rifle, too, but was so panicked that he didn't even try

to use it. Instead, he just stared at Seth. He watched and waited for Seth to kill him.

Seth wasn't going to do it. He was just going to throw him against the bulkhead like the last guard, knock him out, buy a little time... But then the repair bay doors started to slide open. His instincts kicked in. Seth raised his laser rifle at the levitating guard and pulled the trigger.

The corridor lit up as a flash of red energy flew from the tip of the weapon and struck the man in the chest. Almost immediately, Seth pulled back his right hand, disengaging the kinetic glove. The guard fell to the ground in a heap, dead.

"Hey!" The doors to the repair bay were almost completely open. Two more Republic soldiers were looking at Seth, but they weren't moving to stop him. At least not yet. Even after they saw him kill one of their comrades, they were still paralyzed.

There wasn't any more time for mercy. Seth raised the rifle and peered down the sight. Before they could even move, Seth squeezed off two more shots.

Once again, the elite soldiers of the Republic were undone by their training. They saw Seth, still dressed in his military uniform, attacking a fellow serviceman. This wasn't something they trained for. Republic soldiers did not turn on each other. They couldn't react. They couldn't even fight back.

Seth lowered the rifle and charged forward. His mind was spinning, trying to rationalize what he'd just done. A few months ago, he'd killed two of the attackers just outside the Mid-Canada zone. Seth didn't feel anything then. The doctors and psychologists told him that he should feel remorseful or depressed, anxious and traumatized. It just didn't happen. After all, he had been defending himself. It was him or the men trying to kill him.

This time was different, but Seth didn't feel any of the things the experts talked about. Instead, he was angry. All of this felt so pointless. None of it had to happen. No one had to die. If only the

Republic had acted reasonably, if only they hadn't forced Seth to do all of this, then they would still be alive. For that matter, so would the attackers in the Mid-Canada zone.

They wouldn't be the only ones who would die. The casualties of the Fall were just beginning. The trade routes were critically important to the survival of several colonized worlds. Many of them didn't produce enough food to support their population and relied upon interplanetary imports. The relocation didn't redistribute the population across the galaxy enough to solve this problem.

Seth's fury propelled him into the repair bay. He'd already killed the two guards stationed near the *I.S.S. Monitor*. The only people left in the bay were the workers. As soon as they saw Seth, they immediately put their hands up and surrendered. Unlike the guards, they were not trained to fight for the Republic. They weren't going to lay down their lives to protect the starship. That wasn't their job.

None of that was important. If Seth had to, he would have killed the workers too. It wasn't their fault. They didn't deserve it. But it was necessary. It had to be done. The ship was what was mattered. It had to survive. If he failed now, everything would be for naught.

As Seth looked up at the *I.S.S. Monitor*, he felt his heart jump. It was a small ship, but there was something nevertheless majestic about it. The chassis was thin, barely reinforced, and there were no weapon systems or shields to speak of. But it also was devoid of Republic regalia. Even the tell-tale red flag near the aft of the ship was rather small. All of this was overwhelmed by the throbbing purple glow of the Heilmann Drive.

The ship was still in working order. The workmen hadn't even started stripping the bulkhead panels. It was ready to fly off of the station. This should have felt like victory for Seth. But it wasn't enough.

No matter what Seth did, even if he was successful in saving this last ship, he could not prevent the coming starvation. He could not stop the upheaval. One starship, especially a small one, was not

enough to save all the people who would suffer from the thoughtless and cowardly decision by the Republic to abandon faster-than-light travel. All he could do was save the engine and hope to rebuild the great society that they dismantled.

Thinking about this just made Seth even angrier. He flung his right arm around and pointed his palm at one of the workmen.

"Extend the docking tunnel," Seth growled. He flicked his little finger just enough so that the man would feel the pulse of the kinetic glove against his skin. "And don't make me ask you twice."

The worker didn't need to be told twice. He hurried over to the console near the back of the repair bay and started typing in commands.

A door on the edge of the room slid open. A long jetway emerged from the door and snaked up towards the airlock on the side of the *I.S.S. Monitor*.

"Start disengaging the docking clamps," Seth shouted at the other worker, pointing the laser rifle at his chest. The nervous-looking man glanced towards the dead bodies near the entrance to the repair bay. That was all the convincing he needed. He ran towards the moorings that secured the *Monitor* and began to dismantle them.

When he finished with the first clamp, the worker looked back at Seth. "What do you think you're going to do? Do you really think you can get away with this?"

"I don't have a choice," Seth replied. "This is the last Heilmann Drive. They can't build any more. If I let you take this apart, we may never travel the stars again."

The worker froze. He looked right at Seth, examining him closely for the first time. "Wait... Aren't you the one who was telling us this would all be fine? Week after week, you appeared on those awful broadcasts and said that the Fall was for the best, and that it wasn't permanent."

Seth gritted his teeth. "I lied. Hurry up."

"But wasn't your job to protect us? You said they can't build another

starship. Weren't you supposed to prevent that from happening?"

"That's what I'm doing right now." Seth shook the laser rifle at the worker. "And I need you to quit talking because I don't have much time."

The covered jetway reached the starship's airlock and connected with a loud *thunk!* The man operating the docking controls sighed. "If the guards aren't here, it means they're just waiting to shoot you out of the sky."

Seth felt his stomach lurch. He was probably right. The Republic had three squadrons of low-atmosphere fighters at Europa station. A few laser blasts or a single missile would be enough to bring down the *Monitor*. It didn't have any shields. It was barely armored.

"Then they will shoot me out of the sky," Seth said, swallowing his fear. "So what? Would that be any worse than what will happen to this ship if I do nothing?"

He started to walk towards the jetway, and the two workers just watched him. Seth lowered the laser rifle and started to take the kinetic glove off of his right hand. They weren't going to try and stop him. They were on his side.

Seth ran up the jetway towards the airlock. Before he was even there, the workers opened the door for him. Just like the citizens in the dance hall, they wanted to see him succeed. They were on his side.

*

The command center of the *I.S.S. Monitor* was surprisingly intimidating.

Seth took a second to re-orient himself. It was a sterile, gray room. There were two consoles near the front, flanking a large viewscreen. A row of panels near the back displayed various information about the ship: energy levels, hull integrity, and visual images from cameras stationed on the exterior bulkheads. Two dark red plush seats were bolted to the floor in the middle of the room.

This wasn't what he expected. He could still remember the

command center he saw in the dream of the gnostin. There were fewer screens and panels. Everything he recognized was in a different spot across the room. It was all wrong.

The controls should have been similar enough. There were very specific steps that needed to happen before take-off, and they were all relatively universal. A trained pilot would know all of this. A trained pilot would understand what all the control panels did, and could move from one ship to another without any problems. But all Seth knew was the exact instructions he'd been given. He knew what buttons to press, not what they did. It was like the gnostin trained him to fly a very specific ship... and it wasn't this one.

He couldn't let that stop him.

Seth ran from panel to panel, trying to figure out which was which. When he found something he recognized, he tapped in the orders he remembered from the gnostin dream. He engaged the life support systems, which would keep atmosphere pumping through the vents across the ship. He began cycling the Heilmann Drive. Once that was done, he sealed the airlocks, engaged the diagnostic systems, and fired up the impulse engines. With that last step, Seth felt the ship shake beneath his feet. It was lifting off.

His heart skipped a beat as he realized what was happening. He had control of the ship. This was it. This was the last step. Seth ran over to the main pilot's console and sat down. Everything else he had to do, he would do from here. It had controls for both the impulse engine and the Heilmann Drive.

First, Seth needed to take off from the station. He had to pilot the ship far enough away from the surface of Europa that a Heilmann leap wouldn't damage the station or the moon itself. Then he had to leap before the fighter squadrons could shoot him down. That was it. In theory, it seemed so simple.

Seth remembered the workers in the repair bay. Taking off while they were still in the bay would kill them. Hopefully, they were smart enough to leave on their own. But he had to make sure. He stood up

from the pilot's console and hurried to the communication controls. He tapped a few keys on the panel. The view-screen at the front of the room flickered to life, showing a camera feed from outside of the *Monitor*.

He hoped to see an empty repair bay. Instead, the workers were still there. And they weren't alone. Commissar Absalom and four Republic soldiers were standing in the doorway, talking to them. The discussion looked heated.

So the Commissar managed to escape the dance hall... Seth wasn't surprised, but he was disappointed. Absalom was the only one who could stop him. All the other soldiers were paralyzed by their training and their upbringing in the Republic. Absalom was different. He was born and raised on Vangelia. He was a fighter, and he knew plenty about betrayal and deception. If he was back in the game, he immediately became the most dangerous obstacle in Seth's path.

The exterior cameras on the *Monitor* were designed for use in space, so they were not paired with microphones or other sound recording equipment. Seth could only watch the argument between the Commissar and the workers unfold.

"Get out of there!" Seth yelled at the screen, though they couldn't hear him. He ran back to the pilot controls. His fingers found the command to open the main gate of the repair bay. With a few quick motions, he could begin decompression and force all of them out. But he didn't want to. He didn't want to see the workers die.

As he watched them, he realized that they were standing up for him. They were stopping the Republic soldiers from advancing on the *I.S.S. Monitor*. The two men who helped him board the ship were standing in front of the laser rifles, refusing to budge. Commissar Absalom was yelling something. Seth wasn't sure if he was chastising the workers or his own soldiers.

For just a moment, Seth felt good. He wasn't alone. There were others in the Republic who agreed with him. These two men, down in the repair bay, were willing to stand up to their government to help

him escape. It warmed his heart.

Then the screen flashed with crimson light. The two workers fell to the ground. Thin plumes of smoke rose from their bodies. They were dead. The soldiers killed them.

Seth's entire body trembled. His skin went flush. All of the fury he felt before returned to him, redoubled in strength. Absalom murdered two people because of his ridiculous belief in the Fall. He thought it was right: he thought that humanity deserved to be struck down from the heavens, and he was willing to destroy anything in his path.

There was no longer a reason to hesitate. Seth didn't care what happened to Absalom and his soldiers. They could freeze in space and Seth wouldn't blink back a single tear. His fingers flew across the pilot console, sending a command down to the station to open the repair bay airlock.

A loud klaxon broke through the silence. Red lights flashed within the bay. Absalom's soldiers, who were about to approach the jetway onto the *I.S.S. Monitor*, panicked. They ran for the door near the back, where the dead workers still smoldered. Absalom tried to turn them back, to force them on ahead in the face of impending decompression, but they wouldn't listen. This time, the soldiers refused the orders of their manic commander. They pushed him back towards the door before the repair bay gates opened up into the vacuum.

Seth was disappointed. In the heat of the moment, he wanted to blow them all out into space. He wanted to end the threat of Commissar Absalom once and for all. And Seth wouldn't have even needed to feel guilty about it. If Absalom remained and was killed by the decompression within the repair bay, it would be because of his own foolish stubbornness.

As it was, the commissar and his soldiers managed to escape before the bay doors slid open. They would live to see another day. Seth jogged over to the communications controls and changed the display on the view-screen. Now he watched through the camera on

the top of the *I.S.S. Monitor*. It showed the repair bay slowly creaking open.

Seth returned to the pilot's console. He positioned his hands on the impulse engine controls. Slowly, he maneuvered the ship towards the opening bay doors. It was shaky at first—Seth had never flown anything bigger than a hovercab—but the buttons were intuitive enough that he found his footing by the time he was a few dozen yards in the air.

The ship lifted past the repair bay doors, into the low atmosphere of Europa. Seth's hands shook as he piloted the *Monitor* away from the station and towards the depths of space. By now, the fighter ships docked at Europa were taking off. Maybe they were in the air. They probably had orders to shoot him down on sight, and there was nothing he could do to defend himself. Even if the *Monitor* had weapons, they were at a separate console, and Seth could not operate them while flying the ship.

This should have been victory. Seth had the ship, he was approaching a safe distance to leap away from Europa, and nothing had managed to stop him yet. Just when he was about to let himself feel a little victorious, the viewscreen at the front of the command center started to flicker.

Seth looked up. The familiar face of Commissar Phaer Absalom filled the screen, dwarfing Seth at the pilot's controls. The commissar looked uncharacteristically downtrodden. The rings under his eyes were darker than usual. His face was slick with sweat. His brow twitched. He was rubbing his hobbled leg with his left hand and wasn't even bothering to hide the movement.

"Stop this right now!" Absalom shouted. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Didn't I tell you back on the station?" Seth asked. "I'm saving this ship."

Absalom scoffed. "No, you're not." He gritted his teeth and stared through the view-screen with his piercing blue eyes. "You are a traitor

and a mad man. I should have never trusted you. I know that now. That was my mistake, and I will rectify it today.”

Rage surged within Seth again as he remembered everything he had to do to get control of the *I.S.S. Monitor*. He betrayed everything he believed in and became a stooge to the Republic. He helped bring about the Fall. He convinced people that it was right. Then, he killed some of his own allies when they tried to stand up to him. And those were just the first of many to die because of the Spatial Preservation Act.

Seth leapt to his feet, away from the pilot's controls. He glared at Absalom. “You think this has anything to do with you and me?” Seth shouted. “This is about the fate of the entire galaxy! This is about all of humanity!”

“Yes!” Absalom exclaimed. “Yes it is! Tell me, Mr. Garland, do you remember everything I showed you? Do you remember what that precious Heilmann Drive of yours does? It is going to destroy the fabric of reality!”

Seth refused to believe it. “That’s just fear talking,” he said. “You can’t just give up on everything we’ve done in the last two thousand years because of one problem you don’t know how to fix yet.”

The commissar’s face turned bright red. The last few strands that held together his composure snapped and he yelled from the screen. “We have reached too far, Mr. Garland! You say that I am a coward, but you are wrong. I am the brave one, the one with the God-given strength and resolve to change the face of the galaxy to save it rather than let the hubris and indulgence of our species destroy it. By Aesu, even if no one else will stop you, even if I am the only one willing to stand in your way, I will destroy you before you can doom us all.”

There was nothing Seth could say to respond to the commissar. The policies of the Republic, the disturbing reports from warped space, and the religious devotion instilled in him since childhood had blended into a righteous fervor. If Absalom truly believed that the Fall was imposed upon man by God, there was no way Seth could ever

reach him.

Absalom wasn't done. Now he attacked Seth's plans. "What do you think you're going to do with a single tiny ship? Even if you somehow manage to leap somewhere... You'll end up dead sooner rather than later. Someone will shoot you out of the stars, or steal the ship, or perhaps in a moment of self-reflection you will realize what you have done and take your own life. Just give up now. What can you accomplish? "

"I can save this ship," Seth said. "And I can find someone who can figure out how to replicate it. I can start research on a real solution to warped space. And I can rebuild the trade routes without the Republic!" He felt his pride swelling with each proclamation. Even though he didn't know how he would ever back up his boasts, it still felt good. He decided to go even further. "And then I will come back with a fleet of ships and we will conquer this crippled Republic that has stood in the way of human progress too long."

Absalom stared at Seth in disbelief. "Well, then I can tell my pilots that they are about to turn an arch-traitor into stardust." With that, the commissar shut off the connection and the view-screen went blank.

Seth scrambled back to the communications console. He didn't know what most of the buttons did, but he'd managed to get a video feed from one of the cameras mounted on the hull before. Now he wanted to see the view from as many of them as possible. He scrolled through the available viewing settings and selected one labeled "ALL EXTERIOR".

The view-screen at the front of the room flashed to life again. This time, it was divided into four quadrants, each one displaying a different angle outside of the *Monitor*. At first, Seth thought he could breath a sigh of relief. There wasn't any movement on any of them. The entire base, and the surrounding icy surface of Europa, was entirely still.

A shimmer of movement on the bottom left quadrant. There was action at the exterior spaceport. Ships were taking off. Seth squinted.

Just as he feared, they were low-atmosphere fighters. Standard Republic fighters were equipped with kinetically charged lasers and two missiles—more than enough to take down the fragile *Monitor*.

In the top right, the doors to a docking bay slid open. A soft orange glow poured from the bay. Something was lifting off. Seth recognized it instantly. It was the ship he took to Europa, the *I.S.S. Everest*, a medium-sized intra-stellar cruiser. It was a warship and police vessel. There were probably six different weapons systems it could use to prematurely end Seth's rebellion.

They were coming at him from both sides. There was no escaping with the impulse engines. Maybe he could outrun the *Everest* at sub-light speeds, but the fighters would overcome him in mere minutes. He would be within missile range in seconds.

There was only one way to get out alive. Even though he was still within the atmosphere of Europa, he had to leap away. Seth rushed to the pilot console and began preparations.

The Heilmann Drive was ready. The energy cells were full. The hull bracers were engaged. The combustion module was primed. All Seth needed to do was put in the coordinates for the leap. A new set of controls appeared on the pilot's console. It was nothing but a number pad displaying the digits 1 through 8.

Seth froze as he realized that he didn't know how to plot a Heilmann Leap. And he didn't know where to leap.

In all of the excitement, chaos, and desperation, this was the one problem Seth never anticipated. He'd overlooked it entirely. He wasn't even sure why. Maybe he assumed that Heilmann leaps were calculated by the ship's computer. Maybe he figured there would be pre-programmed options based on the major trade routes. Maybe he just thought it would be more intuitive.

None of those things were true. Even looking at it, he couldn't fathom how spatial coordinates would be represented by a string of numbers without zero or nine. Apparently, the Heilmann Drive used its own proprietary number set system for calculating leap distance

and position. And it was nothing like Seth had ever encountered.

Seth glanced up at the view-screen. The fighters were closing in on one side. The *Everest* was approaching from the other. He could already start to see the lights on the large ship. It wouldn't be long before it could target him. He had to do something. He had to get out of there somehow.

His fingers reached towards the number pad. What was the worst thing that could happen? He would program the Heilmann Drive for a leap outside of the galaxy. No ship had ever returned from beyond the galactic rim. Of course, no ship had ever survived being utterly annihilated by the Republic fleet either. In this case, the devil that Seth didn't know seemed preferable.

He still hesitated. Leaping out of the galaxy wasn't really the worst thing that could happen. If Seth accidentally leapt through a colonized world, he would destroy it. The *Monitor's* Heilmann Drive would carve a thin hole through the planet and incinerate it for fuel. The planet's orbit would destabilize and everyone there would die.

It was so unlikely. There was no way, of all the places and paths in the galaxy, his random coordinates would end up taking him through a colonized world. It was less likely than picking a needle out of a haystack on the first try. Seth couldn't let such a remote possibility deter him. One leap and he would be away from the fighters, away from the missiles, and then he could take the time to learn how to actually plot a course with the faster-than-light drive.

With that in mind, Seth started typing. He didn't even know how many digits were in an accurate set of coordinates. It didn't matter. He was going to keep putting them in until the console stopped letting him. There was no rhyme or reason to the numbers he picked, just the first ones that popped into his mind.

4-1-2-1-5-8-5-4-1-3

Suddenly the control panel stopped responding. Every light turned green. Then it all faded out, replacing all the other controls with two buttons. One said "leap". The other said "cancel".

Seth glanced up and saw the missiles coming. There was nothing else to do. It was leap or die. Closing his eyes, he slammed his hand down on the "leap" button.

A sick feeling filled his stomach. It was the same discomfort he always felt on a Heilmann Leap. Before now, it was something he was used to. He could trust that the ship he was on would be at its destination and the mild nausea would be worth it. But Seth didn't know where he would end up. Most likely, it would be some empty patch of nothingness in the middle of the galaxy. But what if he'd gone outside? His spine tingled. Even he was afraid of the universe beyond the rim.

Everything was still. The nausea passed, as it always did. Seth placed his hands on his legs and rubbed the fabric of his uniform. He was still in one piece.

Finally, he felt brave enough to open his eyes. He was still in the command center. The lights were still on. The air was still breathable.

Seth looked up at the view-screen. He expected and hoped to see nothing but empty space, dotted with a few stars. Anything else from a random leap would be odd. And if there weren't any stars... Well, then he would know he was beyond the rim.

At first, he was relieved. He saw a few distant dots of light but little else. It seemed as if his plan worked. He was in the middle of nowhere. Now he would be able to comb through the documentation on board the ship and hopefully figure out how to program a real Heilmann Leap.

Then, something caught Seth's eye. There was a strange, red-colored light in the corner of the upper-left quadrant of the view-screen. It wasn't a faraway star. The color was too vivid. It looked artificial, but that was impossible.

Seth tapped a few buttons on the pilot console and switched to the impulse engines. Very carefully, he started to turn the ship. He twisted it around so that the camera could catch more of the light source. Almost as soon as the image on the view-screen started to come into

view, Seth felt his breath catch in his throat.

The light was the tip of an antenna, which stretched out from a massive metallic sphere. More lights dotted the sphere, blinking in and out of existence with a random persistence. There were wide doors near one edge of the sphere, and a large glass observatory atop the structure. Even the observatory was much bigger than the *Monitor*.

It was a space station.

As far as Seth could tell, it was in the middle of nowhere. It floated between the solar systems like a deep space outpost, but looked far bigger than any outpost Seth had ever seen.

How was this possible? Seth couldn't even remember the numbers he'd typed into the console to program the leap. And yet they'd taken him here. Even if the station was big, it was nothing more than a speck of dust in the vast expanse of the galaxy. Leaping to such a remote and unknown location with a set of random numbers was functionally impossible. Unless, of course, the numbers weren't random at all.

In the hundreds of years leading up to the Fall, power outside of the People's Interstellar Republic largely flowed into the hands of a few dozen interstellar corporations. These corporations, which were not permitted to operate on Republic-controlled worlds, were nevertheless allowed to use the Republic-administered trade routes to make a fortune. They moved resources from planet-to-planet, allowing worlds to specialize and flourish. They generated massive amounts of wealth within the galaxy, though they retained most of it for their shareholders.

These shareholders were heavily monitored by the Republic. The High Council knew that these corporations were the only interstellar organizations with any leverage other than the PIR. If there was any force that could harm the Republic, it would be one of these businesses. The High Council placed spies in their ranks, traced every aspect of their finances, and used their exclusive control of the trade routes to keep these rival powers in check.

Of course, the shareholders of these corporations never truly had any interest in challenging the PIR. The Republic operated the trade routes very efficiently. Privatized faster-than-light travel would be more expensive, and would cut into their profit margins, so they tacitly permitted the PIR's espionage.

There was one exception. There was one company that remained remarkably evasive of the Republic's meddling. Its employees were well-paid enough that they refused to turn traitor. Its headquarters was hidden away, beyond even the grasp of Republic operatives. It

was only incorporated on two colonized planets. Both corporate charters featured entirely separate and distinct shareholder lists. All of the names on both lists were fictional. There didn't appear to be a single real person who owned any part of the company.

At first, this terrified the High Council. Certain that it was a shell group for carrying out the illicit activities of other corporations, they focused all their attention on this illusive organization. But as time passed, senior officials in the Republic began to lose interest. The company wasn't doing anything interesting at all. It dabbled in various businesses, but never established a foothold. It spun off any subsidiaries as soon as they became bloated. Every few years, it seemed to change focus. One moment it would be trading in ore, the next it would be manufacturing computer chips. Its profits, which were significant, disappeared into the pockets of the shadowy owners. It never attempted to consolidate any power, never grew, and never asserted itself within the interstellar community.

The High Council grew bored and tired of spending valuable resources chasing a phantom corporation that didn't seem to have a direction, let alone pose a threat. By the time of the Fall, most people in the ranks of the Republic had forgotten entirely about the mysterious company. It was just another small business that ran a couple shipments every day on the trade routes. Only a few elder statesmen could even remember the days that it was relevant. Every so often, one would make a half-hearted inquiry and find that information was just as scarce as it was before. There were no legitimate owners, no known headquarters, and still no apparent purpose.

The name of that corporation was Lachesis Technologies. And it had a purpose, but it was much larger than anything the narrow-minded bureaucrats of the Republic could ever imagine.

Seth felt his heart thundering in his chest as he walked down the cold, dark hallway in front of him. This should have been a moment of respite. Less than an hour ago, he was staring down death as he tried to escape Europa with the *I.S.S. Monitor*. Now he was safe. He succeeded. He had the ship, he managed to leap away, and he even ended up somewhere inhabited.

But all those risks represented threats that Seth understood. He knew the danger of a Republic laser rifle or missile. Now he felt out of his depth.

As soon as he leapt near the space station, Seth received a transmission. A computerized voice instructed him to land the *I.S.S. Monitor* in the docking bay. He considered refusing, but curiosity overwhelmed him. Something brought him to the station. He needed to find out what that was.

The docking bay was old and dilapidated. The walkways were creaky and looked as if they hadn't been used in years. Strangely, there was no dust. It was like the station was uninhabited.

Dim blue lights illuminated the ground in the docking bay and led him into the hall. They continued to pull him forward into the eerie station. There was no one around. Everything was dark and shadowy.

The entire structure seemed abandoned, and that wasn't really a surprise. The Republic gave priority to anyone aboard a deep space station during the relocation. Everyone was pulled off of any outpost more than one light-year away from an inhabited planet. At least in theory, this way no one was left stranded in deep space forever.

As Seth stepped forward, following the blue lights on the ground, he started to consider the best case scenario. In this hopeful fantasy, he had managed to leap to an abandoned space station that was recently evacuated but still habitable. He would be able to use it as a base of operations while he tried to decide where to take the *I.S.S. Monitor* next.

He couldn't rationalize such optimism. With all of the empty space in the galaxy, it was impossible he just happened to leap to a useful

derelict structure. It was far more likely that something brought him there, and chances were that something was waiting for him.

The lights continued to lead Seth through a maze of hallways. Now he started considering the worst case scenario, which was that he had actually leapt outside of the galaxy. No one knew what was beyond the rim. Perhaps this station belonged to an extragalactic force that would destroy him just like anyone else who dared leap from the Milky Way.

Fortunately, this pessimism seemed just as uncalled-for. The recording from the station was in English. It seemed unlikely that aliens from beyond the rim would be able to communicate using the primary language spoken in the People's Interstellar Republic.

None of Seth's theories made any sense. The only thing he could do was push on and see what mysteries the station would reveal.

After a few minutes, Seth reached a large metal door. It was emblazoned with a familiar symbol. At first glance, it looked like the double-helix structure of DNA. But as Seth approached, he saw that it was two entwined snakes. There was a single word beneath the symbol: "LACHESIS". Before Seth could recognize the name, the door slid open.

Inside was a massive room with high-vaulted ceilings. There were viewscreens on every wall, displaying videos, camera feeds of the darkness outside of the station, and spreadsheets of unreadable information. Neatly arranged consoles lined the floors, surrounding a large open area in the middle of the room. Seth squinted as he looked towards the empty area and saw what looked like the shadow of a thin figure.

"Please, come in Mr. Garland."

The voice was soft, noticeably feminine, but cold. Seth didn't dare disobey his host. He was too overwhelmed with fear and curiosity. How did she know his name? Why was she expecting him?

Seth stepped into the massive room and felt a blast of chilly air. The temperature was just a few ticks below comfortable, and Seth

wrapped his arms across his chest to keep warm.

"Where am I?" he shouted. "Who are you?"

The lights in the center of the room slowly lifted, revealing the shadowy figure within. The first thing Seth noticed about her was how thin she was. He was used to the people on Earth, who could most generously be described as full-figured. Seth was the smallest person he knew but compared to his host he was solidly built.

Her age was impossible to discern. At a glance, she couldn't have been more than forty years old. Her skin was free of wrinkles, smooth and perfect. But at closer inspection, there was something wrong. Her flesh lacked natural color and her skin was taught against her face, smooth but artificial. She'd had extensive plastic surgery and surface-level body modification, but all of it was incredibly skilled.

The woman's blue eyes shined brightly in the dark room. They were cybernetic, cutting-edge implants that almost looked real. But they had an tiny internal light source that betrayed their artificiality and they moved jerkily around the room as she focused on Seth.

She wore an elegant high-collared black pantsuit. It was a few decades out-of-date on Earth, but fit the spindly woman well. Her fingers were flawlessly manicured and painted with deep red polish. They almost looked as false as her skin and her eyes. Her ivory hair draped straight down in perfect symmetry right above her shoulders.

"It has been a long time since I have had a visitor," the woman said. When she opened her mouth, Seth could see that her teeth were straight and pearly-white. Seth shuddered. He couldn't decide whether she was hideous or hauntingly beautiful. She'd had so many surgeries and minor cybernetic implants that she barely looked human anymore.

"You... You haven't answered my questions."

The woman crossed her legs and pursed her lips. For just a second, Seth could see the faint shadow of crow's feet in the corner of her eyes. "Forgive me. My name is Moira Quick. I am the founder, CEO, and sole owner of Lachesis Technologies. This is my longtime

home and headquarters. And I brought you here."

"You were the one who sent the man with that gnostin, weren't you?" Seth exclaimed. "You tried to brainwash me."

Moira smiled. "I did what I had to do. But it seems that you resisted it. You *did* resist it, didn't you?"

Seth's heart jumped into his throat. He felt his hands start to tremble. And he began to wonder whether he'd ever been acting of his own free will. When he used the Lachesis gnostin, he immediately discovered that it was attempting to brainwash him into stealing a starship for the company. He fought off the influence of the device, and mined it for its secrets... or had he? After all, he'd gone ahead and done everything the gnostin wanted him to. He even leapt the ship straight to the Lachesis space station.

"Don't worry, Seth Garland," Moira said as soon as she noticed his fear. "You came here of your own volition. I was testing you.. If something as simple as mass-produced human technology could overcome your free will, I could never trust you."

"It was a test?" Seth's mind was running in circles. Even if he wasn't brainwashed, it was the gnostin that put the idea in his head. It was the gnostin that showed him the way to do it. It was the gnostin that brought him there.

Moira's eyes narrowed. "I tried to brainwash you to steal a starship and take it to a dock on Quantron. There, my men would have killed you because you couldn't be trusted. You resisted the brainwashing, and you pushed into the depths of the gnostin and discovered the location of my home. You passed the test with flying covers, Mr. Garland."

Seth took a deep breath. He still wasn't entirely sure that he trusted what Moira was saying. He hadn't found the location of the space station. It had been implanted in his head without his knowledge. "I'm sorry Mrs. Quick," he said. "But I'm really confused. What do you want with me?"

"You are nervous," Moira replied. "That is understandable." She

raised one of her hands to point at him. It was trembling. "I need you to keep something in mind. You have spent the last few months of your life preparing for this moment. I have spent the last... " Her voice trailed off as she decided not to continue. "I have spent a *much* longer time. So I am also quite nervous."

"Preparing for this moment?" Seth took a couple more steps towards Moira. "You knew the Fall was coming?"

Moira nodded. "Among other things."

"What other things?"

A long, cold silence filled the room. Seth could see that Moira was considering how much to tell him. He thought about running up to her, grabbing her, and demanding to hear everything that she knew. She was small and thin, he was sure he could overpower her. But something stopped him. As soon as he looked in her eerie cybernetic eyes, he was terrified. No matter how fragile she appeared, she commanded an incredible and overwhelming presence. He didn't want to hurt her. He wasn't even sure he really could.

"Let me tell you a bit about myself, Mr. Garland," Moira said, staring straight at him. "My first job was packaging cargo on a solar mine. I worked my way up from the lowest of the low to where I am now. First, I surpassed all my peers. I made myself stand out. I did everything I could to succeed, and I didn't stop clawing my way to the top until this very moment. And I didn't do it because I wanted money or power or prestige. Every dime I earned I spent, either to further my cause or simply to keep myself alive for as long as I needed to. I've called in every favor I have. And very few people know I still breathe."

"Why... Why then?"

Moira leaned forward. Her illuminated eyes seemed to peer straight into Seth's soul. "To save the human race."

Seth felt overcome by a chill. He broke Moira's gaze by looking away and backed a few steps towards the door. Then he tried to re-assert himself. "I've heard such things before," he said. "The

commissar I worked with on Earth, the man enforcing the Fall, told me he was saving the human race.”

“Then he has no idea what is going on at all,” Moira replied. She folded her hands in her lap. “Of course, that is not his fault. No one really understands like I do.”

“Tell me,” Seth demanded. “Why did you help me? Why did you bring me here?”

Moira pressed her perfect teeth together. “When I was your age—a long, long time ago—I was given a vision of the future. I saw the Fall, and the terrible things that follow. It was only a sliver of things to come, but it was enough. We cannot lose the Heilmann Drive, Seth Garland. We need it.”

Seth nodded. “I know. That’s why I stole the *I.S.S. Monitor*.”

A grave look passed over Moira’s face. “The *Monitor*? You were supposed to take the *Illustrious*. That was the plan.”

Seth remembered the difficulty he had in operating the controls aboard the *Monitor*. The gnostin trained him to operate the large military ship, not the nimble science vessel. “I was a bit late in getting to the *Illustrious*.”

“So you don’t have any weapons, or shields, and very little space.” Moira sighed. “I suppose there is nothing that can be done now. But *Monitor*? That’s a terrible name. Change it.”

Another frigid silence passed between them as Seth waited for Moira to elaborate. She’d hinted at some awful future, some reason the survival of the faster-than-light starship was necessary. Everything about her was strange, from her unsettling appearance to the massive, otherwise empty space station around her. And all she had to tell him was to change the name of his starship? Seth couldn’t believe there wasn’t more.

“Is that it?” he finally asked. “Is that your advice? Rename the *Monitor*? You’re not going to tell me what I’m supposed to do? Or explain this terrible threat you keep talking about?”

Moira smiled. “Didn’t you have a plan when you left Europa? That

is what you should do. As for anything else, it is best if I keep quiet for now. We all have our roles to play. You have your role. I have my role and, to be honest, I have probably interfered with you too much as it is."

Seth couldn't handle it anymore. He felt like he was being manipulated. Moira's obfuscations were infuriating. She was keeping everything from him. On top of that, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was some other programming left over from the gnostin that would kick in.

"This is not acceptable," Seth shouted. He started to charge towards Moira. "You will tell me what is going on right now! I will not be used!" He reached out, as if to grab her by the arm, but froze in place.

Moira looked up at him. She wasn't afraid. "You are many things, Seth Garland," she said. "But stupid is not one of them. As you may have guessed, I am not in particularly good health. You could hurt me. You could kill me. In fact, right now if you pulled me from this chair I would stop breathing. So you are right to think you can threaten me. But it goes both ways. If my brain function is interrupted for even a second, the power generators on this station will trigger an instantaneous implosion."

"You're not scared to die?"

"Quite the contrary," she replied. "Please, Seth Garland, if you think you cannot handle what I am telling you you should end this now. It would be a relief. After so long, I could finally rest." Moira's artificial eyes made it incredibly difficult to read her. But it looked like she was genuinely pleading with him. "Take this burden from me. I have done all I can. I am tired. I want to be done. The death you could give me now is far quieter than the death I have seen for myself."

Seth backed away from her. "Don't be silly. I'm not going to kill both of us."

"Then you will have to trust me. I have given you the starship you wanted. It is in your hands now, in your control completely. This is how

it should be, and how it must be. A time will come when you can know more. But that time is not now. Now, you need to build your strength for the coming trials.”

That was it. She wasn’t going to give him any guidance. She’d spent untold decades planning for this meeting and all she could tell him was that he was on his own. There was nothing he could do. He could only appreciate that she was on his side.

“I guess I will be going then,” Seth said. “Thank you for your help, though I wish you would tell me why you gave it.”

Moirra held up a hand. “I ask you one more thing, a simple favor.” She pointed to the screens that surrounded her chair. “For years, I have survived on the kindness of a few starship pilots. I paid them well, but they risked their careers to bring me supplies and entertainment. I am not on any of the authorized trade routes. Every few weeks, someone would leap in and transmit news and videos from across the many worlds. Would you mind doing the same?”

Seth arched an eyebrow. “You want me to bring you things to watch?”

“I am alone on this station. Without news feeds, films, sports, anything stimulating... I grow bored. The burden I carry is heavy enough. I do not wish to also be bored.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Moirra grinned and, for just a second, Seth could have sworn it was genuine. “Your first stop should be Airlann. I probably shouldn’t tell you that. But I like you. I want you to succeed, and not just because our species depends on it.”

★

Seth sat in the captain’s chair of the *I.S.S. Monitor*. It was floating a few hundred miles away from the Lachesis space station. The leap coordinates for Airlann—which Moirra transmitted to him when he returned to his ship—were already programmed into the computer. But Seth wasn’t ready to leap just yet. He still needed time to think everything over.

Everything seemed wrong to him. Stealing the *Monitor* was supposed to be an act of independence. He broke away from the iron grip of the People's Interstellar Republic. He wanted a life of his own, among the stars. And now, before he could even begin this new existence, he found himself working for someone else. Moira Quick was giving him an incredible amount of autonomy, but Seth knew that she was still in control. Even her refusal to order him around was an exercise of this power.

Once again, he was serving some greater cause. Only this time, he didn't understand what it was. The Republic was, for all its faults, admirably transparent about their goals. They wanted control over the human race, and they wanted to use that control to further the comfort and equality of their citizens. But what was the goal of Lachesis? What did Moira want? She spoke of a great burden, an oppressive destiny, but refused to elaborate.

Seth was part of that destiny now. He was sure of it. Even if Moira was letting him go about his business, she had something in mind for him. It would just be a matter of waiting until the day arrived when she would finally reveal her intentions.

There was no turning back. He would go to Airlann like she suggested. Airlann was a neo-luddite colony. They rejected advanced technology, so it seemed like an odd choice. They wouldn't have been friendly to a starship before the Fall. Now, he expected them to be outright hostile. But Moira wouldn't have suggested it without a reason, and Seth was curious.

After Airlann, Seth would begin building an alliance. There were dozens of worlds that were crippled by the Fall. They would see Seth and his starship as salvation. He would work with them, and hopefully find a way to save faster-than-light technology forever. A new, better society would rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the Fall.

Seth smiled as he thought of the phoenix. It wasn't a bad idea for a starship name.

Epilogue

Phaer Absalom was sick to his stomach. He stared out of the window in his office on board the Europa station and rubbed his aching leg. As much as he tried, he couldn't stop thinking about Seth Garland. They'd worked together for months. They were friends. Garland saved Absalom's life. And then, just like that, he betrayed him.

Maybe Absalom should have seen it coming. It wasn't like Seth entered his life under the best circumstances. He was arrested protesting the Fall. Absalom only brought him into the fold because he thought he was an asset to the Republic. Garland could be very convincing, and he was willing to spend a couple hours every week trying to convince people that the Fall was the right thing to do.

It had all been an act; a way to get access to a starship. Seth Garland never believed in the Spatial Preservation Act. He was a coward unwilling to accept that humanity had to fall from the skies. And he'd won. He single-handedly prevented the Fall. When he leapt away with the *I.S.S. Monitor*, he prevented the end of faster-than-light travel. And there was no way to even chase him, because he had the last ship capable of such a feat.

Worst of all, Absalom was the only person willing to admit that it was a disaster. Most people in the Republic didn't even know about Garland's theft of the *Monitor*. He'd managed to cut off all the cameras on board the Europa station before the news got out. The other commissars who knew were unconcerned, they figured he would be killed sooner rather than later. The scientists assured Absalom that a single Heilmann Drive couldn't do much damage to the fabric of space by itself. They all just acted like it was best to pretend that it never happened.

That wasn't good enough for Absalom. He'd already put through his recommendation to the High Council to begin re-assembling a

small number of starships in order to pursue Seth Garland. It was likely the council would reject him, or that such a feat was impossible, but he would keep petitioning them until they gave in. They were weak-willed. They would eventually allow Absalom to finish the job they gave him. It was only a matter of time.

A loud chime disturbed Absalom from his thoughts. He looked up at the door and saw a flashing blue light. "Come in!" Absalom shouted.

The door slid open. Standing on the other side was one of his lieutenants, a young man by the name of Avery Jacobs. He was fidgeting nervously. "I've got some information that you requested, sir," he said. "But I'm not sure that you want it anymore."

"What are you talking about, lieutenant?"

Jacobs took a deep breath. "It's the report on Mr. Garland's father," he replied. "You asked me to look into it, but that was last week, and —"

At the very mention of Seth's name, Absalom felt his muscles tighten. A throbbing pain ran up his leg from his ankle. He remembered that he'd called in a favor with the prison administration to find out what became of Seth's father. Seth believed he was in some sort of indefinite detention within the system and Absalom wanted to prove him wrong. That was back when they were friends, when Absalom still had hope for Seth.

He wanted to tell Jacobs to throw the information away, to never look into it again. But Absalom was curious, and he knew that he would get a strange satisfaction out of knowing what happened to James Garland. Seth would never be able to find out. He would always be in the dark because he betrayed Absalom.

"Hand it over," the commissar said. Jacobs passed him the tablet and loitered in the doorway while Absalom read it over.

Most of the information on the tablet reiterated what Seth told him. James Garland was a Sensory Stimulation Specialist who refused to give up the profession after it was banned by the High Council. He

was discovered plying his trade beyond the law and sentenced to seven years prison. But that's where it got interesting.

James Garland had his sentence commuted to three years for good behavior. He was a model prisoner and well-liked by all of the officials. He was scheduled to go home to his family when Seth was only ten years old. Everything was set up to re-integrate him into society, including a new job in research and development with a government avionics manufacturer.

At first, Absalom was confused. This was nothing like the story Seth told him. It appeared as if James re-joined his family without incident. If nothing else, he'd been free for over ten years. Then Absalom saw the actual documentation from the prison. Specifically, he examined the form authorizing the release of James Garland.

He was not retrieved from prison by his family, or taken from the gates by the Republic police. Instead, he was released into the custody of a third party.

Absalom's hand tightened around the panel. "You know, this might be why Mr. Garland hates us," he said. "He thinks we took away his rim-damned father. But it wasn't the Republic. It was someone else. They plucked him right out of prison and made him disappear."

"Who?" Lieutenant Jacobs asked.

"I do not know," Absalom replied. "All I have is her signature. Don't know why she was allowed to take custody of a Republic prisoner. Highly irregular." He paused, squinting as he read the signature. "Does the name 'Moiria Quick' mean anything to you?"

"Nope. Doesn't ring a bell."

From the same author on Feedbooks

[Faster Than Light: The Fallen Goddess](#) (2010)

The first in a series of short stories about the I.S.S. Fenghuang, the last faster-than-light starship in the galaxy, and its crew of rebels determined to reunite humanity.

The Heilmann Drive allowed humanity to spread across the stars and prosper for nearly two thousand years. But when the use of the device begins to eat into the fabric of the universe, the People's Interstellar Republic bans all faster-than-light travel. A new age begins, one of isolation and stagnation, and becomes known as the Fall.

One rebel, Captain Seth Garland, steals the last starship in existence. He is now mankind's only hope of re-uniting the stars.

The Fallen Goddess: When Captain Garland's crew questions their safety aboard their ship, he goes in search of of an engineer who can repair the Heilmann Drive. His quest leads him to a discovery that will redefine the future of his rebellion and all of mankind.

[Faster Than Light: Dobhriathar](#) (2010)

The second in a series of short stories about the I.S.S. Fenghuang, the last faster-than-light starship in the galaxy. In this volume, Governor Caitlin Adair struggles with her place among the crew while they investigate an isolated solar mining platform.

The Heilmann Drive allowed humanity to spread across the stars and prosper for nearly two thousand years. But when the use of the device begins to eat into the fabric of the universe, the People's Interstellar Republic bans all faster-than-light travel. A new age begins, one of isolation and stagnation, and becomes known as the Fall.

One rebel, Captain Seth Garland, steals the last starship in

existence. He is now mankind's only hope of re-uniting the stars.

Dobhriathar: As Caitlin struggles with her place aboard the ISS Fenghuang, the rebel crew visits a deep space mining platform in search of materials to improve the ship. There, they discover an abandoned mining team and a mystery that could change everything they think they know about the galaxy.



www.feedbooks.com

Food for the mind