



FASTER THAN LIGHT DOBHRIATHAR

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Faster Than Light: Dobhriathar

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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.

Now there is only one.

Caitlin Adair ran her fingers along the worn velvet of her green dress. She was nervous. It felt like it was the first time she'd ever been asked to do her job in her entire life.

Her mother died from a wasting disease when Caitlin was only eleven years old. This was a traumatic enough experience on its own, but Caitlin's mother was the Governess of Balashyre, one of the largest cities on Airlann. As her oldest daughter, Caitlin was expected to step up and take the title for herself. And she did, but she never took on any of the responsibility. Her mother's retainers and advisers handled everything for her.

Now Balashyre faced a situation that befuddled the wise men and women of her court. It was nothing they'd ever dealt with before. There was a starship sitting in a field just outside of the city walls.

Caitlin took a deep breath. She was seated behind her heavy wooden desk. It was a piece of furniture that belong to her mother, her grandmother, and a line of governesses that stretched through the centuries.

She thought about all of the wise women who had sat at the desk and wondered what they would do in this situation. Starships were not permitted on Airlann. They were banned by the Treaty of Fréamhaigh along with all other industrial and post-industrial technology. This would have been a crisis at any other time, but this wasn't just any other time.

"Governess?" a soft voiced asked. It was one of Caitlin's serving maidens. She was standing in the doorway. "Captain Seth Garland of the *I.S.S. Fenghuang* is here to see you."

Caitlin leaned back in her chair and tried to look imposing. It was difficult. She was only twenty years old. Her skin was pale, barely touched even by the gentle Airlannian sun. Nevertheless, her eyes were sharp and focused. Even if she'd never done it before, she had

a job to do. She had to protect her people.

“Send him in.”

The maiden nodded and ducked out of the room. Caitlin prepared herself. She closed her eyes and put her head down in prayer to the Goddess Airlanni. Her red curls fell around her face as she reflected on the task in front of her.

Caitlin had only met off-worlders once, and it was a brief and unpleasant encounter. They were traders who visited Balashyre shortly after her mother’s death. She refused their business, as was custom, because they dealt in unworldly goods. They did not take this well and accused her of oppressing her people. They even went as far as to suggest that her mother would have survived the wasting with their tools.

“It is an honor to meet you, Governess.” At the sound of the surprisingly soft voice, Caitlin looked up. A young man now stood outside her doorway. He was small, barely taller than Caitlin herself. His skin was the color of papyrus, his eyes were narrow and dark. He had short but straight black hair, haphazardly slicked back towards his neck. His clothes were alien, a dark form-fitting jacket that didn’t seem to display any rank or insignia, and stiff pleated pants.

“Why would you come here?” Caitlin asked. “Of all places, why Airlann?”

Seth did not immediately respond. Instead, he took his time stepping into the room, considering the question. “I believe that my starship is the last one in the galaxy,” he finally said.

Caitlin furrowed her brow and slammed her fist down on the desk in front of her. There was a good chance that the captain was actually younger than her so she hoped she might be able to scare him after all. “That was not my question! Why here?”

The captain didn’t even flinch. He just stopped in the middle of the room and held up his hand. “You didn’t let me finish. I *believe* that my starship is the last one. I don’t know. The People’s Republic has lied about plenty up to this point. If they have a ship to send after me, they

won't think to look here." Now he took another step towards her. "I came here to ask for your help."

"Why would you think anyone here would be willing to help you? Are you insane?"

Seth smiled. "I don't know. What do you think?"

"I do not think that it is any of my business! I do not think it matters!" Caitlin exclaimed. "Starships are banned in my city, on this planet, and now, if I have heard correctly, throughout the galaxy. I should have you arrested."

A quick grimace flashed across Seth's face. For just a second, Caitlin thought that he might be reconsidering his decision to come to Balashyre. But he immediately recovered, leaning forward to speak in a low tone. "I have always been amazed by Airlann. How do you do it? How do you maintain a society that so completely rejects the progress of the last two thousand years? There are so many wondrous sights to be seen in the galaxy, so many things to do... and that's all without mentioning the drugs."

Caitlin clenched her teeth and hissed at the captain. "You are just like the others. You think that we need your technology and your medicine. You don't understand that—"

"I don't mean *medicine*," Seth said. "I mean *drugs*. This is the only planet that's kept Opizone off the streets. That stuff is fantastic, or so I've heard. I've never tried it. I think five percent of all humanity has some sort of addiction to—"

"You do not amuse me, Captain Garland. Please get to the point."

Seth nodded. "What I'm trying to say is that it's remarkable what this planet has done. Everyone is free to leave and yet... they don't." He paused, thinking. "Or I guess they *were* free to leave, at least before the Fall."

"The Fall?"

"That's what they're calling it out there." Seth motioned upwards, at the ceiling, but he clearly meant to point to the stars. "The death of space travel. The splintering of the human race. The end of progress,

as far as I'm concerned. We're all stuck on our own planets now."

Caitlin felt her heart skip a beat. "We are... trapped." It was as if she never thought of it that way before. The first time she heard about the Fall, she was glad. The rest of the galaxy was coming to the same realization that the people of Airlann discovered centuries before. But now...

"Is everything all right?" Seth asked.

As painful as it was to admit to herself, Caitlin wasn't sure. "There is a tradition here known as the Sraithing," she said. "When we turn sixteen, we are given the opportunity to leave Airlann for a month. Sometimes even more. We can explore the galaxy, visit other planets, and learn for ourselves the dangers of technology." She sighed. "I never got that chance. Before I was old enough, I inherited my mother's calling. I could not leave, even though..."

Caitlin was not going to say any more. She was surprised at how much she'd already revealed to the young captain. She did not want to tell him that she barely had any responsibility on Airlann and that, had her retainers been willing to cover for her, she could have participated in the Sraithing like all of her peers.

"If you arrest me, there will be no more Sraithing," Seth told her. "There will be no more galaxy. Just this planet."

"The People's Republic said this was a temporary issue. They said they would re-open the trade routes."

"They lied. Just like I said"

Once again, Caitlin surprised herself with how disappointed she was. "Somewhere, deep down, I always thought that I would get to see the stars."

Seth smiled. "You still can." He reached across the desk and extended his hand. "Just come with me."

Caitlin looked into his dark eyes and was transfixed. She hadn't thought about leaving Airlann for years, but there was something about Captain Garland that lead her back to those long-buried dreams. Despite herself, she stretched out her arm and took his

hand. It was soft, as if he'd never worked a day in his life, either.

Suddenly, Captain Garland's eyes flashed red. He squeezed her hand. His calming voice became an unnatural growl. "You're coming with me!" he hissed, and pulled as hard as he could on her arm.

Caitlin was yanked from her chair and felt her legs give out from under her. She braced herself to hit the floor, but the impact never came. Instead, she watched as the ground itself crumbled beneath her. A mighty quake shook the office, splitting the earth in two. She slipped between the cracks and then there was nothing. There was only darkness beneath her, a never-ending pit.

Seth was gone, her home was gone, Airlann was gone... There was only the void. And she was falling faster and faster.

A scream rose from her lungs and flew from her mouth, but failed to fill the dark expanse around her. It was as if she had no voice. She was helpless. She couldn't even cry out. There was only silence... And then...

"ALL CREW REPORT TO THE CONFERENCE ROOM."

At first, the booming voice confused Caitlin even more. She couldn't see where it was coming from. Then she realized that she was lying down. She was still falling, but she was on her back and she wasn't moving.

She was asleep. It was just a dream.

"ALL CREW REPORT TO THE CONFERENCE ROOM."

Caitlin's eyes flew open. The first thing she saw was the gray metal ceiling of her quarters. Then she looked over to her left. A large view-screen displayed the dark depths of the stars outside.

She remembered where she was. She was on the *I.S.S. Fenghuang*. She was now a member of Seth Garland's crew. No matter how many times she had the nightmare, she found it was almost a relief to discover it was real. She accepted his invitation to join him on his mission and now they were hundreds of light years from Airlann. There was no going back.

And now he was waking her up because she had to go to the

conference room. She had the quarters farthest to the back of the ship, where the artificial gravity was lightest and closest to the mild pull of Airlann. Everywhere else on the vessel gave her a headache after too long. Even in her room, she still felt like she was falling when she closed her eyes.

Caitlin didn't have much of a frame of reference to compare starships, but she knew that the *Fenghuang* was a mess. According to Captain Garland, the *Fenghuang* was built to survey uninhabitable planets in uncolonized star systems. It was not meant for even short-term habitation, so most of the crew quarters were actually refitted cargo holds. Their beds were stiff mattresses tied to crates, some of which carried food and supplies for their mission.

The conference room itself was just a laboratory with most of the equipment stored under the tables. There weren't even chairs, so the crew had to stand around near the walls waiting for everyone to gather. Caitlin was the last one in, so they were waiting for her.

"Glad to see you could join us, princess," Alena Heilmann said once Caitlin finally stumbled into the room. She was a tall woman in her early thirties with long, wavy blond hair. Her steely blue eyes were narrow as they watched the Governess. She stood next to Captain Garland at the front of the room.

Alena was the chief engineer on the *Fenghuang* and the inventor of the Heilmann Drive, the machine which made faster-than-light travel possible in the first place. That was two thousand years ago. Caitlin still didn't understand how Alena was still alive, let alone relatively young. Captain Garland said it was "time compression" and the effect of traveling at over ninety-nine percent of light speed for centuries at a time. That didn't help her make any sense of it.

"I was asleep," Caitlin said. "I apologize. I doubt we are in any hurry, so hopefully it will not inconvenience any of you."

In the opposite corner of the room, Lance Reynolds groaned aloud. "Stop apologizing," he said. "It just makes them think that they're in charge."

Lance was a large, muscular man in his late twenties. He had dark skin and kept his head completely shaved. He was a professional athlete and politician. Before the Fall, he represented the entertainment industry of the planet Berkshire in the parliamentary government of the Incorporated Industrial Worlds. After the Fall, the parliament was dissolved and his baseball team, the Berkshire Bulls, didn't have anyone to play against. He joined Seth after Berkshire agreed to grant the *Fenghuang* safe harbor. This was all shortly after Caitlin joined the crew, and Berkshire was the first new world she visited.

"We are in charge," Seth said. He glared at Lance. "I am in charge. Don't forget, this is my ship."

Lance just shrugged. "Whatever."

There had been tensions on the ship ever since they brought Alena Heilmann aboard. When she appeared rather unexpectedly after two thousand years, she forced Seth to realize that he didn't really have a plan for ending the Fall. That didn't sit well with Lance and Caitlin, who joined him because they believed that he did.

"Just get on with this," said Leah Wu. She was the final member of the *Fenghuang* crew. Small and unassuming, with jet black hair and eyes, she was probably the one angriest about the changes aboard the ship. Seth recruited her from the planet Yuan because she was regarded as among the best engineers in the galaxy. But even she couldn't figure out how to repair or maintain the Heilmann Drive. Alena seemed to make her redundant, and she had more reason than anyone else to want to end the Fall. Her sister, who had been trained to operate a Heilmann Drive, was trapped on Earth. The People's Republic had sequestered anyone with knowledge of the engine shortly before the Fall.

Seth nodded. He looked around the room at his crew—all four of them. "I know a lot of you have been concerned about the fact that we don't have energy shields on the ship."

"We were almost shot down twice last week!" Lance exclaimed.

Seth chuckled but Lance wasn't trying to be funny.

"The *Fenghuang* is a science vessel," Seth continued. "It was not designed for combat, so we don't have the energy generators necessary to just install shields. Fortunately, Alena had an idea." He looked to her to finish

"Energy shields weren't invented two thousand years ago," she said. "For some people, that might have posed a problem when trying to design energy shields for a new ship. But not me." Off to the side, Leah groaned audibly. Alena's arrogance hadn't made her addition to the crew any easier. "I realized that there was a better way to power shields than an on-board fusion generator. The Heilmann Drive could provide more than enough energy. Most of the power generated after a leap has to be dissipated into heat. Shunting some of it to shields is simple, and I don't know why none of your scientists have thought of it."

Now Leah just had to speak up. "Because most of us don't even know how the Heilmann Drive works! If we were allowed to see the designs, I'm sure we'd come up with all sorts of modifications."

Alena simply ignored her. "In order to get the stellarium crystals needed for the shield emitters, we'll be traveling to Epsilon Andrii. It's one of the only stars in the galaxy that can support a stellarium mining operation."

Most of what the crew said was senseless babble to Caitlin, who barely understood how an electrical circuit worked, but this caught her attention. "Wait a moment," she said. "Is this a mine on a star? Forgive me for being ignorant, but how is that possible?"

Unlike the objections of Lance and Leah, Alena actually took the time to address Caitlin's concerns. She turned to face the Governess and smiled. "The mine is not actually on the star's surface. The mining platform orbits the star at a safe distance for habitation while an attached mechanized rail system travels into the corona of the star and harvests various gaseous elements. There is also a processing plant on the station, which produces stellarium."

“Will the crew of the mine be friendly?” Caitlin asked next. She remembered the last few planets they’d visited. Most of them were hostile. They believed in the Fall. They believed that the Heilmann Drive was dangerous and that the *Fenghuang* posed a threat.

Seth was the one to answer this question. “The mining platform is abandoned,” he said. “There are no habitable planets in the Epsilon Andrii system. They crew evacuated before the Fall and went home.” Caitlin nodded. That made sense to her. If there were no colonies in the star system, the Fall would have trapped them on the mining platform. “That means we might be able to make it a base of operations for awhile. I’m sure all of you would appreciate stable gravity and sunlight.”

Caitlin could see Leah nodding to herself out of the corner of her eye. “Let’s do it,” she said. “I’m sick of places that are trying to kill us. An abandoned solar mine sounds creepy, but not actually dangerous, so it’s a step up.”

Seth smiled and clapped his hands together. “Then it’s decided!” He seemed very happy to make a decision that the rest of the crew approved of. It was rare that no one had any objections. “Lance, get back to the command center and start plotting a leap. We’re finally moving forward.”

*

Caitlin closed her eyes and tried to steady her nerves as the *Fenghuang* completed its leap. None of the other crew members seemed to notice the sensation. Maybe they were just too used to it. But every time the ship leapt across the galaxy, Caitlin felt her heart race and her skin crawl. She couldn’t hear anything. It was like the sound was sucked out of the room. Her hands trembled and her stomach bottomed out. The first time, when the ship traveled from Airlann to Berkshire, she almost threw up. Now it wasn’t so terrible, and she wondered if she’d eventually adjust. She wasn’t sure she wanted to. It was wrong to feel nothing like Seth and the others.

As her body seemed to settle down, Caitlin looked up at the view-

screen at the front of the command center. Brilliant and blinding light filled her vision, searing her eyes. The sick feeling in her stomach seemed to get worse, rather than better. A loud high-pitched noise rung in her ears as her hearing returned. Just above it, she could hear Captain Garland yelling.

“Turn down the brightness!”

Caitlin quickly remembered that her job was to control the communications console, which included the view-screen. She scrambled to find the correct dial to decrease the intensity of the display and quickly ratcheted it down. They’d leapt into the system very close to the star and the external camera was pointed straight at it.

None of the preset view-screen levels did anything. No matter which of the buttons she pressed, the brilliant light from the star overpowered the room. The pain was too much and she did the only thing she could think of. She shut off the view-screen completely. The command center mercifully went dark.

“Next time could we turn the view-screen off *before* we leap?” Caitlin asked.

Seth laughed, even as he was rubbing his eyes. “But what if we see something? Wouldn’t that be remarkable?”

For some reason, this sent a chill down Caitlin’s spine. There was nothing to see during a leap. It was always black. But Seth would always stare at the screen anyway. He couldn’t look away from the darkness between the compressed space.

“I always close my eyes,” she said.

Ignoring her, Seth turned his attention to the dark view-screen. “I appreciate that we’re not blinded anymore, but if we’re going to try and dock with the station it would be nice to see where we’re going.”

Caitlin looked down at the panel in front of her. Now that she had some time, and wasn’t distracted by light searing into her eyes, she could try and manually adjust the camera and view-screen settings to handle the close proximity to the star.

She turned down every setting she could find on the panel, then prepared to activate the screen again. "I do not know if this will be enough, so I would look away." Then she closed her eyes, stared at the floor, and hoped for the best.

The view-screen flickered to life. It was still bright, and still caused the screen to emit a high-pitched noise that turned her stomach, but now Caitlin could look up to see where they were. The surface of Epsilon-Andrii filled the screen. They were so close that they couldn't even see the darkness beyond. The only thing other than the shining corona of the star was a long, spindly shape near the center of the screen. It was their destination, the solar mining platform that hung just above the blazing celestial fusion.

The sublight drive on the *Fenghuang* flared to life and the ship began to travel towards the orbital station. As they approached, Caitlin continued to adjust the screen to keep it from blinding the crew yet again. But she also watched as the platform grew closer and closer.

It was bigger than she imagined. Constructed in low solar orbit, the mine was at least a hundred times bigger than the *Fenghuang*. Brief glimpses of the side of the platform that faced the star revealed that it was covered in an armor of mirrored scales. The station was just on the edge of habitability, and excess light and heat was directed away in any way possible.

Long metal spires stretched from the mining platform and seemed to reach into the brilliant oblivion of the star.

"I know that this is coming late," Lance said. "But I don't think I want to stay here for very long. This is goddamn terrifying."

Seth chuckled. "Are you kidding? This is probably the safest place in the galaxy right now. Even if the People's Republic managed to get a starship up and running, they'd never look here. And even if they did, I'm not sure their sensors would find us."

"It cannot be this safe to be this close to a star," Caitlin added.

At that, Seth sat up from his chair in the middle of the command

center. He pointed at the viewscreen. "This is the stablest star in the galaxy. Arguably, it's one of the stablest celestial bodies we've discovered. In recorded history, this star has never had a coronal ejection. The temperature at this distance hasn't change more than one degree centigrade. This mine has been here for hundreds of years on the very edge of oblivion... but hasn't had as much as a damaged shield or hull plate from the solar heat." He paused. "Can you think of anywhere on Airlann that has gone as long without a hurricane, tornado, or earthquake?"

Truly, Caitlin could not. Nevertheless, it seemed impossible that a space station could be habitable on the edge of a star, let alone safe.

"We're probably a lot better off teetering on the precipice of incineration than aboard this death trap of a starship," Leah said. "No one is going to shoot us down on an abandoned mining platform."

A flashing light caught Caitlin's attention and she turned her attention back to the communications panel. Something was happening. Someone was trying to hail them. "Well I have some interesting news," she said. "I am not so sure that the mining platform is abandoned."

"What?" Seth asked. He rushed over to her side and looked down at the panel. It was obvious that he didn't trust her to use it, but this time she was right. There was a signal coming from the solar mine. "No way there's anyone still there. It has to be an automated beacon."

"It looks like the message is audio only," Caitlin said. "Should I put it through to the speakers?"

Seth paused, then just shrugged. "I guess we should listen to what they have to say."

Caitlin tapped a few buttons in front of her. She was getting comfortable enough to where she didn't have to ask for help any more, though she had a moment of fear as the command center filled with discordant static. Did she do something wrong? She re-checked her work. The light on the console wasn't flashing anymore. Instead it was a solid blue color. The speakers were activated. Everything was

fine... except for the signal itself.

"They must have left the communications channel open before they evacuated," Leah said. "Nothing strange about that. We should just ignore it."

Suddenly a man's voice broke through the static. It was choppy and barely audible, but there was no mistaking it. "This is the mining platform *Antigone*. Is someone there?"

Seth stood up straight and looked around the command center, as if he wanted someone else to respond. No one was willing to relieve him of that duty. "This is Captain Seth Garland of the *I.S.S. Fenghuang*," he said at last. "We came here assuming that this platform was abandoned and—"

The voice cut him off, now slicing through the static with newfound strength. "Oh thank the stars!" the man exclaimed. "I don't know how you got here, but I really don't care. We need your help."

In 4191, the People's Interstellar Republic overwhelmingly voted to pass the Spatial Preservation Act. The SPA effectively banned faster-than-light travel by providing for the decommission and destruction of every starship in the galaxy equipped with a Heilmann Drive. Every engineer who knew how to build a Heilmann Drive and every scientist who knew how to operate one was relocated to Earth and placed under military supervision. After almost two thousand years of interstellar movement and communication, the hundreds of inhabited planets were cut off from one another.

The provisions of the SPA were staggered over several months. This allowed for people to choose the planet on which they would spend the rest of their lives. It also allowed time for soldiers, scientists, and miners stationed on interstellar frontier stations to return home so that they would not be stuck in deep space for the rest of their lives.

These months leading up to the complete termination of interstellar travel were chaotic and, at times, violent. There were not enough ships running enough routes to relocate everyone who wished to move. Some worlds distributed the seats on these vessels in lotteries. Others sold them to the highest bidder. Inevitably, tickets were stolen and fenced on the black market.

The People's Republic placed a special emphasis on the space stations and mining platforms. The military officials charged with enforcing the SPA knew that even one person trapped in deep

space after the final starship was destroyed would create a huge problem. The public pressure to mount a rescue mission would force them to build another Heilmann Drive. That was the last thing they wanted to do. They wanted the Fall—what they called the end of interstellar travel—to be permanent until a safer method could be found.

Days before the Fall began, the People's Republic announced that they had managed to retrieve every single person living on a space station, research outpost, or mining facility that was not within the solar system of an inhabitable planet. They said that no one was left behind.

They lied.

Caitlin could hear her heart pounding in her chest. She shifted uncomfortably, feeling her laser pistol pressed up against her ribcage on her right side. It was tucked into her black jacket, which felt a lot tighter than the last time she wore it. She wasn't getting nearly as much exercise as she used to back on Airlann.

"I am not so sure we should go in there armed," Caitlin said. She was standing, along with Seth and Alena, in the main airlock of the *Fenghuang*. They were getting ready to board the mining station *Antigone* and meet with Commander Arcturus Hathaway, man who contacted them before docking. "I think it might give them the wrong idea."

Alena laughed. "Are you kidding? We don't know what they want yet. They could want to steal our ship, so I hope you're prepared to start shooting."

"Besides, we know they've been on this station alone, without any outside contact, for at least a year," Seth added. Caitlin knew that the Fall didn't just end interstellar travel, but interstellar communications. The only way people could send messages or data between planets were on the ships that leapt across the galaxy. "There is a fair chance

they're all crazy."

"Do you think the People's Republic just abandoned them here?" Caitlin asked.

Seth looked back at her and nodded. "Of course they did. I don't know why I didn't see it earlier. They could lie about rescuing everyone stationed in deep space and there would be no way of ever knowing that they weren't telling the truth."

A chill traveled up Caitlin's spine. The thought of being stuck in the middle of nowhere, away from Airlann or any other world, was horrifying. Planets were the source of all life. The nutrients of the planet provided food, the atmosphere of the planet provided clean water, and the gravity of the planet provided stability.

"We have to help these people," she said. "We have to get them home. I do not want to hurt them." She shifted the laser pistol under her jacket again, hoping that she could at least get comfortable with the weapon. She couldn't.

"You didn't have to come along," Alena replied. "We could have brought Lance. And probably should have if you're just going to chicken out on us. I'll call up, let him know to come down here and relieve you."

That was the last thing Caitlin wanted. Finally, after weeks of leaping around on the *Fenghuang*, recruiting crew members and intermittently getting shot at, she had a chance to really make a difference. "No," Caitlin said. "I am ready for whatever happens. But I want to be here to make sure neither of you make any mistakes."

"Fair enough," Seth said, smiling. "Keep us honest. But you better have our backs if a fight breaks out."

A loud grinding noise filled the airlock as the doors started to open. The sickening smell of stale air wafted in from the mining station. It wasn't like the processed oxygen aboard the *Fenghuang*, which was able to gather atmosphere from the planets it visited and mix it in with the artificial stuff. It was wholly manufactured, so fake Caitlin could taste it.

One figure stood behind the airlock door. It was a haggard man with short blonde hair. He was wearing an orange uniform that had been washed so many times it was practically yellow. A nametag near his left shoulder read "Hathaway".

Seth and Alena hesitated, as if they expected the miner to attack them. They waited to make the first movement, not sure whether to greet him or shoot him outright. Disgusted, Caitlin pushed past them and approached Commander Hathaway. She extended her hand to greet him.

"It is good to see you are well," she said. "My name is Caitlin Adair, this is my Captain Seth Garland." She smiled. "And you do not have to despair any more, Commander. We are going to get you home."

*

When Caitlin was a young girl, before she could even conceive that one day she would have to step up and become Governess of Balashyre, she loved nothing more than fairy tales and legends. Every night, her mother, Morgance, would bring her a glass of spiced milk and tell her one of the many tales passed down through the centuries on Airlann. Caitlin's favorite, and the one she would ask for every night, was the legend of the first Dobhriathar.

The first Dobhriathar were a group of four Airlannians—a farmer, a rancher, a miller, and a builder—who traveled to the stars over a thousand years ago and saved the planet from famine.

Morgance always began the tale the same way. Just as Caitlin took her first sips of milk, she set the scene:

"On one fateful day, hundreds of years before even your great-grandmother was Governess of Balashyre, offworld traders brought a terrible plague to the lands of the Goddess." Thanks to Morgance's thick accent, Caitlin was never sure if her mother was saying *traders* or *traitors* but it worked for her either way. "You know them now as pests, the common locustfly, but back then they overrun our crops. They ate our corn and our grain, and we had nothing to feed our cattle or horses. The animals starved as we ate their food, and then we had

no food left of our own. We became so desperate as to begin eating the bugs themselves, but we knew that even that would not last. They exhausted their own food as they exhausted ours. We had to begin anew, but every time we planted our crops, they would return.”

At this point, Caitlin would almost always ask the same question. “Why could we not wait until they were dead, then begin planting again?”

“It was not that simple,” Morgance would continue. “For the locustfly could appear dead for moons, then return again as soon as there was food. Besides, we did not have such time on our hands. We were all starving. We could not wait them out.

“Then, as it seemed like our entire planet would wither and die, the Goddess Airlanni chose four souls to band together and save us. One was a poor farmer from Arrynton. She had seen all of her crops vanish before her eyes in the first wave of the plague. Another was a wealthy miller from Twiningshire, who had given all of his money to purchase food for his neighbors until there was no longer anything else to buy. The third was a rancher from Grathberg who’d lost all of his cows to the famine. The final chosen one was a builder from right here in Balashyre. All four traveled to the Great Council to propose the same plan. They wished to travel to the stars to find a solution for the problem.”

“But that is where the plague came from!” Caitlin insisted. This was before she even knew about the custom of the Sraithing and thought that it was remarkable that an Airlanni would ever travel offworld for any reason. “Why would they do that?”

Morgance would smile and pat Caitlin on the head. “And that is just what the Great Council said! The Locustflies were forced upon us by the offworlders! Only evil came from the stars! The four chosen ones were shouted down by the Great Counsel. No one believed that Airlanni herself spoke to these men and women and told them what they must do. They were called cowards and traitors... ” Here, Caitlin was sure which word her mother used. “... and most people thought

they wanted to flee the dying planet rather than save it.

“Fortunately, they were clever. For, you see back then, there were still places on the planet where one could find the devices left behind by our founders. The four managed to send a signal to the offworlders, who had come offering food and assistance during the plague. One of their great ships descended from the heavens and found the four chosen ones. From there, they set off on their quest to save Airlann and all their fellow men.”

From there, Morgance would always tell of the adventures the four chosen ones had among the offworlders. They visited many planets, met with many dangers, and finally found their way to the home of all mankind: Earth. They stood before the great leaders of the true homeworld and asked for their assistance. They learned that the Locustfly had come from Earth, and they despaired. But the gardens and fields of Earth were relatively unmolested. Earth, unlike Airlann, survived the plague.

“It was not any of their heathen devices that saved us,” Morgance would say. “But another creature. The four chosen ones returned with a starship full of turkeys, which then did not live on Airlann, and set them free among the countryside. The Locustflies were eaten by the turkeys, the crops were saved, and when there were too many turkeys, we simply hunted them and ate them as well.

“The four were hailed as heroes and called Dobhriathar. After being ridiculed and hated, they were validated as prophets of the Goddess Airlanni. Without them, there would be no Airlann. Either we would have died out or we would have become another planet dependent on the off-worlders. But the Dobhriathar brought us a solution that allowed us to preserve our people and our culture.”

From that date forward, Morgance explained, the word “Dobhriathar” became synonymous with a group of people chosen by the Goddess Airlanni to accomplish some great task for their planet or their city. Sometimes they were prophets, sometimes they were war heroes, sometimes they were, like the first Dobhriathar, regular

citizens who rose above their birth to change the world.

As Caitlin grew up, she began to doubt many of her mother's stories. The legends of Airlann all followed the same pattern. An off-worlder brought some awful disaster down upon the planet as the people fell under the spell of his devices. Everything was thrown into chaos. The Goddess intervened, usually through some convenient earthquake or storm, and sent the off-worlder fleeing from Airlann, never to return.

The tale of the first Dobhriathar was different. It felt more plausible. It didn't have the same isolationist slant. The most recent Dobhriathar appeared within her mother's lifetime, in Balashyre, to help resolve a war between the Eastern and Northern continents. There were people who remembered meeting the chosen ones who brokered the peace deal.

And most importantly, Caitlin wanted to believe in the Dobhriathar. She wanted to believe that Airlanni touched the lives of real people, and chose them. She wanted to believe that her heroes were real.

*

"What are you talking about? I don't want to go home."

Caitlin stared blankly at Commander Hathaway. That was the last thing she expected to hear. Certainly, a man stuck for years away from his planet would want to return. He would want to feel the comfortable embrace of her gravity, breathe the fresh air of her skies, and drink her cool waters.

Realizing that the miners were friendly, Seth stepped out front to take over for the dumbfounded Caitlin. "Of course you don't!" he exclaimed, though he was clearly also confused. "As Miss Adair indicated, I am Captain Seth Garland of the *I.S.S. Fenghuang*. Now, if you don't want to go home, how is it that you require our assistance?"

Commander Hathaway glanced left and right, as if trying to make sure that no one was listening. Then he leaned in close, sticking his head between Seth and Caitlin. "Not here," he said, whispering. "Not

where we might be heard. I don't want to scare anyone."

The haggard man turned on his heel and started down the hallway. After a few steps, he turned and motioned for them to follow. Seth exchanged glances with Alena, who just shrugged. There was nothing else to do but go with him.

While Caitlin's last few weeks had been full of new places and experiences, nothing shocked her more than the interior of the mining platform. She couldn't understand how anyone could live there. Seth had told her before that the space station would have real gravity and sunlight. That was looking like just another thing he made up to get everyone to go along with his plans.

Long, narrow, snaking hallways stretched from one end of the platform to the other. There were no windows or even view-screens. Everything was illuminated by a sickening blue light. The walls were sterile, the floors were rigidly even, and the disgusting artificial air choked her more with every breath.

As uncomfortable as the *Fenghuang* was, she couldn't wait to get back. At least there was pleasant lighting and where she could look out at the stars.

They seemed to walk forever, until they finally reached the commander's personal sleeping quarters. Several other miners passed them as they went. Every single one looked terrible. They glanced left and right as they walked, their hands visibly shaking as they held them at their side. It was like they were all waiting for something terrible and they were certain it was around the next corner. Commander Hathaway shouldn't have been so worried about scaring them. They were already scared.

Once they were in the commander's quarters, he offered them seats across from his desk. There were only two chairs. Feeling lightheaded from the stale air, Caitlin quickly claimed one of them. Seth and Alena quietly bickered for a second after Seth offered the other chair to Alena and she took offense at the courtesy. They glared at each other until Seth finally gave in and sat down, letting Alena

stand in the back, towering over everyone.

Finally situated, Seth began to question the commander. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Why didn't you leave in the relocation? Did the People's Republic even send a ship to rescue you?"

Commander Hathaway leaned back in his chair and laughed. "Rescue us? You mean they tried to kidnap us. When they came here with their fancy ships and their bureaucratic nonsense, I told them what my crew told me. The only way we were leaving this station is on our backs."

Caitlin leaned forward. "Are you insane?" she asked. "What is wrong with you?"

"I thought we brought you along to be the calm one," Alena quipped in the background.

Fortunately, Commander Hathaway didn't take offense at the Airlannian's surprise. "My father worked this mine for years. He taught me the craft. Every summer since I was a boy, I'd come here from NewPasTur because it was so much more pleasant than the factories there. It's safe. It's calm. My friends are all here. My wife is here. We have greenhouses that supply us with food. There are no diseases to worry about. Why would I want to go back? This *is* my home. Ask anyone here and they'll give you the same story." He grunted. "Besides, when all of this blows over, y'all are gonna be glad we're all still here. You know how long it would take to get this place started up again if we just abandoned it?"

He still thought that the Fall would just "blow over". Most people had figured out that was just another Republic lie. The Republic said that as soon as they came up with a safer method of interstellar travel, then they would re-open all the trade routes and everything would be back to normal. But there was no safer method. The Heilmann Drive was the only method. In the two thousand years since its invention, it had never been replaced and never been improved.

"So, if you want to stay here, how can we help you?" Seth asked.

Commander Hathaway suddenly fixed on Seth with a fierce glare.

"We have a problem on the *Antigone*, Captain. And it's a problem that none of the engineers on the station have been able to solve."

"Then I have good news for you, Commander. The woman standing behind me is literally the most famous engineer in the galaxy."

Hathaway stared at Alena, who just smiled. "Good!" he exclaimed. "Because I need you to look at our engines, our gravity drive.. Everything!"

"You don't know what's malfunctioning?" Alena asked.

"No, but I know we're in trouble. We're falling into the star below us."

A sudden quiet fell over the room as everyone considered what the commander said. Caitlin tried not to stand up and run screaming from the room. She remembered how close the platform looked to Epsilon Andrii on the view-screen. It was just on the edge of destruction. And now...

"You're falling into the star?" Seth finally asked.

Commander Hathaway nodded. "Or the star is expanding. We don't know. But it's obvious. We're inching closer and closer. It's only a matter of time before we burn up."

Sweat sprung up across Seth's forehead. Caitlin wondered if he was feeling what she was feeling. The room was suddenly hotter.

"We would be glad to help you," Seth said. "In exchange, we would request a fairly small amount of solarium crystals. Is that acceptable?"

"Of course," Hathaway replied. "We've been mining and refining them for nothing for awhile now. You're free to take as much as you want."

Seth nodded. "I'll get the rest of my crew on board. We'll want to get this figured out as soon as possible."

Hathaway seemed to relax. It was as if all of his worries melted away. He seemed to trust that Seth and Alena would be able to fix his problem. "Thank you so much," he said. "But I also have one more request. Please don't tell anyone what I told you here. Most of my crew doesn't know about the... deteriorating orbit or whatever it is. I

don't want to cause a panic."

"Of course," Seth told him. We'll be completely discreet."

In the year 2447, the explorer Geovany Andrews became the first person to visit the Epsilon Andrii star system. Andrews was a pioneer of interstellar travel. At the time, most of his counterparts spent their time trying to find habitable planets. But Andrews believed that this was foolish. In almost two hundred and fifty years, humans had colonized dozens of worlds already. Most of these worlds were barely populated. There were more than enough colonies.

Andrews was looking for something else. He wanted to find alien life. On all of the planets, in all of the star systems found by mankind, they had yet to discover a single living organism. Plants and animals from Earth flourished on every colonized world, but there was no evidence that any of them had any life of their own. Either it died so long ago that even fossilized bacteria was destroyed, or it never existed at all.

Unlike most of the other scientists searching for extraterrestrial life, Andrews did not believe it would be found on Earth-like planets. He believed that life could evolve anywhere, out of any system, and that the spontaneous emergence of life on Earth was so unlikely that even across thousands of worlds, something like it would never be repeated.

Andrews never found what he was searching for. Instead, he found something almost as remarkable. The Epsilon Andrii orange dwarf was a star like no other star. It was the most stable celestial body that had ever been discovered.

Epsilon Andrii appeared to be very near the beginning of its main sequence. The magnetic fields surrounding the star were in absolute harmony, never creating any resistance. There were no solar flares. There were no sunspots. Every measurement showed that it was a perfect sphere.

The People's Interstellar Republic immediately ordered the construction of a research station, which would eventually become the mining platform Antigone. Gathering minerals within the corona, which was a dangerous proposition on most stars, was perfectly safe at Epsilon Andrii. The star could also be used as a forge, as the temperature at various distances from the core was always consistent. After the mining platform at Epsilon Andrii was built, the Republic and other interstellar governments built similar stations on other stars, but none of them were as safe or as reliable.

Meanwhile, Geovany Andrews didn't just give up his search for extraterrestrial life. He gave up on science. To him, Epsilon Andrii was a repudiation of everything he used to believe in. It was proof of God, of a great designer, because it was so impossibly perfect. His contemporaries justified its existence just as they justified the existence of life itself. There were millions of stars in the universe. An entirely stable star was inevitable. Andrews refused to believe it.

He devoted the rest of his life to the star. Disowned by his peers, he was not allowed to actively participate in the study of the celestial body, but they compassionately allowed him to live on the research station, where he recorded his own observations and performed his own experiments...

"What are we looking at?" Caitlin asked. She was staring over Alena's shoulder at a computer screen embedded in a large panel. It was more complicated than anything aboard the *Fenghuang*. Numbers and words scrolled across the screen at an unfathomable pace. Caitlin wasn't sure how Alena was keeping up.

“Gravitational data from the star below,” she responded. “I want to make sure there haven’t been any fluctuations that might have caused the *Antigone* to begin a slow descent out of orbit.” Caitlin just sighed. That barely made any sense to her. Alena looked back at her, away from the steady stream of numbers. “You don’t get it, do you?”

Caitlin met her gaze. “I come from a world that believes that has banned the combustion engine. Nothing you say is going to make sense to me the first time around.”

Alena took a deep breath and tried to simplify the situation as much as possible. “This mining platform was designed after years and years of absolute, unwavering stability from the star below. Every machine and program here just assumes that nothing about the star below will change. A single variation in the gravitational pull might disrupt the orbit and send the mining platform hurtling downwards.”

Despite the fact that most of Alena’s explanation went over her head, Caitlin was beginning to understand the problem. Epsilon Andrii was so predictable that the platform was unprepared for any changes.

“It is like so many of the planets we have seen after the Fall,” Caitlin said. “They were so reliant on the trade routes, which provided them with a constant flow of resources, that as soon as they were disrupted everything fell into chaos.”

Alena narrowed her eyes as she glared at Caitlin. “It’s nothing like that,” she hissed. “What are you even doing here?”

“I want to help these people,” Caitlin said.

“Yes, and I’m sure they appreciate the enthusiasm. But I’m not sure how you’re supposed to do that. The only reason this platform would be spiraling down into the star is a mechanical failure. And you’re not going to help us find that.”

Caitlin slumped her shoulders. “I... I just... ” She knew that Alena was right. She knew that there wasn’t anything she could do to help the people on the *Antigone*. There was no reason for her to be

aboard the mining platform. And she certainly didn't want to be there. She wanted to return to the pleasant air of the *Fenghuang* and let the others deal with the problem.

She just couldn't.

"Show me," she said. "Show me what you are looking for and I can help."

Alena tapped a few buttons on panel. The screen froze. "Are you joking?" Alena asked.

"No. All you are doing is watching numbers. You must be looking for something. A pattern, a decline, an increase... I can do that too, if you tell me what to watch out for." Alena didn't respond. Not yet. "That way, you can devote your talents to something that actually requires them."

A soft chuckle escaped Alena's lips. "Fine."

"Really?"

"This is starting to make me nauseous anyway." She motioned for Alena to look at the screen with her. "But before we begin, I'm going to have to teach you a little bit about gravity."

Caitlin gulped and wondered what she'd gotten herself into.

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She could still see the numbers when she closed her eyes. After a thirty minute lesson about the intricacies of creating an artificial orbit around a celestial body Caitlin spent five hours watching green digits speed across a black computer screen. Alena was right to stop when she did. Caitlin was sure that she was going to throw up.

It wasn't just that the motion made her sick. It was also the fact that she didn't find anything. According to Alena, one of the most likely problems was a slight fluctuation in the amount of artificial gravity produced by the space station. A malfunctioning on-board gravity generator could, theoretically, throw off the carefully maintained orbit. And the space station computers, designed around the perfectly stable star below, would be hard-pressed to fix the problem if it got out of control.

The numbers on the screen in front of her represented the amount of energy exerted by the gravity generator paired with the mass and volume of everything on the station at the time. Alena said that there wouldn't be a perfect ratio of artificial gravity to the weight of the station, but that it should be close. A malfunction in the gravity generator, especially one large enough to cause the very orbit of the station to change, would stand out among the numbers.

There was nothing that stood out. There was no malfunction. In fact, Caitlin began to suspect that Alena was wrong. Just looking at a few of the number sets, and doing a quick calculation in her head, Caitlin realized that there **was** a perfect ratio. The gravity generator wasn't just not malfunctioning. It was working at perfect efficiency—at least at the times that Caitlin randomly picked to calculate.

But it was more than that. After an hour and a half, Caitlin started to think that the numbers were repeating themselves. She saw certain pairings of mass and energy expenditure that looked familiar. At first she thought that there had been a malfunction and the flow of data started over. But the dates and times were new.

Three hours into the process, Caitlin saw the same numbers a third time. Then, as she was completing her examination of the artificial gravity generator records, she saw them a fourth time. It didn't even begin to make sense to her until she was done and she saw exactly what database she'd been examining. The time frame for the numbers was the last five revolutions the platform made around the Epsilon Andrii star.

"It's not possible." Those were the first words out of Alena's mouth when Caitlin presented her findings. "You must have done something wrong."

Caitlin was prepared for this. Even though she felt awful, as if her time in front of the computer screen had sucked the life out of her, she was ready to defend what she saw. "Everything was set up just how you left it. Maybe the data is wrong, but what I saw was not. The number were repeating. And if I am not mistaken, they repeated five

times.”

Alena thought about this. She considered what it meant and tried to simplify it so Caitlin could understand just how ridiculous it sounded. “It takes two years, three months, and fifteen days for the platform to revolve around the star,” she said. “So what you’re telling me is that two years, three months, and fifteen days ago... This station had the exact same mass, volume, and used the same amount of energy to maintain the artificial gravity?”

“I guess that is correct. That is what I am saying.”

“And it was identical two years, three months, and fifteen days before that?”

Caitlin nodded. Her temples were throbbing, as if under intense pressure. She just wanted to get this over with so she could sit down and rest.

“Not possible,” Alena concluded again. “There are too many variables. The number of crew aboard, the amount of minerals mined from the star’s corona... . There’s no way figures like that would be consistent from revolution to revolution.”

This just frustrated Caitlin. She didn’t think she was trying to advance some unlikely or controversial position. She was just relaying what she noticed in the data. “I am not saying anything is *possible*. I am just explaining what the numbers say and...”

She lost her train of thought as her head started to swim. The room spun around her and she leaned up against the bulkhead to keep her balance.

Alena rushed to her side. “Are you okay?”

Caitlin wasn’t okay. Her ears were ringing with a high pitched noise. She started to slide down the bulkhead. The last thing she saw before she blacked out was Alena’s face, leaning over her, trying to hold her up.

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When Caitlin was nine years old, the city of Levinberg began construction on a great paper mill, the largest on all of Airlann. Their

governess, a powerful member of the Great Council, believed would both end a critical shortage of paper in the western continent as well as establish Levinberg as a cultural and commercial hub. Unfortunately, Levinberg was upriver from Balashyre, and their huge mill threatened to divert the river and dramatically disrupt fishing.

Morgance Adair, the Governess of Balashyre, attempted to negotiate with Levinberg but they refused to modify the plans. She petitioned the Great Council to prevent the construction of the mill but they refused to get involved. When it became apparent that there was no diplomatic solution to the problem, the people of Balashyre clamored for war. Balashyre was larger than Levinberg, had more people, and a better-trained military. But Morgance knew that war was an ugly proposition and that hundreds would die even in victory. Fearing for her city, she did the only other thing she could think to do. She called for the formation of a Dobhriathar.

The great academics, merchants, traders, farmers, and priestesses of Balashyre gathered at Morgance's castle to present their case for being part of the Dobhriathar. They lined up by age in front of the gates and were admitted one at a time to present their ideas for how to resolve the conflict with Levinberg. From their numbers, Morgance would choose four. They would study the issue, weigh the options, come to a conclusion about what should be done, and carry out their decision with her full authority.

When the last invitee finished her presentation to Morgance, and before the governess could retire to consider who would be chosen, one more supplicant appeared before her.

"I want to be in the Dobhriathar," she said.

Morgance's eyes went wide and looked down at the girl. It was her own daughter, Caitlin. "Oh, darling, I am sure you do. But you are too young!" Morgance stood up from her chair and went to pick her daughter up. "I am sorry I have been so busy, but once this is all resolved, I will have plenty of time to play with you."

Caitlin pouted and took a step away from her mother. "I do not want

to play! I want to join the Dobhriathar! Will you hear me out?"

After a second of consideration, Morgance returned to her chair. Smiling, she responded, "Of course I will, darling."

"I hope you are not just humoring me," Caitlin said, her hands balled into fists at her sides. "I am serious."

Morgance carefully hid a chuckle behind her palm. "Go ahead," she said. "I am listening."

Caitlin straightened up and jutted her chin out. "They get most of their dried food and fish from our town. We should stop selling it to them. Then they will see what will happen when we lose the river."

The room was quiet as Morgance considered how to respond to her. Then, finally, she replied, "It is not that simple, darling. Our farmers must sell to our merchants to make a profit, and then our merchants must sell the food or it will go bad and they will lose their money. Besides, I cannot tell the merchants who they cannot deal with."

Caitlin furrowed her brow. She was glad that her mother was legitimately listening to her, but she didn't like how quickly she dismissed her ideas. "Then we should buy it," Caitlin said.

"We?"

"They city or... um... you. I know we have a lot of money. We do not even have to give them more money than they would make selling to Levinberg. We just have to pay them *not* to sell to Levinberg."

Morgance steepled her fingers in front of her face. Caitlin could tell that she'd made a good point. If her mother's reaction was genuine, it meant that she'd come up with an idea that had eluded all of the wise men and leaders of the city.

"Fascinating," Morgance replied. "It may deplete our treasury in the short run, but if this kind of embargo against Levinberg makes them reconsider building their mill..."

"They will not have any food without us!" Caitlin exclaimed. "They will have to!"

Morgance nodded. "I hope you are correct."

Caitlin's eyes lit up. "So, can I join the Dobhriathar? Can I be one of the chosen?"

"You are not even ten years passed, darling. You cannot be part of the Dobhriathar."

"But the Goddess spoke to me! She gave me this idea! She chose me!" Caitlin wasn't sure if this was a lie or not. She'd come up with the idea on her own, but she was sure that this meant that the Goddess Airlanni placed it in her head so that she could join the Dobhriathar.

Once again, an awkward silence fell between them. Morgance leaned back in her chair and sighed. "That is not the point of the Dobhriathar."

Caitlin stared at her mother, her mouth hanging slightly open. "But... But..."

Morgance stood up and walked towards her daughter. She put her arm around the girl and knelt down at her side. "It is but a formality. It is a way to legitimize any further requests I make of the Great Council. If I have a Dobhriathar formed, they will take my proposals more seriously. And, now, there will be a certain weight behind my decision to buy out the merchants of my city. These decisions will seem to come from the Goddess, not from me."

"But it came from me!" Caitlin exclaimed.

"I know and I am very grateful for your advice, darling."

And just like that, Caitlin burst into tears. It didn't have anything to do with the idea, or even the fact that she couldn't join the Dobhriathar her mother was gathering. That was all secondary to what she just realized. The Goddess Airlanni didn't choose anyone anymore. The tradition of the Dobhriathar was not maintained because it was true, it was maintained because it was expedient. It was something that the governesses and the Great Council could invoke to maintain or establish their political power.

Caitlin turned her back on her mother as she sobbed. She'd been so proud of herself, so happy with her proposal to help with the

Levinberg situation, and now she was just humiliating herself. She was just proving that she was a child who should be humored instead of trusted.

"I am so sorry, I did not mean to..." Morgance's voice trailed off. "I know how much you liked those stories."

"It was not a story!" Caitlin yelled. "It happened!" She spun around to face her mother. "The Goddess chose those people. And she will choose me some day!"

With that, Caitlin stormed away from her mother, through the halls, and all the way to her room. It was the last time she would ever mention the Dobhriathar to her mother, and the last time her mother would ever even reference the tale again.

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Caitlin's eyes flew open and she took a deep breath. She looked around. She was lying on a bed in the small medical bay on board the *Fenghuang*. Seth was sitting next to her, monitoring her vitals. Once he saw she was conscious, he turned his attention towards her.

"You're finally awake," he said. "I was starting to get worried."

"What happened?" Caitlin asked. "Am I okay?"

Seth shrugged. "I guess so. Nothing seems wrong. Then again..." He looked away from her, towards the console that displayed her heart rate and blood pressure. "Next time we recruit someone to join the crew, it should be a doctor."

Caitlin stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Don't worry," Seth said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "You just passed out. You weren't getting enough oxygen. That was your first time on a space station, right?" Caitlin nodded. "Yeah, you were just taking shallow breaths for a few hours. Probably didn't even notice it."

"The air there did feel awful," Caitlin replied. She pulled herself up on the bed. Her head was still throbbing and she wondered if she'd hit it after falling unconscious. "How long was I out?"

Seth tapped a few buttons on the console in front of him. "Two hours, four minutes, and nineteen seconds. That's why I was worried

about you. I felt like a long time, considering there was nothing wrong with you, as far as the instruments could tell.”

“Did you take care of me the whole time?”

“I figured that Alena and Leah could handle everything on the *Antigone*. I don’t have much of a crew. I have to watch out for who I’ve got.”

Caitlin was surprised and touched by Seth’s concern. She’d never even thought before that he cared about her personal well-being, or the well-being of anyone else on the crew. It was enough to make her think that he might be receptive to what she’d discovered on the *Antigone*, even though Alena brushed her off before she collapsed.

“I found something on the mining platform,” she said. “Something I think you should know about.”

Seth smiled and crossed his arms. “I knew it was a good idea to let you come along.”

Caitlin proceeded to explain what she’d discovered from the artificial gravity computer. The distribution of mass and volume aboard the *Antigone* cycled along with each revolution around Epsilon Andrii. No matter what was going on aboard the station, this was consistent, day-to-day and hour-to-hour. Every time the mining platform circled the star, it would experience the exact same pattern of weight fluctuation.

Seth looked at Caitlin as he considered this. “So let me get this straight,” he said. “The station orbits in a circle around Epsilon Andrii. Every time it is in a certain position in this orbit, it has the same weight and mass. And this is true for every position. And this has been true for at least the last eight years or so.”

“Alena said it that it was not possible,” Caitlin said when she was finished. “And I can see why she is right. Even if the station was set up to operate on such a cycle, it would be affected by outside forces. If a single cargo ship was late in picking up solarium crystals, the weight would change from revolution to revolution. There is no way that such variables could be controlled.”

"It's perfect," Seth replied. "Just like everything else about the star. Somehow, every force in the galaxy conspires to create this flawless cycle. From the smallest atom in the star to the mind of every starship captain that visits the station. Including, perhaps, me." He smiled. "Fascinating."

Caitlin's eyes went wide. "You... You believe me?"

"Why wouldn't I?" He leaned forward and took Caitlin's hand. "The numbers don't lie. Besides, a universe where this is possible is much more interesting than a universe where it is impossible."

"We still have not figured out why the station is falling into the star," Caitlin said. "And unfortunately I do not think that my findings will help at all in that matter."

Seth let go of her hand and leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his face with his palm, bristling the hairs of his wispy goatee. "I wouldn't say that," he replied. "Something strange is going on aboard the *Antigone*. Their orbit is deteriorating and it won't be long before they're stardust and we don't know why. On top of that, they've been operating in an inconceivably consistent cycle that is entirely beyond their control for the better part of a decade." He held up two fingers. "A pair of inexplicable circumstances. We'd all be foolish to think they aren't connected."

Once the Epsilon Andrii research station was built, Geovany Andrews spent the rest of his life orbiting the star. Most of the other scientists left and returned to the station in shifts, going home to their homes and families across the galaxy. He made a new home aboard the station.

As the years stretched on, Andrews became more and more reclusive with the research staff. At first, he ate with them and talked with them as peers, even though he was not participating in their work. Then, as his own experiments grew more elaborate and esoteric, he stopped discussing anything relating to the star. Later, he quit talking all together. The scientists would see him walking through the halls, head down, staring at the floor. And finally they rarely even saw that.

Despite the fact that he hardly seemed to leave his room, even to eat, Andrews lived to be well over a hundred years old. By the time he died, the station was already in the process of being converted into a mining platform. Very few of the station's inhabitants knew who he was, or that he had been the one to discover the star in the first place. But a few of the older scientists who'd served with him when he'd been more social returned to the station, both to pay their respects, and out of curiosity.

They wanted to see what he'd been working on for well over fifty years.

At first, the returning scientists thoroughly documented their visit to the station. They intended to catalog all of Andrews work and

publish it, regardless of merit, as a novelty. But as they unsealed his personal room and went through his voluminous research, something changed in them. They spent a month on the station and when they returned, every single one of them refused to discuss what they found. Some of them wouldn't even acknowledge that the trip even happened.

A few weeks after they returned, news of a fire on the Epsilon Andrii station spread through the galaxy. Several workers were killed containing the blaze, and it set back construction efforts for over a year. The People's Republic, who provided the funding for the station and the upcoming solar mine, conducted a thorough investigation and determined that the fire was the result of arson. The arsonists weren't particularly careful and were quickly identified as the team of scientists who had gone to pay their respects to Geovany Andrews.

After the trial, a reporter asked the scientists why they did it. All but one of them still refused to discuss what happened on the station. But one provided a very brief explanation for their actions, though refused to elaborate at all.

"We thought that if we destroyed it, we wouldn't have to think about it anymore."

Commander Hathaway shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was aboard the *Fenghuang* now, in the conference room, against his own objections. Seth had gathered the entire crew of the starship to meet with him and didn't want to leave the ship unoccupied. He was still somewhat concerned that someone on the station might try and steal it.

"I want to go back to the *Antigone*," he said. "Can we get this over with?"

Seth chuckled. "I don't know why you're so getting so rims-damned antsy. We have good news for you."

The commander's eyes lit up. "Did you find out how we can save the station?"

"We found out that we don't need to. The station isn't actually falling into the star."

Hathaway furrowed his brow and looked around at the crew of the *Fenghuang* as if he'd been ambushed by all of them. "What? *That* is your good news?"

"It's funny," Alena said, approaching the commander. "We went through everything. I checked the engines and there was no change in output or efficiency."

Leah stepped forward. "I examined all of the computers, and they were all functioning. In fact, they were in better shape than what we're working with on our ship." She shot a look at Seth, who just nodded in agreement. "And there was nothing wrong with their weight distribution models or orbit projections."

Now it was Caitlin's turn to add her voice to the crowd. There were still doubts stuck in the back of her mind. She didn't understand why Commander Hathaway would believe that the *Antigone* was falling into the star when it wasn't. And she still wanted an explanation for the strange readings she saw. Still, she had to tell the truth. "There is nothing wrong with the artificial gravity. It has been working perfectly."

"So I was starting to get confused," Seth said, then summarized the findings of his crew. "There was nothing wrong with the station or the star. So I decided to check the path of the station. And I found that the orbit of the *Antigone* isn't descending at all. The star isn't expanding. There's no danger at all. Everything is fine. Maybe I should have checked this earlier, but I assumed that you had some basis for your concern." Seth paused, thinking. "What ~~was~~ your basis for believing the *Antigone* was in danger?"

"What do you know about what is happening to my station?" Hathaway asked. "How dare you call me a liar."

Seth took a deep breath. "I'm not calling you a liar. But we can't find any evidence for what you're suggesting. I'm not entirely sure why

you think the *Antigone* is falling into the star. If you have other data, we'd be glad to look at it and—"

Commander Hathaway interrupted Seth by standing up and slamming his hands on the table in front of him. Then he started for the door. "I guess asking you to help was a waste of time. I'll handle this myself." He turned back to look at Seth. "Kindly leave the station Captain. You'll be safer anyway. I don't know how much longer we have." And with that, he stormed out.

An awkward silence fell over the *Fenghuang* crew in the conference room. "We're not going to get any solarium crystals, are we?" Lance finally said.

"I *wish* the station had been abandoned," Leah replied.

Seth was still stunned. He paced around the room, then sat down in the chair Commander Hathaway just vacated. He held his head in his hands. "I thought he'd be *happy* that the station isn't going to be destroyed by the star." He looked up. "That's good news, right?"

"So what now?" Alena asked. "Do we just leave?"

Caitlin shook her head. "We cannot leave them here. They are in danger."

"Did you miss everything that just happened?" Leah snapped. "They're *fine*. The only thing that sucks about this is that we're gonna have to find solarium somewhere else."

"They are not fine!" Caitlin replied. "Something is going on aboard that station. He would not simply make this up! If we leave now then..."

Seth stood up and walked over to her. He put his arm around her shoulder. "The Commander asked us to leave. We should probably do that. What happens to them now is their own fault. They chose to stay here. They chose not to believe us. They chose to refuse our help."

Caitlin refused to accept it. She felt like the rest of the crew was missing something. It just didn't make any sense that Commander Hathaway would believe that the station was falling into the sun for no

reason. He had to have evidence, and the only reason he was refusing to hand it over was Seth's condescending attitude.

"No. I want to stay here. I will convince Commander Hathaway to let me investigate further and I will figure out what is going on." She could see that the other members of the crew were not enthused with her plan, so she continued on. "And I will make sure that we leave with plenty of solarium crystals so that this trip was not for nothing."

"You are going to figure out what is going on?" Leah asked. "You don't know anything about space travel or engineering or science or —"

Seth held up his hand. "Be quiet, Leah," he snapped. "There's no reason to speak to her like that."

"It is fine," Caitlin said. "She is right. I know nothing about those things. But I do not think this has anything to do with science or engineering."

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Caitlin suppressed a cough as she choked down another breath of the stale air aboard the *Antigone*. She was miserable. Why was she doing this to herself? She couldn't even say, but there was no going back. Seth agreed to keep the *Fenghuang* docked at the station for another day and Commander Hathaway permitted her to perform her own investigation on the station. She didn't want to let either of them down.

Her eyes surveyed the mess hall in front of her. It was where the crew of the *Antigone* took most of their meals. The food on board the station came from a series of hydroponic bays near the aft. They grew vegetables, fruits, grains, and even synthetic meat. This was just one more reason why they were able to stay on the mining platform indefinitely. They had more food than they would ever need.

While Caitlin was impressed with the ingenuity, she refused to take dinner with the crew. She wasn't sure she was comfortable eating food that wasn't grown in planetary soil. It seemed wrong. At least everything they had on the *Fenghuang* came from farms on Yuan and

Berkshire.

Instead of eating, Caitlin just watched the crew. They seemed agitated, nervous, even paranoid. They shoveled their food into their mouths with their heads down, their hands shaking as they held their forks. Most of the men looked like they hadn't shaved in days. The womens' nails were almost uniformly broken and chewed off. Commander Hathaway had assured them that he was the only person aboard that knew the station was slowly descending into the star. But it sure looked like something was on their minds.

"Psst... Hey..."

Caitlin was thrown from her thoughts as she realized that there was someone sitting next to her. It was a rough-looking woman whose dark hair was streaked with shocks of white. The nametag on her faded orange uniform displayed the name "Varren". Caitlin thought about ignoring her, but the woman was very persistent.

"Miss? Miss, are you from the ship docked outside?"

Caitlin turned to face the woman. "Yes. Yes I am."

"Can I talk to you about something?" She sighed. "My name is Toni Varren. I'm a forge operator here on the platform. I need your help. I need to get off this place."

That caught Caitlin's attention. It was the first time she'd heard any of the *Antigone* crew even suggest that they wanted to leave. Most of them acted like they were perfectly happy aboard the mining platform with their friends and family. Hathaway didn't want to evacuate and he thought the *Antigone* was about to be destroyed.

"We may be able to arrange that," Caitlin said. She wasn't sure if it was true or a lie. There was plenty of room aboard the *Fenghuang*, but Seth was fairly paranoid about letting anyone he didn't trust onto the ship. Still, she thought it was the best way to get the woman to trust her. "What is going on? Why do you want to leave?"

Toni leaned in and spoke in a very hushed tone. "Because I'm afraid. I don't want to scare anyone else, but I think the station is falling into the sun."

Goosebumps prickled up across Caitlin's arms and she started to feel a pit forming in her stomach. Hathaway wasn't the only one who knew about the descent of the *Antigone*. As she looked up from Toni and glanced once more at the faces of the rest of the crew, Caitlin realized that they all knew. Somehow, every one of them realized what was going on.

"How do you know?" Caitlin asked. She still wasn't able to get a good answer from Commander Hathaway, but maybe this woman would be more willing to talk, especially if she thought that Caitlin was her ticket off the station.

Toni put a trembling finger up to her lips. "Shhh... I'll show you. Meet me near the forge in fifteen minutes." Then she got up from her seat and quickly shuffled away.

Caitlin's mind raced. She was scared. She was in over her head. There was a very good chance that whatever Toni was going to show her was going to be something she couldn't possibly understand. She wanted to go back to the ship and get someone to come along with her. But they didn't seem to have any interest in solving the problems of the people aboard the *Antigone*. What good would Seth or Alena do if they were just going to insult Toni?

Taking a deep breath of the awful air around her, Caitlin decided that it would be best if she went alone. She could just talk to the others afterward if she didn't understand.

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The forge was a dark and strange place. It was a large room near the back of the mining platform filled with dust and dirty containers. The smell of chemicals overwhelmed the stale oxygen and burned Caitlin's nose. There were several large airlock doors at the end of the room. Heavy rails lead up to the doors. They were rusting and decrepit, just like everything else aboard the station.

From what Caitlin had gathered, the forge was designed to utilize the searing heat of the star just below them. The rails lead from the station out into the corona. The containers and the rails were made of

a material that could withstand the temperature. But anything inside them could be cooked with the remarkably consistent heat of Epsilon Andrii. Then the containers would return to the *Antigone*, where they could be cooled and their contents extracted.

Caitlin stared at the airlock doors, waiting for Toni to arrive. It was so strange to think that there was a star on the other side. It was so close that she could almost feel it.

Footsteps echoed in the forge behind Caitlin. She turned to see Toni standing near a stack of containers. "Do you know what would happen if that airlock opened even one centimeter?" Toni asked as she approached. "We would both be boiled alive in seconds. The water in our bodies would turn to steam and the rest of us would turn to liquid."

Caitlin didn't even know how to respond to that. Her heart was racing. She was terrified.

"One of the most important things we learn on this platform is to respect the star," Toni continued. "Because at any moment, for any reason, it could just kill us all."

"You... You said that you had something to show me," Caitlin said. She tried to keep her cool, even though all she could think about was fleeing the forge as fast as possible.

Toni nodded. She walked across the room, towards one of the control panels. "I'm sure you've noticed that there aren't any view-screens on board the *Antigone*. That's because we respect the star. For hundreds of years, it was forbidden. I don't know why. No one really knows why. That's just how it was done. We would not put cameras out to watch the star."

"It has been rather depressing," Caitlin said. "Everything here is so dark and so artificial."

Toni's eyes went wide. "I know! That's why we had to do something. When we all decided that we were going to stay on the station, and maybe not see the sky again for years, well... Me and some of the forge crew decided to rig up a little something. Just so

we could get a little natural light once in a while... or at least something like it. We rigged a camera to one of the forge rails and sent it a few yards from the platform.”

The forge operator tapped a few buttons on the console in front of her. Suddenly, the screen near the front of the forge flared to life, filled with a brilliant white light. Caitlin held her fingers up in front of her eyes as she watched the screen adjust, then reveal the magnificent corona of the star below them.

Almost immediately, Toni seemed entranced by the image of the star. She stared into the view-screen, her mouth slightly open, and was quiet.

Caitlin approached the view-screen and looked at it. It didn't seem bright anymore, but just focusing her eyes on the image gave her a headache. “What do you see?” Caitlin asked. “What makes you think that the station is getting closer to the star?”

“I can see it,” Toni replied, never even looking away.

That just didn't sound right. Caitlin crossed her arms. “Now I do not know much about stars, but even on my world I was able to learn basic geometry. I am fairly certain that from this far away, you would never be able to see such incremental movement.”

“You don't understand. *I can see it.*”

Caitlin's head was now throbbing and she had to turn away from the screen. She couldn't imagine how Toni could continue to look straight at it without even flinching. “Why did you say that you were not allowed to look at the star?”

Toni didn't respond for a long time. She was frozen at the console, seemingly unable to tear herself away. After what felt like minutes, Caitlin decided that she wasn't going to get a response out of the woman. Caitlin turned around and headed for the door. She was just going to have to talk to Seth and Alena about this. Even they might not know anything. This seemed beyond their expertise. Maybe it was just best to leave the station to its own fate.

Just as Caitlin was about to reach the exit, Toni finally responded.

"Stupid reasons," she muttered. "Stupid, stupid reasons."

Caitlin froze. There was something about Toni's voice that sounded wrong, like it came echoing through a deep hallway. She couldn't just leave her behind.

"I think you should come with me," Caitlin said. "We can get off this station. I would also like my captain to have a look at you."

Toni stood up from her seat at the console. She turned to look at Caitlin. Her eyes seemed to swim in her head, glassy and directionless. Before Caitlin could even react, Toni rushed forward and grabbed her by the neck. Pain arched through Caitlin's entire body as the woman's grip paralyzed her.

"You *do not believe me*," she said. Caitlin flailed her arms and tried to free herself. But Toni was too strong and far too quick.

"What are you doing?" Caitlin demanded. Toni didn't respond with words. Instead, she kicked Caitlin in the side and dragged her back towards the view-screen. She let go of Caitlin's neck just long enough to grab her by the hair. Then she forced Caitlin to gaze at the star.

The searing light nearly blinded Caitlin as she struggled to look away. "Stop it!" she yelled. "Stop it!"

Toni would not let up. She tightened her grip on Caitlin's scalp. "No. You will see it. I will make you see it."

Caitlin tried to close her eyes but she could not. She was transfixed. Even though it hurt, she couldn't stop staring into the brilliant image of the star. She could almost see the flames, rising up, licking up towards the camera. But it was more than that. She could feel it in her head. The pressure against her skull, the pounding in her temples... It was almost too much to bear. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Do you see it yet? Do you *understand*?"

"No!"

Toni forced Caitlin's face closer to the screen. Now the pain was too much. Dark spots flew across her vision. A high pitched noise filled the air. She was sure her head was going to explode. Then, just

as it became more than she could bear, everything turned to black.

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“This is unacceptable! You cannot abandon your city!” Edgar Worthington, the First Witanman of Balashyre, turned red as he paced around Caitlin’s office. He had been her closest adviser since she ascended to Governess. He was a large man in the twilight of middle age. His bushy dark eyebrows drew a sharp contrast with his shock of white hair.

Caitlin sat at her desk, arms crossed. “It is not my city, Edgar. You know that better than anyone.” When Governess Morgance died, Caitlin was too young to take on all of the responsibilities of being a Governess. Edgar had effectively ruled in Caitlin’s name until she reached maturity, and continued to make most of her decisions for her. Whether out of laziness or ambition, he’d never allowed her to take up the role herself.

Edgar stared at his governess. He’d never been shy about reprimanding her and Caitlin sometimes wondered if he’d ever stop seeing her as the little girl she used to be. “This is an affront to the Goddess,” he said. “Not only are you abandoning the position that has passed to you through Her divine right, but you are abandoning Her soil... and violating the Treaty of Fréamhaigh to go to the stars.”

“There is nothing in the treaty about leaving Airlann,” Caitlin replied. “Unless I am mistaken, even you have spent a year traveling the stars.”

The Witanman shook his head and looked down at Caitlin across her desk. “So you think this is some sort of Sraithing? You are not a child. You are too old for such frivolities. This is where you belong. On Airlann. In Balashyre. That is what the Goddess intended for you. And it is clear that the Goddess did not intend for any of us to go jumping about the stars. Everyone has discovered that now. That man, that Captain Garland... He is not just in violation of the Treaty of Fréamhaigh but also of interstellar law.”

“How do you know what the Goddess intends for me?” Caitlin

stood up and met the gaze of the large man. "The galaxy is in crisis. Unless someone does *something*, everything is going to fall apart. The only person who is trying to do anything is Captain Garland. And of all the planets in the galaxy, the Goddess lead him to Airlann. And of all the cities on Airlann, the Goddess lead him to mine."

This caused Edgar to lean back and laugh. He exaggerated this holding his sides to mock her further. "So that is what this is still about. Listen, *girreis*, the Goddess has chosen you for something. She chose you to lead this city. She did not choose you to solve the problems of this world, let alone the universe. The Dobhriathar is a fairy tale. There are no anointed ones and there are no validated ones."

Caitlin was quiet. He was wrong. He sounded like the Great Council when they spoke to the original Dobhriathar. They doubted the chosen ones. They told them that it was forbidden to leave the planet. But they were right in the end, and without them there would be no Airlann.

Even if the tale of the first Dobhriathar was nothing but a legend, it still taught an important lesson. What would happen if no one stood up to end the Fall? Captain Garland said that the People's Republic lied. They were not working on a solution. They were doing nothing to re-establish interstellar travel. Someone had to stand up and try to find a solution. If Captain Garland truly had the last starship in the galaxy, he was the only one who could do it. And he was alone.

"He needs my help," Caitlin said. "I am supposed to go with him. I can feel it."

"The city needs you."

Caitlin snapped. She slammed her hand down on the table. "No it does not!" she exclaimed. "You have run this city since the day I ascended to take my mother's place. The city has never been more prosperous..." She pointed to the sky, or at least to the ceiling. "The people up there need my help. No one else will fight for them. So I have to."

“What if you are wrong? What if this Captain Garland does not have a plan? What if this is just the errand of a fool?”

Caitlin narrowed her eyes. “There is something I am meant to do up there. I am sure of it. The fact that you do not believe me, or even that no one believes me, will not deter me. You cannot keep me here. My decision is made.”

Edgar nodded. “Fine. If I cannot convince you that you are wrong... Then it is not my position to try any further. I will oversee the city in your absence and look forward to your safe return.”

He turned around and started to walk towards the door. “Thank you,” Caitlin said.

“I hope you are right,” Edgar said. “An interstellar Dobhriathar would be... Quite interesting.”

The initial few days aboard the I.S.S. Fenghuang were a blur to Caitlin. The ship leapt across the galaxy from star to star as Seth introduced himself to a dozen or so presidents, kings, diplomats, and emperors. He wanted their help. He told them that they could be a part of rebuilding the galaxy, one starship at a time.

At first, Caitlin could only marvel at what she saw. The Fenghuang never landed on any of the planets they visited. Most of them didn't want anything to do with Captain Garland and his proposal. But it was just so amazing to be on a starship, away from her home planet, surrounded by all sorts of technology that she'd never seen before. More than that, it was overwhelming. The Fenghuang was built to be crewed by more than two people, and Caitlin had to learn how to use almost every device in the command center to even keep the ship running.

Once the initial shock and delight wore off, Caitlin began to realize that Seth Garland was just as directionless as her adviser feared. They only managed to convince two planets to assist them—Berkshire and Yuan. They took on two more crewmembers. The first was a scientist who couldn't even figure out how the engine aboard the Fenghuang worked. The second was an interplanetary sports superstar who didn't seem to have any sort of qualifications at all. After a bit of pressing, Caitlin found out that he was Seth's favorite baseball player. That was enough to convince Seth to invite him aboard.

This didn't seem like a Dobhriathar at all. The mission began to

look like the bizarre fantasy of a single man, a man who just happened to have the only starship in the galaxy. It became even worse when they found their final crew member, Alena Heilmann, the mother of interstellar travel. She was supposed to be long dead, but still lived thanks to "a strange trick of physics", as she called it. Her existence became the focal point of Seth's mission and revealed that, until she showed up, he had no plan whatsoever.

But Caitlin did not give up. She knew that she was chosen by the Goddess Airlanni for a reason. Maybe she wasn't supposed to join them to save the galaxy, but there was someone out there who needed her help. And she would find them.

A flash of light. A loud, high-pitched noise. And then a voice. "Wake up." It was a voice she'd heard before, but it was not familiar.

Caitlin slowly drifted awake. She tried to take a deep breath and stretch her arms. She couldn't do either. The air was so stale that it choked her. Her hands were tied down. She was sitting in a chair and her wrists were bound to the armrests.

"Wake up, Miss Adair."

She opened her eyes and tried to figure out where she was. It was a dark room. A flickering panel above her chair provided the only illumination. The walls to her sides were a dark gunmetal and covered with unintelligible writing. The wall in front of her looked more like a giant door, or perhaps a window.

There was a man standing in front of her. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realized that it was Commander Hathaway. He was turned away from her, looking straight into the giant door.

"What... What is going on?"

Commander Hathaway didn't turn to face her. He continued staring straight forward as he spoke. "I didn't understand at first. There were so many things going on. So many wonderful things that I couldn't sift through them. I couldn't make sense of them."

Caitlin once again tried to pull her arms up, to free herself. "Why am I here? Where am I?"

"I worked for decades on this station," Commander Hathaway said. "I thought I knew every nook and every cranny. But it wasn't until we were stuck here that I *really* started looking around. That's when I found this place." He finally spun to look at her, a manic look on his face. "Can you imagine? A secret room. It was sealed behind a bulkhead. Probably hidden for centuries."

"That is... interesting." Caitlin tried to stay calm. She was still piecing together the last few minutes of her memory. The last thing she could recall was staring at the view-screen in the forge as Toni's fingernails dug into her scalp.

Commander Hathaway danced around her chair. Caitlin craned her head back, following him. "I wondered why it could be. I wondered what they wanted to hide." He motioned all about him, towards the scrawled-upon walls. "Someone was here a long time ago. Someone built this room into the station and everyone since then wanted to forget it."

How long had it been? By now, the rest of the crew aboard the *Fenghuang* had to notice that she was missing. When did she tell them that she would be back? She couldn't even remember. Her head was spinning, still disoriented from whatever made her black out before.

"Can I just go back to my ship?"

The commander didn't even respond. He just continued on, as if speaking only to himself. "It took me weeks to figure out what this room was for. But I had plenty of time. There was nothing more to do. We didn't need to operate the mine or the forge. Not really. We didn't have any orders that we had to meet. In fact, no one was going to come to pick anything up."

"Someone will come looking for me eventually."

That finally got Commander Hathaway's attention. He circled back around to face Caitlin and scowled at her. "Why are you so upset?"

he asked, his voice now soft. "Why would you ever want to leave?"

Caitlin tried to calm down. Making Hathaway angry wasn't going to solve anything. He was clearly unstable. She didn't want to push him to hurt her. "I do not want to leave. Not until we have figured out what is going on. I was to help you. I want to save this station. But there is nothing I can do if I am tied up here, in some room hidden away from everything."

"It's too late for that," he replied. He almost sounded disappointed. "You have seen the surface of the star. And you know what will happen. You know what must happen. I didn't understand at first. But now I do. And so will you."

Once again, Hathaway walked to the back of the room. Caitlin managed to turn enough to see that the commander was standing near a small panel. He tapped a few buttons and let out a contented sigh. A loud *whirring* filled the air. Caitlin turned to see the massive door in front of her begin to slide open.

Her first thought was to hold her breath, as it looked and sounded like an airlock. Her second thought was to remember what Seth had told her about the vacuum of space, which was that holding her breath would do very little to save her. Then came her third thought, which was the relief which came with the realization that the air was not going to be sucked out of the room.

The giant door was not an airlock. It was a window, the only one on the entire space station. The reinforced glass was heavily tinted and several inches thick, but it was now the only thing between them and the brilliant corona of Epsilon Andrii below.

"Behold!" Commander Hathaway exclaimed. "And look upon it, for you shall see such wondrous things!"

Even through the the thick glass, the light from the star was overwhelming. Caitlin could almost feel the heat singeing her skin.

Caitlin cringed as the pain in her head roared back to life. It wasn't just because the room was now incredibly bright. There was something else.

The high-pitched tone filled the room. It was loud, almost deafening, but just beneath it she could hear something else. Soft whispers and dissonant chimes echoed in her ears. It was almost as if something was trying to speak to her.

"Close it!" Caitlin demanded. "Close the window!" She continued to struggle with the rope binding her wrists, realizing that it was getting a tiny bit looser with each pull.

"Why would I ever do that?" Hathaway asked. Caitlin looked back again to see that he was still at the console. "When I come back, you will understand. And you will see what we both have to do." A loud *woosh* revealed a hidden sliding door on the left side of the room. Commander Hathaway crossed in front of Caitlin, staring out of the window the entire time. He had to tear himself away just long enough to close the door behind him.

And just like that, Caitlin was alone with the star. Even though she was focused on freeing herself from the rope around her arms, and even though it hurt her head and split her ears, she couldn't help but gaze into the light.

Shadows danced on the surface of the corona in perfect, undisturbed patterns. The whispering grew louder and louder until it almost overwhelmed the high pitched tone. She couldn't understand a single word, but it was still starting to make sense to her. It was an idea, repeating itself over and over again.

The Dobhriathar must be broken.

What did that mean? Images flashed in her head. She could see herself aboard the *Fenghuang*. She could feel the heat in her hand as she reached into the bowels of the Heilmann Drive and grabbed something. What was it? She didn't know. But she knew that as soon as she pulled it out, it would destroy the ship. It would send the *Fenghuang* and the *Antigone* spiraling into the star below. All she had to do was free herself and she could do it. She could end everything. Just like she was supposed to.

Why did she want to do it? She would die too, wouldn't she? But it

wouldn't really be death. She would join the eternal peace of Epsilon Andrii. She would become part of its perfect cycle

Then, just as these thoughts were about to overwhelm her, her right wrist broke free. She looked down to try and untie the ropes around her left arm. As soon as her gaze broke from the surface of the star, the whispering stopped. Her mind was clear again.

Sweat poured down her face as she realized what was going on. The star was doing something to her. She couldn't look at it. She couldn't let it control her. It was going to kill her.

Caitlin fumbled as she unwrapped the knot around her left arm. Once it was free, she briefly glanced up. The light from the star seared into her eyes and tried to lock her in place. The whispers returned louder than ever.

The Dobhriathar must be broken.

It took every ounce of strength for her to turn away again. She jumped to her feet and turned her back on the window.

She couldn't let herself look at it again. One more glimpse, and there would be no more fighting it. It would have her. She ran to the back of the room and slammed her hand on the panel that had opened the window. There were only a few buttons, one of them had to close it.

As soon as Caitlin heard the grinding gears, she was overwhelmed by a sudden desire to look back. It would be the last time she'd ever get the chance to look upon the star, and that ate at her. Even though she knew what it would do to her, her entire body ached to let her stare into the light once more.

Caitlin's hands shook as she held the wall in front of her, resisting the urge to turn around. The light filling the room began to fade. The high-pitched tone grew quiet. Her head twitched, as if she wanted to turn around involuntarily. But she held firm. She would not give in.

Finally, the room went dark. The air was silent. And Caitlin dropped to her knees. She was exhausted, but she knew that she didn't have any time to rest. Commander Hathaway was right about one thing.

Looking upon Epsilon Andrii made her understand. She now knew what he saw, and how he and everyone on board the *Antigone* got it wrong.

The station was not falling into the star. The star was trying to force the station to destroy itself. It was reaching into the mind of everyone on board and planting that idea in their head. But why? Why did it want to destroy the station?

*

Caitlin looked left and right as she exited the *Antigone* forge and stepped into the hallway. She didn't know where Commander Hathaway was. She wasn't even sure he was the only one who was a threat to her. Everyone on board seemed shiftless, anxious, as if they were somehow being affected by the star as well. Did they even need to look into it to feel its influence?

All she knew was that she had to make it back to the *Fenghuang* to tell Captain Garland and the others what she discovered. She still wanted to save the station, but she now knew that it would take more than a few systems diagnostics and repairs to keep them from destruction. Now that Commander Hathaway was beginning to understand what the star was asking of him, it would only be a matter of time before he figured out a way to do it. Caitlin didn't understand anything about the machines that kept the *Antigone* in steady orbit, but she knew that they were complicated enough that it would be simple to make them malfunction.

One of the crew members, a young woman with brown hair and deep-set eyes, approached Caitlin in the hall. Before, everyone on board the *Antigone* looked down at the floor as they passed her. It was like they refused to even make eye contact with her. Now, this woman stared straight at her as she grew closer. Something was different. Something had changed.

As Caitlin continued towards the airlock, she found that the other members of the crew were similarly fixated on her. They all watched her intently as she passed, their gaze never deviating from her face. It

was eerie, and as each one passed her, she feared that they might try and stop her from reaching the ship. It was not until she was only a few yards away from the airlock that one of them actually did.

He was a man with silvery eyes and a receding hairline. He stared at Caitlin as she approached, just like all the rest, and she was beginning to ignore it. Then he reached out and grabbed her arm. Before Caitlin could even react, he pushed her up against the bulkhead.

"You know what has to be done," the man hissed. His breath was foul and sulfuric. "The Dobhriathar must be broken." With that, he let her go and walked away.

Caitlin was frozen to the spot, though her entire body was shaking. Her head was swimming and, this time, she was sure it had nothing to do with the stale air on the station.

She tried to justify what she had just heard. It was the same exact phrase that echoed in her head as she stared upon Epsilon Andrii. But then it made sense. The star was pressing into her, using ideas and thoughts in her own head to influence her. But how could this man, this miner on a space station thousands of light-years away from Airlann know about the Dobhriathar? It was impossible.

"Hey!" a familiar voice shouted. She looked up. Alena Heilmann was standing down the hall, near the airlock. "Where have you been? It's been almost twelve hours. We're starting to worry."

Caitlin took a deep breath. How could she even begin? "The station is in danger. I think the ship is in danger."

Alena didn't even flinch. "We already looked at everything. There's nothing wrong with the station. It's not falling into the star."

"I know," Caitlin replied. "That is not what I am talking about."

Alena put her hands on her hips, waiting for a further explanation but it wasn't forthcoming. Caitlin wasn't even sure she wanted to elaborate. Even if Alena believed the truth, all it would mean was that they would have to leave the station immediately. And as much as Caitlin wanted to be away from Commander Hathaway and the

hypnotic power of Epsilon Andrii, she needed more answers. If the people on the station knew about the Dobhriathar, Caitlin had to understand how and why.

"You have an open mind, right?" Caitlin asked. "Because I need you to have an open mind."

This just made Alena more skeptical. She cocked an eyebrow and sighed. "Just be quick about it. I don't want to waste any more time here than we already have."

"The star is doing something to the people aboard this station," Caitlin replied.

Alena stared at her. "The star?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but..." Caitlin considered what she would say here. There really was only one way to get Alena to understand her. They had to go back through the forge, to the massive window out on the star. Once Alena saw that, once she realized that the star was trying to get in her head, just like it got in the heads of the entire crew of the *Antigone*, she would be just as curious. "Just give me fifteen minutes. I need to show you."

"Why am I even listening to this?" Alena asked, but she didn't refuse to go along with Caitlin as she turned around and headed for the forge.

Caitlin felt a lot safer with Alena at her side. She was a scientist—perhaps the most famous scientist in the galaxy. There had to be some explanation for the madness of the crew, the images and words Caitlin saw in her head when she stared at the star, and the almost inconceivable reference to the Dobhriathar. If anyone could figure out what was going on aboard the *Antigone*, it was Alena Heilmann.

While Caitlin saw several crew members on her way to the airlock, returning to the forge was a very different experience. The halls of the mining platform were suddenly very empty. The crew was gone.

"Where is everyone?" Alena asked as they approached the forge

"I have no idea. There were people everywhere just a few minutes

ago.”

Alena motioned towards the heavy metal door to the forge. “Do you think we can get in there on our own?” Caitlin just shrugged and approached the panel next to the door. The controls were unfamiliar to her. She couldn’t remember what Toni did to get inside. “Maybe we should turn back. This is all ridiculous anyway.”

Caitlin wasn’t ready to give up. She pressed the largest button on the panel and, when that didn’t do anything, started mashing her fingers against the rest. The light above the door went out. A machine near the back of the hall whirled to life. And then, to Caitlin’s relief, *click!* The door swung open.

The forge was now almost completely dark, illuminated only by the flickering of a view-screen. At first glance it looked empty, but as Caitlin gazed through the dim light she could make out several figures in burnt orange jumpsuits. They were standing several yards into the forge, facing away from the door and staring at the view-screen in the back.

Caitlin was quiet as she entered the forge. The people inside didn’t seem to know she was there and she wanted to keep it that way. But as she approached them, she couldn’t help but let out an audible gasp.

It wasn’t just a few members of the crew standing inside the forge. It was all of them. Dozens of men and women stood in front of the dim view-screen, completely still, watching the light from the star.

“What the hell is going on?” Alena exclaimed as soon as she saw the crowd of people. Caitlin turned and put a finger to her lips to silent her, but it was unnecessary. No one in the forge even flinched at the sound of her voice. “What are you all watching?”

Once Caitlin realized that either the *Antigone* crew couldn’t hear them or didn’t care, she tried to explain the situation to Alena. “This is what I was talking about,” she said, still keeping her voice down. “The star is responsible for this. And we need to figure out how and why.”

Alena circled around the crowd, and Caitlin followed right behind

her. She approached the crew member nearest the back, a younger man with black hair, and examined him. He was perfectly still. His eyes were glassy and unblinking. His jaw hung slightly open.

"Hey!" Alena exclaimed. "You there?" The man did not respond. Alena lifted her hand up to his face and places her first two fingers under his nose.

"What are you doing?" Caitlin asked.

"He's still breathing." Alena furrowed her brow and thought for a second about what to try next. Then she reached into her jacket and pulled out a laser pistol. She checked to make sure it was charged and placed the barrel against the young man's temple.

Caitlin grabbed her wrist. "What are you doing?" she yelled. "There is no reason to hurt him."

Alena batted away Caitlin's arm. "I wanted to see if he was faking." She pulled the weapon away from the man's head, then pointed it straight at the woman next to him. Her eyes didn't even move to look at the gun. "I don't think they're faking." She put away the gun and turned to face Caitlin. "What's going on?"

"That is what we need to figure out. I think it has something to do with the star. Commander Hathaway took me to this hidden room nearby. He made me look at the star and it... It gave me these visions. Visions of destroying this station and our ship."

"That's insane," Alena said. "But, then again, so is all of this." She motioned to the paralyzed men and women around her. Let's find Commander Hathaway. Maybe he knows something"

Caitlin and Alena pushed into the crowd. The paralyzed *Antigone* crew didn't make any effort to get out of their way, but they also didn't make any effort to stop them. Caitlin went from person to person, trying to locate the commander, but he was nowhere to be found.

With each vacant face staring into her, Caitlin felt the fear in her heart grow. They were gone. The part of them that was alive was missing. They didn't even seem human anymore.

"He is not here," Caitlin said as soon as she'd looked at all of the

gathered crew members. Commander Hathaway was not among them. It did not come as a surprise. "He is probably in the command center or in the hidden observation room. We should go."

Alena didn't respond. Caitlin looked to her side and realized that she'd lost her. "Alena!" she called out. She was about to yell again when her stomach turned. Alena was standing at the very front of the crowd, staring at the view-screen like everyone else in the forge. The corona of Epsilon Andrii glowed softly on the screen. As Caitlin's eyes passed over it, she could hear the ringing in her ears and the pressure in her head surge forward. It almost overwhelmed her again.

"No," Caitlin gasped. "This is not happening." She rushed forward and put her hand on Alena's shoulder. "Stop looking at it." She pulled at with all her strength, forcing her to look away.

Caitlin breathed a sigh of relief as Alena broke free from the hypnotic power of the screen. . She immediately spun away from it, towards Caitlin, and looked at her with wide eyes.

"We have to get out of here," Alena said.

"I know," Caitlin replied. "The commander is not here. We are wasting our time and—"

Alena shook her head. "No. Forget the commander. We have to get off this station right now."

Before Caitlin could object, the air was split with a loud *crash!* The floor shook, nearly knocking Caitlin and Alena to the ground. The crew members surrounding them didn't lose their balance for even a second, shifting their weight perfectly to accommodate.

Suddenly, Caitlin felt light-headed. It was as if her feet were lifting off the ground. And then she realized that they were. The gravity on the station was changing. She didn't need to look at any statistics to confirm it. She could feel it in her bones.

Alena held her wrist to her lips. The small comm link around her arm flashed as she called the *Fenghuang*. "What's going on?" she demanded.

Seth Garland's voice crackled through the speaker on the comm

link. "Some kind of explosion on the station. We're trying to figure out. We think it had something to do with the artificial gravity drive."

Caitlin didn't need to hear any more. She'd already put it all together. "We told him how to do it," she said. "We told him how to crash the station into the sun."

And with that, Caitlin and Alena took off running. They pushed through the paralyzed crew members towards the door. Caitlin struggled with the strange way her body seemed to float with every step, but Alena grabbed her hand and pulled her forward, helping her keep her balance.

As they reached the door, the lights outside flickered. The view-screen behind them lit up and burned out. The forge went dark.

Suddenly, the crew of the *Antigone* woke from their waking slumber. No longer entranced by the faint image of the star's corona, they returned to life.

The young man near the back, the one who Alena first examined, stumbled towards them. He seemed to be having just as much trouble with the fluctuating gravity as they were.

Caitlin stopped. "Are you okay?" she asked.

He didn't respond at first. He just sneered. Then as he got closer, he lurched forward and tried to grab Caitlin by the arm. She tripped backwards, just narrowly avoiding his fingers. He looked up at her, fury in his eyes.

"The Dobhriathar must be broken," he hissed.

A flash of red light momentarily brightened the room and the young man fell backwards. Smoke rose from his chest and Caitlin looked back to see Alena holding her laser pistol out in front of her.

"We have to go," Alena said. "We're not welcome here."

The rest of the *Antigone* crew backed off. They saw what happened to the man who dared approach Caitlin and Alena. He was dead, and it took them a second to decide whether they wanted to risk the same fate.

This gave Caitlin and Alena just enough time to back out of the

forge. Just as they were leaving, the crew realized that Alena couldn't shoot them all and rushed forward. But it was too late. Caitlin put all of her weight on the metal door, shutting it. Alena put her laser pistol up against the control panel and pulled the trigger, locking them in.

"They are going to be trapped here. They are going to die here," Caitlin said.

"They were going to kill us," Alena replied, almost as if that excused it.

The comm link on Alena's wrist crackled to life again. "The station's orbit is deteriorating," Captain Garland said. "It's... It's really happening. It's falling into the star. Just like he said it would."

"Just like he made it," Alena replied. "We're headed back to the ship. Prepare to leap. These people have lost their minds. Let's leave them to the results of their madness."

Alena started down the hall, towards the airlock. Caitlin wanted to tell her to stop. There was still too much they didn't know. But they couldn't risk staying on the station. If it was falling into the star, they had to leap away. No mystery was worth dying for.

Without anyone in the halls to stop them, they reached the end of the hall quickly. Alena brought her arm to her mouth and yelled into her comm link. "Open the doors! We're here!"

The gears whirled and clicked as the airlock came to life. Sparks flew from the door, flying across Caitlin's face and sending her reeling backwards. Then the airlock doors stopped moving. They were stuck.

"What's going on?" Alena demanded. "Open up!"

A long string of static crackled across the comm link speaker. After a few seconds, Captain Garland responded. "We can't. Someone... They've overridden the controls. We cannot separate from the station. They're going to take us down with them."

And, in that moment, everything finally made sense to Caitlin.

The legends of Airlann were full of men and women who experienced visions. Almost all of these were credited to the Goddess Airlanni, who came to the aid of her people to give them the answers that they needed. Some versions of the Dobhriathar legend included elaborate dreams sent to the chosen, giving them the solutions to the problems that plagued the planet.

But not all visions were the work of the goddess. Some spoke of sights that did not exist, and were driven mad by their persistence. They would commit crimes, even murders, at the behest of the strange desires that overwhelmed their senses.

Many believed that these awful visions came from the depths of the stars, from the black sky beyond the protection of the goddess. They believed that these hallucinations, as well as those that were burdened with them, were evil.

If Airlanni, their own planet, was their goddess... then the void was their devil. Their demons came from the depths beyond the pinpricks of light that broke the darkness of the night.

Caitlin was raised to know that these poor souls were not possessed by monsters from beyond the stars. They were plagued by biological defects, tricks upon the brain, that convinced otherwise rational men that reality was not what it seemed. They had a disease that was just as real and as fatal as the wasting that killed her mother.

But now, after staring into the surface of Epsilon Andrii, Caitlin couldn't help but wonder if there was something to those old stories

and superstitions. She had no doubt about what she saw. Something in the star got into her head, and it showed her visions that she could not deny.

The star wanted them dead. And it looked like it was about to get its way.

Arcturus Hathaway stood at the back of the *Antigone* generator bay, his arms stretched out to his sides. His hands were swollen and red. The controls and screens around him were dark, save for intermittent streams of sparks that flew from their surfaces. As soon as he heard the door open behind him, he turned to face his visitors. His eyes were wide, manic and bloodshot.

"I didn't know which panel to destroy... So I broke them all." The commander's voice trembled with excitement.

Alena pushed past Caitlin into the room. "Step back. Let me..." As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realized that there was nothing more that could be done. Hathaway hadn't just destroyed the interface, but there were huge holes in the wall near the console. He'd damaged the gravity drive itself. "What have you done?"

Hathaway lower his hands and took a step towards them. "We are surrounded by darkness, but soon there will only be light. Beautiful, warm light!"

"We're all going to burn to death!" Alena exclaimed.

Caitlin stepped into the generator bay behind Alena. "That is what he wants," she said. "That is what it wants." She looked at Hathaway and tried to keep her voice calm. "The star wants us dead. Not you. Us. Me, Alena, Captain Garland... Am I right, commander?"

A wide smile spread across Hathaway's face. "I thought you wouldn't understand! I thought you would fight this, but you see it too."

"The Dobhriathar must be broken," Caitlin said and Hathaway nodded furiously.

"What are you two talking about?" Alena yelled. She pulled her laser pistol out of her jacket and pointed it at Commander Hathaway.

"We don't have time for this and he's just going to get in our way."

Caitlin rushed in front of Alena and grabbed the barrel of the pistol.

"No! Do not kill him! I need to understand."

"The only thing you need to understand is that we have thirty minutes, tops, until the bulkheads of this station start to melt... and if I'm going to get the airlock open, I need every second of that time."

"Just... Just let me talk to him for a moment."

Alena nodded and lowered her gun, but only enough that it was pointed at Hathaway's legs instead of his chest. She started to circle around him, towards the control panels in the back of the generator bay.

Caitlin looked back at the commander. "How do you know about the Dobhriathar?"

Hathaway smiled again, but he didn't say anything. He just motioned to the ceiling and pointed up, towards the sky.

"The star told you. Did it use that... word?"

"It does not need to use words. Where it comes from, there are no words."

Caitlin felt a chill run down her spine. "What do you mean? What is it? What is Epsilon Andrii?"

Commander Hathaway tilted his head to the left as he thought about this. After a few seconds, he seemed to come up with an answer, but when he opened his mouth, only one word came out.

"No."

"What?" Caitlin asked. Hathaway started to move his lips, as if he was trying to speak but nothing came out of his mouth. Caitlin just kept asking questions, hoping that he'd have the answer for one of them. "Why does it want us dead? Is it because of the Heilmann Drive? Is the People's Republic right? Is it damaging the... the..." Caitlin tried to remember what Seth told her was the problem with the Heilmann Drive, but she couldn't think of the words.

Alena, who had made her way to the gravity control panel, filled in the blanks. "The fabric of space-time," she said, though she'd barely

been paying attention to the conversation.

"Does the star want us dead because we are damaging the fabric of space-time?" Caitlin finally asked. Hathaway shook his head. "Then why? What is going on?"

"No." The commander's head twitched, and he tried to speak more, but again it was like something was stopping him. "I... I want to tell you."

The commander looked down and saw his feet begin to float up off of the ground. As the artificial gravity systems failed completely, he was lifted into the air along with Caitlin, Alena, and everything in the room that wasn't bolted down.

Fear pumped through Caitlin's heart. It felt like the dreams she had, like she was falling. But she couldn't let that distract her. She had to focus. "If you want to tell me, then just tell me. I need to know."

Hathaway opened his mouth but instead of saying anything, he began to stick out his tongue. A look of panic filled his eyes and he started to wave his hands around. He kicked his feet in the air then grabbed at his face, but it did nothing. He couldn't stop himself. As soon as his tongue was stretched past his teeth, he bit down.

Caitlin screamed as she saw the blood gush from his mouth. Almost as soon as the crimson liquid spilled forth, it formed into perfect spheres and drifted towards her. The commander's severed tongue, barely two inches of pink flesh, floated up towards the ceiling.

"What's going on back there?" Alena asked, then looked back to see Hathaway writhing in agony, bleeding profusely. His eyes rolled back into his head and he appeared to lose consciousness. "Well, I don't know what you did, but I guess that was better than shooting him. No risk of hitting any equipment." Caitlin looked at her, horrified at her calm reaction. "Come over and help me."

Caitlin reached up and pressed her hand against the ceiling of the generator bay. She pushed herself towards the back of the room and the panel that Alena was working on.

"It made him bite off his own tongue so he would not be able to tell

us anything," she said.

Alena sighed. "He was insane. That's it. Plain and simple. He can't even see the star in here. There aren't any windows."

"You saw it too."

"Just hold this for me." Alena passed a long, shimmering cable to Caitlin. "We can discuss your theories later, when we're alive because I'm not going to pay attention to them right now."

Caitlin knew she was right, and decided to keep quiet. There was no point in convincing Alena of anything if they were just going to be dead within the half-hour.

The scientist and the governess worked quickly to try and repair as much of the computer interface as possible. There was no hope of fixing the artificial gravity generator, but if they could get the security systems back online, they could open the airlock doors and return to the *Fenghuang*.

Hathaway had shut off power to almost every system on the mining platform. Alena didn't say so, but Caitlin assumed that this included life support. Normally, this would have been at the forefront of her worries, but the station would burn up in the corona of Epsilon Andrii long before the air ran out.

The only two systems on the station that were still receiving power from the generators were the emergency lights and the artificial gravity drive. Since Hathaway destroyed that, he hadn't bothered to cut the supply of electricity. Alena figured that all they had to do was re-wire the cables from the gravity drive to the security and docking systems. Caitlin didn't know what she was doing, but Alena gave very clear, concise instructions and she was able to follow along well enough.

Over the next fifteen minutes, they drifted between consoles, spliced wires into wires, ran cables from one end of the generator bay to the other, and carefully stitched the gravity and security systems together.

For the most part, they ignored the floating body of Commander

Hathaway, though they had to push him to the front of the room because he kept getting in the way. Alena asked Caitlin to do this, but she could barely look at the man. His skin was pale and blood still bubbled from his crimson-stained lips. In the end, Alena had to take it upon herself to dispose of the incapacitated commander. She grabbed onto his arm and flung him towards the door, hoping he would slip out into the hall. Instead, he struck the wall near the doorway with a *thud*. For just a second, Caitlin thought she might have seen him twitch in pain.

By the time Alena and Caitlin were done, they were drenched in sweat. Beads of perspiration floated from their foreheads and arms and rose into the air. The temperature on the station had risen to sweltering temperatures. The station's cooling systems were failing as it moved closer to the star. This was their only shot. If this didn't work... They didn't have the time to try and fix it a second time.

"This is it," Alena said as she started booting up the security computers. "If anything goes wrong..."

Caitlin's eyes were wide as she looked over at her. "What do you mean if anything goes wrong? I thought you were supposed to be the greatest engineer in history."

"I'm working under pressure! And power distribution isn't exactly my field. If the voltage isn't modulated correctly or one of the wires is spliced to the wrong cable, bad things are going to happen." She sighed. "But we did a good job, so I'm moderately confident about this."

Alena tapped a few more buttons on the security console. Caitlin held her breath as she heard the generators *whirr* in the background. Sparks flicked from the cables that stretched across the room and Alena held up her hand, as if to tell Caitlin that everything was fine.

The lights on the security panel flickered and flashed, then dimly came to life.

"It is working!" Caitlin exclaimed.

Alena smiled. "I knew it would. Now, I just need to unseal the airlock

and remove the docking clamps from the *Fenghuang* before anything else goes wrong.” She quickly went to work on the console, furiously tapping the flickering buttons.

Caitlin watched her intently. Even though she’d never used this particular interface, Alena was able to navigate it with ease. She found the command for releasing the docking clamps first, and freed the *Fenghuang* from the grasp of the mining platform. Then she got to work on disabling the airlock seal.

Suddenly, a loud, guttural noise filled the air. Caitlin turned just in time to see Commander Hathaway hurtling towards her, arms outstretched. His eyes were still glazed over, his skin was still as pale as death, and blood still poured from his mouth... but he was alive.

Before she could react, Hathaway grabbed her by the shoulder and threw her towards the ground. Beads of sweat flew from her face and blinded her as he twisted in the air and struck the floor. Pain throbbed in her arm and she looked up, readying herself for another blow.

But Commander Hathaway didn’t care about her. He was headed for Alena and the now-functional security console. Caitlin struggled to right herself as she floated upwards. She was still adjusting to moving in zero gravity, but she was able to push herself off the ground and chase after the commander.

Just as Hathaway was about to reach Alena, Caitlin thrust her arm out and wrapped her fingers around his ankle. He let out another deep groan, finally pulling Alena’s attention away from the console. She looked back and her eyes went wide.

“I have this!” Caitlin yelled and pulled on Hathaway’s ankle. “Just get those doors open.”

Hathaway tumbled backwards, towards the front of the generator bay. Caitlin let go of him and circled towards the security console, trying to put herself between the mad commander and Alena. He steadied himself on the far wall and looked at Caitlin with dead eyes. Then he opened his mouth and let out a furious roar, the only noise he could make. Blood poured from his throat, into the air, and he pushed

himself towards her.

His forehead struck the bubbling crimson liquid and it covered his face and eyes. He didn't even seem to notice. All of his attention was fixed on Caitlin. He was going to do whatever he could to prevent them, and the *Fenghuang*, from leaving the station before it was destroyed.

Caitlin caught Hathaway by the shoulders as he struck her, and they grappled, spinning in midair. His blood splashed across Caitlin and she felt her stomach wrench. But she could not let her grip falter. Her resolve had to be as strong as his if they were to survive.

Hathaway's fingers dug into her flesh as he grabbed at her neck. She tried to pull away, to throw him towards the front of the room again, but he was too strong. There was only one thing she could do. She wrapped her own hands around his throat and pressed as hard as she could.

He was stronger than her, but his strength was fading as he continued to bleed out. The remaining color drained from his face and his grip on Caitlin's neck started to falter. But she didn't let go. Even though her hands were slippery with sweat and blood, she continued to squeeze his throat with all of her might.

Caitlin had never hurt anyone before. She'd never fired a gun or even thrown a punch. She tried to tell herself that this was justified. Hathaway was already dead at his own hands. He'd sent the station hurtling into the star below. She was only speeding up the process a little. And she was doing it to survive. As she watched his life slip away, she realized that it wasn't enough. The agony in his face was seared into her brain. She was just about to close her eyes, as if not seeing it would make it better, when the room lit up with a bright flash.

Suddenly, Hathaway's hands fell from Caitlin's shoulders. His entire body gave way and Caitlin let go of his neck. He started to float away, towards the side of the room, when she saw Alena Heilmann standing behind him. She pointed her laser pistol at Hathaway's body and fired again. Red energy arched from the weapon and struck him

straight in the chest.

Caitlin was dumbfounded. She didn't even know what to say, though that didn't stop her from speaking. "I had him," she said. Even though she was grateful that Alena stepped in and took the killing blow, it still somehow felt wrong. "Why did you do that?"

"Because it was easy for me," Alena replied. "And because I was afraid you would have to dwell on it. We don't have time for that." She holstered her laser pistol inside her jacket. "Come on. The airlock is open. We need to go."

"How long do we have?" Caitlin was still frozen in place, floating in the center of the generator bay where she'd fought with Hathaway.

Alena reached towards the bulkhead and pressed her hand against the wall. She immediately pulled away as the metal seared her palm. "Minutes. If that. Let's go." She spun around in the air and kicked the bulkhead, propelling her towards the generator bay door. Caitlin pushed off from the floor, following her into the hallway.

Almost as soon as they were out of the generator bay, they could hear a muffled cacophony echo through the halls. It sounded like yelling and screaming, coupled with the sound of fists pounding on metal walls. The crew was still locked in the forge, trapped within the falling station.

"We can't help them," Alena said as they approached the door to the forge.

Caitlin could see the walls shaking as they struggled to get out. "Because they are already lost?"

"Because we don't have time."

Caitlin wanted to object, but she could feel that Alena was right. The heat was almost unbearable now. Her clothes were soaked with the same sweat that stung her eyes. The air shimmered with heat from every surface. She singed her fingertips every time she touched a wall to push herself towards the airlock.

The comm link on Alena's wrist crackled to life. "What's your status?" Captain Garland's voice echoed through the static. "We're

starting to boil over here.”

“I’ve unsealed the docking clamps,” Alena replied. “Begin take-off. If we’re not there in one minute, leap without us. Save the ship at all costs.”

Those words made Caitlin’s heart skip a beat. She remembered how long it took her to run from the forge to the airlock. A minute didn’t seem like nearly enough time, especially in zero gravity. That could only mean one thing. “Did you just tell him to leave us behind?”

Alena looked back at her and smiled. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it,” she said and reached towards Caitlin. “Just trust me.”

Caitlin took her hand. The second their fingers touched, Alena grabbed her and pulled her forward. She wrapped her right arm around Caitlin’s waist and kicked off with her feet.

Beads of sweat flew off of them as they soared through the simmering hallway. Alena withdrew her laser pistol with her left hand and fired it behind them, striking the searing walls, propelling them faster and faster. Caitlin dared to look back and see that the plastic on the wall panels was beginning to melt. The station was collapsing. This time it was no delusion, it was no product of madness. They were falling into the star.

Suddenly, Alena thrust her left arm out. She thrust the barrel of her laser pistol against the wall. Sparks flew as metal struck searing metal. Caitlin could feel the Alena’s muscles tense as she held on, letting the friction slow them down. Then, with a mighty heave, Alena shoved Caitlin into a nearby door.

At first, Caitlin panicked. She thought Alena was abandoning her. Then she realized that they were already at the airlock. The walls around her were not the dull gray of the mining station. She was back on board the *Fenghuang*.

Alena remained in the hallway outside, aboard the *Antigone*. “What are you doing?” Caitlin asked. “Get in here!”

“I have to make sure this closes when we separate. Otherwise...”

The ground beneath Caitlin shook. It was too late. The *Fenghuang*

was already breaking away from the mining station.

Caitlin leapt forward, towards the door, and seized Alena's hand. Before she could even object, Caitlin pulled her into the airlock.

The walls of the *Antigone*, just yards from the airlock, began to glow. They were white hot. Caitlin could almost see them melting in front of her face. . She wrapped her arms around Alena and grabbed the comm link on her wrist.

"We are on board!" Caitlin yelled. "Get us out of here! Close the airlock and leap!"

A loud grinding noise filled the air as the airlock doors began to close. The interior of the *Antigone* lit up, becoming nothing more than a blinding white as it was slowly consumed by the star below. For just a second, as the doors were sliding shut, Caitlin felt something speak to her.

The Dobhriathar must be broken.

"Don't listen to it," Alena started to say. But Caitlin could barely hear her. All the sound was pulled from the room as the *Fenghuang* began its leap. Caitlin felt her stomach wrench inside her. For the first time, it was actually comforting.

In the blink of an eye, they were gone. They were transported lightyears away from the burning wreckage of the *Antigone* and the seductive corona of Epsilon Andrii. As soon as the ship settled, finishing its leap, Caitlin could finally take a deep breath. The cool, clean air of the *Fenghuang* filled her lungs. They were safe.

*

Captain Seth Garland sat at the head of one of the lab tables in the makeshift conference room aboard his starship. He held his hands in front of his face and stared through his fingers at Caitlin and Alena, who were seated across from him.

"Do you want me to believe that the star was *speaking to people*?"

Caitlin gulped. While she hadn't said those words, they were the underlying assumption behind everything that she'd come to believe about the fate of the mining platform *Antigone*. She wasn't sure how

to back up such a facially ridiculous theory. Fortunately, she didn't have to. Alena did it for her.

"Normally, I would write off what happened to the crew of the *Antigone* as some sort of mass delusion," she said. "But I looked into the star myself and I saw something."

Seth smiled. "And you couldn't be delusional, too?"

"No," Alena replied, without a hint of irony. "And I will back up what Caitlin saw. I believe that the star wanted us all dead."

Even though he tried to hide it, Caitlin saw Seth flinch. "Why do you think that is?" he asked as soon as he'd regained his composure. "Why would we even matter to..." His voice trailed off, as if he was unable to acknowledge that a star could have any inclinations whatsoever.

"I don't know," Alena replied. "But if we assume that all of this was done to destroy this ship and to kill us, and that these visions began early enough to plant the idea that the station was falling into the star... Then it knew we were coming."

Caitlin could feel a cold sweat break out on her brow. She was suddenly hit with all the implications of everything that they were discussing. Seth and Alena were both very rational, scientific people and here they were, talking about something that seemed an awful lot like the demons of her childhood fairy tales. But no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't argue against them. She'd stared into the corona of Epsilon Andrii. She felt its will break through into her mind. She could still remember what it told her to do, how to destroy the *Fenghuang*. A very small part of her still wanted to go through with it, as if the star was still affecting her.

"What do we do with all of this?" Caitlin asked.

Seth stood up and clasped his hands behind his back. "First of all, we don't leap anywhere near Epsilon Andrii again. I'm curious about this, as I'm sure you are, but it's too big of a risk. When we've established more of a foothold in the galaxy, and produced more starships, we can send scientists to investigate the star and figure all

of this out."

Caitlin thought long and hard about how to reply to him. He seemed to think that the threat was posed by Epsilon Andrii itself. But Caitlin knew better. The crew of the *Antigone* knew about the legend of the Dobhriathar. Somehow, the power of the star stretched from its corona all the way to the distant shores of Airlann. There was something bigger behind this. Something bigger than a star.

But how could she explain that without sounding ridiculous? She remembered how her mother scolded her for believing that she could be part of a Dobhriathar and for taking such legends so seriously. Seth did not even believe in the power of the goddess, how could he even begin to understand?

"I do not think it is so simple," Caitlin said. "If there is some consciousness behind the star, it is unlike anything we have ever encountered before. We cannot assume that it is limited in the same way that we are."

A grave look settled across Alena's face. "She's right. If Epsilon Andrii is some sort of extraterrestrial life form—and that's what we're saying here—it may not experience space and time the same way that we do."

Seth nodded. "Then we have a much greater enemy than the People's Interstellar Republic. All the more reason we have to move quickly to establish ourselves. And the first step is finding another source of solarium crystals. This ship is still unshielded."

Caitlin reached beneath her chair. "Do not worry about that, captain," she said, pulling a small container from beneath her. "I took this as I was leaving the forge after Commander Hathaway tried to trap me and hid it in my jacket. I figured that we would not be back."

Alena quickly grabbed the container from Caitlin's hands and opened it. The light in the conference room reflected off the solarium crystals inside, bright enough that all three of them could see it.

Just like that, the tension and fear was momentarily broken. "We did it," Alena said, a smile spreading across her face. "After all of

that, we got what we came for.”

“I figured it was time I pulled my weight around here,” Caitlin replied.

They both looked at her with genuine gratitude and, for the first time since taking off from the surface of Airlann, Caitlin was glad she was on board the *Fenghuang*. She had what she'd always wanted, ever since she was a little girl. Along with the rest of the crew, she'd been chosen for some greater purpose. Whatever that purpose was, it was so grand that the stars themselves stirred to hinder them.

This was where she was meant to be. She was part of a Dobhriathar, and a great destiny awaited her.

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