



FASTER THAN LIGHT
THE FALLEN
GODDESS

MALCOLM PIERCE



Faster Than Light: The Fallen Goddess

Malcolm Pierce

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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 2187, the year the Heilmann Drive was invented, 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.

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Towers of metal and glass thrust up into the deep blue skies of Ediston, nearly piercing the atmosphere itself. These skyscrapers were once the gleaming pride of the planet, the technological empire of NewPasTur. They were home to the luxurious offices of the greatest captains of industry. Now the windows were dull, frosted with grime. Flowing banners hung from the outside walls, emblazoned with the words of desperation.

“Cheap lofts!” Cubicles were now bunk beds.

“Move in today, no credit check!” Board rooms were now wash rooms.

“Sunlight 18 hours a day!” Corner offices were now hanging gardens. There was little farmland near Ediston, but people made do. Vegetables were raised outside high-rise story windows. Grains could be grown between two strips of industrial carpet.

The streets ran like rivers of the poor and destitute. Those who were wealthy enough to leave were already gone. If they didn't leave the planet before the Fall, then they moved from the city shortly afterward. Once they were gone, the fuel dried up and the shipments stopped coming. Ediston was still the capital city of NewPasTur in name only. The government had abandoned them, perhaps in the hope that they would destroy themselves.

The skyscrapers shook as an explosion ripped through the skies of Ediston. Movement on the streets stopped as everyone turned to look up.

It was a starship. No one on NewPasTur had seen a starship in over a year.

The vessel was a dull gray, the color of gunmetal and mercury. The hull was long and narrow, almost like a sword. There were no pipes and no exhaust. There were no windows. The sub-light engines were small, barely large enough to take off and land from a planet or a

moon. The rear of the vessel glowed an unnatural purple hue as the ship settled and hovered above the city. Everyone on the surface knew the meaning of that soft glow. This ship had a Heilmann Drive. This ship could travel faster than light.

Hope filled the hearts of the men and women below. Some of them saw their ticket off of the rapidly disintegrating planet. Some of them saw a return of the Old Economy and perhaps the rebirth of Ediston.

The ship shuddered. It let out a loud groan. For just a second, it looked like the savior of Ediston would collapse under its own weight.

Aboard the *I.S.S. Fenghuang*, a similar terror spread throughout the crew. In the command center, navigator Lance Reynolds, a burly man in his mid twenties, felt his heart stop. This was only the second time in his life that he'd plotted a course for a Heilmann Leap. The first time hadn't been so bad. The *Fenghuang* ended up a few light-years away from its destination and no one was hurt. This time was different. This time he'd leapt straight into a planet's atmosphere. That was the first thing his captain told him never to do.

"Are we in the atmosphere?" Captain Seth Garland yelled. "What was the first thing I told you?"

Lance spun around in his chair and glared at Seth. "What did I say? I'm not a navigator! I've never done this before!"

"Well neither had I, before I found you," Seth replied. "And I did just fine! I managed to leap to several different planets without killing myself in the process."

Lance glared at him. "Well we're not all as brilliant as you, Captain." Seth smiled. "Good point." He was a wiry young man, barely twenty if out of his teens, but confident enough to fill up the captain's chair on the bridge. He had dark hair and a wispy beard that betrayed his youth. His eyes were the shape of almonds and his skin was pale. He looked to Lance like a Yuanian, but Seth insisted he was a homeworlder, born and raised on Earth. "Well, looks like we're not dead. Good job, Navigator Reynolds. Pat yourself on the back."

"You do not need to be so disrespectful," Caitlin said. Lance breathed a sigh of relief. Caitlin Adair was the Governor of Balashyre, a city on the planet Airlann. She had porcelain pale skin and long, wavy red hair. She was seated at the communications console on the other side of the command center.

"I am sincerely sorry, Governor," Seth replied.

No one was entirely sure whether 'Captain' or 'Governor' was the superior rank, especially Lance. 'Navigator' wasn't a rank at all and yet that was how he was assigned.

The only other person on the ship was Leah Wu, a scientist from Yuan given the title 'Mechanic', which was also not a rank. She was in the engine room, keeping tabs on the Heilmann Drive.

Leah's strong, shrill voice crackled through a speaker near the back of the command center. "What was that? What just happened?"

"Nothing to worry about," Seth replied. "Are we right to stay in one piece?"

"Looks like it."

"Excellent news," Seth said, feeling his nerves calm a bit. Despite her role as mechanic on the Fenghuang, Leah had no clue how the Heilmann Drive even operated. If it had been damaged in the leap, she could not fix it. No one on the ship could, though that was hardly their fault. Only a few people in the galaxy would even know where to begin.

A light flashed on the console in front of Caitlin. She sat up straight and tried to remember what that meant. When she couldn't, she turned to ask Seth. "This glass sphere is lighting up. I am not sure what to do."

Caitlin's homeworld, Airlann, rejected post-industrial technology. Shortly after colonization, a transport full of their citizens were killed after an inexperienced navigator plotted a Heilmann leap outside the galactic rim. This led to a reactionary, neo-Luddite movement which became cemented in their very culture over the following millennia. Even though they knew of the technological wonders of other worlds,

Airlannians were content to live as if they'd never left Earth's 18th Century. Caitlin was not only adjusting to space travel but also to electricity.

"That is probably the NetComm. I'm guessing our friends down on NewPasTur have noticed us. Press the button below that."

Caitlin cautiously followed orders and the large view-screen in the front of the command center flashed. Once black, it was now filled with the face of an older man in a bright orange military uniform. Seth resisted squinting as the fluorescent color of the jacket filled the room with blinding luminescence.

"By the rim, Cait, you need to figure out how to turn down the contrast on that thing."

The man on the screen did not even seem to hear Seth's comment. Like the citizens on the surface of NewPasTur, his eyes were filled with hope. A wide smile stretched across his face. He started to raise a salute but he couldn't complete the motion. He was just too happy. "You... You're here. Salutations! The Fall is over! Let me be the first to greet you!"

Seth cringed. He sat forward in his captain's chair and held onto the armrests. "About that..."

He didn't let Seth finish. "Just transmit your codes and we can begin preparation for the re-opening of the trade routes. You have no idea what this means to NewPasTur, Captain."

Lance and Caitlin exchanged worried looks. Seth was nonplussed. "Listen, who is this that I'm speaking to?"

"My name is Boston Raynor, the Ginn Prime of the NewPasTur Air Force. I am authorized to receive the re-establishment codes from the People's Republic. I can provide you with—"

Seth held up his hand. "That's not necessary. You see, Boston... I'm not with the People's Republic."

The grin disappeared immediately from Ginn Raynor's face. "I do not understand. Our sensors show that you have just leapt into our airspace. You are operating a Heilmann Drive. You..."

"My name is Seth Garland. And you are just the person I want to talk to. Because it is clear to me that you understand the importance of interstellar travel for your planet."

"Transmit the re-establishment codes, Captain."

"I don't have any codes, but if you'll listen to me, I can—"

"Then you are in violation of the Spatial Preservation Act of 4191 and I have been vested with the authority to arrest you in the name of the People's Interstellar Republic."

All of Ginn Raynor's hope had turned to anger and hate. His face was twisted into a sneer. His lips quivered. It was almost as if he had to keep from crying. Caitlin saw it. Lance saw it. Seth was not so ready to abandon this cause.

"There is no People's Interstellar Republic anymore!" He exclaimed. "There is no 'interstellar' anymore. Except for me. That's why I want to talk to you."

Suddenly, the control panel in front of Lance flashed to life. Lights blinked across the top and his eyes went wide. "Captain, they are launching fighter drones."

Seth was not deterred. He stood up from his chair and walked towards the view-screen. "I see you have ordered your troops to take me down. Just hear me out first." He took a deep breath. "They told you they would come back, didn't they? They told you that they wouldn't abandon you. They told you they were working on a solution. Listen to me, Boston, they lied to you. This ship, this ship I'm standing on, is the last one. They were going to destroy it. That's why I took it."

Ginn Raynor just glared straight ahead. Seth stared right back, despite the fact that he was far shorter than the massive head on the view-screen. Their standoff continued until Lance interrupted.

"The drones are two minutes away," he said. "Should I ready our weapons?"

Seth shook his head. "We don't have weapons."

"We... We don't have weapons? But what about this button on my console that says—"

"The console is mass produced, put on every ship in the former Republic fleet. Trust me, we don't have weapons. This is a science vessel. Hit that button and I believe you'll launch an atmospheric probe."

Now both Caitlin and Lance looked at Seth in terror. But he didn't divert his gaze away from the view-screen. He was sure he could reach Ginn Raynor. "I have spoken with the governments of Airlann and Yuan. I have their representatives on board. We are going to end the Fall. I want your help." He pleaded with the Ginn. "With NewPasTur as a partner, our new alliance has the industrial and commercial hub it needs. However, if you destroy this ship, you destroy the hope of ever re-establishing the trade routes."

"The Heilmann Drive was outlawed for a reason!" the Ginn roared back. "I know you look down on us and you wonder how we're surviving without the trade routes, without the Old Economy. But this is a sacrifice we must make for all of mankind. If you refuse to submit, our sacrifices will be in vain."

Seth took one more stride forward. "If that is what you believe, then you and every one of your people will die on this planet. You will never see the stars again." Ginn Raynor did not flinch.

"Captain, the drones are thirty seconds away," Lance said. "And apparently we don't have any shields, either."

"It's a science vessel," Seth repeated.

Caitlin counted down the seconds in her head as the stalemate continued between Seth and Ginn Raynor. "I don't want to die here," she said under her breath, assuming it was inaudible.

"No one is going to die," Seth replied softly. He looked back up at the view-screen. "You ever heard of manifest destiny, Ginn? First man conquered the ocean. Then man conquered the galaxy. Are you going to let us stop there? Are you going to put an end to the trajectory of our species?"

"I won't let you destroy... everything." Ginn Raynor shook his head. "I apologize. Not to you, to my people."

A loud klaxon filled the command center. Lance stood up straight. "Drones are arming their weapons."

"Don't worry about your people," Seth hissed at Ginn Raynor. "I'll be back for them. The future is no place for fear."

"The drones have locked on, Captain! What do I do?" Seth grimaced. "Leap."

The sky above Ediston shimmered as the purple engines of the *I.S.S. Fenghuang* spun to life.

CRACK! The sky was split by the sound of fighter drones dropping out of sonicspeed. It was followed by silence. The bustling streets of Ediston stood still as they watched the hawk-nosed planes twirl around the *Fenghuang*. For just a few minutes, they had a future. They envisioned the return of their planet, of the industries that made it so prosperous during the Old Economy. Now they watched as their own government attacked this beacon of hope.

The hovering vessel was not fighting back. It was not launching missiles. It was not even knocking the drones out of the sky with masers. To the desperate inhabitants of Ediston, the *Fenghuang* looked as if it was about to martyr itself.

The fighters flew closer and closer, ready to engage and blow the last starship in the galaxy to pieces.

A rumble echoed through the streets of Ediston. A gust of wind swirled across the ground and twisted towards the starship. A blinding light flashed between the skyscrapers, and the starship was gone. The fighter drones were left circling an empty spot of sky, firing their missiles into the air.

The *Fenghuang* had leapt away just in time. The people, knowing nothing of what transpired between their leader and the captain of the ship, cheered.

Their hope was not dead.

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"So, this is a mutiny?" Seth asked. He stood tall, at least as tall as he could stand, at the head of the conference table in the boardroom

of the *Fenghuang*. His crew—all three of them—sat around the table. “You want to start ordering me around?”

Caitlin sighed. She sat near the other end of the table. “No, it is nothing like that.”

“First of all,” Leah said. “You are not even really a Captain. At least not in the military sense.” She brushed her long black hair out of her face and stared at Seth with her dark eyes. “And second, you are endangering our lives. This... This is not what any of us envisioned when we joined you. We’re not sure you have a plan.”

Seth examined the faces of his crew. He was losing them. Once they were eager to join him; now they were questioning their decision. Was NewPasTur the beginning of their unease, or was it the breaking point? He was alienating his only allies. He had to talk them down.

“I do have a plan but that did not go as I expected,” he said. “NewPasTur should have been more receptive to our cause. They are a planet of industry, a planet of technology, and they were hurt by the Fall more than anyone. My reasoning was sound, I just happened to run into a petty bureaucrat who thought he knew what was better for his people.”

That was not enough.

“I think I want to go home,” Lance stated. “I want you to take me home. I don’t want to die out here.”

“We’re not going to die.”

Leah didn’t want to hear it. She pushed her chair back from the table. “How can you say that? If we’d tried to leap a few seconds later, we’d be atmospheric dust right now!”

“But we’re not,” Seth countered. “And that has to mean something.”

The three crew members just stared at him. “This ship was built to be manned by nine people,” Caitlin said. “There are four of us. There are no weapons. There are no defenses. None of us know how to repair the engine if it is damaged. And if we keep making rough leaps, even I know it will be damaged. Do you not see? This is a

fool's errand. We cannot continue."

Seth stretched his arms across the table and looked at his crew. His weary eyes still shone with passion. "But we must," he said. "I must. I would rather die on this ship tomorrow than die after a hundred years on Earth." He sighed. "Just tell me where you want me to drop you and I will. I will pilot this ship alone if I have to, but know that wherever you decide to go... you will spend the rest of your lives there unless I succeed."

This argument did not sway Ginn Raynor, but Seth knew that it would affect Caitlin, Lance, and Leah. There was a reason they joined him on the *Fenghuang*. Despite being born and raised on different planets, in different cultures, they had one thing in common: they were not ready to abandon the stars.

"We don't want another NewPasTur," Leah said. "That's all we ask. Don't put us in a situation where we have to pray to survive... at least not until we know we can fix this bucket of bolts if we take a missile."

"Yeah, I'd really like someone on the crew who knows how to repair a Heilmann Drive," Lance added. "Let's face it, living the rest of my life on the planet of my choosing is far better than ending my life on the first planet that can stick an artillery round in our engine."

Seth furrowed his brow. This wouldn't be easy. Schematics of the Heilmann Drive were heavily guarded by the People's Interstellar Republic prior to the Fall. Now anyone who knew how to build a Heilmann Drive or even patch one up was on Earth, likely under surveillance. Seth recruited Leah because she was a brilliant scientist and he'd hoped she could reverse engineer the technology. It was impossible. The architecture was too strange, too unlike anything else.

The design of the Heilmann Drive had not changed for almost two thousand years and its inventor, Alena Heilmann, created nothing else. There was no analog. Its secrets were closely guarded, passed down by Republic scientists and engineers to maintain their absolute control over the only method of interstellar travel. In the scientific

community there were those who knew how it worked, and they were few; there were those who did not know how it worked, and they were legion. Leah was among the latter group and there was no crossing over.

“If we want an engineer who understands the Heilmann Drive, we have to go to Earth,” Seth said. “They are all there. But we cannot go to Earth. This ship is wanted, I am wanted, and we do not have the element of surprise or deception.” Suddenly, Seth looked up. He was smiling for the first time since their escape from NewPasTur. “However, I have another idea.”

“You are happy,” Caitlin pointed out. “But we are questioning your leadership. What is going on? I am sorry, but this feels like a sort of overdeveloped irony that comes with all of these... gadgets.”

“I know where we can find an engineer. I know where we search for allies next. I just needed a little push.”

It began with the headaches. The inhabitants of the Orion, a research station located along the trade route between Earth and Gammaron, began experiencing severe migraines. The outpost was in deep space, far from any planet or star, so there was no possible source of radiation poisoning or vector for disease. Internal tests revealed nothing was wrong with the researchers. They were in perfect health.

Other symptoms started to show within the next few weeks. Distorted vision, confusion, forgetfulness... One of the security officers went berserk and opened fire with a pulse rifle in one of the labs, injuring two of the crew. The People's Interstellar Republic sent an independent team to examine the situation. To these outsiders, the problem was obvious.

Light curved as if passed across a fun-house mirror. Sound echoed off of nothingness. The report of the head PIR scientist summed up the problem succinctly: "There are no more straight lines aboard the Orion." The change happened so slowly that the crew aboard the research outpost didn't even notice it, even as it chipped away at their sanity.

The trade route between Earth and Gammaron was the most traveled leap in the galaxy. Scientists quickly connected the dots and came to the conclusion that the distortion was caused by the repeated compression and dilation of the same stretch of space. The Heilmann Drive was changing the very fabric of reality.

No one knew how this would affect the universe beyond the trade routes. But they did know that the risks were high. The question posed to the people was this: If space was acting like a rubber band that had been stretched too many times, what would happen when it broke? Their answer was this: We can't let that happen.

In 4191, the People's Interstellar Republic passed the Spatial Preservation Act, which provided for the immediate suspension of the major trade routes, a six month period of relocation for anyone wishing to move, and then a moratorium on the use of the Heilmann Drive across the galaxy. The PIR promised that the Fall would only last until their scientists found a safer method of interstellar travel. But rumors swirled that they were destroying the starships and detaining engineers who knew how to build and even operate them. As the Fall began, most people knew that it would not be a temporary inconvenience.

One year later, the last starship in the galaxy was scheduled to be demolished. But then it mysteriously disappeared...

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Caitlin stepped off the shuttle and looked up at the soft green skies of Linaria. This was only her second visit to another planet, and the first time she'd ever seen an emerald world. It took her breath away—in more ways than one. Almost as soon as she adjusted to the surreal color of the sky, she felt a sharp sting in her throat. The atmosphere on Linaria was, as Seth put it, imperfect. It was more than capable of supporting human and other homeworld life, but to those who were not born on the planet, it could be quite unpleasant.

Seth and Lance were the next off of the shuttle. Leah remained on the *Fenghuang*, high in orbit above the planet. This time they had not been attacked. In fact, they were welcomed with open arms. The first, and only, person to contact them once they leapt into orbit was the High Counsel of Linaria himself. And he was thrilled to see the starship. He invited them to land at his palace, and to speak with him

directly rather than through a military liaison. It was a far better result than any of them expected.

A young man in a black, form-fitting military jacket was waiting for them as they exited the shuttle. He was stone-faced, neither smiling nor frowning. Seth approached him.

"Greetings, soldier," Seth said. "I apologize, I do not know your traditions. Do you shake or do you bow?"

"What?"

Seth grinned. "I see. Neither." He turned around to face Caitlin and Lance. "They don't do either." He couldn't hide how nervous he was. He was even more scared than when he was staring down the NewPasTur fighter drones.

"Right this way," the emotionless soldier said. He spun on his heel and started walking away from the landing zone. Seth followed him, and the others followed Seth.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Lance asked Caitlin, struggling to keep his voice quiet.

"That man? He seems quite dedicated to his job. I see nothing wrong with that."

"Not the Linarian. Captain Garland. Why is he so anxious?"

Caitlin shrugged. "Maybe he is not so fond of face-to-face meetings. On Airlann, I greatly preferred communicating with letters. It allowed me to think about my words. Maybe he needs to think about his words."

"You seriously wrote letters?"

Caitlin didn't answer him. She was quickly adjusting to the rest of the galaxy, even if they were not adjusting to her.

The Grand Palace of Linaria was a massive stone structure patterned after an ancient temple. Columns of white Alban rock, common on emerald worlds, surrounded monolithic walls. On top of the palace, a massive fresco displayed the figure of a woman in a flowing cloak. She held fire in her hand and she was offering it to a clamoring, desperate crowd.

A similar Alban statute stood in front of the palace, almost as tall as the building itself. It displayed a woman with wavy hair and a strong chin. She was holding her right hand open. An open flame, presumably fueled from within the statute itself, burst from her palm. In her left hand was a massive orb carved from lavender rock.

Caitlin was intrigued. She tapped Seth on the shoulder and he fell back to speak with his crew.

"Who is that woman?" Caitlin asked. "Is that some sort of goddess? Is she like Airlanni?" Airlanni was the planet-deity of Airlann, and Caitlin was momentarily relieved to find that her culture was not so out of touch with the rest of the galaxy. Her companions were generally quite agnostic, and tended to look down upon her devotion to Airlanni.

"You could... You could say that it is a goddess. But is nothing like Airlanni. I'm sorry." "What is her name?"

Seth grimaced. "That woman is Alena Heilmann." Lance stopped walking. He stared at Seth.

"Heilmann as in Heilmann Drive?"

"That's right," Seth said. "They worship Alena Heilmann."

"Why would they worship a real person?" Caitlin asked. "I mean... Airlanni is real. That is what my people believe, at least. But she is not real as in there are not photographs and videos of her. There are pictures of Alena Heilmann. Even I have seen them."

"This is why I thought they would have some ideas about how to take care of our engine," Seth said under his breath, mindful of the Linarian soldier just meters ahead. "They have gathered everything they can that belonged to Heilmann. Hopefully somewhere in one of their shrines is a schematic or diagram that the Republic didn't confiscate."

Lance looked at him incredulously. "So of course these people want to help us! The Fall is blasphemy to them. Why didn't we come here first?"

Seth stepped even further away from the soldier leading them. He

grabbed Lance's arm, pulling them both back. Then he leaned in, whispering in his navigator's ear.

"We didn't come here because on Linaria, the theft of a starship is punishable by death."

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The High Counsel of Linaria, Adom Ironson, was a thin bespectacled man in long, faded purple robes. He leaned over the heavy wooden table in his office, staring at Seth and his crew.

"The Heilmann Drive is more than an engine," he said. "It can take a man from one edge of the galaxy to the other. That is true. But it is more. Plot a leap through planet and you destroy that planet. Plot a leap through a star and you can create a black hole. Plot a leap outside of the galactic rim and..." He spread his arms wide. "Who knows? Perhaps you find yourselves among the gears of heaven itself." He pointed up at the ceiling. "What you have up there is not just a starship. It is the finger of God. And you have saved the only one still in existence."

The old man's smile did not set Seth or his companions at ease. It was only a matter of time before he started asking questions. It wouldn't be long before he realized that the *Fenghuang* was not rightfully given to a fugitive of the People's Interstellar Republic. "That is why I came to you, sir," Seth said. "Because I know just how important the Heilmann Drive is to you. All I want of you is one thing, one simple—"

The younger man to the Counsel's left stood up and cut off Seth with a wave of his hand. This was Prime Minister Ibid il Hydrian. Ironson was the spiritual and symbolic leader of the Linarians, while Hydrian was their head of state. "We will do whatever is in our capability, Captain Garland. It is of no concern. However, we first ask something of you."

The word "captain" had a very specific meaning in Linarian religion that transcended the traditional galactic usage. Prime Minister Hydrian's decision to refer to Seth as a captain should have put him

at ease. However, he knew that the Linarian courts were entirely controlled by the clergy. Hydrian could acknowledge Seth as the rightful captain of the *Fenghuang* and it would not be enough to save him if Ironson and the church were unconvinced.

"Of course," Seth said. "As the only faster-than-light ship in the galaxy, we are in a unique position of being able to offer you transport, supplies, information... Being our friends puts you in quite a position of power, even on other planets."

Ironson glared at Seth. "We do not want anything so material. I am sure you could convince many other governments to shower you with gifts for a single shipment of steel or circuit boards or whatever the blasted soil they weren't prepared to create themselves. But we are not so backwards. We ask something different of you."

Seth could sense a desperation in him. That, more than colloquial religious terms, calmed his nerves. He could tell that Ironson and Hydrian needed something. They needed it more than anything else in the galaxy, and he was the only one who could provide it.

"I can deal with different," Seth said. He looked at Caitlin and Lance. "We can deal with different, right?"

Caitlin smiled. "This is all different to me." Seth bit his tongue. He'd told her not to speak. Because they rejected technology and space travel, the Airlannians were apostate on Linaria and the last thing he wanted was anyone discovering her identity. Then again, it was his own fault. He'd asked her the question in the first place.

Prime Minister Hydrian pulled out a small piece of paper and an ink spray pen. It was primitive technology for the Linarians, but perfectly suited for a clandestine transaction. Hydrian scrawled something on the paper and passed it to Seth. Seth picked up the slip and glanced at it. The only things written were a set of galactic coordinates and a date.

"That's... That's it?" he asked. "You just want us to leap here in two days? And do what, exactly?"

Ironson furrowed his brow. "You'll understand."

Seth looked at the coordinates written on the paper. He played with them in his head, thought them over, and suddenly he felt his heart speed up. "Wait," he said. "This is within sublight space of Earth. I can't go there."

Lance groaned aloud. "Don't... . Don't say that, Captain... "

Hydrian arched an eyebrow. "Why can't you go near Earth?"

Seth was quiet for a second while he tried to formulate a response. There was no plausible lie to explain why a legitimate starship captain would be unable to travel near Earth. Every starship was commissioned by Earth, every legitimate captain approved by the People's Interstellar Republic. If he could not go to Earth, he could not be legitimate. He could only be a thief.

A dreadful lull fell over the meeting as the inevitable truth bubbled to the surface. Seth Garland was not a starship captain, at least not officially. If there had been any doubt, it was dispelled by his silence and the sweat springing up across his brow.

Lance wondered if he could sprint for the door and, if he made it out, could blend in amongst Linarian society. Caitlin worried that she would never be buried on Airlann. Seth... Seth still could not even think of anything but how quickly he'd destroyed everything he worked for.

First Counsel Ironson motioned to Seth. "If I may, I would like to speak with you alone."

"Of course!" Lance immediately volunteered and headed for the exit, grabbing Caitlin's wrist on the way out. Prime Minister Hydrian just bowed his head and left the office.

Suddenly everyone was gone. Ironson stared at Seth and Seth averted his eyes. He knew that the older man held his life in the palm of his hand. The horrible silence continued as the First Counsel paced around the room. Finally, after a few laps, he was ready to strike.

"What is wrong with you, you backwards coward?" Ironson roared. Seth sat straight up in his chair. He dug his fingernails into his palms

and wanted to be arrested. “Do you really think we don’t know how you got that ship?”

Suddenly the words began to pour from Seth’s mouth—he was going to give every justification and excuse he could think of. “They were going to destroy it. I had to do it. I couldn’t let it end. I couldn’t let us all be stuck here. By the rim, I just wanted to keep the spirit of Alena Heilmann alive. I had to do it.”

“Of course you had to!” Ironson exclaimed.

Seth stopped the torrent of excuses. He looked up to see that the First Counsel was smiling again. “... What?”

“It is a shame. I hoped that you would be different, but like all the other offworlders, you do not understand us. You hear the stories, that we execute mutineers and starship thieves, and you take them literally. You cannot see the galaxy through the stars.”

“You’re not going to kill me because I stole the *Fenghuang*?”

“Why would we do that?” Ironson asked. “You saved the last piece of God in this soil-bound galaxy. You are not the thief. They were the thieves, and I sincerely hope that someday we will have the chance to judge them.”

For the first time since landing on Linaria, Seth breathed easy. He wiped the sweat from his brow and he leaned back in his chair. Now that the truth was out there, now that it was accepted, he just had to explain the details. The details were far less offensive than the basics.

“Now... Now you understand why I cannot go to Earthspace. I am wanted there, this ship is wanted, and we both cannot risk the loss of the ship.”

Ironson slowly walked over to Seth and placed his hands on the young man’s shoulders. “But we have to, because this is more important than you can ever know.”

“More important than the *Fenghuang*?”

“It is very possible.”

“And if I do this, I can have access to all of your records concerning

the development of the Heilmann Drive?"

"You can have anything you ask. We will join you as you look up, and follow you even if you look down."

Seth did not answer. He just thought. He remembered his escape from Earthspace, how if it had not been for several lucky breaks, he would be stardust. How could he even consider going back? He wasn't even sure how much he could trust the Linarians. While he understood a certain reverence for Alena Heilmann, he could not fully empathize with a man who saw her as more than human. She was clearly quite human and Ironson's willful self-delusion made him uneasy. How could he believe a man whose own beliefs were so irrational?

"How do you explain the Fall?" Seth asked.

Ironson sighed. "Why do you have to put it like that"? He said. "What you really want to know is how we reconcile our faith with what you believe is the reality of the Heilmann Drive."

"I don't know. Humor me."

"The Heilmann Drive did not cause the Fall. Man caused the Fall," Ironson said. "Alena Heilmann found God. Then we used God. We used His powers not for good, but to make money. We established these soil-cursed trade routes and abused what He gave us. Now He is punishing us." Ironson crossed his arms. "The Fall is our Flood, Seth Garland. You are the one who has answered the call of the rising tides and you will have to be our Noah."

*

"I realize that the old plan wasn't working," Lance said as he worked his console in the command center, steadying the ship after the latest leap. "But is the new plan to only go places where there are people who actively want us dead?"

"That's ridiculous," Seth replied. "No one wants us dead here. They want us dead on Earth."

"Yes, but we're only about 100 AU from Earth."

Caitlin, who was standing near the back of the command center,

couldn't help but feel that that was a lot closer than it sounded. "How far away is that, exactly?"

Seth considered how to answer her. She wouldn't understand astronomical units, light seconds, or even the voluminous number of kilometers required to describe the distance. "About an hour," he replied. "That's how long it will take them to scramble their interplanetary fleet and come out here to shoot us out of the sky."

Caitlin folded her hands together, grasping them as if holding on for dear life. "Airlanni protect us."

The command center was quiet. None of them—not even Seth—knew exactly what they were doing just outside the Kuiper Belt. The Linarians refused to provide any more details, except to reaffirm the exact coordinates and the exact time. This uncertainty was terrible for the morale aboard the *Fenghuang*—which was already abysmal—and Seth decided to take action. He spun around in his captain's chair to face Caitlin.

"I bet you've never seen Earth."

Caitlin shifted on her feet. "I... I have only been off Airlann for two weeks. That would not be a fair bet."

Seth turned his chair again, this time towards Lance. "Put up the viewer!" The screen at the front of the command center blinked on, displaying a vast starscape. The sun, Sol, was the brightest of the bright dots but, this far away, it did not overpower the other celestial bodies.

Seth stood up and walked towards the screen. He studied it, tilting his head to the side. After a minute or so, he found the dot he was looking for. He reached up, towards the screen, and pushed his finger up against a pinprick of light.

"This is Earth," he said. "This is where we all come from."

"You sure about that one?" Lance asked, skeptical.

"I'm the only one on this ship who grew up in this arm of the galaxy."

Caitlin smiled. She could feel her cheeks heating up. When Seth told her what their mission was, where they would be going, she

would have never imagined the effect it could have on her. Earth. The birthplace of humanity. Everything started there. Every Linarian, every Airlinnian, every man, woman, and creature in the galaxy came from that single, dim light. Only a handful of her people had ever seen Earth. Now she was one of them. Even if all she could perceive was a small amount of the light reflected by Earth's surface... she was still seeing it. It was real.

She felt a tear building in her eye and quickly moved to wipe it away. She didn't want any of the crew to think it affected her so much. "It's beautiful."

Seth returned to his seat but Caitlin kept watching the screen. She couldn't pull her eyes away until—

"Sensors are picking up something!" Lance exclaimed. Caitlin's heart started to race. She wasn't ready to leap out yet, and if the People's Republic fleet was here already they would have no choice but to leave. Would they ever come back? It was impossible to know.

"Start plotting a leap," Seth said. "Something out of range, something far away. The Linarians will have to—"

"It's not coming from Earth. It's coming from outside the solar system." Lance looked at his console. He tapped a few buttons, forced the computer to re-process the sensor data, and found that it gave him the same result.

Seth shook his head. "This isn't possible. There isn't another starship in the galaxy. Nothing... Nothing could survive out there."

"I'm plotting its course and putting its destination on the viewer." The image in the front of the command center shifted slightly, showing a different starscape. Seth, Caitlin, and Lance were silent as they watched.

A red light flickered on the right of the screen. Then they saw the ramscoop. It looked like the blade of a bulldozer, glowing crimson as it gathered and burned all the errant matter before it. Seth was the only one who recognized it. He'd seen something like it in history books. Ancient history books.

As it floated into view, Seth realized that the strange vessel was, in fact, a starship. But it was not like any starship he'd ever seen before. It was large and clunky, its surface covered with pipes and wires. The edges and corners were rusting. On the whole, it was at least five times larger than any vessel Seth had ever seen. But most importantly, there was no Heilmann Drive. There was no sublight drive. There was just the ramscoop.

Seth could see something written on the side of the hull. "Lance! Zoom in on that name!" he exclaimed, pointing at the screen. Lance hit a few buttons and the view-screen focused on the name of the starship: *U.S.S. Ragnar*.

"U.S.S.?" Seth said aloud. "Where is this ship from?" The mystery vessel lit up as it spun around in the darkness of space. It now faced the view-screen.

"Captain," Lance said. "It... It looks like they might be trying to communicate with us."

"What does that mean?" Seth asked.

"They're sending a signal. But it's not one I immediately recognize. It's very low frequency and—"

"It's radio," Seth said. He was beginning to understand what was going on, but still couldn't get a grip on why. This ship predated quantum communications systems. It predated the People's Interstellar Republic. It predated effective interstellar travel and the Heilmann Drive... but here it was. "Caitlin, there's a dial on your left. Turn it all the way down, then hit the 'autoreceive button'."

Caitlin obeyed his commands. Suddenly the crisp sound of static filled the command center. She covered her ears, shocked by the cacophony.

"This is Captain Seth Garland of the *I.S.S. Fenghuang*," Seth said. "Please respond with identification."

He leaned forward and waited to hear something from the static. A voice broke through the noise and rose from the chaos. "Greetings Captain Garland!" It sounded like a young man, though the radio

interference was more than distracting. "This is the *Ragnar*. We did not expect to meet anyone here. Do you hail from Earth or Linaria?"

Seth looked around at his companions as he considered the answer to this question. Caitlin just shrugged. Lance motioned at his console as if the proper response was to leap out of the solar system and never return.

"I'm... " He hesitated. "an independent vessel. I was asked by the Linarian government to meet you here. But they did not explain exactly what you are."

"Well, Captain, we—" The young man's voice cut off. It sounded as if someone grabbed the radio from his hands. The soft sound of voices echoed through the command center. Seth could not understand what they were saying, but it was clear that a woman was arguing with the young man in charge of communications.

"What is going on over there?" Seth asked.

There was a crash on the other end of the transmission. Someone else had control of the radio. A strong, feminine voice responded to Seth's question. "Nothing is going on over here," she said.

"I don't think that's going to suffice," Seth replied. "I don't know what the Linarians intended, but I think we are risking our lives to meet you out here. I need to know who you are."

"You... You're not Linarian?"

Seth groaned aloud. "It's a long explanation. Just tell me who you are before the People's Republic gets here and obliterates us."

The voice on the other end was silent for just a second as she processed this demand. "This is the *U.S.S. Ragnar* and I am Captain Alena Heilmann. And I am not sure why anyone would want to obliterate us."

Even after the Fall, the most popular film in the galaxy was The Call of the Darkness, the definitive biography of Alena Heilmann. No one knew how much of the story was true and how much was myth. No one really cared. The film became the truth and the truth was accepted across the dozens of planets in the galaxy.

The story was simple. Alena Heilmann was only seven years old when her father, the renowned Air Force test pilot Ragnar Heilmann, was chosen to helm the first interstellar spaceship in the history of man. This ship, the U.S.S. Zephyr, was a sublight vessel powered by a “ramscoop”. The ramscoop collected space dust, obliterated it, and used the resulting energy to power the engine. The faster the ship went, the more dust it gathered, and the more energy could be produced.

The Zephyr was capable of approaching 98% of lightspeed. That meant that, unlike other spaceships built on Earth, it could travel to other solar systems and other planets capable of supporting life.

There was, of course, a downside. Time compressed for the crew of the Zephyr as the ship approached the speed of light. To the crew, a fifty lightyear trip lasted only a few weeks. To the rest of the universe, it lasted fifty years.

Ragnar Heilmann’s flight on the Zephyr was a one way trip. By accepting the assignment, he was abandoning his family. By the time he returned—if he returned—even his seven year old daughter would be dead of old age.

The family of every Zephyr crew member received a massive benefits package from the US Government. Most of them spent the money on petty indulgences or investments that would sustain their families for generations. Alena Heilmann used the money to find her father. She attended the lectures of every respected physics professor in the world. She received three PhDs before she was twenty-five. And then she fulfilled her destiny. She built the Heilmann Drive. She made instantaneous interstellar traffic possible. She was not even thirty years old when she changed the course of human development forever.

The pursuit of safe, instantaneous interstellar travel had been Alena's life goal. Once she developed the Heilmann Drive, she had nothing left to live for. She was aimless, and fell into despair. No one knew exactly what happened to her after that. She never built another engine. She never designed another starship. She just disappeared. The legend, as it was repeated in The Call of the Darkness, was that she built her own starship and set out to find her father, Ragnar. After all, with the Heilmann Drive, she could arrive at his destination before him.

But that was just a story...

*

Seth Garland was not a religious man. He did not believe in a God or a Goddess, and he certainly did not follow the Linarians in the worship of Alena Heilmann as a divine being. However, standing in her presence, he could feel his heart beating deep in his chest. He was filled with a reverence that he never thought possible.

Alena was nothing like the actress who played her in The Call of the Darkness. She was not small and unassuming. She did not fit the message of the film, which was that the greatest achievements come from the most unlikely of sources. She was more like the statutes on Linaria. She was at least an inch taller than Seth, who had over a millennium of evolutionary stagnation on Earth to blame for his

diminutive form. Her eyes were deep, dark wells. Her hair was long, wavy, and blonde. She commanded the room with her presence, and Seth imagined that would be true even if she wasn't supposed to be long dead.

They were standing just outside the airlock on the *U.S.S. Ragnar*, where the *Fenghuang* was docked. Alena insisted that they meet in person and Seth was unable to refuse her. Seth came without any of his crew, leaving Caitlin in charge of his ship. Alena waited at the airlock to greet him. They were alone, together, and that tension was almost too much for Seth to handle. Even as he went to greet her—to shake her hand, which he was sure was still the custom when she left Earth—his whole body was trembling.

"I don't even know what to say, Ms. Heilmann," he said as they clasped hands. It was electric. He was touching the woman who gave humanity the power to spread across the galaxy. "You'll forgive me if I never planned for this moment. I thought you were—"

Alena sneered. "You thought I was dead. I rather liked it that way." She pulled her hand away from Seth. "Now, I have to know. How did you find me? Who told the PIR about my waystation? If it was one of my crew, I'm throwing him out the airlock and you can't stop me." Seth was stunned. He tried to understand what she was saying, but none of it made much sense to him. Alena picked up on this uncertainty and pounced. "It's not the PIR anymore, is it? No more People's Interstellar Republic? Can't say I mourn it. Sorry about the confusion, it's been about a hundred of your years since I picked up any news from Earth. I just saw one of my ships out there and figured you were with those bastards."

"I'm not with the PIR. I'm actually a private enterprise. I think I'll need to explain some things to you."

Suddenly, Alena smiled. "They've finally stopped regulating the engine! It's about time! I knew no one would use it as a weapon and —"

"That's..." Seth's voice trailed off. He sighed as he realized what

had to come next. He was going to have to explain to her that her engine was now against the law, banned as a threat to the entire universe. She didn't look like she would take it well. "I actually have some bad news."

The color drained from her face. It was almost like she expected it. Seth did not wait to sit down, or to re-join either Alena's crew or his own. He just blurted it out, right there in front of the airlock. His starship was the last one left. It was outfitted with the only Heilmann Drive that was not destroyed after the Fall. And the only reason it still existed was because he stole it. It hurt for him to tell her all of this, especially since he had so many questions for her, but he plowed through with the events of the past year as quickly as possible.

Alena did not stop him. She just listened. She did not speak until he reached the end of his story, the trip to Linaria and the request to come to the coordinates that turned out to be her waypoint.

"I don't know what to say," she told him when he was finally done. "Everything I created, everything I was so proud of... It wasn't something creative. It was something destructive. It was something horrible."

"It wasn't something horrible!" Seth said. "An entire galaxy has you to thank for its prosperity." He could see that this wasn't enough. He'd never expected what was happening. Alena Heilmann was not immediately outraged about the Fall. She did not feel as he did, that it was an irresponsible and idiotic reaction to an invisible threat. No, instead she was worried. She was worried about what her invention had wrought.

"It's been forever for all of you." Alena said. "But for me it's only been... it's only been a few years. The compression engine... it's part of your culture, it's part of your history. It's part of my memory and my present. Your societal upheaval is my recent personal failure."

"The compression engine? We call it 'The Heilmann Drive'."

"Don't."

Seth reached out, as if to hold her arms and comfort her. But he

could not bring himself to do it. He could not bring himself to touch Alena Heilmann. She was something beyond human, something legendary, something that should not live and yet did.

"Don't look at me like that," she exclaimed. "You're like the Linarians. I'm just a human! I'm just... I'm not anything like what you think I am. I just—"

"You've just been alive for the last two thousand years," Seth interrupted. "What am I supposed to think?"

"That I've spent all but a few weeks of that time just a hair away from light speed. It's not magic. It's physics."

"But why? Why fly around in an ancient starship and just watch time pass?"

Alena shrugged. Her shoulders slumped. "Because I was curious. I wanted to see what would happen. I began by flying between Earth and Linaria—one of the first planets we settled—and skipping fifty years at a time. Then the Linarians expected me. I started taking a few of them with me. They wanted to leap across time, they wanted to be like me..."

Suddenly, the sound of static filled the air. Seth and Alena looked up. A deep voice emerged through the noise. "Captain Heilmann! There are multiple ships coming out of sub-light speed on the radar. They will be here within minutes."

Seth knew exactly what that meant. "It's the PIR."

"What do I do?" Alena asked.

"Come with me. Come on board the *Fenghuang*. We'll leap away. We can solve this."

Alena wilted. She looked down. "This ship... My crew... I promised them that they would make it home to Linaria."

"We don't need them! We need you! You can solve this. You can —" Seth stopped speaking as

Alena pressed her fingertips against his chest. "No. Go back. Save yourself. Save the last compression engine. Save the last Heilmann Drive."

"Maybe we can take you with us! What is so important about—"

Alena pushed Seth towards the airlock. He stumbled backwards into the decompression chamber as she walked away.

"Close airlock," Alena said. The onboard computer responded and the sound of grinding gears filled the decompression chamber. Seth wanted to rush forward, to grab her, but he saw the doors sliding shut. It was too late.

Seth was back on the *Fenghuang* where he was safe. His ship could leap away from any threat. But Alena was gone. She was on her own.

*

"Captain, the Republic ships are closing fast," Lance said. He tapped away at the control panel in front of him. "What should I do?"

Seth held his head in his hands as he sat in his chair on the command center. He didn't know what to say. Alena sealed the airlock aboard the *Ragnar*. The only thing keeping the two starships together was the docking clamps on his side. "Leah, is there any chance they can outrun the Republic ships without us?" he asked.

Leah, who was now in the back of the command center, replied quickly. "It's not possible. The ramscoop drive would take at least thirty minutes to get up to the basic subwarp speed of the Republic craft."

"What if—"

Leah cut off Seth before he could even begin. "If we leap with their ship attached, they'll be crushed and burned along with the rest of the space dust we leap across."

Seth nodded. He assumed that was the case. He was just going to ask to be sure. With that option gone, there was no getting around it. They were going to have to leave her behind or fight it out. The *Ragnar* had a few weapons, but upon a quick survey they appeared to be Maser cannons built in the early 2200s. The *Fenghuang* might be able to take out a single ship with a quick, planned leap through it... assuming all of the Republic vessels stood perfectly still. Fighting

was simply not an option.

"Detach the docking clamps," Seth said, as much as it hurt him to leave Alena behind. "Deploy one of our drone scouts, attach it to the hull of the *Ragnar*. I want to be able to follow them."

"Drone scouts?" Lance asked.

"It's actually the button that says 'missile'. Remember, it's a science vessel." Lance cringed as he pressed the button labeled "missile", worried for just a second he was about to kill the legendary Alena Heilmann. The ship shook softly as it launched a small pod which immediately attached to the side of the *Ragnar*. Lance sighed in relief and wondered when he would start trusting Seth.

"What now?" Leah asked.

"We need to leap away," Seth said. "Far enough that the Republic will think we're gone... but close enough that we'll be able to receive a signal from the drone scout in a reasonable amount of time. I'm thinking sixty or so AU outside of the Kuiper Belt. They'll think we're long gone even if we're just out there."

Caitlin turned back to face him. "Captain, the Netcomm is lighting up. Looks like they want to talk."

"They don't want to talk," Seth quickly answered. "It's a ruse. There's no reason to open a Netcomm channel with them."

"I... I already did," Caitlin said. She cringed as she expected Seth to scold her. He didn't. Instead, he seemed to recede into his chair, as if out of fear.

The view-screen at the front of the command center lit up, displaying the commander of the Republic ships. He was an intense man of imperceptible age. He had no wrinkles, but a shock of white hair and a face tortured by a lifetime of anguish. He wore the dark crimson uniform of the Republic military and proudly displayed his rank of Commissar. No matter how old he was, Seth was sure he was the youngest Commissar in the Republic. His name was Phaer Absalom, and Seth knew him all too well. He was the military mastermind behind the enforcement of the Fall.

“So this is your conquering fleet, Mr. Garland?” Absalom asked. “This is what you warned me about?” His lips quivered, as if suppressing laughter. “How... delightful! It’s some sort of historical artifact. Apparently you plan to defeat the People’s Republic with antiques and curiosities!”

Seth leveled his gaze at the view-screen. He was silent.

Caitlin was not. “What is this about conquering?” she asked. Seth continued to stare forward, not responding.

“The Republic fleet will be within firing range in fifteen seconds,” Lance announced.

Seth sat up in his seat. He clutched the armrests of his captain’s chair. “Once the leap is calculated... ” He sighed. “Do it.”

“We’re just leaving her behind?” Leah asked.

“I would never leave her behind,” Seth said, looking straight at Absalom, hoping the threat was implicit.

“The ships are closing in!”

Seth grimaced. “Then go! Leap!”

A flash of light. The *I.S.S. Fenghuang* was gone.

★

“We have to go back,” Seth said. He crossed his arms. He could see the look on Lance’s face: fear. He could see Leah’s expression: worry. And he couldn’t miss Caitlin: anger.

“You lied to us!” she exclaimed. They were all standing in the command center of the *Fenghuang*, which now floated in stillness several dozen AU from the Kuiper belt. “You told us that you were going to re-unite the worlds! But you just wanted power for yourself. You wanted to conquer the PIR! You did not steal this ship to help humanity, you stole it because with it you are the most powerful man in the galaxy.”

Seth spun and glared at her. “You saw Earth. You saw your real home and no one else on your backwards planet can ever say the same,” he hissed. “And I lied about nothing. That man—Commissar Absalom—and I have a history. I never intended to conquer anything.

I just told him that because I wanted him to worry.”

Leah stepped forward. She was not quite as angry as Caitlin, but still concerned. “This isn’t about a few stray words, this is about your plan. Or your lack thereof.” She sighed. “Suddenly we need Alena Heilmann to fix the Heilmann Drive? Someone who all of us knew was dead is now absolutely necessary? What were you planning on doing if Alena Heilmann was not miraculously alive?”

“She’s not necessary,” Seth said. “Just very useful.”

“You never had a plan, did you?” Lance asked. “Just grab the last starship in existence, go around to all the planets struggling with the Fall... and what? Extort money from them? Power? What were you even trying to do?” The command center was quiet.

The truth was this: Seth’s crew was correct. He did not have a plan. He never had a plan.

The truth was this: Seth was a student, albeit a star pupil at the Republic School of Interplanetary Relations. The RSIR taught young, ambitious recruits how to handle the cultural differences that had arisen between the various planets in the galaxy. Even though the Old Economy provided almost every nation, every culture, every world, and every person with the potential to lead a comfortable life, there were still conflicts. There were fights between planets and even interplanetary wars. In exchange for use of the interstellar trade routes, the People’s Republic required all disputes to be mediated by a diplomat trained at the RSIR.

The truth was this: Seth did not want to be merely a diplomat. Diplomacy was a means to an end.

Seth steepled his hands in front of his face. He was going to have to explain himself. “I stole this ship because I had to. I never had a plan. I made promises where it was convenient. I made threats where it was necessary. All I wanted was to save this ship, to save the hope that one day humanity might once again be re-united.”

The crew was still quiet. He was only telling them what they already knew. He had to give them more. They wanted an apology. Seth was

not sorry. There was nothing to be sorry for. But he had to give them what they wanted. "I regret that I brought you all on board before I knew exactly where this was going. I may have misrepresented my goals and means. But now I have a plan. And now there is absolutely something we must do. I'd hoped to save this ship, to save what it represents. Alena Heilmann can help us do that. And she can do better. She can improve it. She can end the Fall."

"So until now, you had no endgame?" Leah asked.

Seth shrugged. "I had no opening. But what does that mean now that everything has changed? We have to rescue Alena Heilmann. The Republic has no interest in ending the Fall. They will hide her, they will imprison her, because she threatens the very core of their power."

The truth began to set in among the crew. All three of them joined Seth for different reasons. Caitlin wanted to see the stars just once before she died. Leah was devoted to the advancement of technology and saw this as a chance to stay on the cutting edge, no matter the legal repercussions. Lance had spent his life traveling between the planets and felt stranded on a single world. They all thought that Seth was something more, that he had a grand vision for the future, and that they could play a part. Now they realized that he was just a man, a man who happened to steal a starship, and a man who had no idea what to do after that.

"You lied to us," Lance said. "You said you could save the galaxy from the Fall." He gritted his teeth as he thought about the situation they now found themselves in. "But now, it looks like you proved yourself right. You may be a piece of shit, but it looks like you stumbled into the right rimsdamned place at the right rimsdamned time. The galaxy needs Alena Heilmann."

"I was supposed to live my entire life in a single city, on a single island, on a single planet," Caitlin said. "Now I have seen the Earth, the source of everything. I have heard the voice of Alena Heilmann, the woman who made my society, my planet and my life possible."

Now I have the chance to save her. You may have betrayed me, but you have made me more than I ever could be. You're right. We have to go back for her."

"But how?" Leah, the engineer and science officer, was the only one still unconvinced. "We have no weapons. We are nothing."

Seth smiled. "Why" was the problematic question, and they were already getting comfortable with his answer. Now they were asking: "How?" And the answer to that was quite simple.

"We attached a drone scout to their ship before we jumped," Seth said. "And it's been sending back data ever since. They have taken the *Ragnar* and Ms. Heilmann to an observation outpost on Europa, the sixth moon of Jupiter. That's good news."

"Why?" Lance asked.

"Because," Seth said, now beaming. "I've broken out of that outpost before."

It was only three years after the debut of the Heilmann Drive—one year after the disappearance of Alena Heilmann—when the first accident happened. One of the reasons the drive was so effective was that it could power itself with matter gathered and compressed in the path of a leap. The instantaneous fusion of space dust, small asteroids, and other matter provided more energy than even the largest starship needed.

Unfortunately, the Heilmann Drive could not differentiate between matter. It compressed and fused anything and everything in its path. This meant navigators had to find a straight line between the beginning and end of the leap that did not touch any stars, planets, or moons.

For those first three years, everyone believed that the reason it was necessary to navigate around large bodies was the safety of the ship. They were afraid that leaping through a planet or a star would overwhelm the Heilmann Drive and destroy the vessel. Then it happened. A haphazard leap across the galaxy sent the U.S.S. Magellan on a course directly through Upsilon Scorpii, a star approximately 500 lightyears from Earth. The Heilmann Drive was stronger than anyone could have ever expected. The Magellan survived, surprising even the navigator, who had realized his miscalculation a second too late. The star, however, did not fare so well.

Even though only an incredibly small portion of the star was

compressed during the jump, it was still enough to start a chain reaction. The star collapsed into a black hole, destroying the Upsilon Scorpii solar system. It was then that the United Earth Alliance, the organization which would later become the People's Interstellar Republic, realized the darkness behind the Heilmann Drive.

It was not only the greatest engine ever built. It was also the most terrible weapon ever built. Leaping through a solid object destroyed it, no matter what that object was or what it was made of. Asteroids, starships, moons, planets, and even stars could be obliterated with a single leap.

This danger, however remote, led the People's Interstellar Republic to take control of all interstellar starships and starship technology. Only a select few were taught how to operate the Heilmann Drive and even fewer were taught how to build them. This control was remarkably successful. Despite its potential, the Heilmann Drive was never used as a weapon of war.

Until today.

*

"You're sure about these numbers?" Lance asked, looking over the coordinates Seth handed him. "I feel like we're trying to thread a moving needle."

"If I'm wrong we are shot down over Europa. Or we destroy the moon and kill Alena Heilmann along with hundreds of others." Seth crossed his legs and stared forward at the blank view-screen in the command center. "In other words, I'm not wrong."

The crew was silent. They were haunted by their doubts, both about this mission and about their so-called captain. He was not the man they thought he was. He did not have a grand plan to end the Fall. He was brash, impulsive, and dangerously inexperienced. His motives seemed far more self-serving than altruistic.

That didn't matter. Seth was the only person who could save Alena

Heilmann. She was a legend to most and a goddess to a few. She was supposed to be dead, lost to the winds of time. But the galaxy needed her again and she had returned. Now she was in the hands of the People's Republic, specifically in the hands of the men charged with enforcing the Fall. She was an inconvenience to them, a danger to their beliefs and their livelihoods.

Now the only person brave—or perhaps stupid—enough to mount a rescue mission was a traitorous student with a stolen starship.

Lance was scared for his life, but knew he could not turn his back on this imperative. Leah was furious that she'd been hooked into this aimless rebellion, but she could not ignore that she was now needed. Caitlin regretted ever leaving her homeworld, but realized that she had the chance to be part of something bigger than any of her ancestors ever imagined. The woman trapped on that moon was the reason Airlann even existed. She led her people from a single world and, behind her, they conquered the galaxy. If the Goddess Airlanni was real, undoubtedly she was something like Alena Heilmann.

"I have seen more than my sisters ever will," Caitlin said. "If I am to die before my time, let it be now. Let it be for this."

"We're not going to die," Seth replied. "But still, that's a good attitude."

Lance felt his muscles tighten as he realized how close they were getting to the leap. "Captain, we're fifteen seconds away." He took a deep breath. "The Europa sensor relay will enter the leap window in ten... nine... eight..."

"Calculate the leap," Seth said, his voice wavering ever so slightly. "Be ready on my mark, but keep counting."

"Five... four... three... two... one..."

"Airlanni be with us now."

"Leap."

★

The Europa orbital sensor relay was cresting just across the dark side of the surface when it began to shudder. It was just a creak at

first, but within seconds the steel structure started to collapse.

For dozens of years, it had circled and twirled around Europa in perfect harmony with the moon. Now it broke off from its path and dived towards the surface. As it dipped out of orbit and began to burn up against the atmosphere, it lit up the darkness around it, illuminating a long, gunmetal starship hanging ominously above the moon.

In the command center of the *Fenghuang*, Lance's hands were shaking. His finger still held down the trigger for the Heilmann Drive. He hesitated. He was one second late. Now he was sure they were all dead.

Everyone else was still. Caitlin stared at the console in front of her, waiting for it to light up with another threat from the Republic Fleet. Seth grasped the armrests of his chair, expecting a maser blast, a missile, or worse: an explosion he wouldn't even feel because it would kill him instantly. Leah watched as the ship's sensors came back online and...

"The satellite is going down!" she announced. "We just clipped it, but it was enough!" A wave of relief passed over the crew. Caitlin exhaled. Lance finally eased up on the trigger. Seth sat up straight and let himself smile.

"The stars are with us," he said. He walked towards the front of the command center. "The orbital relay on Europa goes quiet at least once a day thanks to electrical storms on Jupiter. When it does, they reboot the entire sensor system to get it back online. That takes about twenty minutes. They're going to think that's what happened. We have twenty minutes to get into the atmosphere and down on the surface." He put his hand on Lance's shoulder. "We can do that, right?"

"If we can leap through an orbital sensor array," Lance said, "We can do anything."

*

The Europa research station had a single spaceport, a large

placed lot just outside of the main facility. It was not atmosphere-controlled, and anyone going between a ship and the station had to travel either in a shuttle or, if no shuttles were available, a lifesuit.

The spaceport was designed for Heilmann Drive starships and intra-stellar fighters and transports. It was built centuries after the last sublight ramscoop starship was decommissioned, and thus hardly had the space to accommodate the *U.S.S. Ragnar*. The massive ancient vessel took up most of the landing area and blocked the view from the station across the lot.

No one even noticed as a small gray ship, glowing ever so slightly with a purple hue, floated down from the upper atmosphere and settled right next to the *U.S.S. Ragnar*. With the sensors offline, the *Fenghuang* was practically invisible. Once it landed, and the Heilmann Drive powered off, it looked like nothing more than another errant part of the ancient sublight ship.

Perhaps when the shuttle launched, a guard should have noticed something. Perhaps an entire research station should not have taken a sensor outage for granted. Perhaps they should have been more prepared. Centuries of peace had weakened them, and that was just what Seth Garland was banking on. They did not know what it was to be at war. He would show them.

*

“Do you think I am a sin-blood fool?” Commissar Absalom growled. “Of all the ridiculous stories he could have given you, he chose this?” He sat in a folding chair across from Alena Heilmann and her crew, boring into them with his pale blue eyes. He wore the dark red uniform of the People’s Republic, immaculate on every inch of his body except his left leg. It was covered in leather straps and held together with a brutal metal framework.

Absalom could not fold his leg, and had to stretch it out before him. It was broken, probably beyond ever properly healing, and he refused to let it go. Even in Alena’s time, bionic limbs were readily available, and she could not understand why he would withstand the agony and

disability of the shattered extremity.

"It's not a story!" exclaimed Sam el Titanian, one of the two men in the holding cell with Alena. He was the Ragnar's navigator. "This is the Goddess! This is Alena Heilmann! And you cannot speak to her like this!"

Absalom shook his head. "This is deeply humiliating. I believed that Mr. Garland and I had a certain... mutual respect for each other. But clearly he does not think very highly of me. And, perhaps, if this is the best he could do, I should not think so highly of him."

"Let me out of here," Alena hissed. "I have done nothing wrong. I have not violated your pathetic Spatial Preservation Act. Allow me to go, allow me to fix this mess you've made. Let me work on improving the compression drive instead of wasting time in this cell. What could you possibly want from me?"

"I want Seth Garland!" Absalom roared. He almost came out of his chair, and might have jumped across the room at Alena. But he stopped as he put weight on his leg, grimaced in pain, and returned to his seat. "I want his ship."

Alena shrugged. "I only knew him for a few minutes, but I know that he'll never let you have that ship," she said. "If he has any sense, you'll never see him again. He'll stay just out of your grasp."

Suddenly, the room shook violently as an explosion ripped through the research station. Absalom was nearly thrown to the ground from his chair. He steadied himself and looked up at Alena. "I guess you don't know him as well as I do." He quickly scrambled to his feet and limped over to an intercom near the door. He pressed a button beneath the speaker. "Status report! What was that?" he growled.

"Some kind of blast in the western hull," a deep voice replied through bursts of static. "Near the supply depot. We have a breach, approximately a meter in width."

Absalom grinned. "We're being attacked," he said. "I will be in the command center momentarily. In the meanwhile, send down a security squad to the supply depot in lifesuits. And most importantly,

scramble fighters. Somewhere in Earthspace there is a starship and I want it."

He let go of the button on the intercom. He looked back at Alena Heilmann, who was rather upset about this turn of events. "What of your savior now?" Absalom asked. "He's an arrogant fool. Always was. Always will be."

Alena glared at him. "At least he tried. Someday history will look upon you as a monster. You are about to destroy everything we have spent our existence working for."

"I'm going to save our existence," Absalom said. "But you're like him. You wouldn't understand anything like that. Too blinded by ambition to see that reality hangs by a thread." He turned away from her and limped out of the holding cell.

Alena and her crew were alone and they were despondent. They were trapped. They had no way of verifying their identities, either historically or with the Linarian government. And now it looked like their sacrifice was for nothing. Seth Garland had not taken the last Heilmann Drive and run. He came back for them, straight into the trap Absalom set.

"We should have taken the ship from him," Sam said. "We should have known that a thief could not be trusted."

"Then we would have been thieves," Alena replied. "No, if this is going to be the end... It is not our fault. It is not his fault. At least he tried to—"

The doors to the holding cells slid open again. Alena and her crew immediately went silent. Four men in lifesuits charged into the room. They carried heavy laser rifles. The lifesuits were pure black, stretching from the sharp tips of the toes to the subtle curve of the skull. From the neck to the mid-thigh, they were covered in circuits and small tubes. These suits provided the pressure and atmosphere required to survive on most uninhabitable worlds. They were skin tight, but revealed little of their wearer.

"What now?" Alena asked. "Do you want to use me as bait?"

One of the men reached up and grabbed the top of his lifesuit, pulling it down over his face. First Alena saw the unkempt dark hair, then the almond-shaped eyes, and finally the wispy goatee. It was Seth Garland.

"Of course not. I'm going to get you out of here."

*

"They have sent soldiers down to the hull breach to find you," Alena said as they left the holding cells. Seth was back inside the lifesuit, knowing full well that everyone on the station had seen his picture. "If you go back there, they'll be waiting."

"Good thing that's not where we're going. You really think I'm stupid enough to break into this station by blowing a hole in the hull?"

"I didn't think you were stupid enough to come back for me."

"It's not stupid if we escape," Seth replied.

"So how did you break in?"

Seth stopped and looked back at her, through the mesh of the lifesuit. "I docked at the airlock. My shuttle has a Republic callsign." He motioned forward with his hand. "Now let's get going before they realize that the breach is just a distraction." The rest of the crew rushed down the hall. They held their rifles haphazardly. It was obvious, even to Alena and the Linarians, that they were not soldiers or even remotely acquainted with warfare. Nevertheless, they were the only way out.

Lance, as the only one among them who had ever even handled a weapon before, led them forward through the halls of the Europa base. Most of the crew were either working on restoring the sensors or securing the supply depot near the hull beach. Most likely, there were very few people between the holding cells and the airlock.

Suddenly, Lance heard footsteps as they approached a corner near the airlocks. Someone was coming towards them. He immediately signaled back at Seth, Alena, and the rest.

At first, the escapees rushed to hide in the adjacent doorways. As they scattered, Seth spun around and motioned to everyone,

including Alena and the Linarians. He twirled his index finger in the air. "Act natural," he said. "Act like we're supposed to be here."

Seth's crew quickly gathered around him again. Alena and her two men followed behind him and kept their heads down. The footsteps grew louder and louder. Shadows peeked around the corner. Three soldiers in Republic uniform emerged. Alena felt her heart race as they looked up. First they glanced at Seth and the others, hidden in their Republic-issue lifesuits. Nothing suspicious there. Then they started to turn towards her and—

"Shoot them," Seth hissed.

Lance and Leah hoisted their laser rifles up and fired upon the soldiers. They didn't see it coming. They couldn't. The lifesuits hid not only their identity, but their allegiance. Before the soldiers could even react, before they could even consider that the men in front of them were enemies, blue energy lit up the hallway in pulsing flashes. The laser rifles made no sound. They just left burning holes in the uniforms of the soldiers, and killed them instantly.

"Good work," Seth said. He turned to face the one member of his crew who did not raise her rifle. "Except you, Governor. You have to be faster."

Caitlin stopped. "Those men did nothing wrong. I didn't want to hurt them."

"Good thing you were alone in that, or else we'd all be dead. The only thing we have is the element of surprise. Next time, don't hesitate." He twirled his finger again and pointed forward, towards the airlock. "Move out. The longer we stand here, the more innocent people we have to shoot."

No one, not even Caitlin, hesitated this time.

★

Seth pulled off the hood of his lifesuit. The airlock between the Europa station and the shuttle closed behind the escapees. All of his crew was aboard, along with Alena and her two Linarians. "We're all alive," he said. "Which means that we're beating my projections."

Fantastic."

"What projections?" Lance snarled. "You had projections about this mission? About who would survive?"

"If I told you, none of you would have agreed to this. Now look at us."

"Don't get cocky yet," Leah said. She was at the nose of the shuttle, steadying the controls as they departed from the station. "Their terrestrial sensors have rebooted. Once we're a few meters away from the base, we're going to light up their boards."

"They're going to launch every fighter they have," Seth said. "But that's not important. We just need to get to the *Fenghuang* and leap." He ran his fingers through his hair as he considered the timing of their escape. "Factoring in the time it will take to warm up the Heilmann Drive and plot the leap, that will take twenty minutes. We have fifteen." He sighed. "You want to know my projections? We'll be shot out of the sky."

Alena stepped forward in front of the crew. "Unacceptable. If we route the power from life support to the compression drive we can cut that down a few minutes. Then we just need a distraction."

"I'll be the distraction," one of the Linarians said. It was Sam el Titanian, the navigator of the Ragnar. "We have weapons aboard the *Ragnar*. You go with them, I'll take off and fight them while you get the leap ready."

"You won't be alone," the other Linarian added. "It would be my honor to fight to save you, Goddess."

"If you take the *Ragnar*, you'll never outrun them," Seth said. "The ramscoop drive can't accelerate fast enough."

Sam nodded. "I know. I wasn't planning on escaping." The shuttle was quiet. Even Alena was shocked by their devotion. The others, who had only just been introduced to the depth of the Linarian faith, were blown away.

"You shouldn't do that for me," Alena told them. "I'm just another person. You know how my engine works. You can be just as helpful to

Sam shook his head. "You are our goddess."

"I'm no goddess!" Alena exclaimed. "You don't have to sacrifice yourselves for me. We can figure something else out. We can—"

"Don't be so quick to turn down their help," Seth said. "If we have the support of the *Ragnar*, we will have enough time to leap."

Alena looked at the two Linarians. They stood tall. They stood ready to fight for her, to die for her in what was certain to be a suicide mission. "Are you sure about this?" she asked.

"In the history of our people, there has never been a man asked to give his life for you," Sam said. "We shall be the first."

She wanted to discourage them. She wanted to tell them that it wasn't worth it. She wanted to prove to them that she was human, that she was not divine. "There has to be another way."

"They want to destroy everything you have worked for," Sam said. "They want to make your engine, your life's work, illegal. They want to make your divinity a crime."

The two Linarians were more than ready to martyr themselves. She turned away, turned towards Seth and looked down at the ground. Could she really ask them to do this? Could she really endorse this?

"They already gave up their lives for you," Seth told her, quietly, in the hopes that the Linarians could not hear. "How far is Earth from Linaria? Forty light-years? Even if they returned with you, everyone and everything they knew would be gone. They want to do this."

Alena clenched her fists and had to resist lashing out at something. "All because the Republic is afraid. They want to destroy me. How could they have forgotten? The compression drive changed everything. It saved our species."

"That was two thousand years ago," Seth said. "It might have seemed like a short time to you, but everything has changed. While you were gone, you became a goddess and a demon."

"I'm neither. I'm just a person."

"You brought us the stars," Seth told her. "Like it or not, you're not

just a person. And, like it or not, we need you again. If anyone can rebuild the Heilmann Drive, it's you. These people worship you with good cause. Their sacrifice doesn't just save you, it saves everything you created."

Alena nodded. "It... It should have never come to this." She turned and approached the two Linarians. They lowered their heads as she placed a hand on each man's shoulder. "I truly appreciate your sacrifice. When I return to Linaria, I will tell everyone of your heroism."

The shuttle shook as it docked with the *Fenghuang*. A loud grinding noise filled the air as the airlock began to open. Leah jumped up from the controls. She grabbed Sam and looked him in the eye. "Are you sure about this?"

"Generations of Linarians have lived and died without such an opportunity," Sam said. "This is the greatest honor our people have ever known."

"Then take the shuttle, dock with the *Ragnar*... And Goddess be with you."

The airlock opened. Seth looked out of the window of the shuttle before disembarking. The fighters were already scrambling. This was going to be a close call, no matter what the Linarians did.

*

"We've got fighters coming in hot!" Lance yelled, almost as soon as he took his station in the *Fenghuang* command center. "They're readying their weapons. They're going to be within range in—"

Caitlin interrupted him. "The *U.S.S. Ragnar* has sent a message. They said that they are in the air... and to stay behind them."

"Sublight engines online," Lance said. "We can begin takeoff."

"Do it," Seth said. "And turn on the viewscreen."

The front of the command center lit up, displaying the surface of Europa and the dock. The massive *Ragnar* floated up from the paved ground. It started to turn and face the fighters launching from the research station when two explosions rocked its starboard hull. The fighters had launched faster than expected and hit the *Ragnar*

with a volley before it was ready.

The *Ragnar* reeled as it continued to ascend, tipping towards the port side. The engines pulsed, almost as if the Linarians were sending a sign that they were still alive and in control.

Seth didn't panic. Based on his calculations, there was still a window in which they could escape. "Don't worry about them," he said. "And get us off the ground before we're exposed!"

Lance stared at his control panel. He waited just a second, just long enough for it to glow a dim green, and then responded. "Initializing takeoff."

The command center shuddered as the sublight drive engaged and the *Fenghuang* lifted off from the surface of Europa. Lance deftly piloted them behind the *Ragnar* and tapped a few buttons on his console. The ship stopped ascending and hovered in mid-air behind their Linarian protectors.

Another volley of missiles slammed into the *Ragnar*, starting a chain reaction of explosions down the spine of the large vessel. It shook violently and Seth held his breath. It looked like it was going to be torn apart before the *Fenghuang* warm up its Heilmann Drive.

"Lance, you better be calculating that leap!"

"Just another minute," he said.

The fighters were getting closer. Fire was spreading across the surface of the *Ragnar*, followed by streaks of small explosions. They wouldn't be in the air for another minute.

Seth dug his fingernails into the armrests of his chair. He started planning his surrender. As soon as the *Ragnar* went down, he would establish communications with Commissar Absalom. If he was lucky, the commissar would see the value in saving the ship, or at least Alena Heilmann, and let them live.

"The Linarians are requesting a comm line," Caitlin said. "Putting them on screen."

The command center of the *Ragnar* filled the view-screen. There was smoke everywhere, sparks flew from the consoles in the

background, and bright red alarms flashed across the walls. Sam, bleeding freely from a cut just above his eye, staggered into view. "I... I just want to see you one more time," he groaned. "I wanted to make sure... Make sure that you were all right."

Alena walked up towards the screen. "I'm fine, Sam."

He smiled. "Good. I'll see you someday, someday beyond the rim." Sam staggered away. Just before the feed cut off, he started yelling, "Engage weapons! I'm taking them with us!"

The *Ragnar* reappeared on the view-screen, just in time to see the front of the ship light up with maser and missile fire. They were broken, but they were still fighting back.

"We will not let them die for nothing," Seth said. "Get us ready to leap, Lance. It doesn't matter where, the odds are on our side with any coordinates."

Suddenly, Alena Heilmann stood up. She approached the front of the command center. "Stop!" she yelled.

"We only have so much time," Seth said. Alena didn't care. She pressed her teeth together in frustration as she watched the *Ragnar* begin to fall from the sky. Smoke poured from every surface. The engines were flickering and almost offline. That was her ship, named after her father, and she could not let herself forget him. She could not stand by while everything she worked for was being destroyed.

"Re-calculate the leap," Alena said. "Take us right through Europa. Let's end this now." A quiet chill settled over the command center. Everyone spun to look at Alena.

Seth stood and faced her. "That will destroy the moon," he said. "Everyone there will die."

"So what?" Alena hissed. "Those people are the ones behind the Fall. Kill them and that's a step in stopping this madness. Commissar Absalom will be dead, his men will be dead, and we will have one less obstacle in our way."

Seth could not deny the truth of what she was saying. All it would take was simple calculation. Instead of leaping away from Earth-

space, the *Fenghuang* could leap through Europa. The moon, and the research facility along with it, would be destroyed. Phaer Absalom and the wing of the military charged with enforcing the Fall would all be dead.

"You can't really be considering this," Caitlin said. She'd abandoned her position at the communications console and rushed to Seth's side. "There are hundreds of people down there who have nothing to do with the Fall. They are innocent."

"No one in the Republic is innocent," Alena said. She looked up at the view-screen. A deep breach was just about to split the *Ragnar* in two. "They are monsters. They would kill anyone in their path... and for what? To keep us from the stars? We will show them that no man stands in the way of destiny. We will begin blazing a path towards a new future today."

Caitlin could see that Seth was being convinced. She turned her attention to Lance, who was still waiting for a definitive order. "You're not really going to let them do this are you? He's not a real captain. She's... She's not thinking straight. Don't let them do this!"

"I... I don't know," Lance said. He was frozen. He could not bring himself to disobey Alena Heilmann or kill everyone on Europa. "Captain, what should I do?"

Flames shot up from the ground as the rear half of the *Ragnar* crashed back to the surface of the moon. The front of the ship was still afloat, still firing every weapon it had to distract the Republic fighters.

Alena could not stand the indecision. "Fine, if you can't do it, I will." She grabbed Lance and, with surprising strength, hurled him to the ground. Before he was even down, she started tapping buttons on his console, plotting a leap straight through the center of Europa. With just a few commands, she would compress and destroy the lunar core and send the entire moon either hurtling off into space or to certain destruction in the atmosphere of Jupiter.

"If we do this, we lose Earth forever," Seth said. He was

surprisingly calm. This caught Alena off guard, and she stopped her calculations. "We become just what they feared. We become the reason they never build another Heilmann Drive. We become the reason they shoot down every starship that even comes close to the solar system."

Alena's finger hovered over the console. Seth could see that the calculations were complete. "Do we need Earth?" she asked.

"It's our home. We can beat them another way. The Heilmann Drive is your legacy. Don't make your legacy into a mass murderer."

Her finger twitched. She wanted to press the button. She wanted to destroy them. And yet... "You're right." She stood up from the console. "But I'm not going to be the one to spare them."

Caitlin smiled and breathed a sigh of relief, though it was short lived. On the view-screen in front of them, she saw as one final explosion rocked the remaining fragments of the *U.S.S. Ragnar*. Their shield was gone. The fighters would be gunning for them now.

"Lance!" Seth exclaimed. "Get those original calculations back up!"

The navigator quickly returned to his seat at the helm of the *Fenghuang*. "Done... and done. Don't know where this will take us, but we aren't gonna kill anyone in the process."

Seth squinted. He could see the missiles coming for them. They were little specks of light amid the smoke from the *Ragnar*. Just in the nick of time. "Leap!" The specks became vapor trails. Seth almost thought he could see the tips of the warheads, aiming right at the *Fenghuang*. He counted down in his head, waiting for impact. *Three... two... one...*

A brilliant flash and then, for just a split second, everything went black.

Seth opened his eyes. He was still in the command center. He looked around. Lance was covering his face with his hands. Caitlin was clinging to one of the consoles with an iron grip. Alena was leaning against the back wall, arms crossed, as if she knew full well that they would leap in time.

"We're... We're alive?" Caitlin asked.

Alena scoffed aloud. "Of course we're alive. If their missiles got close enough to us during the leap, they'd just be compressed and turned into fuel just like anything else."

Seth arched an eyebrow and looked at her. "Really?"

"Thank God I'm here," Alena said. "Because I don't think I can trust my legacy to any of you." She turned towards the door and left the command center.

Epilogue

The development of the Heilmann Drive changed society. In the years of interstellar travel, humans became Homeworlders, Yuanians, Linarians, and dozens of other identities. Despite that, they were all tied together by two things. The first was a common origin. Even the most sectarian society told reverent stories of Earth, the home of all humanity. The second was the Heilmann Drive itself. Almost anyone could step foot on a starship one day and be on a new planet the next.

The Fall marked the end of that freedom. Now, every planet was an island. Many were already prepared to deal with this. Worlds such as Airlann had little contact with the rest of the galaxy for hundreds of years and proceeded as if nothing had changed. Others, like NewPasTur, had been thrown into chaos.

After centuries of unity, the galaxy was splintered. In their explorations of the universe, the humans had never encountered another sentient life form. The long search for "aliens" had been fruitless. But now, they were aliens to each other. The Airlanni built their society around a planet, the NewPasTurians built their world around a technological niche, the Linarians worshiped a mortal woman, and the Yuanians worshiped the financial markets.

The People's Interstellar Republic was so successful at controlling the old economy because there was no unity among the other planets. Had a few worlds allied, demanded the plans to the Heilmann Drive, or threatened military action, the Fall may have never happened. But they were diverse, they were hostile, and this chaos allowed the Republic to control the destiny of the entire human race.

If anyone was going to take it back, they would need to bring these worlds together. They would need to find some common ground, some reason to cooperate. Naturalists would have to ally with capitalists, technocrats with theocrats.

They still had one thing in common. They still had Earth.

*

“What now?” Alena asked. She poured herself a glass of Yuanian whiskey from the decanter in the conference room. Seth watched her. She was the first person on the crew to pour herself a drink. This made him smile. He’d left the bottle out in every meeting and none of the others were willing to bite.

“That’s a good question,” he said. They were alone. He thought of telling her the truth. He still didn’t have a plan, his theft of the *Fenghuang* had been more impulse than anything, and his ultimate goal was the destruction of the People’s Republic. “I suppose we should figure out some way for you to get started on a safer Heilmann Drive. Gather resources and scientists, set up a lab somewhere sympathetic to our cause.” Telling her was too risky. She was more than capable of taking over his command. As much as he respected her, Seth was not willing to turn everything over to her.

Alena took a drink. She cringed. Seth repressed a chuckle as he realized that, after hundreds of years traveling between Earth and Linaria, she’d probably never had anything quite as bitter as Yuanian liquor. “Tell me the truth, Captain Garland,” she said. “If that’s your plan—have me rebuild the compression drive—what would you have done if you never found me?”

“I was going to unite the planets against them,” he said. “I’m still going to do that. It’s just going to be a lot easier.”

“I’m glad you’re ambitious,” Alena said. “I’m ambitious.” Seth sipped from his glass, being sure to hide his own reaction to the strength of the whiskey. “I hope you understand why I spared Europa. We can’t let them make us the villains. Not yet, at least.”

“It was the wrong decision,” Alena said. “But it was your decision.”

She drank again, this time without flinching. "They're going to come after us. They still have the Heilmann Drive plans. They can build more, they can hunt you down."

"Let them come. I'm not afraid of them." He lifted his glass towards Alena. "The future is no place for fear."

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