

FALL FROM EARTH

a novel by

Matthew Johnson

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This book is for Megan, of course.

CHAPTER ONE

“Planetfall in ninety seconds,” the computer said.

The falling pod hit atmosphere, shook violently as the air pushed back against it. Any items the convicts had left unsecured bounced from wall to wall in smaller and smaller pieces; the pod itself seemed nearly as fragile, groaning from the stress. There was no guessing how old it was, part of a dropship probably built for the Corp Wars almost two double-dozen years ago. Of course, things aged more slowly in space, as Shi Jin knew. Her Nine Dragons, the ships she and Griffin had salvaged and used to start their rebellion, had been as old as this. She had studied enough poetry at the Academy to know irony when she saw it.

Jin closed her eyes, tried to relax before the landing thrusters kicked in. At thirty, her body was not quite as compliant as it once had been, but going limp was something it could still do. She tensed and relaxed her muscles from head to feet. Her grey hempen coveralls marked her for a convict, the black badge pinned to them for a traitor, and with the next ship not due for five years there was no chance of escape.

For as long as anyone could remember, most criminals had been conscripted into the Fleet, given the hardvack or Nospace jobs that warped genes and minds. She had changed all that. Most of the Fleet people who had sided with her during the rebellion had been just those draftees, people who had seen the Borderless Empire’s failings firsthand, and now it was not considered safe to let convicts serve on Fleet ships. Instead they were used to prepare planets for colonization, clearing land and building roads, houses and sewers. If things had been different she might have come here ten or twenty years later, a Fleet officer given a grant of land at the end of a distinguished career. But things had not been different, and it was her inability to pretend they were that had made her rebel, led her here. Despite everything, she did not think she would want to trade places with any

version of herself that had made a different choice.

The roar of the landing thrusters was so loud Jin couldn't hear the other convicts screaming. Minutes later, the pod touched down with a shock, throwing her against her restraints. There was another rumble as the pod lurched a few degrees to the side, then silence.

"Planetfall achieved," the computer said at last. The restraints opened with a click and Jin and her cellmates rose unsteadily to meet their future.



In the ship above Griffin sighed, remembering his last conversation with Jin before the ship made orbit. "You don't have to do this," he had said, just before she boarded the pod. "If you stay, no one will be able to do anything about it."

He could not come with her, of course: having lived his whole life in zero-gee, he would probably not even survive the landing if he tried. But there was nothing keeping her from staying on the ship.

Jin turned away. "I know. But we're a month away from any other Empire world here. I can make new plans, find a way off this rock—"

He reached out to hold her shoulders. "Jin, it's over. If they thought there was anything more we could do, they wouldn't have let us live."

"They didn't think I could do anything the first time, either. This could be exactly the right place for me to be."

He shook his head, his shaggy brown hair and beard trailing slowly behind without gravity to keep them in line. "I wouldn't count on the other convicts lining up to join you. Most of these people are dissidents and petty crooks, not revolutionaries."

"You've never given up on me before. Don't start now."

The landing pod's airlock had opened then, the countdown to release begun. She had turned to look at him again and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I'll be in touch. The pods have comm units so..."

He had nodded, pushed himself away, the reaction pushing her gently into the pod. She was right. Fool that he was, he was caught in her orbit. "Take care, plyemyanik."



Jin stood up, felt her legs fail beneath her, victims of more than a

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month at zero-gee. Steadying herself against the wall she moved slowly out of the room, leaving her three cellmates to find their planet legs and clean themselves off. She headed for the airlock, impatient to see her new prison. A few of the other convicts were already out of their cells, hunger and gravity conspiring to make their steps slow and unsteady. She ignored them, stepped into the 'lock and waited for it to cycle. A sour, rotten smell reached her as the outer door hissed open, overwhelming the stale recycled air.

They had landed in a long, broad valley bordered by hills on one side and a wide river on the other. All around were jagged blades of a stiff brown grass, and as the ground rose to the hills on the horizon it was covered with hundreds of identical, stunted trees. The rotten smell was almost overpowering now, the sky above a sickly yellow.

Turning her head, Jin saw the other three pods scattered across the valley. She set off for the closest of them, about a li away, a few minutes' walk. The grass, as sharp and stiff as it looked, tore through the legs of her coveralls and drew blood. Halfway between the pods she began to feel dizzy, and sucked more air in. Her vision was starting to blur, her lungs to burn; she stumbled and felt the grass slice through the skin of her knee. How far was it to the pod—a hundred paces?

She tried to control her breathing, forced herself to keep going. Up ahead the pod's airlock was opening. She had no breath to spare but had to warn them to stay inside. No sound came out when she opened her mouth, and before she could do anything else the world went grey and slapped her, hard.



Jin opened her eyes, fought to focus on the figure standing over her. It was an older man, in his late fifties or early sixties, with very short white-blond hair. As he leaned closer, she saw where shreds of plaskin had eroded around his right eye, revealing a shiny metal socket and camera lens.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

Jin fought for breath to speak. “Air...airlocks, close...not enough oxygen...”

“Yes, I know,” the older man said. He sat down next to her, helped her sit up. “We’ve let all the pods know to stay sealed.” He paused, leaned closer. “My name is Father Theou, by the way. Heresy.”

She pointed to the black badge pinned to her coveralls: “Shi Jin. Treason.” There had been no question of hiding her badge; she needed it to get her food rations, and her grey hempen coveralls had no pockets in which to keep it. It wasn’t really necessary to have badges to mark them as convicts—with the next ship not due for five years, there was no chance of escape—but then, the real purpose of the badges was not to let others know they were criminals. It was to make sure they knew.

Father Theou nodded. At this distance, Jin could see his implant clearly enough to see the tiny character *Ti’en*, heaven, stamped on it; his mark, she supposed. “I thought as much—you look rather like the actor who played you in your trial.”

“I didn’t see it. How was yours?”

“Very informative. I confess I wasn’t going to watch, but I wanted to know how they’d come up with a recantation for me.” He smiled. “At any rate, we have more important things to discuss.”

Jin stood, slowly. “The atmosphere. We can’t—”

“It’s not quite so bad as that,” Father Theou said. He was keeping his voice low and level, trying to calm her. “I suspect your collapse had as much to do with your being hungry and unused to gravity as with the lack of oxygen. A few other people have been outside exploring since you arrived. The air is thin, and there’s something in it our bodies don’t like—probably whatever it is that makes it stink so much—but we should adapt in time.”

“We’ll need to generate more oxygen to get that far,” Jin said. “And there’s no way we can terraform this place. They just sent us with basic construction equipment, not oxygenators.”

“Perhaps there was a gwai in the first survey team’s data, giving the Colonization Office the wrong information. We’ll know soon enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t I tell you? The Colonial Magistrate is on his way. He should have answers to some of your questions.”

“I hope so,” Jin said, wondering what kind of incompetent a civil servant would have had to be to land this assignment. Being sent to a place like this was almost as much of a punishment for the Magistrate as it was for the convicts.

She turned to the airlock, looked out through its porthole. Outside,

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a young man wearing the blue and gold silk robes of the Soft Church was helping an old man walk over to the pod. Each was carrying a pen-sized breather they brought to their mouths every few minutes, like the one Father Theou had taken from the pod's kitbox to rescue her. The younger man stopped regularly to swear at the sharp grass tearing at his legs. The older man was wearing standard convict-grey coveralls but did not have a badge showing his crime. Instead, he wore the stylized bowl of the Colonization Office pinned to his chest. It was silver, marking him for a Magistrate.

Jin leaned against the porthole, trying to get a better look at the old man. As he came nearer to the airlock, she saw his face.



“Thank you for coming,” Father Theou said, helping the older man inside and giving him a new air puffer. “Magistrate Linden, welcome. And your name, Brother—?”

“Bennett. Sims, Brother Bennett Sims,” the young man said awkwardly. He was tall, with light brown hair cut close to his skull; his face was red from exertion, and the dozen small cuts on his legs were dripping blood on the carpet.

Father Theou nodded and smiled at the young adelfos. The creed they had each been taught told them to embrace the similar: best to do that now, and hope Bennett might see past the white heresy badge that separated them. After all, the way Theou saw it, the Church had split from him, not the other way around. “You’ve no doubt noticed, this world is not what we expected,” Father Theou said.

Bennett nodded, and turned to Linden. “Magistrate, what do you—that is, what can we do to meet our new terraforming needs?”

For a moment Linden said nothing. It seemed to Father Theou as though the Magistrate was not fully there. Something about Linden, he could see, had made Jin furious: she was shooting him daggers and avoiding his glance by turns, but to all evidence Linden saw none of this, staring blankly ahead as though seeing ghosts.

“I don’t know,” Linden finally said.

“I think Magistrate Linden is saying—” the young adelfos, Bennett, began haltingly.

“Don’t use that title,” Linden said. “Call me just Ande. Please.”

No one spoke for a moment. Father Theou knew magistrates could

never admit to not being in full command of any situation, and were trained in particular words, postures and vocal tricks that made people instinctively grant them authority. Linden was using none of those, and Theou could see that it puzzled Jin as much as it did him.

After a moment she spoke into the silence. “There’s a Traveller—a Spacer, still up on the ship, who’s a friend of mine,” Jin said. “They know some ways of generating oxygen without dedicated equipment. If I can contact him—”

“There are two message rockets on the ship,” Bennett said, to Ande. “If we tell the Colonization Office about the situation, they’ll send someone to help us.”

Jin turned to face Ande, finally looking at him directly. “Sir,” she said, clearly choking on the word. “We can’t wait that long. It will be at least a golden month before any help can come. We need a new source of oxygen right now. You have to authorize it.”

“I can’t,” Ande said after a pause.

“Will you authorize sending the rockets?” Bennett asked.

“No. I won’t—do what you need to do.” He closed his eyes, took off his silver bowl pendant and put it in the pocket of his coverall.

Father Theou looked from Bennett to Jin, saw each of them unsure of what to do next. He could not know why Ande had refused his charge, but it was clear this was his best chance to earn a place for his followers on this world. “At any rate, we must stand together,” he said before either of the others could speak. “With what we are learning about this world, disunion could be fatal.”

“I’m not sure—” Bennett began.

“I hope you’re good at holding your breath,” Jin said. She shrugged and turned away. “I’m going to use the communicator. If any of you want to help get an oxygenator going, you’re welcome to.”

“I need to—we have to send that message,” Bennett said to Ande. “We can’t let her—” He turned to Theou beseechingly.

Father Theou could see the younger man’s face darken as his glance fell on Theou’s Heresy badge. “We are more alike than different,” Theou said.

Bennett paused for a moment, and then shook his head. He turned back to Ande. “I’m sorry,” he said, and then turned to go back into the pod.



Bennett could feel his eyes glazing over as he stared at his datapad screen. This was not going well. He rubbed his eyes with his hands and turned away from the screen. The featureless white walls of the pod's maintenance room offered little in the way of relief from the screen's glare.

He closed his eyes and remembered the look of the planet outside, tried to reconcile it to what he had seen on the briefing vid. It was impossible. Life on that planet would have been hard, yes, but he hadn't asked for an easy assignment. With only light terraforming to be done, he could have helped the convicts become a community—and perhaps, once they no longer felt like outsiders, he could have convinced them that they could again become Compatible within the Church. There is more glory in ministering to the lost, they said, than in giving Enosis to the Lonely One, the Emperor herself.

This planet, though, seemed almost beyond hope. It looked like the very first thing they would have to do to survive would be to disobey orders, making their own oxygen. He was here to minister to the convicts, not get involved in politics, but still—to be Compatible meant all of humanity sharing one same culture, the same beliefs, and the authority of the Magistracy was central among those. If enough started listening to Jin, this whole planet might be lost to the Void.

The sky was the hardest thing to accept. All the worlds in the Borderless Empire, even the marginal ones like Jutland or Setebos, had blue skies, or else blue-tinted domes. That was what the blue on his robe stood for, that shared link with all humanity and Connection with the Allsoul. Could this be a sign that he had been wrong—that he had not been called here after all?

A voice came from the door. “Brother Sims?” she asked.

“Yes?” Bennett said, turning in his chair to face her. He started at the sight of the red murder badge on the young, terribly thin woman's chest, and then reminded himself this was why he was here.

“I heard that you had come with us, to minister to us,” she said. “It has been a very long time since I have been to a Service. Would I be permitted back?”

He made himself smile, uneasy. “Of course. That's why the Church is Soft; everyone who sincerely wants to can become Compatible.”

“And if my crimes are too great?”

“Nothing you could have done is so bad it can’t be forgiven.”

She was silent for a moment. “But what if they are? What if the Enemy has claimed my soul?”

“There is no Enemy. There is only the Allsoul and the Void.” Bennett studied the girl’s face, looking for some hint of what she was thinking. He wondered where she had gotten her ideas; the last of the Tartarids were supposed to have been excommunicated dozens of years ago. He supposed every heresy lived on in pockets here and there around All-the-Stars.

“Of course,” she said. “Thank you, Brother Bennett.”

He rose from his chair as she turned to leave. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No. Thank you.”

It was only after she was gone and he had settled back down in chair, thinking that his time studying in the House hadn’t prepared him for this, that he realized he had never learned her name.



Griffin was floating in front of a viewport, watching the planet turn below him. He thought about what Jin had told him about it, wondered how many of the convicts would have accepted this option if they had known what to expect. Almost all, probably. His people were living proof that life would survive anywhere it had even the slimmest chance.

Drifting aimlessly about the ship for a few hours now, he’d only just realized how much he’d become accustomed to the noise of the engines. The ship sounded very quiet with them stilled. The air recycling system, on the other hand, was starting to grumble menacingly. It was old, and not meant to be used for such long periods—well, he could probably patch it to last at least a few more years. As it was, he was hardly straining it, all by himself. He was used to stale air, had never known any other kind, and only occasionally dreamed of flushing all the sweat, gas and garbage smells out into vacuum and pumping in a tank of fresh air.

The vidscreen on the wall nearby pinged and displayed the characters MESSAGE WAITING. Griffin hit the OPEN CHANNEL key and Jin appeared.

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“Griffin, we’ve got to get started. Will it be easier to build it up there, or send the parts down in the boat?”

“I’ll send it down,” he said. “I’m going to have to figure out exactly what we need.”

“Okay. Listen. I could use something else: a list of anyone here that has any background in xenoscience. It should be in convict records—let me know when you have it, all right?”

The image blinked out, replaced by a camera feed of the planet outside, and Griffin was alone. He sighed. She had snared him right away when they first met, pulled him from his people and into her orbit. Together they had, perhaps, done a little good; but that was over. Now it was time to remember where he had come from.



Jin put the last piece in place, sat down on her bunk. She could never feel at home until she had set up her chess set. Even if the pieces were just scavenged spare parts, the board carved into the surface of a desk, the game was always the same. It was the one she and Lieutenant Wiesen had left unfinished, that she had carried in her head wherever she went. So long as she kept it set up, she knew someday she would win.

Other than Lieutenant Wiesen, the only person who had ever beaten her was Ande Linden. During her rebellion, she had outplayed every other Fleet Magistrate they had sent against her, but he had always been one move ahead of her.

She picked up one of the white bishops, diagrammed its options. She sometimes wondered if the gambit she had planned would really have worked, or if it had been part of a trap laid by Lieutenant Wiesen. In all the years since she had never been able to find one, but that did not mean it was not there. She wondered now if Ande’s strange behaviour, his refusal to take command or even wear his uniform, had a trap hidden in it.

She picked up her datapad, keyed it on. That was the one good thing about having Bennett on board: they had all been given datapads so they could receive Enosis, be joined with the community, Church and Allsoul. Jin was not too proud to take one for its more secular functions. Later she would use it to learn all the names of the other convicts, memorize their faces, but for now she had to find someone

who could help with the oxygenator.

The list Griffin had compiled for her had only one name on it. Not surprising—xenologists, who studied the life native to extraterrestrial planets, were some of the most valued workers in All-the-Stars. She leaned back on her cot, called up the file. The datapad's screen showed an image of a copper-skinned woman with streaks of gold running through her black hair. A Core Worlder, then, from a family with enough pull to give her cosmetic genework.

“KAUR, RUCHIKA,” the entry read. “Born on Gemini colony, Year 7 Monkey, made Meritorious Citizen at birth. Graduated Xenological Institute (Mars) Top Honours 9 Fox, granted Imperial Citizenship. [Redacted]. Arrested 9 Rabbit, convicted 10 Rooster of [Redacted]. Sentenced to merciful death; sentence commuted to life in exile as per Colonization Office request, assigned to mission to Colony Planet 10 Horse One. Assigned bunk B, Cell 9, Pod Two.”

Jin closed the datapad, wondering what a xenologist could have done to earn a death sentence. She took a few more deep breaths, prepared herself for the trip over to Pod Two. *Exile for life*, she thought to herself. Maybe by the end of it she'd be used to the smell.



Bennett cleared his throat, peered inside the open door. “Magistrate Linden?” he called, straining to see inside the dark room. He heard movement, saw a flash of white hair.

“Please, come in,” he heard the old man say. His voice was shaky, held into his chest so that it came out almost a whisper. It reminded Bennett of Father Philo, his Doctrine instructor at the House, whose lungs had been burned by the air on Jutland. The lights rose to half and Bennett could see the older man sitting on his bunk.

“I’m sorry, I—did I wake you?”

“No. I was awake. Come in, please. Brother...Sims, isn’t it?” Beneath the shakiness, the old man’s voice was deep, reassuring.

“Yes, zi Linden.” Bennett stepped inside, gave him a half-bow. He waited for the old man to say something. After a few moments, it became clear that if they were going to talk he was going to have to do most of the work.

“Please, zi Linden, you can’t just resign this commission,” he said. “This colony needs your leadership. These people, they aren’t

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ordinary colonists, you know that. We can't let people think this mission is just a chance for them to repeat their mistakes."

"Surely you can give them the guidance they need?" Ande said.

"I can't get involved in politics."

Ande stood, started to make his bed. "And I can? Tell me, Brother Sims, what would you say if I told you I'm not fit to lead? That I am the last person here who should risk repeating his mistakes?"

Bennett watched him carefully. Was he being tested? "You were given this commission by the Magistracy. It's not for us to question our duty."

"No?" Ande turned to face the young man again. "Tell me, Brother Sims, why have you not taken your new name yet?"

"I'm not a full member of the Order. This is my initiating mission. But you haven't—"

"Five years is a long time, isn't it? Aren't most initiations only six months?"

"Yes. I requested this mission because it was so long—I thought no one else would want it."

"And were you right?"

A pause. "Yes."

"So. You are doing something difficult—staying for five years among criminals, heretics, those the rest of the world considers beyond redemption—so that a better end may be achieved." The shakiness in the voice was almost gone, Bennett noticed, replaced by a reassuring warmth. He could feel himself nodding, agreeing almost as much with Ande's voice as with his words.

"Yes. And that's what I'm asking you to—"

"I am doing something difficult as well. I was born, raised and schooled to do what you are asking. I spent more years than you have lived doing it. Now I must not do it—to achieve a better end. Do you understand?"

Bennett stood unsteadily, put his hand to his temple. "I—I still don't..."

"No, you don't understand, but you still agree. They all would—that is why I can't help you. In this life, on this world, we can't afford to agree with things for reasons we don't understand, nor can we afford to make the same mistakes twice. Now, you can stay if you like, but I must tell you I won't be saying anything more of any importance—"

and you, I expect, are a very busy young man.”

“Well—thank you,” Bennett said, turning to leave. He paused. “Why did—why did you take this commission, if you didn’t intend to serve?”

“I’m a criminal, just like everyone else here; the only difference was I got to keep my rank. But make no mistake, this planet was meant to be my prison.”



Ruchika shook off her field jacket, a cloak of stiff green rubberized cotton. She had just remembered something else she’d need, her sample scraper, and had to find room for it in one of the pockets of her vest.

“Shouldn’t you be unpacking?” someone asked from the doorway.

“I’m not staying,” Ruchika answered, not turning to look. She had had enough waiting, enough delays. “I have to work.”

“The work is here, *zi Kaur*. There’s nowhere to go, and we need your help to build that oxygenator.”

Ruchika sighed, put down the scraper. It was a woman talking to her, in her thirties, with straight black hair. “*Shi Jin*, yes? Sorry, *zi Shi*, but I’m not a terraformer. You want one of those big hairy people with tremendous lung capacity.” She pulled the UV penlight out of another pocket, put it down and replaced it with the scraper.

Jin stepped in her path. “You must know there’s not enough oxygen out there. You can’t go.”

“There was a survey team here, ten years ago. They would have built a research station somewhere out towards the mountains, and it’ll have its own oxygenator. All I need is enough oxygen in puffers to get there, and I can get back to work.”

Jin looked at her as if she had sprouted wings. “It doesn’t matter. You can’t go now. You’re the only one who can help us build the oxygenator. If people hear you wouldn’t help—”

“What does it matter what they think?”

“It matters because this is a ship full of dangerous people, and they won’t much like it if they hear you refused to help them.”

“Are you threatening me? You’re not in charge, you know. Nobody is in charge here. We’re on our own.”

“You’re right. There’s nobody who can tell two hundred angry

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criminals to ignore the fact that you wouldn't help them survive.” This time Jin caught her eye. There was something there—some look, something in her voice—that made Ruchika stop and listen. “You might wish there was, though.”

She crossed her arms. “If I help you with this, will you let me go? You won't draft me into any more terraforming?”

“If you really want to go—”

“I do. Now, what do you need me to do?”



I study hard during the cold nights
And my sleeves are wet with tears.
Yet future rewards are in my mind
Like the blue sky on the horizon.

Bennett put down his datapad. So far he had been working for an hour and had gotten no further than choosing the correct poem to introduce his report. Fleet ships could move between the stars, but there was no way of sending information across that distance except for the two TSARINA-equipped rockets. That meant his message had to be perfect: he had heard of minor clerks junking memos just because they had an irregular meter, or used the characters in the Lonely One's name.

He looked around the room for inspiration. There was little to be found in the spartan bunkroom, just the linens and meagre personal effects of himself and his bunkmate. He closed his eyes, hoping the internal landscape would be more fruitful. All he could see was the scene outside, the sky yellow like a rotten fruit and the grass bloody where he'd walked on it.

“How goes our message in a bottle?” came a voice from behind him.

Bennett opened his eyes, startled. “What? I mean, I'm sorry?”

Father Theou was standing at the doorway. Something in his posture made him look as if he were still wearing his robes, instead of a grey coverall with the white badge that marked him for a heretic.

“The message, about our situation, how is it going?” Father Theou prompted.

“Oh, that,” Bennett said. “I didn't know what you meant, about a bottle.”

“An old story from the time before the Borderless Empire. Hanzi is mostly water you see, though ironically they called it Earth then, and people were often lost at sea. Some of them would write down who and where they were, and put it into a glass bottle that they would throw into the water, hoping the bottle would be carried to land and they would be saved.”

Bennett nodded, hit the SAVE key on his ‘pad. At the rate he was going, he couldn’t afford to lose even what he had—especially since he still had to convert it from SoftScript into good calligraphy. “And were they ever? Rescued, I mean?”

The older man considered for a moment. “No,” he said sadly. “I don’t suppose they ever were.”

Feeling uncomfortably like he was back in his first days at the House, Bennett stood. It was no use. He was only an adelfos, a missionary, while the older man was a pateros; even though the priest and his whole congregation had been excommunicated, Bennett had been conditioned to defer to him. “Well, I think we have a better chance than they did,” he said. “We know where it’s going, and who’ll receive it. And they know where we are.”

A small smile appeared on the priest’s face. He was back at the House all right, Bennett thought. That was the only other place where they laughed at you when you were trying to be serious.

“They also know *who* we are, Brother Sims. The Borderless Empire runs on two things: time and energy. How much of either do you think they will waste on two hundred criminals?”

“You can’t say that. They won’t just—” Bennett stopped and looked at the datapad in his hand—looked at the space on the screen waiting for his words, words that would explain what had happened without implying that the Colonization Office had been wrong to send them there. “Do you really think it’s no use?” he asked.

Father Theou sat down on the bunk opposite. “I’m a priest, Brother. If I didn’t believe in calling out to a higher power, where would I be?”

“But you aren’t—”

“I still have faith, and so should you.”

“What you said, though, about the bottle. If I don’t think they’ll send help, how can I do anything?” Bennett stared at Father Theou, feeling that he had again fallen into one of the logic traps that Sister

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Stagires used to set for him.

Father Theou gestured to Bennett's bunk. "Sit. Take a load off your feet. Now take a load off your shoulders. You aren't responsible for the physical wellbeing of these people—you mustn't confuse faith with hope. Hope is based on circumstance, and it isn't our business. Hope won't make that message heard. But you can have *faith* that your mission here can succeed. You can give faith to others. Anyone could write that message—you have a job here that no one else can do."

Bennett held up his hands. "I know. I came to give Enosis, but it's too soon. They don't want it."

"It may very soon be too late. If your message isn't heard, if Jin's machine doesn't work, we'll have two hundred men and women in danger of dying Incompatible, their souls forever lost to the Void. Perhaps more importantly, if this colony is to succeed, it must be a community—and we are the ones who can make it one."

Bennett turned his datapad off, making sure to give thanks to the adelfoi who had laboured for months in the computoria to make the 'pads for his mission, painstakingly copying and soldering circuit boards from the original plan. "We'd need to set up a network. We don't have power to run it, not for long."

"If there's power to run the oxygen machine, there's power for the network. I've run them on low-energy grids before."

Bennett watched Father Theou as the pateros waited for his answer. "You have, haven't you?" he asked. "That's why you have that white badge." He turned partly away from Father Theou, turning his 'pad back on. "I'll have to think about it."

Father Theou stood stiffly. "This isn't a time to be doctrinaire, Brother Bennett," he said. "I am your only ally. And we are the only ones who can save these people for the Allsoul. Think about that." He paused for a second longer, then turned and walked away in silence.



Ruchika looked up to see the ship-to-surface boat coming down. All she could see was its landing thrusters, glowing white as it struggled to slow its descent, and occasionally the flash of the attitude jets keeping it pointed up and on target. It thundered as it hit the upper atmosphere and started to grow even brighter with re-entry heat. A

few seconds later she could see the shape of the boat itself, a long, eight-sided cone, and a second after that a thin plasteel parachute opened out of the nose. It began to fall more slowly, and seconds later the main thrusters cut out as a fine rain began to fall. Another thunderclap, a real one, rang out as the rain increased and the boat touched down, hard, at the side of the river.

“As soon as you feel short of air, use your puffers,” Jin was saying. “You can run out of oxygen very quickly, so it’s better to go back in to refill if you have to. Yell out if you notice anything strange.”

The sky had darkened and was filled with brownish-orange clouds. Every few seconds, a flash of lightning on the horizon made everything look bright yellow. The others stepped gingerly, wary of the sharp grass, but as Ruchika had expected it curled up into tight loops at the rain’s touch. Jin gave her a quick look, frowning, and then started to walk toward the riverbank, gesturing to the others to follow.

“Don’t run,” Jin said. “Uses too much oxygen. Steady steps.”

The rain was getting worse now, coming down in fat round drops that stung where they hit skin. They reached a long muddy bank at the side of the river where the boat sat at a cocked angle.

“It’s sinking,” one of the other convicts said, a young man with a Petty Crime badge.

“If we let it sink it won’t be able to lift off again,” Jin said. She hit the OPEN key on the boat’s hatch and quickly drew her hand back from the still-hot metal. The hatch hissed open. “Ruchika, do you know which ones are most important?”

Ruchika shook her head, not bothering to look inside the hatch. She wasn’t about to give this farce any more of her time and attention than she absolutely had to.

Jin paused for a second and then nodded. “Teams of two. You—go inside and keep filling up the spare puffers. Ruchika and I will get the parts out of the boat. You and you, carry from the boat to the pod.”

Jin stepped into the boat and began pulling equipment out. Ruchika sighed and joined her. The pieces looked like each had been taken from a different source, and all of them looked old.

“This planet stinks,” Ruchika observed, trying to budge some ancient machine where it had wedged in the hatchway.

“What do you think it is?” Jin asked.

“Maybe part of a hydrocarbon. It has that rotting smell,” Ruchika

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said, knocking the machine free with her shoulder. She held her mouth open, waiting to receive a puff of oxygen. ,

Stepping back inside the boat, Jin and Ruchika each gathered up another armful. The boat lurched and began to sink more quickly.

“We’re almost out of time,” Jin said. “Do we have everything we need?”

“I think so,” Ruchika answered, glancing around the boat.

Jin hit two keys on the small control console next to the hatch, stepped outside the boat. Its bottom had sunk nearly a bar into the mud.

“We’d better get back to the pod,” Jin said. She began to walk quickly away from the boat.

Ruchika followed close behind, taking a hit of oxygen from her puffer when she started to feel light-headed. “I thought you said not to run—is that thing dangerous when it takes off?”

“Not normally, but with the mud...”

The boat’s main thrusters went off, pushing it up and the ground down with equal force. A shockwave of mud flew toward them, knocking them to the ground and soaking them with stinking water. The boat was in the air.

Ruchika struggled to her feet and spat a mouthful of mud onto the ground. *It will be worth it*, she promised herself.



Jin’s feet sank into the mud as she stepped out of the pod. The others had all been anxious to get back inside once the equipment had been brought in, but as soon as she’d seen the rain was letting up she had decided to explore. She looked around. The grass was still curled up—now that she’d felt the stinging, acidic rain, she understood why—and the river was running much higher than it had been. She’d have to find a place for the oxygenator where it would not be at risk of getting washed away.

Remembering that she had seen a small island just offshore, she started to walk toward the riverbank. After a few paces she glanced back at the pod and stopped, moving to examine the small pits she saw all over its hull. She ran her hand over its surface, could feel small cracks below the surface as well as the ones already visible. She took another puff of oxygen and set off for the nearest pod, to see if

it was in similar shape.

Pod Four was the furthest of the pods from the river, probably less than a li from where the stunted trees began. It had landed on uneven ground, and Jin noticed that there was a small overhang where the rim of the pod bridged a depression in the soil. Finding it, she peered underneath, ran her hand along the underside, which had been sheltered from the storm. It was smooth, intact. It was the rain, then, and not the air that was corroding the pods. She frowned. If it was corrosive, it might not be possible to electrolyse the water without it destroying the oxygenator. For that matter, the river water might not even be drinkable.

Jin straightened up, felt a pain in her lower back, gravity getting back at her for having been away so long. She stretched, and then froze as she saw movement at the edge of her vision. Turning her head she saw something moving just inside the tree cover—something large, more than half her height. She rose slowly, took a step toward the trees. Whatever she had seen, it was gone now. Shaking her head, she peered into the darkness between the closely spaced trees. She took another step forward, looked into the forest for another few seconds then turned back towards the pod, stepping gingerly on the slowly unfurling blades of grass.



Ruchika paused to swipe her bangs away from her eyes as she tried to pry the power converter open with a screwdriver. She was lying on her stomach in the pod's machine room, craning her neck to see the underside of the machine she and the Traveller had cobbled together. Her hair fell back in front of her face and the screwdriver slipped from her fingers, landing in a spot where it would be nearly impossible to retrieve.

“Vack it!” she shouted.

“Problems?” Griffin’s asked, over the speaker.

“No, it’s all right,” she said. This whole project was an annoyance. She should have been out of the pod hours ago.

“You want to take a break?”

“I’m nearly done.”

“Still. Calm your nerves.”

She scowled, but pulled herself out from under the machine and sat

up. “Easy for you to say. All you do is sit up there and give orders.”

“When you ought to be giving orders to me, is that it?”

She said nothing for a moment, wondered if he was really annoyed or just joking. She had never been good at reading things like that, even face-to-face. “I didn’t mean—”

“I’m not offended. It’s natural that a xenologist wouldn’t expect to take orders from a Traveller—or a rebel.” He paused. “Of course, not many xenologists end up in places like this. You never did tell me...”

She sighed. He had been fishing for her story since had they started work. Was he just a busybody, she wondered, or did he—or Jin—suspect why she was there? “There’s not much to tell,” she said. “I published some unpopular findings.”

“Which were?”

“I was part of the survey team on a recently discovered planet that had some odd features. After weighing all the evidence, I realized the only possible conclusion was that the planet had been altered by an alien intelligence.” She expected that would be near enough the truth to be convincing.

“That’s a crime?” Griffin asked.

“Sure. One of the early emperors—David the Second, I think—made looking for aliens illegal. He said the Borderless Empire had the mandate of Heaven to rule over all those that were part of the Soul, and anyone who wasn’t part of the Soul couldn’t possibly be intelligent.”

“So if you knew it was illegal, why did you publish?” Griffin asked.

Ruchika shrugged. “I was right. I’m a xenologist. What could I do?” She twisted a piece of copper wire round her bangs and then crawled back under the machine, seeking the screwdriver by touch.

“Why were you so sure?”

“Xenology stuff. Hard to explain.” She had said too much, made him curious. It had been so long, though, since she could tell anyone what she knew, what she had discovered. The temptation to tell everything was strong.

Well. She could wait a little longer, if she had to; and when the time came, she would have a lot more to tell.



“Are you sure of this?” Father Theou asked.

Shi Jin’s eyes flashed with anger. “I’m sure that I saw something. And yes, I know the survey didn’t find any animal life of any size. We know how reliable the survey’s been.”

“Yes. Still, with the environment so harsh...” Father Theou trailed off.

He had to handle this carefully. Jin would be an ally of convenience, if that, but it was vital that he maintain the balance between her and Bennett: it would only be by keeping them both convinced that they needed his support that he might be able to keep his faith alive here. It was ironic, he thought, that while this planet was the last place in All-the-Stars where the Apomekanid heresy still existed, its main tenet—that the network that joined them in worship could itself have a soul—was meaningless here. It would be years, perhaps decades before his new network was sufficiently sophisticated for anyone to worry about whether or not it had a soul.

“The grass survives. So do the trees.”

“Plants, yes. But I’ve served the Church on a dozen different worlds, and I can tell you how few had any animal life that we didn’t bring there.” He held his hands out in a calming gesture. “A lot of colonists—very bright, educated people—have had fantasies about encountering aliens. In an unfamiliar place, especially one so strange and exotic as this, it’s only natural.”

Jin frowned. “I didn’t say I talked to anything, just that I saw something. Some planets do have animals.”

“But you don’t believe that’s what it is.” Father Theou sighed. He knew her type—for all that she had been a rebel, Jin was Fleet through and through: an argument to theology would be useless. “I’m trying to be empirical, Shi Jin. You could start a panic just by jumping to conclusions. People use up a lot of oxygen when they panic, you know.”

“So what should I do?” she asked. “Tell everyone I just imagined it?”

“You’ve told people?”

“They deserve to get the truth for once,” she said, eyes narrowing.

“What truth? That you saw something that may have been moving, that may have been alive? That they have one more reason to be afraid?”

“Fear is healthy if it makes you more careful. If what I saw is

dangerous, we have to learn more about it.”

“And if it isn’t dangerous? If people get lost in the woods looking for it, and pass out?” Father Theou shook his head. “No. We’ll investigate, but just a few of us. If there is something out there, it’s avoiding us so far. For now, we have to get your oxygen machine running. Then we can decide on our next step.”

“Okay,” Jin said after a moment. “But I’m not going to tell people I was—” She stopped. “What is it?”

“Oh—nothing,” he said. “I thought I heard someone outside in the corridor, but there’s no one there. There, you see how easy it is to imagine things? None of us is immune.”



Ruchika stood nervously in the airlock, waiting for the air to cycle. She calmed herself by doing the exo-check she had learned at the Institute: tapping her puffers to hear if they were full, patting all of the pockets on her vest to make sure each held the tool that belonged there. Finally the inside door sealed shut and the outer door began to open. She realized that she had been hyperventilating. She took a puff of oxygen and tried to calm down.

The outer door opened and she stepped outside. The sulphurous smell assaulted her, stronger than she remembered it, but she suppressed her gag reflex and told herself she’d have to learn to like it. This was the chance she had been waiting for all her life. She hoped the oxygenator in the station was still working.

Looking around, she found the edge of the valley beyond Pod Four. She drew her datapad from her vest and called up the first survey team’s notes, trying to compare their map to the topography in front of her. She started to head up the rise, toward the forest. Fifty paces out she decided she’d drawn the right conclusion from what she’d overheard: Jin didn’t know anything, and the realities of life here would keep her from investigating any more for a while. Smiling, she went up out of the valley and into the stinking forest beyond.



“Ruchika?”

Jin looked around the maintenance room for any hint at where the xenologist might have gone. She saw the assortment of parts that she

assumed was the oxygenator and stepped over to examine it.

“Perhaps she’s taken a break,” Father Theou suggested, hanging back in the doorway.

“I don’t think so,” Jin said, looking closely at the machine. It was very fragile for something all of their lives depended on. “She said that she wanted to leave as soon as she was done. She could have—”

Noticing the vidscreen on the wall, Jin walked over to hit and hit the OPEN CHANNEL key. “Griffin? Hey, Griffin,” she called.

“Yes?” came the voice from the speaker. “Jin? How’re things?”

“Do you know where Ruchika is? Did she finish building the machine?”

“Yes—yes, she did, she was going to find you. Didn’t she?”

“No. But the machine is working?”

“I think so. She said she ran a few litres through it and it worked. Listen, what’s going on down there?”

“I’m sorry, Griffin, I’ll call you back, all right?” Jin hit the CLOSE CHANNEL key and turned to Father Theou. “We’ll have to test the river water, see if it’s as corrosive as the rain.”

She stepped past Father Theou into the corridor and the two began walking toward the airlock. The hallway was full of people clustered around the viewports, trying to see if they could spot whatever it was Jin had seen. Several of them stopped her as she walked by, but she told them she had nothing more to say.

“And if it is corrosive?” Father Theou asked, following closely.

“Then we’d better hope that Brother Bennett is right, and the Magistracy won’t just let us die here.”

They turned a corner and saw Bennett coming toward them. “Brother Sims, you must come with us,” Father Theou said pleasantly, to forestall conflict between the other two. “We are on a fact-finding mission.”

Bennett got in step with the others, a bit behind to speak quietly to Father Theou. “Father, I’ve thought about—”

“That should wait until we can address the group,” the pateros said, shaking his head slowly.

When they reached the airlock, Jin stabbed at the OPEN button, glaring at Bennett. “I won’t think any less of you if you’d rather stay here,” she said.

Bennett stepped into the ‘lock as the inner door opened. “I was

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going to say the same thing. You may have already used more than your share of oxygen.”

“We can all go,” Father Theou said. “If the machine does not work, two more puffers aren’t going to make a difference.”

The outer door slid open and they all recoiled from the smell of the air outside. Jin stepped out of the airlock, started toward the river. The other two stepped out more cautiously, the older man taking a puff of oxygen. Jin kept up her pace, only occasionally looking back. Father Theou was making slow progress, trying to step on the grass without cutting himself, while Bennett had stopped to examine the pod’s pockmarked outer hull.

Passing Pod One, Jin saw faces at the portholes watching her. She wondered how much communication was passing between the pods. Did they know about the rain, about what she had seen? She stopped at the edge of the river, where the bank was made up of thickly clumped black sand. The water was shallow here, where it reached out to meet a small, sandy island ten or so paces offshore. She crouched by the water, holding her hand over its surface. *There is no other way to know*, she thought, remembering how her skin had reddened and blistered where the rain had hit it.

She tried to blank her mind then thrust her hand into the water, waiting for pain. It felt cold, but that was all. She looked over her shoulder to see Father Theou and Bennett approaching.

“It’s clean!” she shouted to them. She cupped her hand, brought water to her mouth and drank deeply. “It’s good,” she said, swallowing. “It’s water. We have water.”

Seized by an impulse she had not felt in a dozen years, she pushed her whole face in the running water, blew bubbles up to the surface. She knew the priest and the missionary were watching her, probably amusing themselves at her expense. Well, let them; she knew what the Travellers said, that water was life. She drank as much water as she could hold, feeling like she had gone years without either.



Liz Szalwinski pushed her way to the front of the circle. Most of the convicts were taller than her, and she had to give a few good shoves near enough to see what was going on. She was surprised at what she saw: the Magistrate was nowhere to be seen, and instead

Brother Bennett, the Soft Church missionary, was standing next to two convicts whose badges marked them as a rebel and a heretic.

“Most of you have heard that the oxygen machine is now working,” Bennett said. “You may also have heard some rumours going around. I’ve called this meeting to make sure everyone knows the truth.”

His words were drowned out by the crowd’s response. Liz had heard at least a dozen different rumours in the last few hours: that the old survey team was still here, that a group of raiders had their camp here, that there were alien ruins here.

“There’s something alive out there!” Jin shouted, briefly quieting the crowd. She held her hand parallel to the ground, about at waist-height. “It was about a bar and a half tall, and it moved—quickly. We need to protect ourselves. We have the equipment to build an electric fence around the pods, to scare off any animals that come near.”

“Fortifications are a direct violation of colony law,” Liz said, realizing only after she closed her mouth that she had spoken aloud. This was insane. They had a perfectly good Magistrate to run the settlement; he had no right to refuse to do it. As it was, everyone was panicking, yelling and wasting their oxygen arguing with a traitor.

“We need protection!” Jin shouted back at her. “Who knows what’s out there?”

“The survey said no animal life. This is just an excuse to build you a little base where you can pretend you’re still fighting your rebellion.”

Liz didn’t wait for Shi’s answer but turned and started back to her pod. Just by being part of this argument, she was giving it credibility, admitting that the convicts could break the rules if they all agreed to. None of the others knew the kind of damage rebels did. They were listening to Jin as if they had all the right in the universe to decide things for themselves. Well, she had thought that herself, once—and she hoped that learning better would hurt them every bit as much as it had her.



“We can build a barrier without breaking the rules,” Malcolm Smith said, bringing his voice up from way down in his stomach to be heard over the crowd. “I was a farm foreman back on Hesiod. If we just make it out of wire and keep the voltage low, the Equitable

Marketing System permits it.”

That law, which held the Borderless Empire together by making all the worlds dependent on each other, was one he knew well: he had studied it carefully, looking for a loophole that would let him hold back enough crops to feed himself and his family. There was no such loophole, of course. That was why he was here.

“There’s another issue,” Bennett said. “Our power supply is limited. If we build the fence, we might not have enough power left for the network.”

“We have to have priorities,” Jin protested.

“I know my priorities,” Bennett said. “If I didn’t value your souls above my physical safety, I wouldn’t be here.”

That won him a few points with the crowd, Malcolm thought. He had to admire Sims for volunteering for this job, though he’d never exactly been a devout believer, sometimes going a month or more without Enosis. Out here, though, he could see the appeal—a community that didn’t judge you, accepted you without question. He missed a lot of people from back home—after his arrest for holding back food his wife, his friends, his children had all been sent to different labour camps. A lot of the others must feel the same way, he knew. For a lot of them, being part of something might just turn out to be more important than survival.



“We’ve got power—a whole ship’s worth of power,” someone was saying. *Peter Huyt*, Jin thought, *that was it*. He had been a City Magistrate on Palimpsest who had been conned by a passing Traveller into infiltrating a non-existent spy ring and gotten a Treason charge for his trouble.

“Griffin has to stay up there,” Jin said, knowing that standing up for the Traveller wouldn’t help her standing with the convicts. Oh, well—even in this game, there were some pieces she refused to sacrifice.

Weren’t there?

“He got the same sentence the rest of us did,” the man said.

“Why should he stay up there when we have to deal with stinking air and Soul-knows-what kinds of animals are out there?” Huyt asked.

“He can’t take the gravity—” Jin began, but it was too late. Huyt

had found the perfect lightning rod for all the anger and frustration that had been building up in the convicts since the ship had left the detention centre on Xerxes.

“Why should he g-get the whole ship to himself?” Another convict, a thin man with blotchy skin and a red Murder badge, moved to stand next to Huyt. “I have to share a b-bunkroom—he thinks he’s too good to touch the ground.”

“How do we know he won’t just take the ship and go?” Huyt asked.

“You can’t trust Spacers around equipment. They’ll take things they don’t even need,” Nick Leung said. He was one of the few convicts Jin already knew: a former Fleet Pilot who, like most of them, detested Travellers on principle.

“The TSARINA’s been disabled—he can’t go anywhere.” Jin protested. She scanned the crowd, looking for anyone she might get support from. Someone was watching her, she realized—a wire-thin woman with straight black hair and a red Murder badge. She was looking right at Jin, ignoring the commotion.

“We must have compassion,” Father Theou said from behind her. She had begun to wonder if the priest was going to say anything or just stand there like a statue. “Don’t you agree, Brother Sims?”

Bennett looked overwhelmed by the anarchy of the debate. He had never encountered anything like it before, just as most of these people likely never had; most people could go their whole lives without ever being asked to decide anything for themselves. Now it was all coming out like a flood.

“Yes, yes,” Bennett said weakly. “We can’t—we must do no harm. But communications, we can conserve power if we limit those, and that will let us run the network.”

Jin looked from face to face in the crowd, wondering how they would take Bennett’s proposal. Some of them seemed disappointed they weren’t going to see any blood, but his Soft Church robes and a lifetime of conditioning kept them from arguing. As the crowd started to break up, she stepped over to him, hoping to make him pay at least a little for what had happened.

“Tell me, Brother Bennett,” she said in a carefully controlled voice. “You weren’t going to let them bring Griffin down—you were going to speak up if Father Theou didn’t—weren’t you?”



Xiang Kao moved to where Jin was sitting on the grass, her eyes closed. “Excuse me,” she said.

“Can I help you?” Jin answered, not opening her eyes. She was so fragile, so vulnerable: Kao had imagined that, having survived so much, Jin might be more solid than all the rest, but she was not.

“I think that you are right,” Kao said. As always, it was difficult for her to put words together in the right order. “They are wrong. I think they are wrong. I believe Tartaris the Enemy moved them.”

Shi rose to her feet. Kao noticed she had cut her hands on the grass while pushing herself up. “I always heard there wasn’t any Enemy. Murderer and heretic isn’t a very common combination.”

“There is an Enemy. I am his child.”

Kao saw Jin looking at her carefully. “What’s your name?” Jin asked.

“I am Xiang Kao,” she said. She could see the disbelief on Jin’s face.

“I didn’t know,” the other woman said after a moment.

“No. Nobody does until too late.” The habit of hiding, of being invisible, was so ingrained that Kao could hardly believe she had told the woman her name. She had to, though, before she did what she had to do.

“Thank you for saying you agree with me,” Jin said. “But why didn’t you speak at the meeting?”

“If I spoke out, people would learn who I am. They would not want the Enemy’s child among them.”

“That’s not true,” Shi said.

“They would be correct. I am a child of Tartaris; killing is all I am able to do.” Kao said, not wasting any energy arguing. “For many years I was only able to do wrong things because of my curse. Now I think I can do a right thing with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will kill Brother Sims for you.”



Jin was speechless. Could it possibly be true this woman was Xiang Kao, the assassin? Stories about her, the terror of Palimpsest,

had spread for more than a dozen years; Jin had never known whether or not to think Xiang Kao actually existed. The woman watched her, her face impassive, as she tried to think of what to say. Better not to show she doubted her.

“No. No, Sims is the only thing keeping a lot of these people in line, right now. I hate to admit it, but we need him.”

“You must take command,” Xiang Kao said. “It will be easier if he is dead.”

“If he dies, he’ll become a martyr. There are enough people here who still have an investment in the system—they’ll take his place if he’s gone.” She paused, watching Kao’s expressionless face. “Thank you for your offer. But it’s—it just isn’t what we need right now.”

“Of course,” Xiang Kao said. “I see.” She turned slowly and walked back toward her pod.

Jin watched her carefully as she left, saw the barely perceptible slump in her shoulders as she entered the airlock. She wondered if she would regret not taking Kao up on her offer.