

THE FALLING STAR

CHAPTER 1

SCOTT J YOUNG

HALSTAAN

A CENTIMETER to his left and he would have been dead. Halstaan Cross heard his heart pounding in his ears, vibrating inside the deathly silence of his helmet. Adrenaline pulsed through his veins and time slowed. His vision narrowed. All he could see from his vantage point on the hull of the derelict ship was the business end of the blaster pointing at him.

Should've sent the new guy, Halstaan thought.

Someone once told a much younger Halstaan that space travel was a grand adventure filled with wonder and boundless wealth. They failed to mention it was also tedious and silent, briefly punctuated by moments of sheer terror and deadly consequence. Today alone, he had almost been killed twice. Before his shift began, the gravity paneling in his berthing failed and he nearly drowned while floating weightless in his shower. Now some cabbagehead had just sent a magnetically accelerated bolt of metal within a couple centimeters of his face.

After frantically waving his arms in front of him, Halstaan slowly placed his hands flat over his chest—the old kingdom sign for "I'm unarmed" or "peace." Ten meters toward the bow of the transport, a figure stood holding the blaster, visor on the helmet betraying nothing. Halstaan remained perfectly still. Without warning, a flood light activated, splashing across the ship's hull, illuminating the dark figure briefly. Halstaan got a better look at his assailant. The person was wearing a poorly maintained emergency vac suit. Whoever was inside it was clearly disturbed by the light, glancing up quickly before looking back at Halstaan and squeezing the trigger. A stream of bright blue flashes erupted from the end of the blaster and hit the hull just short of Halstaan. Sparks went tumbling on the hull across his feet.

"Whoa, whoa! Hold it!" Halstaan screamed over the comms, hoping desperately that the shooter could hear him.

Two hours ago, Odin's Lance found a small echo on sensors and came to investigate. This was a typical mission for the Lance. The Commerce Guild owned her and she was tasked with performing long-range rescue salvage along the galactic frontier. The frontier spanned from one end of Triumph to the other, dividing the inhabited third of the galaxy from the remainder. Travel along the frontier was dangerous and ships rarely attempted it, but when they did and inevitably got into trouble, the Odin's Lance was there to pick up the pieces. It had been four months since their last mission and the captain was happy to stick his nose into something that might turn a profit. Anything to serve the bottom line.

Halstaan stared at the person who just tried to kill him and repeated the "peace" gesture frantically. The figure took a step forward but did not fire again. Halstaan was exposed out on the hull; standing on the belly of a transport ship in the middle of wild space without a single thing that he could use to defend himself or hide behind. He needed to find something to put between him and

his attacker. Slowly raising his hands, he chanced a glance behind him. No floating debris, no antennae, not even landing struts. Nothing but the vacuum of space.

Turning his head back, Halstaan keyed his comms and hoped that the emergency suit had an open-frequency communicator.

"Listen, buddy, I'm not here to hurt you. We are a rescue team." Halstaan pointed at the red symbol on the right arm of his suit. "Rescue," he repeated slowly. Maybe this guy didn't speak Common, and this was all just gibberish to him, if he was hearing anything at all.

"Halstaan, you need some help out there?" said a voice over his helmet speaker. It was Philip Getu, Halstaan's apprentice engineer calling from Odin's Lance. "I'm about fifty meters above you."

"This guy has his blaster trained right on me. You might as well be a light-year away." he responded, chuckling despite his circumstances.

"I'm going to retreat nice and slow, then try to maneuver back to the ship without getting plugged full of holes."

"You got it, boss. Holding here."

Halstaan started moving back, his magnetized boots clicking as they locked and unlocked with each step. Provided he made it, this event would be added to the long list of stories he would never share with his wife. In fact, this one would probably go with him to the grave. If this guy didn't kill him today, his wife surely would if she ever heard this story.

Nice and easy, he thought hopefully, and this will all be over soon.

Halstaan continued backing away, only occasionally looking down to check his footing. His retreat took him over a porthole positioned below him that gave him his first look into the ship.

Warning lights flashed inside the compartment on the other side of the window. The ship had probably been running on emergency power for a long time—the warning lights were dangerously dim. That was bad news.

A hand appeared on the other side of the porthole. A small hand. And a small face just behind it. It belonged to a young boy, no older than ten, face dirty and gaunt, with sunken eyes and chapped lips. Halstaan keyed the comms.

"Odin's Lance, Cross. There are more people inside the ship. Children. I'm going to need some help once this guy stops pointing his blaster at me. Victoria, can you try communicating our intentions over all common frequencies and prep a medical team?"

"Affirmative," a deep feminine voice chimed.

Victoria was the flight duty officer and an excellent one at that. Halstaan breathed a little easier knowing she would get things done. He activated the light on the left arm of his suit and shined it into the porthole. The boy was floating inside the small room within. No functioning artificial gravity. Another figure could be seen in the beam of his flashlight; a girl, much younger, and equally malnourished.

"Ah shit, Odin's Lance ..."

Someone jumped in on the comms before he could finish.

"Halstaan, Lanish." It was the captain of the Odin's Lance, Jonathan Lanish. "That ship is registered as Salisian. Do those children look Salisian?"

Salisians all had ceremonial tattooing on their foreheads and neck. These children did not. "Negative, sir. But they are pretty bad off. We should float a rescue cache down here and once it's mag-locked to the hull we can back off. Let them know we aren't looking for a

fight." He kept an eye on the figure with the blaster, which was still menacingly trained on him.

"Hello?" a small voice squeaked in Halstaan's ear. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I can hear you," Halstaan looked down and saw the dirty face looking back at him. "My name is Halstaan. My ship is here too. We are a rescue ship. We're here to help."

"No!" a more mature voice yelled.

Another shower of bright blue bolts flew past Halstaan, skipping off the hull of the transport behind him. He froze. The figure moved towards Halstaan's position, quickly crossing the distance between them. Looking past the blaster, now held within centimeters of his visor, Halstaan could finally make out the face of his attacker. It was a boy, probably sixteen or seventeen.

"This is our ship. We claimed it, " the teenager said.

"Listen kid, we aren't trying to claim anything. But you are in bad shape and if you would just let me take a look maybe we could get you up and running. We'll happily leave you alone after that. Promise." Halstaan noticed a tattoo on this kid's cheek. A small black circle and four red arrows extending out of it forming an "X". He was a pirate.

Piracy in Triumph was rampant along the frontier. The pirates preyed on poorly protected ships too far away from inhabited systems to be able to call for help. They had been known to use their children to con their way onto ships. They would then kill the crew or disable the ship and hope mom and dad made it back in time before they ran out of food or air.

"I'm not a kid!" the pirate said.

“Of course, you’re not. You raided this ship. Probably just ran into an issue restarting the fusion core, right? Most transports like this have fail-safes to make it hard to salvage when they are attacked by pirates—”

“I’m not a pirate either. We are Freeholders. Just taking back what was always rightfully ours.”

“Exactly.” Halstaan nodded and smiled. “But sometimes you need an engineer to fix what’s yours. That’s why I’m here. Let me fix your drive and then we’ll be on our way.”

The blaster lowered. Halstaan looked deep into the eyes of this boy trying to be a man. In a place as harsh as Triumph, it was no wonder this kid had pulled a blaster on him. Halstaan couldn't help but see bits of himself in the boy. Defiance in the face of overwhelming odds. Determination to prove himself to a galaxy that was always working against you. In his youth, Halstaan had been just like this.

“Fire.”

The boy's eyes widened and his body seized. Thrown into a spin, he drifted lifelessly away, carried along by a flurry of escaping air and flying debris from the ship below. Blood streamed from a large hole in his suit, instantly forming deep crimson orbs that jettisoned away like escape craft as the dead boy rotated off into the void.

"Odin's Lance, what happened?" he yelled out over the comms.

No response. Assessing the situation, two things became apparent. A kinetic weapon aboard the Lance had fired a projectile that killed the boy. Then, the same projectile proceeded to cut through several decks' worth of the ship below him.

Atmosphere was now venting from the ship near where the boy had stood. Halstaan had to make a plan of action. The children

inside had minutes before the breathable air vented completely. He took five seconds to catalog his surroundings, prioritize his tasks, and determine an order of operations. Seal the hull breach. Send the team. Get inside. Stabilize ship's systems. Get those kids and anyone else to safety.

"Odin's Lance, Cross. The kid is confirmed KIA. That round punched a good-sized cavity in the hull. I'm patching it now. Spool up the rescue team, we'll need them." He looked down at the kids trapped in the ship. They were clinging to a bulkhead as the atmo dumped out into space.

Halstaan wore what engineers called a "pineapple suit." Though the ancient fruit had long ago gone extinct, the name of the shape stuck. The suit was designed for efficiently and precisely making repairs to a ship in a vacuum, allowing for easy maneuvering and quick access to tools and equipment. The pineapple suit was Halstaan's mobile workshop. He pulled up a menu on his heads-up-display, his eyes darting over the long list of options and tools. He found Emergency Hull Patch and selected it. A mechanical whirr erupted from his midsection as a compartment rotated around to position his requested item in front of him. Halstaan grabbed the patch and edged himself closer to the perfectly circular puncture. The escaping air made it impossible to set the patch, pushing his hands away with such force that he would have been blown off the derelict if not for his mag boots. Halstaan engaged the maneuvering thrusters of his suit to compensate for his lack of strength. Goosing the thrusters, he pressed the patching kit in place and its magnetic seal engaged, snapping securely to the side of the ship. He cut his thrusters, then pulled the large red ring on the back of the patch and stepped back.

All around the perimeter of the patch, the metal began to glow bright red. An intense chemical reaction had just created a perma-

ment bond between the patch and the ship's hull. Now to get inside.

"Odin's Lance, Cross. I'm heading inside to get those kids. What's the ETA on the rescue team?"

The comms were silent.

"Odin's Lance, Cross. Can you please confirm an ETA for the rescue team?"

"Halstaan, Lanish. Are you sure the rest of those on board that ship aren't armed?"

"They are children, Lanish. Send the team."

"Affirmative Halstaan, we'll send the team when you've confirmed there are no more hostiles." The comms clicked off.

Coward! Halstaan thought, then yelled across comms, "There isn't time to wait, Lannish!"

In the ensuing silence Halstaan's mental checklist began again. Seal the hull breach. Send the team. Get inside. Stabilize ship's systems. Get those kids and anyone else inside to safety.

The repetition helped him remain calm and on-mission. The hull breach was sealed, at least on this side. Lanish had stopped the team, but they were probably sitting in the airlock waiting for the all clear.

Get inside.

Halstaan moved slowly to the topside of the transport, mag boots clanking clumsily. It was unsafe to use his suits thrusters with the amount of debris floating around him. With his experience in ship design and engineering, he knew that there should be an airlock somewhere near the dorsal thruster. Rounding the edge of the transport the debris field cleared. Looking toward the thruster, he

scanned the surface for the air lock. It took him a moment, but he finally saw it. A little further than he thought but still in the general area. Get inside. Get inside. The only thought in his mind was get inside and help. He powered off his mag boots, engaged the thrusters on his suit, and launched himself towards the airlock door.

"Victoria, any luck on comms?" he radioed, panting. Apparently Halstaan's exercise routine wasn't keeping him in the proper shape he needed to be for this type of work.

"Negative, Chief."

"Who gave the order to slag that kid? Vic?"

"Odin's Lance Actual, sir."

"Copy."

What screwed-up series of events would have had transpire at Fleet Command that the Commerce Guild would see fit to install Jonathan Lanish as captain of a rescue boat like this?

Halstaan reached the airlock after what seemed like an hour, landing gracefully beside it. He grabbed the exterior control and pulled the door, which opened without issue. His micro thrusters helped him get into position and he shifted his hips to settle his pineapple suit into the airlock. Once inside, he found the interior control panel—the display was black. Halstaan tapped it a few times until it flickered to life. The screen was requesting an access code to permit the airlock to cycle. Halstaan pulled an interface connector from the chest rig of his suit and plugged it into the standard port near the control panel. The connector light turned green and Halstaan could see the airlock controls on his HUD.

"Vic. I'm at the airlock. I need the override code for this door. This ship probably set access points to fail-secure and it's not letting me in."

Most ships had airlocks set to fail-safe in the event of a major incident or reactor shut down to allow for rescue or good Samaritan ships to help. However, that policy changed when operating along the frontier. Pirates were known to slingshot themselves on an intercept course using only inertia and small puffs of pressurized propellant to get close enough to drop a small raiding party onto the hull of an unsuspecting ship. Once on the hull, they would tap into a comm connector just like this one and hack the ship's computer or comms system to simulate an emergency. Once the fail-safe triggered, they could come aboard with no one knowing and take the ship without much of a struggle.

"Roger that, Chief. Give me the registration for that boat and I'll beam that to you now."

Halstaan navigated to the appropriate menu on his HUD. "ISV Juctik, J-U-C-T-I-K. Flying out of Saxby. Registration number: 799-XAX-3301."

"Want me to check RCS?" Victoria asked. Most modern transports, especially those transiting near the frontier, had a special system installed called a Rescue Control System. This would allow rescue crews to gain remote access to the ship and its systems without the need to be physically at the controls.

"Affirmative," Halstaan replied.

The Commerce Guild rescue fleet had contracts with all major royal houses, corporations, and guilds to provide rescue and salvage of any ship flying their colors. It came in handy in situations like a hijacking.

"Cross, Odin's Lance, we got a positive hit on RCS. Decrypting the code now. Two minutes to complete."

"Thanks, Vic."

"Also heads up, Tarbeck is on your six, coming in to help."

"Copy." Halstaan turned around and saw a heavily armored suit coming toward the airlock door. Tarbeck was part of the security team of the Odin's Lance. Most likely, he had been the one that had taken the shot.

A beep in his helmet let Halstaan know that the access codes had arrived and he keyed them into the airlock's control. A warning message flashed. The other side of this airlock, the inside of the ship, was in vacuum. That didn't bode well for the kids but it seemed they had found a compartment that was sealed off from the venting atmo. A final press of a button and the airlock door opened.

"Cross, Tarbeck. I'm taking the lead." Tarbeck unceremoniously shoved Halstaan out of the doorway. Tarbeck began sweeping down the hallway, moving his rifle left and right, up and down as he scanned for threats.

"Tarbeck, is the rescue team prepped?" Halstaan asked. "Are they on their way?"

"Negative. Too dangerous. I'll be the one making that call, Halstaan. We clear the threat, and then we can send in the rescue team."

"There is no threat, Tarbeck. I've only seen a couple of kids here."

Halstaan pulled up the sensor suite on his HUD. A faint overlay started to generate around his surroundings marking access points, maintenance ports, emergency equipment and real-time translations of any sign or displayed text not in Galactic Common. He started off from the airlock in the direction of where he thought the kids were holed up.

Seal the hull breach. Send the team. Get inside. Stabilize ship systems. Get those kids to safety, Halstaan thought. I'll deal with all of this other crap after we get everyone off this ship.

"Cross, Odin's Lance." Victoria's voice came into his helmet. "We just got access to the systems. This boat is running on a prayer. Reserve power is less than two percent. Multiple areas of vacuum throughout the ship. No life sign readings, I didn't turn on the internal sensors to save power for life support."

"Good thinking."

"Boat's been floating for at least a month without reactors. It's a miracle that anyone is left alive at all."

"Copy, Vic. Tarbeck said the rescue team isn't coming. Can you at least confirm they are staged? We aren't going to have long once I find these kids."

"That's affirmative, Halstaan. Airlock one-B. They are condition one."

"Copy." The knot in Halstaan's stomach loosened a bit. The Odin's Lance had a great rescue team, well-trained and fast as kite dragons. It reassured Halstaan to know that the rescue team was staged and ready. He just needed to convince the captain to send them in.

The two men were forced to move slowly along the corridors of the ship. Large containers and pieces of debris floated through the hall like ghosts in the zero gravity. A solitary work boot floated through the hall bumping into a container one direction and then rebounding onto the bulkhead. It wasn't a long hallway, but their progress was hindered by having to secure the drifting containers and secure them out of the way, in case they had to make a hasty retreat. The emergency lighting pulsed, dimming slightly, flirting with darkness, before reviving. The transport was in bad shape. Tarbeck pressed past a pair of doors and moved into an open cargo hold. Halstaan scanned to the right and saw a sealed door. The light on the door panel indicated there was pressurized atmosphere on the other side. Looking through the narrow window into the compartment, he saw a heap in the corner—the

children. Both kids were now wrapped in one large blanket, holding on to each other.

They hadn't seen him yet. Halstaan almost keyed his comms to announce that he had found them but stopped himself—Tarbeck had already killed someone today. Glancing over to make certain Tarbeck was out of sight, Halstaan navigated his HUD and located "Emergency Airlock" on the suit's menu. He unpacked the apparatus and attached it around the frame of the door. After carefully squeezing his suit into the deflated cocoon, he ensured the seals were closed and activated the airlock. A bright red light began blinking and within thirty seconds, Halstaan could hear a distinct pop from the device.

"Halstaan, what the hell are you doing?" Tarbeck's voice was controlled, but clearly angered, "We haven't cleared that room."

"They're kids Tarbeck. They need help. I'll be fine."

Pumps whirred as the airlock continued to form a seal around the door

"Stand down, Cross."

A green light illuminated the interior of his helmet.

"Too late, Tarbeck."

The airlock was ready.

"You're going to get us killed someday, Cross."

Halstaan was still thinking of a sarcastic response when he was startled by a small hand hitting the window. The kid who it belonged to was obviously scared but seemed elated to see him. Halstaan pantomimed for the child to pick up his comm unit.

"Are you the one who came here to help us? Where's Tersan? Did you help him already? Do you have food? We're so hungry."

"Yeah kid, I'm here to help. But, here's the deal. Some of the ship doesn't have air right now. And that's fine, that's definitely a thing we can get past. Do you have a pressure suit? Something to protect you from space?"

"I do but my sister doesn't. She came over normally. Like from another ship." His eyes were wide, gazing at Halstaan through the glass.

"No problem," Halstaan said. "I have a whole team that has all the equipment we need to get her to my ship safely. They're almost here. I'm going to open the door now, ok?"

"But what about the air?"

"It's ok, now. I made a little space of air here with this contraption. We aren't going to have any issues. Go ahead and move away from the door for me."

The kid pushed away and floated to the opposite wall. Halstaan keyed the door open and entered the room. Shutting the door behind him, he confirmed a solid pressure seal. He waved to the girl still huddled in the corner and turned to the boy floating along the wall. A quick examination of the room revealed the sealed hole in the outer wall of the ship where the projectile had entered. Following the trajectory of the round his eyes spotted where it had burst through into the adjacent room, a large space that looked like the galley from what he could see. Judging by the amount of oxygen left in the compartment, the galley had still been pressurized as well. Halstaan was struck by the irony. The projectile that killed the other boy, by breaching the galley bulkhead, had probably saved the kids by giving them access to a vault of breathable air. Still, much of the atmo had been exhausted before he had been able to patch the hull. The rescue team needed to hurry.

"I'm going to remove my helmet and we'll all stay put until the other team gets here," Halstaan said to the children over the comms.

He popped open his helmet and immediately regretted it. The smell was awful. Halstaan was used to some horrible smells onboard ships but this was unspeakable. He winced, and dry-heaved before steadying himself against the bulkhead. It took all his constitution to keep himself from vomiting.

"Come... ugh." He cleared his throat. "Um... Can you come here?" he said to the boy.

"I'm Halstaan."

"I'm Kelper." He pushed off and floated into Halstaan's outstretched arms.

"Now your turn," he said to the girl. She smiled and pushed off the corner and floated toward Halstaan. She grabbed a hold of him tight around his waist. "Hi there, little one. Ok. Now we are all together. Let's call for back up, huh?"

"Odin's Lance, Cross. I have the kids. I've turned on my beacon; you should be able to ping my location."

"Roger that, Halstaan. We will pick you up as soon as we get the all-clear from Tarbeck. Hang tight until then."

Halstaan spent the next twenty minutes getting Kelper into his pressure suit and running a series of diagnostics on the ship via the RCS connection. He discovered that the fusion drive had been scrambled and was completely cold. Additionally, several key systems were either destroyed or were removed from the ship entirely. There was a large section of the cargo hold cut out and nothing but hard vacuum from the primary cargo hold to the main computer core. Halstaan had seen this before. The pirates must have seized all the cargo they wanted and cut their way to the

computer core to forcibly remove it. That much cutting would compromise to the ship's frame. Now trying to tow the ship was out of the question.

With this much damage, they might as well scrap the whole transport, Halstaan thought.

He was getting impatient and the air was getting thin. The last transmission from Tarbeck had been over thirty minutes ago and this ship wasn't that big. What is he doing? Halstaan thought.

"Tarbeck, Cross. You clear the ship yet? There are three people back here that are looking forward to getting a warm meal and some fresh air back on the Lance."

"Cross, Tarbeck. Affirmative. The ship is clear. Pirates picked her clean. Probably left those kids here hoping that their emergency buoy would have enough power to lure in another ship, but the buoy died a week ago. Those kids were in for a slow death if it wasn't for us."

"Agreed. Can you release the team to grab these kids? I'm getting tired of being a zero-G babysitter."

"Negative. Lanish wants to grapple her into the main hangar. Hooks are set and we'll be pulled in shortly."

"Negative, Tarbeck. Do not, I repeat, do not pull this ship into the hangar. There are major structural issues and if we put this boat under tension, we are going to have a huge problem on our hands."

Halstaan felt the ship move beneath him. The Lance had already started the recovery. Halstaan gripped the kids tightly around their shoulders as the ship moved beneath them. The three of them hit hard against the door frame. Halstaan tried to brace them but the ship jolted without warning.

"Put your helmet on, kid!" Halstaan ordered the boy.

“What about my sis—”

"Just do it. I'll worry about your sister. I have a plan."

Halstaan did not have a plan.

He engaged his helmet and the pressure seal light blinked green. He grabbed the girl, whose name he still didn't know, and handed her off to her brother.

"Hold on to her. Don't let go. I'll be right back."

"No!" the kid screamed. "Don't leave us."

Halstaan headed for the door. The seal from the emergency airlock was still solid so he opened the door and shut it quickly behind him. He had to think of something. If he opened the airlock, then all the atmosphere would blow out with no way to replace it. There probably wasn't a child-sized space suit anywhere around here.

"Think, Halstaan, think, think, think," he muttered, as if trying to summon a solution.

The ship shuddered again around him, more vigorously this time, as if something vital, somewhere had broken loose. There was a reverberation along the hull, like that of a tuning fork, which passed through his suit and into his bones. The ship was breaking up.

An alert pinged on his visor. A red flashing light. Bringing up the diagnostic of the ship via the RCS, his jaw clenched involuntarily at the notification. There was now a catastrophic breach of the fusion core coolant on this transport. Even though the cold core posed no threat of meltdown, that coolant was still as toxic and corrosive as ever. Loosed from its protective housing it would corrode and poison metal or flesh indiscriminately.

“Halstaan!?” Victoria said over the comms.

"Yeah, I know. Lanish broke the ship. We've got to get these kids out of here. Is the Rescue team en route?"

"Negative."

Halstaan didn't have time to worry or complain. He needed to get off the ship, to get all of them off the ship. He was surprised by a light flooding the corridor, coming from the direction of the exterior airlock he and Tarbeck had entered through. It wasn't likely that Tarbeck had left the ship to return through the air lock. Halstaan tried to make out the light's source through the cloudy plastic of the emergency airlock's bubble. It was wielded by a man in a large suit that bore universal symbol for "Rescue" and the insignia of the Odin's Lance.

"Tarbeck, is that you?" Halstaan called over the comms.

"Negative, boss." It was Philip. Halstaan had never been so happy to see hear that back-world drawl. "Got one of those personal escape pods for the little one. Just don't tell Lanish or he'll launch me out an airlock."

"I don't see how we can hide this, but if he does throw you out an airlock, I'll be right there with you."

Halstaan knew they had to move quickly. He depressurized his emergency air lock and discarded it and the apprentice engineer transferred the rescue pod to him. Philip accessed his own pineapple suit's emergency airlock and situated it around Halstaan, the rescue pod, and the door, inflating it as soon as it was in position. The dying transports protestations were intensifying, rivets shearing away, and metal twisting under the combined pressure of the grappling ropes and the corrosion of the coolant. The debris field within the corridor was growing, as steel grates and storage covers rattled loose or were pried out of position by the warping bulkheads. Precious seconds ticked by as the replacement airlock inflated and found a seal.

"Greenlight, boss," Philip said, a flash in his helmet indicating a secure airlock.

Halstaan opened the door, and immediately pulled Kelper into the airlock. Stepping through into the room, he raced to get the girl into position in the escape pod. Wild eyed and stiffening her limbs, she struggled against him at first, wary of being placed inside this strange capsule. Against his better judgment he slid open his helmet, held her up to his face, and looked her in the eyes.

"There now, little one, its alright," he spoke gently, "This is nothing but a fancy little ship, made just for you. Its going to protect you on our adventure. Just keep your eyes closed, and we'll be out of here in no time." She glanced towards Kelper, who was waiting in the airlock, and the boy nodded his head vigorously. Even through his suit, Halstaan felt her little body relax, and he wrangled her into the escape pod, sealed it, and moved her into the airlock. He shut the door to the compartment and, closing his helmet, he radioed Philip. "She's buttoned up. Blow the airlock now. Make sure to grab the boy."

They headed for the same entrance Halstaan and Tarbeck had come through. As they traversed the hallway, the ship heaved below them and the floor buckled. Halstaan and Philip shut off their mag boots and activated the micro thrusters of their suits. The walls and floor were moving around them, like the distressed heaves of a mortally wounded animal. Adjusting their trajectory to account for the movement of the ship, they managed to maintain a centered position within the corridor. Orphans in tow, they deftly navigated the corridor, moving quickly towards the airlock.

Halstaan was steeling his mind against the desperation of their situation when a violent tremor split the transport's buckling hull and an unexpected escape route opened before them. The open gash was wide enough for all four to easily pass through to the darkness beyond, and without hesitation Halstaan and Philip

engaged their thrusters and exited the ship. First stroke of luck I've had today, Halstaan thought. They cleared the hull and surrounding debris field before turning back toward the Odin's Lance.

Clear of the imminent danger, Halstaan looked below and saw that the transport had indeed broken precisely where he thought it would. Atmosphere was exploding out in flashes. Sparks erupted from overloading circuits. Reactor coolant ate away at exposed metal. One substantial piece was still in the grips of Odin's Lance, a meagre prize for Lanish, but the other three pieces were floating off. The transport was now just another ship lost to the frontier.

Once safely aboard his ship, Halstaan watched the hulking pieces of the Juctik, sparkling with brief explosions and atmo venting, as they drifted away into darkness. By the time it was entirely out of sight, Halstaan and the crew of the Odin's Lance had finalized preparations for transit. The transport and its crew, like so many others, would be forgotten by all but a few grieving families and disappointed investors. Space travel was always dangerous.

But people were more dangerous.

WANT TO READ THE REST?



