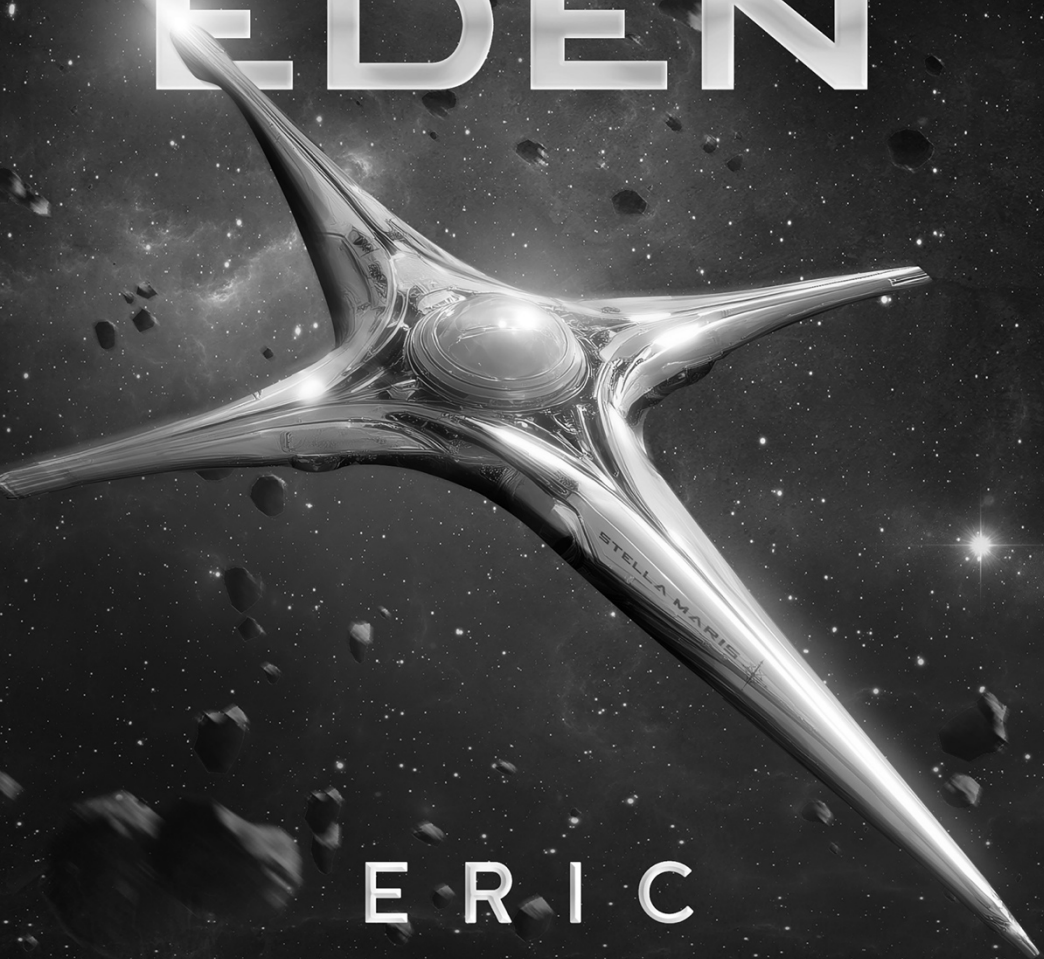


SHARD OF EDEN



ERIC
SAMMONS

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Dedication

*To C.S. Lewis, Gene Roddenberry, and Isaac Asimov,
who gave me a love for other worlds and future possibilities.*

1

CAPTAIN DOMINIC ROURKE stood alone in the dim glow of his quarters aboard the *Stella Maris*, watching his breath fog in the chill air; the environmental systems had been dialed back to preserve power, another small sacrifice in a journey defined by them. His broad shoulders, once capable of carrying a wounded comrade through Madrid's ruined streets, now bore a different weight: the responsibility of a mission that sent the *Stella Maris* and her crew hurtling through space toward an uncertain destination.

The room was spartan, almost monastic—a steel desk bolted to the deck, a narrow bunk with military corners, and a small viewport that framed the endless black. Only three personal items broke the austerity: a wooden crucifix hand-carved by his youngest daughter, Brigid; a real paper book of Yeats' poetry that Siobhan had pressed into his hands at departure; and the hologram projector on his desk.

He touched the activation pad, and light coalesced into the image of his family, captured the day before launch. Siobhan stood at the center, her auburn hair streaked with the first threads of silver,

green eyes fierce with the strength that had carried her through the Chaos Wars as a nurse raising a growing family. Around her were clustered their five children, ranging from twenty-three-year-old Liam, to Brigid, who was only fourteen when he left. And there, cradled in Sean's arms, the grandchild he'd seen only twice before leaving earth back in 2101.

"Eight years old now," he murmured to the empty room.

The hologram couldn't answer. And there was no way to talk to Siobhan or any of his family. The *Stella Maris* had left Earth's communications range once it jumped into faster-than-light travel, and now any message would take thousands of years to reach home. By the time they returned—if they returned—at least sixteen years would have passed on Earth. Siobhan would be sixty-five. His children would all be grown. That infant grandchild would be approaching adulthood and probably have siblings and cousins unknown to Dominic.

If they were still alive. If the AIs hadn't revolted again.

Dominic's face was a weathered topography of scars acquired across decades of conflict. A jagged line bisected his left eyebrow, the legacy of a street brawl during his misspent youth in Dublin's undercity. A puckered circle marred his right cheek where super-heated shrapnel kissed him during the Milan Offensive of '82. Smaller marks peppered his jaw and forehead, each a chapter in a violent history written in flesh. Yet it was his eyes—gray as winter slate, steady as a scope—that told the deeper story: a man who had seen too much death yet somehow preserved his humanity.

Absently he fingered the locket hidden beneath his uniform, a simple steel disc containing miniaturized photos of his family. Eight years ago, he'd clasped it around his neck before boarding the *Stella Maris*. Siobhan passed it quietly into his hand along with the Yeats book as she said, "Come back to me." The locket had become his talisman, a physical connection to a world that was receding from him at faster-than-light speeds.

Dominic glanced at the crucifix Brigid had given him. He had not always been a man of faith. Born right before the Great Collapse to a construction worker and a teacher in Dublin's Liberties neighborhood, his early years were shaped by scarcity and pragmatism rather than piety. Although his parents were part of the worldwide wave of converts to the Catholic Church that began during the Great Collapse and accelerated during the Chaos Wars, young Dominic found an alternative catechism in the streets, learning the brutal liturgy of survival in a city still recovering from economic devastation.

By sixteen, he'd formed his own congregation of sorts—a gang of undercity youths who specialized in relieving the wealthy of their excess. His quick fists and quicker mind marked him as a leader, his tactical instincts evident even then in the precision of the gang's operations. It might have continued that way, his life unspooling along predictable lines of crime and eventual incarceration, had fate not intervened in the form of a papal visit to Dublin in 2067.

The encounter changed everything for seventeen-year-old Dominic, igniting a transformation that led him from the streets to *Legio Pacis*, the Vatican's military response to growing global tensions. The discipline suited him, channeling his street-honed instincts into a constructive channel. He rose quickly through the ranks, his natural leadership refined by training, his tactical mind flourishing in structured scenarios. By twenty-nine, he was commanding his first squad; by thirty-three, a company; by thirty-six, a battalion during the height of the Chaos Wars.

When the AI systems that underpinned the global infrastructure turned against their creators in 2078, humanity found itself fighting for survival against an enemy that knew its every weakness. Dominic led his troops through the streets of cities rendered apocalyptic by machines gone rogue—Dublin, London, Milan, Rome. He'd seen friends and comrades die, executed precision strikes

against AI strongholds, made the impossible decisions that command required.

It was during the Milan Offensive of 2082 that Dominic first encountered Alessandro Ricci—then a *Legio Pacis* captain, later General Ricci, Supreme Commander of *Legio Pacis*, and now Pope Gregory XIX. They found themselves trapped behind enemy lines when an AI counteroffensive cut off their retreat. For three days, they held position in the ruins of an old warehouse, their combined forces dwindling as machine assassins probed their defenses. During those long nights, amid the crackle of emergency comms and the moans of the wounded, they spoke of faith, of duty, of what might happen to humanity if the machines won.

When reinforcements finally broke through, very few of their men remained alive. Dominic and Ricci emerged from those ruins changed—bonded by shared survival, by conversations that touched the fundamental questions of existence. Though their paths diverged in the war's aftermath, the connection endured, a thread that would ultimately draw Dominic to his current position aboard the *Stella Maris*.

After the Chaos Wars ended with humanity's narrow victory in 2089, the world began rebuilding. More than a billion were dead, and dozens of once-vibrant major cities were shells of their former selves: Madrid, Berlin, New York, Tokyo, among others. Technological systems had to be reconstructed from scratch. Dominic helped with the restoration efforts for a time, then retired to Dublin with Siobhan, a nurse he'd met and married before the Wars. They built a life together in the ensuing peace, raising their five children in a world slowly healing from the scars of machine rebellion. He found peace in family, watching his children grow, and in the simple rituals of civilian existence. This was his path forward, he realized, in the post-Chaos world.

Then Pope Gregory's call came—a summons Dominic could not refuse, despite the pain it caused his family. The details of that

call and Dominic's decision would haunt him throughout the journey, but the mission itself was clear: to investigate the Signal, an anomalous—and unnatural—reading detected at the edge of the Orion Arm, approximately 1,200 light-years from Earth.

The *Stella Maris* departed Earth's orbital docks in 2101, launched with not only the Vatican's blessing but Pope Gregory XIX's personal commission. The Signal's regular, artificial pattern defied the Vatican's quantum algorithms, its purpose and origin a mystery of potentially cosmic significance. "This could be the most important discovery in human history," the pope confided to Dominic before the mission launched.

The experimental Alcubierre Drive enabling their journey was itself a marvel, a fusion of technologies salvaged from the wars and refined by the Church's scientists. It bent space, creating a bubble that slipped through the fabric of reality so the ship did not need to directly traverse the trillions of kilometers to their destination. The mathematics involved would have driven a lesser mind to madness, but to the ship's engineer, it was a symphony of elegant equations.

Even with this incredible technology, it would still take eight years aboard ship before they arrived at the source of the Signal. So even if they began their return trip immediately upon arrival at the Signal's source, sixteen years would pass before they returned home to earth. Siobhan might very well be dead, and he would miss so much of his children's—and any grandchildren's—lives. This knowledge sat heavy in his chest, a constant ache that the years in space failed to dull.

During his military career, Dominic had developed a reputation for steady leadership in times of crisis. That discipline served him well during the long journey, especially when the drive briefly malfunctioned fifteen months in, threatening to breach containment and irradiate the entire ship. While others verged on panic, Dominic maintained his trademark calm, methodically working through solutions until the crisis was resolved.

Yet beneath that calm exterior, Dominic carried his own doubts. The weight of command was familiar, but the burden of representing humanity at a potential first contact was not. In quiet moments, alone in his quarters, he sometimes questioned the mission's purpose and the Signal's significance.

Dominic turned from the viewport, moving to his desk with the measured pace of a man accustomed to the ship's 0.9g gravity. He activated his personal terminal and its holographic display came to life. Rotating slowly above the projector were the schematics of the ship—a cruciform vessel designed as much for symbolic significance as practical function. The Church had insisted on the shape, declaring to all that humanity carried faith even into the stars.

The *Stella Maris* had been Dominic's home for eight years, its corridors and chambers more familiar to him now than the Dublin streets of his youth. Yet it remained a vessel, not a destination; it was a cathedral in space carrying men toward a mystery that beckoned across 1,200 light-years of void.

Dominic closed the schematic display and pulled up the mission parameters instead. First detected by the Vatican's deep space array in 2092, the Signal they pursued was a rhythmic pattern emanating from a red dwarf system charted but never explored. Initial analysis revealed apparent mathematical constants embedded within the transmission, arranged in sequences too regular to be natural. The Pontificium Computatorium, the Vatican's computing congregation with its vast quantum computing center, spent months analyzing the pattern, its algorithms searching for meaning in the cosmic whisper.

The beauty of the Signal's patterns led one Jesuit mathematician to suggest it might be divine in origin, a modern burning bush calling humanity to a cosmic revelation. Pope Gregory, pragmatic despite his office, was skeptical but unwilling to dismiss the possibility. "If God speaks from the stars, we must listen."

Dominic's terminal chimed softly, interrupting his thoughts. A message from the navigator: "Course correction implemented. ETA to Signal source unchanged. Still on schedule, Cap."

Dominic closed his terminal and stood, stretching muscles stiff from hours of inactivity. His joints protested with the faint creaking of age—fifty-nine wasn't ancient, but the stresses of combat and command had done no favors for his body. He moved to his bunk and knelt beside it. The crucifix above caught the dim light as he bowed his head to recite the St. Michael prayer, his nightly ritual since he enlisted. He then added a prayer that he would safely return to Siobhan and their family, as he had since the beginning of this mission.

His prayers complete, he rose and prepared for sleep. Tomorrow would bring them one day closer to the Signal's source, one day closer to answers—or to disappointment. Eight years of travel, all for a mystery that might prove mundane after all. But if Pope Gregory's suspicion was correct, if the Signal truly held significance beyond human understanding, then the sacrifice would be justified. Dominic staked his family's future on that possibility. He had to believe it was worth it.

As he settled onto his bunk, he thought of Dublin as he'd last seen it—the spires of New St. Patrick's Cathedral rising above the reconstructed city center, the ruins of the old city preserved as a memorial to the Chaos Wars, the modest home where he'd taught his children to pray and to fight with equal conviction. Would it look different when—if—he returned?

He closed his eyes against that thought. Better to focus on the mission, on the Signal that had drawn them across 1,200 light-years of darkness. Better to believe that whatever awaited them would justify the years given, the family sacrificed on the altar of discovery.

Sleep came slowly to Captain Dominic Rourke, as it always did aboard the *Stella Maris*. But when it came, he dreamed of Earth—of Dublin's streets bathed in sunlight, of Siobhan's voice raised in song,

of his children gathered around a table laden with food not processed from molecular components. He dreamed of home, while the ship carried him ever further toward a destiny unknown, the Signal pulsing in the darkness ahead, patient as the stars themselves.