



FREE WORLDS

A WORLDS APART ANTHOLOGY

9 Stories... at least 7 of which are kinda good



Cement Jaw Habits



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FIDDLER'S GREEN

This story takes place almost two years into the journey of Pegasus, about halfway between Boadicéa and Winter. (Books 02 and 03)

Part One: From Queequeg's Journal...

We weren't even sure Fiddler's Green existed. The files recovered from Testament made one reference to a liner visiting there three hundred years before the collapse, and gave the system coordinates as 915 1965 Horologium. It was a relatively short deviation off our course from Templar to Independence, which would otherwise have been a long transit. After finding no colony at the system identified for Templar, I think Commander Keeler simply did not want to remain in hyperspace for such a long stretch.

I, for one, was perfectly happy to get out of hyperspace early. I don't sleep well in hyperspace. A good day's sleep for me is 300 naps of three minutes duration each. I don't know what it is, but I fall asleep and the next thing I know, it's like nine hours have gone by. That almost puts me out of my mind! I talked with a tabby who lives with one of the drive engineers, Tybalt, who says the same thing happens to him. He thinks its because in normal space, we're constantly brushing up against other creatures that live in the same space but in different dimensions and only cats can sense them. In hyperspace, there is no other life, and nothing to draw us out of consciousness. I think Tybalt might have spent a little too much time curled up on the top of the fusion reactor (Not that I blame him. That's a damb good place for a nap, always warm, gentle hum like your mother's purr.)

Pegasus transitioned two light days out from the system. Following standard procedures, they launched four probes to

the system. 915 1965 Horologium turned to be a trinary system, a red giant sun with a red dwarf and a white dwarf star occupying the outermost orbits. There were six planets in all, all terrestrial bodies except for the white dwarves. The probes detected life on the fifth planet which had a rich oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere and abundant water. It was tilted on its axis so that its north pole faced the gas giant and its south pole faced the dwarf stars, making it warm at the poles with a frozen belt around the equator.

By the time Pegasus was making her final orbital corrections, we also knew that the planet contained vegetation on a massive scale, including fern-like structures over 3,000 meters in length. They couldn't find solid evidence of human inhabitation, though. They spotted some geometric shapes that could have been structures, or could have been rocks. They decided to dispatch two teams to the surface. Miller would lead one team, Lear the other. They chose a landing zone on a relatively large plain, near some of the aforementioned shapes that may, or may not have been, evidence of human habitation.

The Aves Quentin and Victor launched on schedule. I found a nice warm spot in one of the citrus gardens where the light from the solar simulators was just perfect, and began the first in a pleasant series of about two hundred and forty naps.

--- Avember 22, 7324 A.S.

Part Two: On Board the Aves Quentin

Pegasus's second officer emerged from the forward head. TyroCommander Philip John Miller Redifre was a tall, lean man who kept his red hair cut tight to the scalp. His cheekbones and chin were just a tad too prominent and, together with his thin frame, always made older women want to feed him. He smacked his half-gloved

hands together as he approached the forward sensor and mapping station. "What have we got? Anything good?"

Specialist Diaz, a lanky young officer whose narrow and fine dark face was crowned with an incongruous mop of tight blond curls, turned away from his station. "Nothing the probes didn't already tell us, a big expanse of ... swamps, marshes, bayous. It's like the delta of the Sogmush river back on Sapphire, but on a continental scale. It's amazing for a whole planet to have only one uniform topography."

Miller looked over Diaz's shoulder at the topographical display, and pointed to a pattern of lines. "What are those?"

Diaz shrugged. "They could be streambeds."

"Could they be roadways?" Redfire asked.

"They could be sensor distortions. From up here, they could be almost anything." A blinding flash of light filled the cabin and the ship juddered hard enough to make Redfire reach for an 'Oh-Shit' handle. "Kumba yah!" exclaimed Diaz.

Redfire patted the young specialist's shoulder, reminding himself that it was his first landing mission. "I better go upstairs and see what that was."

The specialist nodded. Redfire had a feeling Diaz was glad to be rid of the distraction. He bypassed the lift and clambered up the ladder to the command module. He was feeling curiously ebullient, probably a contact ebullience from the massive forces of energy being released outside the ship.

The canopy that domed the command module showed nothing but opaque banks of dark green clouds, occasionally lit by enormous flashes of lightning. "How can you see through this?" Redfire asked the pilot.

"I can't," answered Flight Lieutenant Lawless. She was the only other person in his party with real landing team experience, having flown three missions to Meridian and one to Eden. Redfire had not yet had the opportunity to work with her, although she had taught him some techniques with throwing weapons in *Pegasus's* Martial Arts Arena. She was a dark haired, dark-eyed, and honey-skinned with a broad face that still managed to be comely. "The NAV systems keep giving me impossible readings. I'm using the beacon from *Pegasus*, but it keeps going in and out."

"Is *Victor* having the same problem?"

"I can't get a channel to *Victor*," said the second seat operator, Flight Specialist Thrace. The turbulent conditions were keeping both aviators busy.

Lawless pointed to a display. "Look at that, a second ago it said we were at 12,000 meters. Now, it says 4,000. I don't know what's going on, but that is not our rate of descent. Look, now it's 8,000."

Suddenly, the ship broke through the bottom deck of the clouds to find itself a lot closer to the ground than they had thought.

"More like 800 meters," Lawless called out. "Emergency maneuvers. Hold on!"

Redfire strapped himself into an open seat as the last of the clouds flew past the canopy and the ship's terrain warning began sounding. The ship was descending at high supersonic. Lawless tried to pull *Quentin* out of the dive. The ship's attitude changed too abruptly for the compensators to keep up. She struggled to level off, a maneuver that should have been smooth. Lawless sensed it immediately. "Something's wrong."

"What?"

"He's not responding." As she spoke, a lightning bolt lashed out from the underside of the cloud deck and stabbed *Quentin's* starboard wingblade. Instead of fading, the lighting persisted, enveloping the ship in electricity and ozone, crackling and sparking around the ship for several seconds.

"Taj Bow!" Redfire watched his instruments flickering. This should not be happening. The ship had been flight-tested in solar flares and the electrical discharges of gas giants. A mere lightning strike should not have disturbed its systems.

"I can't hold her," Lawless reported. She touched the emergency beacon. "*Pegasus*, Aves *Quentin* reports an emergency..." before she could finish, the ship bucked violently and all the instruments blanked out.

Quentin slammed into a deep, vegetation-choked swamp and sent a sheet of water, mud, and pulverized plant-life in a huge wave that reached for the sky then crashed into the swamp. The ship bounced back and rode the wave it had created another few hundred meters before slamming into the water again.

The words "Crash Landing" were flashing on every internal station. The ship's crash protections saved the crew from what should have been instant blunt-force death. Redfire's seat had grabbed onto him milliseconds before impact, and he felt like he had been tied down to a bed during an earthquake while a building collapsed around him. He was one of the few people who knew just exactly how that felt. He spared a glance to Lawless, who was performing a post-landing check on her controls, mostly by pounding on them.

"What were you thinking?" she yelled.

"What?"

"I wasn't talking to you," she snapped.

Redfire demanded a status check. "No structural damage. Systems off-line. I'm guessing damage to the external plating."

"So, where are we?"

Thrace made an informed guess. "Based on our trajectory since the last reliable position check... We are in the northern hemisphere somewhere."

"Could anyone give me a more meaningful answer?"

Diaz answered from the main deck. "We're in a body of water comprising 200,000 hectares, is sixteen meters deep where we are, and the nearest solid ground is about 400 meters east-south-east from here."

"That's more useful."

"Also, we're sinking."

"What?" Redfire checked with Lawless.

She didn't have to answer him. They could feel the ship beginning to cant as it began to sink into the swamp.

Redfire turned to Lawless. "You said the hull was intact. How can we be sinking?"

Lawless shook her head. "I don't know. We're not taking on water, but the ship's being dragged under. We've got about ... four minutes to get out."

Redfire linked to the entire landing party. "Abandon ship. Launch the watercraft." He asked the second seat operator to get him a line to *Pegasus*. "*Quentin to Pegasus.... Pegasus, this is Tactical TyroCommander Redfire on board Quentin. Quentin is down. We have activated the emergency beacon. Acknowledge and*

reply." He waited, but nothing came back. "Is the Emergency COM system down?"

"Negative, we are transmitting." She unstrapped herself.

"Set the beacon and get to the evacuation rafts. You too, Lawless."

Lawless protested. "Don't use that tone with me, commander. I've still got three minutes and change to get the system on-line."

Redfire checked the dorsal escape hatch. It was still above water, but it refused to open. He cursed again in Borealian. "Taj Bow!" He opened the manual over-ride panel, which spat sparks at him. There was a lever inside that he pulled to the side. The seals delocked, He grabbed one side, Diaz grabbed the other. He proved remarkably stronger than Redfire would have guessed. The hatch parted, letting in a shaft of unexpectedly bright light. Redfire blinked, stepped backwards involuntarily, then stuck his head into the hatch.

From the weather they had experienced on the way down, he had expected a drenched, storm-tossed landscape. Instead, there was a sparkling green sky, streaked with many layers of clouds that somehow managed not to seem overcast. The clouds hid the sun, but seemed to glow everywhere from its light. The sky was green turquoise tinged with a faint edge of sherbet orange colors. Across the bog into which the ship had landed, he saw a landscape of gentle green hills stretching off into the distance.

"Shall I release the boats, sir?" Diaz called out.

Redfire nodded. Diaz touched the emergency panel on the side of the hatch. He touched the life-raft release,

and quickly deployed a catamaran from a compartment underneath the hatch.

"Diaz, Samsung, Dornier... Buck ... and you two guys, take the first raft. Check your gear. Grab a pack."

While they exited the ship in a calm orderly manner, he went back into the command module and called, "Lawless!"

"I've almost got it."

"Let it go!"

The back end of the ship was completely immersed, although there was no water in the cabin, and apparently none in any of the ship's outer chambers. There were no breaches anywhere on the outer fuselage. Strange, the ship's natural buoyancy should have kept it afloat. He quickly scanned for a malfunction in the gravity engine that might be causing the ship's weight to increase, canceling out buoyancy. There was no sign of such a malfunction.

The remaining crew were piling into the second catamaran. "Lawless, let's go. We're out of time."

Finally yielding to the reality of their situation, Lawless unstrapped herself from the command seat. "All right, all right."

"Get your landing jacket on. You'll need it."

She was already pulling it on. "Right... Right..."

Redfire climbed through the hatch and jumped onto the boat. "Come on."

"Right," Lawless yelled. She paused to seal the escape hatch and patted the side of her ship. "Please don't sink," she whispered, then climbed into the boat.

"Check... this ... out," said Specialist Buck, a short, red-headed man, who Miller recognized as part of the ship's wrestling club. He was staring off toward the shoreline.

The stretch that of swamp that lay between them and solid ground was overhung, actually crossed, by long thin branches, stretching as far as the eye could see. Between them, long thick cables of vines wove and twisted, festooned with leaf-like structures ranging in size from a few centimeters to several meters in length, in a variety of shapes. Some of the larger ones were moving of their own accord, while the smaller leaves merely twitched in the breeze.

The first boat was already passing under them. Its occupants bent lower, as if in fear that the trees would reach down and grab them.

"Com link to Pegasus?" Miller requested.

The answer came back at him, fast, low, distorted by a passage through the thick, heavy air. "Negative."

"Com link to Victor?"

"Negative."

Redfire checked his tracker. Quentin's emergency beacon was delivering a strong, steady pulse. At least, Pegasus should be able to find them. He adjusted his visual filter. "So, Welcome to Fiddler's Green."

For a few minutes all was quiet, but for the gentle hum of the propulsion systems. Diaz went to the fore of the catamaran, and scanned the shoreline with his tracker. "Uh, ... commander... I think this planet is inhabited."

Redfire held up his sensor glove and zoomed in on the shoreline. A loose knot of people had gathered at the water's edge, a half-dozen or more, roughly dressed.

Their clothing was rustic; shirts in brown, white, or a red-and-white checkered pattern. Their pants were a faded blue, and extended over the front of the shirts with a bib-like extension, held up by a strap over each of the shoulders. Two of them held up a banner, on which was crudely scrawled the words, "WELCUM SPACE PEEPLE!"

Part Three – Fiddler’s Green

Redfire stepped forward, and came over suddenly light-headed. Lifting his arm in greeting, he could almost see little whorls in the dense, humid air when his hand passed through it. “Greetings. I am Tactical TyroCommander Philip John Redfire of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*.” He looked up at the sign. “How did you know...?”

He was answered by a spindly old man, whose skin was as brown and tough as well-worm leather. A stringy beard hung from his lower chin. He looked up at Redfire, for he was a head and a half shorter, and said “You’re from space, ain’t ya?”

“Za, but how did you know?”

“Well,” the old man drawled, “You sure ain’t from around here.”

The Lingotron had picked up the language with few irregularities. At least something was working.

Another, heavier man, in slightly finer clothing came forward. “Now, Zeb, that’s no way to greet the new colonists.”

New colonists? “So this is the colony of Fiddler’s Green, then,” Redfire asked.

The first man shook his head. “Actually, we ain’t called it Fiddler’s Green for ages. We just call it Green. It’s shorter.”

“It’s shorter,” agreed a heavy-set woman. The crowd muttered agreement that “Green” was shorter.”

“Of course, if you want to call it Fiddler’s Green, go right on ahead.” the second man continued, his voice like an out-of-tune woodwind, squeaking, yet somehow ingratiating. “Fiddler’s Green, the gem of the Outer Commonwealth.” He offered his hand. “Hoyt Clagwell, at your service.”

Redfire took the hand and they share an awkward handshake. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Clagwell.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Clagwell replied. “Now, the first order of business, with welcoming these new colonists is the landing fee.”

“Landing Fee?” Redfire asked.

“The Fee for landing in our swamp, and disruptin’ the fine and delicate eco-system of that protected wetland environment. Once the fee is settled, of course, you’ll be wanting to set up your homesteads.”

“We didn’t come here to colonize,” Redfire finally said, his voice sounding vaguely rubbery.

“Well, it doesn’t look like you’ll be leaving any time soon,” Clagwell jerked his thumb toward the swamp as *Quentin* gurgled toward the bottom. “Now, I have several prime acreages available in the lush and beautiful Henning Valley...”

Redfire turned back and looked out over the water. Curiously, there was no damage to the plants that overhung the landing zone, as though they had moved aside to let the ship enter, then closed again.

"We did not come here to colonize," Redfire repeated. "We come from two of humanity's other colonies, the worlds of Sapphire and Republic in the constellation of Pegasus."

The crowd began shaking their heads. "Nope," they said, in a babble of nay-saying. "Never heard of them."

Redfire continued, "Sapphire and Republic are two colonies in a double-star system about 300 light years from here."

"360," Diaz corrected.

"360, we have recovered the technology for interstellar travel and are trying to seek out the other lost colonies across the galaxy. We're searching for the human homeworld... Earth."

"Now, *that one* we've heard of," said the reedy-voiced man.

A large woman followed by two others moved to the front of the assembly. The people of Sapphire and Republic had developed control over their metabolisms millennia before, and obesity was extremely rare, almost always the result of a physical malady or a personal fashion statement. This woman was enormous, with rolls and slabs of flesh wrapped in a floral print dress, capped with straw-colored hair knotted into a bun. A pig came trotting along behind her, snorting briskly.

Redfire tried to continue. "We would like the opportunity to make first contact, reunite your world with other human colonies, and study any records you might have from the..."

The old scrawny man, Zeb, held up a hand. "Hold on, now. That's the mayor. I think he wants to say a few words."

The pig grunted enthusiastically. Redfire knelt down and addressed the pig. "Greetings, Mr Mayor."

The pig sniffed at him and grunted some more. Redfire turned to the townspeople, "Does he talk?"

"Do pigs talk where you come from?" Zeb Riffle asked grumpily.

"Neg."

"Well, why do you expect he would?" asked the fat woman.

Was it the heavy air making him feel dizzy, or some subliminal confusion. Something was making Redfire feel uncomfortable, even embarrassed. "Cats and dogs can talk. I just thought... maybe, on this planet, pigs had been enhanced as well. How can he be your leader if he can't even talk?"

"He won the election, fair and square," Mr. Riffle explained.

The pig snorted urgently.

Zeb rolled his eyes. "Everybody knows it was a landslide. You don't have to remind us every time it's brought up."

Another man spoke up. "Look, the mayor doesn't have to do anything. Nothing's changed around here in the last three thousand years. Might as well give the job to a pig. What else has a pig got to do?"

"That's a good point," said Lawless. She scratched the little porker's chin. "Hey, Little fella, my ship is sunk in that swamp over there. How are we going to get it out?" The pig responded with a series of happy grunts.

Clagwell's sharp, smarmy voice spoke again. "Ma'am, what you need is a spaceship deswampificator."

"A spaceship deswampificator?" Lawless said cautiously.

Clagwell doffed his hat. "You see, your problem is that your spaceship has been swampified. If you want to deswampificate your spaceship, you need a spaceship deswampificator."

"Do you have a spaceship deswampificator?" Diaz asked.

"No, but I can order one and have it here tomorrow for the low price of ..."

He was cut off by the COM Link in Redfire's cuff giving out an attention signal. Redfire responded quickly, as though it were a lifeline to sanity. "Landing Party here, go ahead."

They were answered by a burst of static, punctuated by the distant wail of alarms. A look of concern passed Redfire's face. "Pegasus?"

Commander Keeler's voice came back, above a storm of distortion. "Landing party ... Pegasus ... We're having some problems up here."

"Explain."

"... unable to maintain orbit. ... since your landing team departed ... orbit decaying... repeating, we are still closing on the planet."

"Cause?"

There was a pause, and then Change answered. "We can not isolate a cause."

"How long?" Redfire asked.

Keeler's voice came back on, stronger now, cutting through the static. "At our current rate of descent, Mr. Alkema tells me we will impact the surface in less than

eleven hours... probably a lot less. If we're lucky, we can bring the ship down more or less intact, but even if we do, it'll never lift-off again." Keeler paused for emphasis. "Our mission would end here."

That had always been Keeler's greatest fear, Redfire thought, that *Pegasus* would fail to find Earth and complete her mission.

"We're standing by to evacuate the ship. If our situation doesn't change in the next eight hours, we'll begin launching Aves in Exodus mode."

Redfire responded. "Prime Commander, we were lucky to get their ship down without cracking it up. If you send down more ships, we can't guarantee their safety. Commander ... Commander ..." He looked up. "I've lost contact."

Everybody was quiet for a moment, and then Clagwell said. "Looks like you're going to need two spaceship deswampificators,"

"Okay, let's take stock of our situation," Redfire began. "Our ship is in the drink. *Pegasus* is crashing, and all of the people on this planet ..."

"... are trying to be very helpful," Lawless cut him off. Redfire had ordered the crew to organize whatever COM gear they had salvaged from the ship and try to gain a clear channel to *Victor*. Their instruments invariably failed as soon as they were engaged. The latest effort, involving a gray box attached to a clear blue cylinder had just erupted in a column of smoke and sparks.

"So much for the neutrino beacon," said Diaz. He shook his head. "Commander, this is not possible."

“What isn’t possible, Diaz?”

“It is not possible for that instrument to explode. It doesn’t generate heat. It doesn’t use electricity. How can it be giving off smoke and electrical sparks?”

“Easy Killer,” Redfire said as reassuringly as he could. His real impulse at the moment was to drop kick the malfunctioning instrument into the swamp.

Diaz was right. All of their equipment was failing in the same way, exploding like an electrical appliance dropped into a immersion bath. There was no rhyme or reason to it.

His frustration was increased by having to constantly refuse the fat woman’s offer of ham, buttermilk, and other local delicacies.

Another local man appeared at Redfire’s side. No one had seen him approach. He just sort of appeared. He was a perfectly ordinary looking specimen, dressed in pale tan jacket and pants. He also wore a hat and a sort of relaxed and dazed expression; like a frequent indulgent of recreational pharma. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“We have to help these folks find a spaceship deswampificator,” Hoyt Clagwell told the new man. “Their spaceship crashed in the swamp out behind Zeb Riffle’s place.”

“Oh, another one,” said the new man.

Redfire turned around. “Another? You mean other ships have crashed into that swamp.”

“Well, yeah, it happens all the time.” A pause. “Well, not all the time. My predecessor’s spaceship crashed there, but that was three thousand years ago. So, I guess it happened a lot three thousand years ago. Well, not a lot, but more often than lately, I guess you’re the only ship that’s crashed there, lately.”

“Who are you,” Redfire asked.

The man stuck out his hand. “Henry Limbalk, Commonwealth Development Authority,” he answered with a kind of salute. “I was sent out here to advise this colony and guide it to self-sufficiency. Well, not me personally, my ancestor. I inherited the job. Well, not really inherited, ... more like...”

“Real helpful,” Redfire muttered, as he turned back to Diaz.

Limbalk snapped his fingers. “Hey! You know who might be able to help them out. The Wilsons?”

“The Wilsons?” Lawless asked.

“Clarence and Eva Wilson. They bought the old the old Henning place. Well, they didn’t actually buy it, their ancestors bought it. Well, not their actual ancestors.”

Redfire was getting the kind of headache the caffeine-addicted got when their caffeine was cut off. “Why would they be able to help us?”

The inhabitants murmured to each other, as though they did not know exactly why, but they knew that the landing party had to meet with the Wilsons, and it was up to them to provide the motivation for that meeting. Finally, one of the older men, bald, with drooping eyes, but a sense of time-washed dignity about him, spoke up. “The Wilsons never really fit in here.”

The scraggly man with the beard agreed. “Naw, the Wilsons ... they ain’t like us.”

“What do you mean?”

“City-folk.”

“City-folk,” Redfire said. “Do you mean there are cities on this planet.”

“Naw, but if there was cities, that’s where the Wilsons would live.”

“The wife is real nice,” the fat woman put in, “but the man is a hothead.”

The bald man gestured for the fat woman to hush. “Anyway, they’re outsiders, like you are, but they seem to have the lay of the land figured out, and Clarence Wilson is a pretty sharp fellow.”

“Where can we find these ... Wilsons...” Redfire asked.

He pointed. “Other side of that hill, and then over the next one, past the one after that, and just before you get to the next one, that’s the Old Henning place. That’s where the Wilsons live.”

Part Four – The Old Henning Place

Despite Redfire’s entreaties, the inhabitants thought it best to accompany the travelers on their way to “The Wilson Place.” The journey took longer than they would have liked. Some of the hills were overgrown, some of the trails were blocked with rocks, and making the crossing required side-tracks and doubling back. Redfire’s chronometer had failed, but he was guessing *Pegasus*, if they did not fix the problem, was no more than a couple of hours from being “swampificated.”

By now, it was night. High up in the sky, Redfire could see the planet’s moon, which seemed to have found the only break in the clouds. It was faintly green, and the features visible on its surface formed a face like a fiendish imp, reminding him for a moment of the Festival of Masks with which sub-tropical cities on his homeworld greeted the Vernal Equinox.

“There it is,” said Mr. Limbalk. “Well, I don’t mean it, I mean the Wilson’s house. Well, not the Wilson’s

house, but the house where the Wilsons live. Well, not all the time, I mean they do come out occasionally, but they do sleep and eat there. I suppose they could ...”

Redfire looked down at the homestead, a ramshackle house and a few tumbledown out-buildings. The Wilsons seemed barely able to keep up repairs on their own property. How could they possibly help rescue *Quentin* and keep *Pegasus* from suffering the same fate?

These thoughts, and exhaustion from the trail, dogged him as he knocked at the rotting wooden door to the Wilson home. Although they knew nothing about fashion standards on Green, the clothes worn by the man who opened the door and greeted them were far more formal than any they had seen. Redfire greeted him. “Mr. Wilson?”

“I am Clarence Thomas Wilson,” the man said. His voice was also dignified. “Please to make your acquaintance, Mr. ...?”

“Tactical TyroCommander Philip John Miller Redfire of the Pathfiinder Ship Pegasus.”

“Pathfinder Ship ... from the Commonwealth?”

“Not exactly...”

Before he continued, a lilting woman’s voice called from the other room. “Darling, is that someone at the door?”

“It’s a tactical commander from a starship.”

A woman appeared behind him. She was much younger than Mr. Wilson, or at least appeared to be so. Her face was covered with immaculately applied cosmetics. Her hair was yellow-gold, arrayed in precise curls stacked on top of her head. She wore what looked like lacy satin bedclothes, not the kind young wives wore

with no intention of sleeping in them, but the kind older wives wore with no intention of not sleeping in them.

Mr. Wilson introduced her. "This is my wife, Eva."

"Hello, dears," she said in an accent unlike any spoken by the other inhabitants. "Mr. Clagwell, Mr. Limbalk, Mr. Zucker, Mr and Mrs Riffle... so wonderful of you to drop in. Come in, everyone. Come in."

The interior of the house suffered from the same poor construction and neglect as the outside. However, the furnishings, sofas, chairs, were models of outstanding craftsmanship. The paintings on the walls were clearly originals, and very good originals indeed, but they were mounted on walls whose wallpaper was faded and peeling and where great gaps exposed the construction materials underneath.

Redfire settled in and explained the situation, beginning with *Pegasus* and concluding with the crash-landing in the swamp, as Clarence Thomas Wilson listened attentively. Eva offered to bring them cups of a local beverage, and they politely accepted. When they saw the beverage was in fact, thick and dark as unrefined hydro-carbons, they demurred, at which point she tossed their cups through an open window, and sat down beside her husband.

"You say this ship of yours, this Pegasus, is about to crash into the swamp, too."

Za."

"With how many people on board?"

"Almost seven thousand."

"Don't you have a spaceship deswampificator?" Eva asked.

"Oh, for crying out loud, there is no such thing as a spaceship deswampificator," Clarence Wilson steamed. He pointed to Mr. Clagwell. "Three thousand years ago, his ancestor tried to sell my ancestor a spaceship deswampificator to get his own ship out of that swamp. He paid six hundred Commonwealth Intercreds for a device that was nothing more than a water pump connected to a waffle iron... and it exploded when he turned it on."

"Well, sir, I believe that unit is out of warranty," said Clagwell.

"Get out of my house!" Wilson thundered.

"I told you he was a hothead," said the fat woman.

Redfire tried to bring the group back on topic. "Mr. Wilson, we were told that you have some special insight into the planet that might help us prevent our ship from crashing here, because you're something of an outsider."

"They have treated my family as outsiders ever since we emigrated here from Atlas."

Redfire perked up. "Atlas...?"

"You've never heard of Atlas?"

"Atlas was one of the Old-Line Earth colonies, and one of the greatest, if I remember my colonial history."

"Atlas was one of the first colonies, the largest and most powerful. Eighty billion people lived there when my ancestor left."

"Eighty billion?" Diaz said incredulously.

"Four billion of them lived in the New Gotham-Saratoga-Empire City Megalopolis, a huge city that ran over a thousand kilometers down the eastern seaboard of the northern continent and another two hundred kilometers inland. According to my ancestor's journals,

he could stand at the window on the eighty-fifth floor of his inhabitation complex, and look out across a landscape of skyscrapers stretching from the horizon to the sea." He pulled out what looked like an ancient photograph, color and depth long-washed out of it, encased in a kind of crystalline frame.

"Did your ancestors also come from Atlas?" Lawless asked Eva.

"Oh, no, dear. My ancestors were Be'Trobi. My 543rd great grandfather was a prince of the Be'Trobi."

"Oh, he was not," Clarence objected.

"He was."

"Who were the Be'Trobi?" Lawless wanted to know.

"Be'Trobi never settled on any planet, at least not for very long. They moved from place to place. They were passing by this planet, when my ancestor's ship broke down, and they couldn't leave because they couldn't get a tow-truck."

Mr. Wilson rolled his eyes. "Oh, Eva, not again with the tow truck."

"This is all very interesting," Redfire put in, "but it isn't helping us keep our ship from crashing into the swamp."

Mr. Wilson sighed. "My ancestor was lured to this planet with the promise of leaving behind the chaos and noise of that urban nightmare for a simple life on an agricultural colony. He just wanted to grow crops, to plant seeds in the ground and nurture them toward the sun, and make a fortune on the Atlas Galactic Commodities Futures Exchange. The ground on this planet is fertile enough. My crops do well, as they have for thousands of years, but no technology works on this planet; nothing more advanced than a few simple tools,

or some simple mechanical devices. Everything else breaks.”

“Do you know why?” Redfire asked.

“My forebears have always held that it has something to do with the planet’s magnetic field, the way the thick atmosphere accelerates the corrosion of electronic instruments.”

“Our ship isn’t on the planet, though...”

“Not yet,” snorted Mr. Limbalk.

“Even if the magnetic field reached that far, *Pegasus* is too heavily shielded for its systems to be effective.”

“Unless some other type of energy is penetrating them,” Diaz suggested.

Eva interrupted. “I think it’s because of the tree-men.”

Clarence Thomas Wilson rolled his eyes. “Eva ...”

“The Tree-men?” Redfire said.

“The little green men who live in the trees.”

“Eva, people have been exploring this planet for thousands of years and no one has ever seen a little green tree-man.”

“That’s because they’re invisible.”

“If they’re invisible, how can they be green?”

“They’re an invisible shade of green.”

“Are you saying aliens?” Redfire asked.

“No, they’re just little men who live on this planet. They like people. They think people are entertaining. That’s why we can’t make any electronics, because then we might have ships that would let us leave. They

want to bring your ship down, so they have more people to keep them company."

"Oh, for crying out loud," Mr. Wilson moaned.

"Maybe if you asked them very nicely to let your ship go, they would let it go and not swampificate it."

There was another knock at the door. "Now, who could that be?" Wilson said irritably.

Eva stood. "It's amazing we get any visitors at all, what with you being such a hothead." She crossed to the door. When she opened it, she exclaimed. "Oh, look, more people from the Findpathers."

Redfire turned to the door to see Executive Commander Lear, her aviator, and two crewmen from the *Aves Victor* standing in the doorway. Redfire was almost happy to see her, which he would have bet real money on never happening.

"Pathfinders," Mr. Wilson corrected.

"How do you do, sir." Lear said, smiling pleasantly. "I am Executive Commander Lear of the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*."

"Clarence Thomas Wilson and my wife Eva," he shook her hand graciously.

Exec. Commander Lear crossed the room, having to divert behind the fat woman to reach him. "Report, Tactical Commander Redfire."

"*Quentin* crashed in a swamp. *Pegasus* is falling out of orbit."

"I've been advised of that. You disappeared off our sensors just as we broke cloud cover. We landed about ten kilometers east of here ... on dry land," Lear reported. She brushed the immaculate front of her uniform and addressed the crowd. "Which of you is the leader, here?"

Everyone except Clarence Thomas Wilson pointed at the pig. Lear looked at him. "Oh, ... does he talk?"

"Neg," Redfire answered.

Lear looked perplexed for a moment.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said the squeaky voiced man, doffing his hat. "Did you say your ship set down about five miles in that direction."

"It did. We had some trouble on descent, but ..."

"Well then, you won't mind paying the premium deluxe, solid ground landing fee."

Another perplexed look crossed her face as she tried to think of a response. Wilson bailed her out. "Mr. Clagwell, would you get out of my house."

"Not on my account," Lear chirped. Diplomacy was far firmer ground for her.

"Getting back to the problem at hand... our ship is crashing to the surface." Redfire turned to Lear. "How our your instruments holding up?"

"Most of the gear we brought to the surface is failing. It was all we could do to keep the beacon locator activated long enough to find you."

Redfire's head began to throb harder, like a hangover. "*Pegasus* doesn't have much time left. Executive Commander Lear, may I borrow your external COM link?"

She graciously handed him the mobile unit from her landing jacket. "What are you going to do?"

"I owe a report to Prime Commander Keeler. I'll be outside."

"You'll have to move to higher ground," she advised. "Something about the surface polarity of this planet

interferes with communication signals. If you can get to the roof, you'll have clearer communications."

"Thanks," he said. "If you folks will excuse me."

Redfire walked outside. The moon was still protruding through the cloud cover, and it was still leering at him. It was creepy.

He quickly surveyed his surroundings. He would not have bet on the roof of any of the structures on the Wilson place to support his weight. He looked at one of the tree-like things in the yard, but dismissed that idea when he saw one of its branches curl expectantly. Where could he go to get above the ground?

He almost bumped into the pole. It was thick and wooden, with hand-holds in the form of metal rods extending on either side. At the top, wires stretched off toward town. Of course, if you lived in a planet where active electromagnetic energy in the atmosphere made communication difficult, you would use a direct wire arrangement. He mounted the pole, which raised him five meters or so above the ground. He activated Lear's communicator. "Redfire to *Pegasus*."

Keeler's voice answered. "We receive you clearly Commander Redfire."

"Status?"

"We're about twelve minutes from entering the atmosphere and we can not stop our descent."

"Have you looked for exotic forms of energy that might be pulling you down, or interfering with instruments?"

"Gee, why didn't we think of that. Oh, wait, we did, about ten hours ago." He paused, "Sorry, Ranking

Philip, but you have to realize we have pursued every possible lead without success. We are hoping you learned something on the planet that we can use to save us.”

Redfire felt acutely embarrassed. Anything he reported to the Commander was going to sound trite in view of the circumstances. “I regret to inform you, commander, that I doubt anything we have learned here will be of interest to you.”

“Tell me anyway. Anything you have learned may help us. We’re almost out of ideas up here.”

Redfire sighed. “The surface looks just as the probes reported from space. There is a colony here, captain. Its leader is apparently a pig.”

“That’s an undiplomatic description,” Keeler responded.

“Neg, a literal pig, a pork-beast.”

“Oh, I get it. Does it talk?”

“Neg.”

“So, they’re led by a non-talking pig.”

“Well, not really led...” Redfire almost bit his tongue. Now, he was doing it. “The colonists appear to be agrarian. No advanced technology. All of the technology we brought with us is breaking down as well. *Quentin* sank into a swamp for no logical reason, but *Victor* landed safely.”

Keeler paused a long time before suggesting, “Have you discussed our predicament with the colonists?”

“Za, sir.”

“Have the colonists offered any explanation to you?”

“The closest thing to a logical explanation is that the planet’s electromagnetic field and atmosphere lead to the breakdown of technology.”

“But your communicator is working.”

“Because I’m not standing on the ground. I had to climb a tall pole...” He realized how this must sound. “Anyway, that still doesn’t explain *Pegasus*.”

“Have they offered any non-logical explanations?”

“All they say is that ships always crash into the swamp. That’s why *Pegasus* is coming down, because ships always crash into the swamp.”

“Do you think something in the swamp is pulling the ships in?” Keeler asked

“Neg, neg... I talked to the people here. One lady says its because the invisible green tree men like human beings and so they crash our ships into the swamp so we have to live here and they won’t allow us to develop any technology because then we’d leave... but she seemed even crazier than the rest of them, though.”

“Have you actually seen these little green men?”

“Neg, they’re invisible.”

There was a long silence. Then, Keeler spoke again. “Did the lady indicated that the invisible little green men could help us?”

“Well,” Redfire bit his tongue and almost didn’t tell him. “The lady told us if I asked the Tree-Men very nicely, they would let *Pegasus* go and not crash it into the swamp.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not.”

“Okay,” said Commander Keeler, “I’m going to try to explain this quickly. You think the inhabitants of this world behave irrationally, but their irrationality does follow a pattern, correct?”

Redfire guessed so; there did seem some kind of consistency to their insanity. “Za?”

“All right, so listen. Our expectations of logic are based on the relationships of cause and effect as they exist on our world. We rely on the theory that these laws are the same throughout the universe. However, it is also possible that there are little pockets of the universe where our kind of logic does not prevail.

“Now, imagine that one of the pockets of the universe where things just don’t make sense is the planet we call Fiddler’s Green. Nothing there works the way it should. Logic gets stood on its head. The inhabitants have adjusted their expectations of cause and effect to the condition of their world. You have to do the same.”

“So you mean ...”

“Ten minutes to atmospheric entry,” he heard someone shout.

“Talk to the dambred trees!” Keeler shouted.

“The Tree-Men,” Redfire corrected softly. “Then, you believe they exist.”

“People on Earth used to believe in fairies sprites and elves, too. They didn’t exist, but they gave people away of understanding things they couldn’t explain. Those invisible green men may or not be real, but they are more likely a kind of local mythology the colonists have constructed to explain the disconnect between the normal universe and the reality of life on their world. If asking them to release our ship is the only advice you’ve got, I suggest you follow it.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know that, Ranking Philip, but it fits the only theory I have left. Just ask the tree-men to release the ship and keep me on an open COM link.”

“All right, Redfire out.”

“Good luck, Ranking Philip, see you soon, but not too soon I hope.”

“Tactical TyroCommander Redfire,” Lear’s voice called. He looked below to see the villagers and the crew had gathered to watch him. Of course, his humiliation would have meant nothing without an audience. “What is happening?”

“I am about to obey a direct order from Prime Commander Keeler,” he answered. He looked off toward the woods and swamp and began shouting. “I am going to ask any ... any little green tree men who may be listening to please not crash the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus* into the swamp. Please.”

He thought for a moment, coming up with more things to say. “*Pegasus* is on a very important mission. We’re trying to find the lost colonies of the former Galactic Commonwealth, We’ve already visited five worlds, six with this one, that still have people on them. We’re trying to find Earth, the world all humans originally came from. We like your planet, we like it just fine, but we aren’t meant to be here. So, please, please, release our ship and let us continue our journey, peacefully.”

He paused a moment. “We would be eternally grateful. Once again, I implore you, please release our ship and let us be on our way.”

“Atmospheric entry in nine minutes,” came the voice in his communicator.

Redfire shouted louder. “Look, if you won’t release us out of compassion, then consider self-interest. There are a lot of people on board *Pegasus*, but half of them are Republickers, and Republickers are way too uptight to be entertaining. The first thing they will want to do when they crawl out of the swamp is get this place organized. They’ll start up bureaucracies, filing systems, committees, public hearings on every detail of life. You will find yourselves bored to the extreme.

“You should also know that we have certain weapons that, well, if they broke down due to interference from your atmosphere, might accidentally detonate and destroy the entire planet. And, then, there’s Technician Roebuck...”

“In any case, the people of *Pegasus* aren’t like your colonists, and we have no intention of being like your colonists. We will fight you. We will resist you. We have a lot of intelligence between us. Even if we ultimately fail, we can do a lot damage in the process. If you have learned anything about humans, you know I’m right. In the end, it is not going to be worth the trouble.

“And if *Pegasus* goes down, the homeworlds are not going to be very happy. They will send more ships to see what happened to us. Eventually, they will figure out how to rescue us, and how to punish those that trapped us here.”

“Seven minutes to atmospheric entry,” came the voice. This wasn’t working and he felt ridiculous, pleading into the night, where no one was listening.

“Look, I’ll make you a deal. All of the people on the planet right now will stay behind if you release *Pegasus*. Let the rest of them go and just keep us.” He waited for a response.

“Two minutes to atmospheric entry.”

“All right,” Redfire called. “You leave me no choice.” He loosed his handhold and jumped to the surface, landing hard. He grabbed a landing pack from one of Victor’s crewman and climbed the pole again.

“Eighty seconds to atmospheric entry.”

“I’m sorry I have to do this,” he shouted. Redfire to *Pegasus*. Lt. Navigator Change, I am preparing to engage the swampification evadicator.”

“The what?”

“Hold on tight.” He opened the landing pack and surveyed its contents; spectrum analyzer, water purifier, first aid kit... finally his eyes lit upon the appropriate instrument. He lifted the beacon locator from the *Victor* above his head. “Engaging the swampification evadicator in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... Now.”

The beacon locator erupted in a fit of smoke and spark and sent a sting of electricity through his arm that almost jerked out of its socket. A blue-green beam shot up and out of the device and into the clouds.

The beacon locator was not designed to emit anything in the visible spectrum. The beam persisted for many seconds, growing in brightness and intensity.

“Pegasus I have engaged the swampification evadicator. Can you confirm you have returned to your proper orbit.”

There was a long, drawn out silence. Redfire looked toward the swamp. If he had failed, in a few moments, the entire ship would crash spectacularly into its vegetation-choked depths.

“Keeler to Redfire,” came a voice.

“Redfire here.”

There was a relief in his voice the Commander was scarcely able to conceal. “*Pegasus* has resumed orbit at 57,000 kilometers, with no sign of decay.”

“Acknowledged, Redfire out,” He breathed a sigh of relief that almost collapsed him to the ground.

They stood on the shore of the swamp where they had first made landfall. “Diaz, bring me the spaceship deswampificator from the *Victor*.”

“The what, sir?”

“The spaceship deswampificator ..., um, that we also as an atmospheric purifier when we don’t have a spaceship to deswampificate.”

Redfire turned toward the swamp. The moon was still protruding through the clouds, making a small pool of light on the surface.

“Activate the deswampificator,” he called out over the water.

There was silence. The world held its heavy breath.

“Please!” Redfire whispered.

A rippling circle appeared in the midst of the swamp. All at once, a column of water shot into the sky with the *Ave* at the top of it, riding the wave like a surfing bird. The ship rose in a high, perfect arch and then, canting toward its left-side wing, it fell to the ground, landing barely ten meters from the shore where the Tactical Commander was standing. On impact, it kicked up mass of soggy mud and rotted vegetation that rained down over Redfire, coating him face to toenails with the filthy soggy mess.

Redfire wiped handfuls of foul-smelling rotted gunk from his eyes and mouth. The impact had opened a

latitudinal crack across Quentin's command module, as though the ship were grinning at him.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Epilogue: Queequeg's journal.

And after that, they returned to the ship without further incident. The breach on Quentin's forward hull was serious, but the ship was salvageable.

As for further contacts with the inhabitants of Fiddler's Green, we have left that issue to the home-worlds. Commander Keeler decided not to send a follow-up landing party and we left orbit only a few days after we arrived.

*I sat at the Captain's side while he reviewed the mission reports. At times he became so involved he forgot I was there, and I found it necessary to interpose myself between him and his reader and rub my furry little butt in his face. – 8
September 7324*

"Hey!" said the commander as Queequeg rubbed his furry little butt in his face.

"Starship captain's who ignore their cats do so at their peril," Queequeg said. The cat looked over his notes and determined his Commander was way off track. "So, what happened down there, boss? I know you have a theory. You always have a theory."

Keeler tapped the side of his brandy glass thoughtfully. "There is colonial lore about a planet that had actually evolved intelligence, a literally sentient world. Its electromagnetic field formed its cognitive synapses. What if this planet did have some kind of sentience? What if it longed for the company of other sentient beings. *Pegasus* herself is nearly sentient. What if it found a way to draw our ship near to its surface?"

Queequeg would have laughed, but he could only purr, which was just as good. "You think we encountered a planet that thinks?"

"Put it together, Queequeg. The planet had an incredibly active, very strange magnetic field. We could not figure out why we were descending, but suppose the planet was able to put the idea in our heads, or in the brain-core, through some kind of telepathy, that we should crash the ship onto the surface? It is possible, isn't it?"

Not bloody likely, Queequeg thought. "So, why did it let us go?"

The Commander seemed especially proud as he relayed his explanation. "When Redfire addressed the 'Little Green Men,' I had Specialist American re-transmit his speech across the same EM spectrum exhibited by the planet's magnetic field. Perhaps Miller's threats had some effect. Maybe it was his willingness to play along at the end. In any case, we talked the planet out of stranding us."

He was almost giddy as he continued. "I have ordered eight probes place in orbit to monitor the planet, focusing on the magnetic fields. By the time the Phase two ships arrive, they will have collected enough data to prove my theory. If it turns out to be right, well, just imagine, a thinking planet. My God, it's like a whole new field of science --- geo-psychology, perhaps, and I will have been its founder."

"What about that box of litter you gave Redfire about the rules of logic being different in this part of the universe."

"I always keep that theory around for circumstances like this. It works more often than one would like to admit."

Queequeg pushed on. Although Keeler did not yet realize it, Queequeg was playing with him like a doomed mouse. "What about the Little Green Men?"

Keeler sniffed. "Sometimes humans are a little unobservant, but to coexist with a species for three thousand years, and not notice them, especially a species powerful enough to bring down this ship, seems unlikely."

"Let me show you something, Boss," Queequeg brought up three of the images captured from the planet's surface. The colonists when the landing party first encountered them, the Wilson homestead, and the Aves Quentin lying beached on the shoreline.

"What of it?"

"Look close," Queequeg zoomed in on and enhanced a spot in the trees behind the colonists who had met the landing party. There was a shadowy circle that looked like a face peaking out from behind the trunks of one of the trees, wearing an expression of devilish amusement.

"And here..." Queequeg indicated a spot at the front of *Quentin's* fuselage. From the canopy of the command module, one could almost make it out two little faces peering out from the inside.

Queequeg showed him another face in the shadows behind the Wilson house.

Keeler squinted for a long time. "Za... there does appear to be something here, but that could just be a trick of light and shadow. You know, there is a psychological tendency in humans toward anthropomorphism, a bias that makes us see a face in the random arrangement of objects and features."

"Boss, look at the moon."

The image of the Wilson's house had a clear view of the moon through a break in the clouds overhead. Here, the image of a face was even more pronounced, eyes arched and squinted, and a mouth in a leering rictus of a grin. Queequeg put the image of the moon, and the images of the faces lurking in the other scenes side-by-side.

The faces were the same.

INDEPENDENCE

This story takes place between and Book 04: Winter and Book 05:Aurora Approximately seven years into the journey of Pegasus.

THE AVES PRUDENCE lifted from the skypad as gently as a whisper, and rose like a quail from the roof of the hundred-story Tower of Government. The capital city of Independence receded, an orderly patchwork of parks, boulevards, and hundred-story towers thrust at the azure sky from an island carved in the shape of a perfect circle, connected to the mainland by sixteen magnificent bridges. Its suburbs wrapped in a crescent around the coastline; an urban shadow cast in architecture.

Its passengers spared the sprawling city of Presidio Capitat one last look, before the ship shot into space at a speed that put bullets to shame. Her speed might have given the impression she was glad to be rid of the place, but it was only the speed she had been designed to fly.

"No one on that whole planet tried to kill us," Prime Commander Keeler sighed, wiping a tear from his cheek. "Allbeing bless them all. Maybe, we've finally reached the Galaxy's better neighborhoods."

His Adjutant, Tactical Lieutenant David Alkema slumped in the seat next to him. For him, Independence had been a 27-day marathon. From the time Pegasus had made orbit, he had to be the Captain's constant companion, reminding him of this official's name, that official's title, and that other officials' fetish for women dressed like schoolboys. He appreciated finding the first civilized world in Pegasus's two years in space, but he was looking forward to well-earned time off.

Then, as was his wont, the commander turned critical. "Was it just me, or did the people impress you as being a little bit too ... full of themselves?"

"Sampling error," Alkema reminded him. "The people you met were leaders of their government and economy."

"Za, that's probably it."

"One colony in seven surviving intact," Alkema shrugged. "Not bad, I suppose. Better than we had any right to expect."

The Colonies of Earth, seeded during the Era of the Galactic Commonwealth, had been on their own for over a thousand years (varying depending on how long each individual colony took to orbit its star); time enough to evolve new unique civilizations, even ones unrecognizable as human.

The first world they had visited had been invaded by aliens, and was barely recognizable as human. The second was rotting from its own decadence. The third had been wiped out by a virulent plague. The fourth was in the path of Conquest of an insatiable conquering race, the Aurelians. The fifth had already been conquered by them, as had the sixth.

Independence, however, was like a taste of home; peaceful, advanced, prosperous, with art, religion, music, shopping, and all the other amenities. Her seas, where many of the crew had enjoyed planet leave, were deep and clean and almost violet in color. Her mountains were capped with snow as they should be, her flatlands blooming with wildflowers, her cities rivaled those of the home-worlds and were filled with friendly and interesting people.

"Nobody tried to kill us," the commander repeated, shaking his head. "Totally spoiled us for the next world, probably."

His Third-In-Command, a lean, red-haired, intense officer named and titled Tactical Commander Philip J. Redfire, leaned forward. "You didn't find it a bit... dull?"

"Sometimes I prefer dull," Keeler said. "When the alternative is desolation, destruction, and decay. We've seen plenty enough of that."

Redfire shrugged. "Happy planets are all alike, but every unhappy planet is unhappy in its own way."

"Very clever, you should write that down," Keeler yawned.

"Retrofitting *Pegasus* with the Indie's anti-proton weaponry will almost double our firepower," Redfire went on. Since encountering the ruthless Aurelians, and having barely survived, Redfire had become nearly obsessed with them. They had almost beaten *Pegasus*, and he vowed that next time they met, the advantage would be his.

"If we adapt the Indies' fusion reactor design to *Pegasus*, we can increase energy output by 25%," Alkema added. Independence had an impressive degree of technological progress. "My guess is, they'll have the tachyon pulse antenna operational within four years," Alkema continued. "Once they are in contact with our home worlds, they'll probably want to build their own ships."

"Is that all you guys can talk about," said Specialist Kayliegh Driver, the pretty sister of Prudence's pilot and one of *Pegasus*'s scientists. She leaned over her seat. "The park where we signed the treaty contained over 800

different plant species, at least half of which were non-native and some of those were completely unknown to us. We're dedicating a whole vivarium to studying the plant life from Independence."

"The blood replication technology we shared with the Independents will surely save many lives," Medical Technician Bihari put in. Bihari was a thin and elegant woman from Republic.

The men acknowledged them politely, then went back to discussing how Independence technology could increase the acceleration of Pegasus's Aves and defensive missiles.

Matthew Driver turned slightly to his left, where a small band of screens had suddenly gone blank. He reached over to touch them, but they ignored his activation gesture.

"This is odd," he would have said, if he had been the kind to talk to himself. Instead, he decided to note in his log that at 1444 Mission Time, the bank of communications interlinks between his ship and Pegasus had failed.

"Pegasus Flight Command, this is the Aves Prudence, returning from the planet Independence with seven souls on board. Please respond."

No one answered him. The bank of communication interlinks remained silent. He activated a diagnostic system to check his communications systems. It ran from beginning to end, found no hardware failures, and no operating failures. Abruptly, Pegasus had seemingly ceased to communicate.

He repeated the hail, then asked for live telemetry on Pegasus. Prudence attempted to connect with an

automated system and failed, and substituted its own sensor scan. He saw Pegasus, long and magnificent, a spaceborne clipper ship, hanging silent.

This was definitely weird.

Not that he would have made the observation out loud.

Shayne American, one of Pegasus's best junior officers, answered the call from the Command Module. "Specialist American, this is Flight Captain Driver. My telemetry displays and com-links seem to have locked. Can you attempt to contact Pegasus."

American nodded. "Affirmative, Captain Driver. I will attempt to raise *Pegasus*." She sighed a little as she activated the Comm COM. She supposed it was to her credit that everybody expected her to work out system problems, a testament to her skill. Other times, she wished she could just say, "Can't someone else do it?" Share the credit, share the responsibility, share the blame. "Aves Prudence hailing Pegasus Flight Control, please acknowledge."

No one answered her.

She ran a diagnostic of Prudence's COM system. Perfectly functional. She repeated the message, and got no response.

She leaned back in her chair, concentration etched on her dark features. Complete loss of contact with the base, and with the planet. Complete telemetry failure. She ran through the standard procedures in under two minutes, and then, came to the one that required a complete systems scan of Pegasus. It came back that none of Pegasus's thousands of systems were functioning. This was impossible. She had to check twice to be sure, and

while she was at it, she scanned Pegasus, according to procedure.

"Commander Keeler, we have a situation," she said, not turning around. They were across from her, speculating as to why certain acolytes of the Independent Neo-Iestan religion died their hair pink.

"What's up?" Keeler asked.

"I'm reading no life signs on Pegasus," Shayne American reported. "No energy readings. Nothing."

Redfire and Alkema examined the readings while Keeler looked concerned and American quietly resented them for not believing her the first time. Alkema ticked off the results. "Energy output, zero. Life signs, zero. System cognizance, zero." He translated for the commander. "It's as though everybody on the ship left, and the last one turned out the lights."

"Show me Pegasus." Keeler ordered. American brought up a screen. Pegasus was 20,000 kilometers ahead, brightly lit and proud against a background of bright diamond stars on black velvet night. "The lights are on," he observed.

"But they shouldn't be," Alkema said. "According to our readings, Pegasus isn't putting out any energy of any kind."

"It could be a sensor failure on our ship," Redfire suggested.

"Negative, all of our systems are functioning normally," American answered.

"Try contacting the planet, use our designated channel," Alkema suggested.

American stuck the communication link in her ear, for no readily apparent reason. "Independence Space

Command, this is the Aves Prudence from the Pathfinder Ship Pegasus. We have an on-board emergency, requesting priority response."

No response came from the planet. "I am going to switch to carrier wave," American told them. She scowled, listening. "Do you hear that?"

"I don't hear anything," Redfire told her.

"That's what I mean. Electromagnetic frequencies should be carrying static... normal background radiation. None of it's there. It's like all the stars have gone out."

The Captain mused. "There is an ancient Earth legend that the purpose of humanity is to write down the nine billion names of God. Upon completion of this task all the stars will go out one-by-one." He shrugged, and swirled the drink in his glass. "Maybe someone should have kept an eye on what all of those monks over in Arcadia have been doing all these millennia."

"The stars haven't gone out," Alkema observed.

"At least there's that." Keeler suggested they should migrate up to the Command Module, because that might help somehow. They stood behind and observed Matthew Driver's piloting as he closed on Pegasus. Their home ship loomed large in the space ahead, prow jutting forward like a spearhead, spreading behind, vast sailplanes angled outward like wings. The twin Command Towers rose above at the back of the great ship. It was beautiful, it was majestic, and it was utterly still.

"She looks perfect," Keeler said. "Absolutely premium."

"She should be bouncing nine kinds of beacons on us," Redfire said.

Matthew swung Prudence around behind and plotted a conventional landing path. "How are you going to get us in?" Keeler asked.

Matthew scanned the backside of the ship. "The Hatch Cover for Bay 27 is partially open. I think I can get us in through it."

Alkema looked at the hatch on the cockpit display. It was, perhaps, one quarter of the way closed. It didn't look like it would be a tight fit, but it still made him uneasy.

Matthew guided the ship with a deft hand. The shadow of Pegasus's huge command towers fell over them as they passed over the markers, stilled for once. Gently, he brought the ship into the space between the gigantic hatch and the deck. Beyond the aperture was darkness.

The Aves moved in. The passageway to the hangar was short. "Speed dampers are off-line," Matthew confirmed. "Reversing thrusters. Reducing speed to 4 meters per second." Keeler and Alkema turned up, both wondering how close the top of the passage was to the canopy, painfully aware of the two Shrieks rising up from their wingtips. What would happen if their wings clipped the top?

Matthew unerringly said the wrong thing. "You know, there should really be a simulator training exercise for this."

The displays on the inside of the canopy gave the only indication of their passing. The passengers waited, almost holding their breath.

Suddenly, it dawned on Matthew why the Hatch Cover for Bay 27 had been partly opened. The clean-cut

pilot who wouldn't say 'shit' if he had a mouth full of it said, "Oh, shit!"

Prudence jerked violently upward, too fast for the inertial systems to compensate. Keeler, Redfire, and Alkema were knocked to the deck. Kayliegh Driver and Shayne American, who were already in landing couches, were shoved down.

The space between the top of the passage and the Aves Amy was just barely enough for Prudence to pass through. Bare millimeters separated the two ships and hardly more separated the tips of the Shrieks on Prudence's wings from scraping the top.

"What...?" Keeler began to say.

"Your booze ship landed ahead of us, and was still in the Passageway when we came in," Matthew explained. "We almost collided with it."

"Booze ship?" Keeler asked.

Alkema explained. "You souvenired so much booze on Independence, we had to send it ahead on another ship."

Keeler patted him on the shoulder. "Well done, pilot. If we live through this, you can have an unlimited bar tab at any establishment on the ship."

"Thank you, sir. I don't drink alcohol."

"I know."

Finally, after it seemed like it had been weeks since any of them had dared draw breath, Prudence entered the landing bay. Eight other Aves were parked there. There was an open spot, and Matthew carefully brought his ship into it.

And when they landed, they opened the hatch and stepped down, one at a time, onto the metal deck of the Hangar bay. A landing crew should have met them. Service crews should have been checking the ships on the deck. Goneril Lear should have been complaining to her pilot that her tea was five degrees too hot. Instead, there was no one to be found, and no one who responded on the intra-ship COM links.

"I guess it's a little late for the crew to jump out and yell 'Surprise,'" Keeler said.

"Look at that," said Shayne American. She pointed to an automech poised on the top of one of the parked Aves. Its long metal arm was frozen in place as it was extracting a sensor module from the reactor dome. It looked like a statue.

"The people are gone and the machines don't work," Keeler muttered. "It almost feels like my old house on a Sunday night."

Redfire removed from his pack a souvenir from Independence, a round sphere of some rubbery, glowing, but unidentified material known as a "Happy Fun Ball." The ball had a unique property in that it conserved all of its kinetic energy. In short, once thrown, it could bounce infinitely without losing speed. Redfire chucked the ball as hard as he could into the depths of the landing bay.

The HFB bounced off a far wall then caromed off a structural joist. It ricocheted off the deck, bounced, recoiled, caromed again, snapped back, deflected off the wing of a parked Aves, sprung back, glanced off an overhead lift, boomeranged, rebounded, and finally flew back into Commander Redfire's outstretched hand.

"I think we can conclude that something strange is going on." Redfire said, replacing the HFB in his pack. Not only had the ball failed to hurt any of the technicians

that would normally have been tending the landing bay, it had failed to arouse the ship's internal sensors the way a fast-moving projectile in a sensitive operational area could be expected to. "Let's acknowledge the Borealan herd-beast," Redfire said.

"What does that mean?" Shayne American asked.

"It's a Sapphorean expression for when people refuse to acknowledge the obvious," Alkema explained, always helpful. "Metaphorically, it's as though we're all in a room with a big green hairy herd-beast, but no one will talk about it."

"I'd say he's not only in the room," Redfire went on, "but he's also dropping a pile on the dinner table. Let's face up. The ship is empty. Everybody is gone. We can spend hours going through every section on 221 decks, supposing that they're all hiding from us, or we can acknowledge the obvious and go from there."

"Not just the ship," Matthew Driver reminded them. "The planet, too."

"Exactly, it's as though the whole universe, minus the six of us..."

"Just vanished," Kayliegh Morgan whispered.

"Either that, or Pegasus has been replaced with an exact duplicate somehow," American suggested. In context, it did not seem like an entirely crazy idea.

"Who would have done that?" Keeler put forth. "And, more importantly, why?"

"The Aurelians might be able to pull off something like this," Redfire said.

"Why would they want to?" Keeler persisted.

Alkema shrugged. "Just to play with us. Maybe get us to reveal the secret to hyperspace navigation. It's the

only tactical advantage we have. They would do anything to get it."

"This could be an illusion," Bihari suggested. "It could be all in our minds."

"There's an idea I hate," Keeler grumbled. "If it's true, then we have no way of controlling it, or escaping it."

"We are overlooking the obvious," Redfire said.

"Which is what?"

"The Indies. We're in orbit of their planet. Doesn't it make sense that whatever is happening is something they're doing to us?"

"But they seemed so nice," Keeler deadpanned.

"What if everything we have experienced since arriving in this system has been an illusion," Alkema wondered aloud.

"I think I know how to test that theory," Redfire said. "Captain, I'd like to go to the inhabitation decks. American, you can come with me."

"I would also like to go to the Inhabitation decks," said Dr. Bihari. "My child from EdenWorld, I have to see if he is..."

Redfire nodded. "Understood, perhaps you should come too," He gestured at Kayliegh.

"Hey, why do you get all the women!" the commander demanded.

"I'd rather stay here with Matthew," Kayliegh Driver protested.

"Flight Captain Driver is going to the Bridge with me," Keeler said.

Redfire looked perplexed. "The Bridge? What is it?"

"It's a big room where the command officers sit, but that's not important right now." Keeler shrugged. "If Pegasus had any inkling as to what happened, there might be some clue in our Command Center. And I want these two guys with me because, if there are hostile aliens involved, there's a two out of three chance one of them will get shot first."

"Thanks, Commander," said Alkema. He could see it all now. The doors to PC-1 slide open. The bridge is filled with insectoids, buzzing around with fangs and tentacles, Keeler shouting, "Commander? Who? Me? I'm just the Kitchen Staff Supervisor."

"I'll go, too," said Matthew Driver, as if he had a choice.

The Inhabitation decks were ten decks up and many sections forward of the Landing Bays. Even without transport pods, it was not a difficult traverse.

Crew inhabitations on *Pegasus* were designed as large, chunky, blocks of suites arranged beneath an artificial sky and divided by landscaped walkways of flowers, grass, and trees. It was designed to ease homesickness, as the ship's journey was expected to be multigenerational. An automech was stilled in one of the hedgerows, water arcing from his midsection, the droplets frozen in mid-air. They stopped long enough to stare at it with 'isn't that peculiar' expressions, then proceeded.

"So, why the living quarters?" American asked. "Shouldn't we check out the Engineering Areas, or the Telemetry Labs?"

"Those are only useful if what we're experiencing is... for lack of a better word ... real," Redfire explained.

"If this is all an illusion, it can only recreate what's in our minds to begin with, right?"

"That makes sense," American conceded.

Redfire came to one of the inhabitation blocks, led them up to the second level. "These are my quarters. Neither of you have ever been in them. When I force the hatch. You go in and tell me exactly what you see."

He pressed against the hatchway until it finally gave way. Then he ducked to the side before he could look. Beyond the hatch was a bare room. The walls were plain and white. The single piece of furniture was a bed, covered with simple gray blankets.

"It must be an illusion!" Kayliegh Driver exclaimed. "They had no idea what would be behind these doors, so it's just a generic environment."

"Actually, that's exactly how they're supposed to look," Redfire said. The women regarded him skeptically. He explained. "I find furnishings and decorations distracting. This way, I get out more often. But you didn't know what they looked like until you opened the door. They got it right. Let's try another."

They agreed that they were not, and Redfire led them down the corridor. He stopped before another hatch. "These quarters belong to Tactical Specialist Ayliss Mandelbrot. I have never seen the inside."

"So, how will you know if they're right?" American asked.

"I won't. That's not what I am looking for," Redfire said. He pressed on the hatch until it gave, opening onto Mandelbrot's living space. This main room contained a pair of Odyssey Project-issued couches (in an unimaginative teal and gray check pattern), an interactive self-entertainment suite, and the other basics.

Redfire headed toward the larger of the two couches. When he reached it, he fell to his knees and plunged his hand behind the cushions, rummaging. After a few moments of this, he pulled out some loose coinage and a pair of writing styluses. He examined the coins. "Boadicéan cameos," he said. "Mandelbrot did take some shore leave on Boadicéa, so this comes as no surprise." He looked at the grit and dust on his fingernails. "If this is an illusion, it is a very detailed one."

"What are you looking for?" American asked again.

"I don't know," he answered, already moving toward the kitchen. He opened her food storage unit and surveyed its contents. "A-ha!"

"What is it?"

He pulled out a container of raw meat, rice, and seaweed and showed it to the women. "Carpentarian sushi," he explained.

"No thanks, I'm not hungry," said American.

"Look at the date on this container. Mission date 161. This food is over a year and a half old."

"So, it's not so fresh? What?"

"Radiation treatment and cold storage keeps our food fresh long after it's no longer safe to eat, but that's not important right now. The thing is, she got this take-out, tried it, didn't like it. Makes sense, but it's not something I would have expected. However, she never got around to recycling it either, which I also would not have expected, but it makes sense. You see?"

"Nay, I don't," American seemed irritated. Redfire looked to Kayliegh Driver and saw that he would be getting no help there.

He explained. "If this were an illusion, whoever was creating would not have been able to produce such unexpected, but logical, details of people with whom we have only a passing acquaintance. If it were all in our minds, the details could only be drawn out of what we already knew. Knowing nothing about Specialist Mandelbrot's quarters, I would have expected only to find fresh food in her storage unit. Only reality could contain these unexpected, but logical, details. Whatever we're experiencing must be real."

The women accepted this. It was as plausible as anything on a big empty ship, frozen in time. "So now what?"

"We catch up with the Commander," Miller told them. "And figure out how to deal with this not being all in our minds."

On the Main Bridge, or PC-1 as some still insisted on calling it, Keeler, Driver, and Alkema surveyed two levels of empty command stations and frozen displays. The Captain found a comfortable chair at the Tactical Station and slumped in it. PC-1 was a hundred and twenty-two decks up from the Landing Bay, and without transport pods, it had been a long climb.

"An empty ship," the Captain lamented. "No one to hear my witty bon mots, my cutting ripostes, my stories that go nowhere and serve no purpose."

Alkema passed his hand through the data displays, which was no surprise because they were holographic and hung in the air around every station. He passed by one of the planet monitoring stations. A great black and purple storm was moving over the highland plains. The view showed frozen lightning flashing in the cloud-tops.

Something caught his eye. He checked first one, then all of the displays in his vicinity. "Captain, I think I've found something. All of these displays have the same Mission Time readout. 1444.32."

"That must mean something," Keeler said.
"Otherwise you wouldn't have pointed it out to me."

"That's the same time Flight Captain Driver said his COM links went down. Isn't that right?"

Driver was standing in the forebridge staring into the corner. He didn't respond.

Keeler prompted, "Isn't that right? Your comm links went off-line at 1444.32 Mission Time... Flight Captain... Matthew... Honey?"

Matthew squinted and cocked his head. "I can see her."

"See who?" Keeler asked.

"Eliza... she's right here on the bridge... I can see her. She's right there at the Command Station..."

He pointed toward the Command Station, but no one was there. It was as empty and deserted as the rest of the command deck.

"There's no one there, Captain," Alkema said.

"Can't you see her?" Driver asked, moving a few steps nearer to the Command Station.

"I don't see anyone." He raised his Tracker. "Look, Matthew, besides us, there's not a single life form on this ship. Not even the animals in the Zoological Vivaria."

"Nay, she is here." Matthew edged a few steps closer to the spot, like a cat stalking a skittish and frightened prey. "She is here. I can see her."

Alkema and Keeler looked at each other, then back to Driver. The pilot was known for being rational, calm, and steady as rock encased in concrete and then anchored into deep bedrock. No one on the ship was more firmly in command of his faculties than Matthew Driver. If he was losing them...

"Okay, Matthew," Alkema said calmly. "Tell us exactly what you see."

Matthew continued staring, but blinking and squinting all the while. "It's hard to focus. It's like something you catch in the corner of your eye, but when you turn to see it, nothing is there. If I look away, I can almost see her. She's... she's... standing at the Command Station, like she just stood up. She's turning toward the Flight Communications."

"What does she look like?" Alkema continued.

"I see her shape... it's all faded and flickering, almost like an after-image. She's right here." Matthew was now standing just in front of the Command Station, just ahead of Alkema, outlining a shape with his out-stretched hands. Alkema pointed his tracker at the space Driver indicated.

There's nothing there according to the Tracker, he thought. So, why is every hair on the back of my neck standing up? He stared hard into the empty space, then tried squinting and looking from the corner of his eye, as Matthew was doing. He still saw nothing.

Driver began to extend his hand. "I think... I can touch her."

For no reason he could explain, Alkema cried out. "Matthew, don't... I don't think that's a very good..."

"A-a-a-a-r-r-r-h..." Matthew began to cry out, then, in a split second, like a flash of lightning, he had vanished.

"... idea," said Alkema in the silence that followed.

Hours later, they gathered once again in the Landing Bay. Kayliegh did not take the news of her brother's disappearance well. Bihari tried to comfort her, while American and the men worked out what they had learned, which was not very much. The ship was devoid of life. It was not an illusion. And everything had stopped at exactly the same moment.

Redfire announced his theory. "Somehow, time itself has stopped."

"That does not explain where my brother went," Kayliegh Driver put in tearfully.

"It explains everything else, and that's what we have to work with," Keeler said.

"Pegasus's power and life support systems are time-dependent," American argued. "Quantum power has to radiate, water and air have to flow through conduits."

"Gravity," Keeler added. "If time had stopped would we still have gravity?"

"Of course we would," American huffed. "Artificial gravity exists independent of time. It has to or it doesn't work."

"Za, za, of course," Keeler muttered. It was a good thing he knew how to command, he thought, because he knew so damed little about how things actually worked on this ship.

Alkema wondered aloud. "In any case, water, power, and air are not flowing on the ship, but our bodily functions have not ceased."

"Please don't mention bodily functions again," said the Captain.

Alkema continued. "Obviously, quantum and atomic-level motions have not ceased, otherwise everything would fall apart, but time itself has otherwise ceased moving forward."

"Who has the power to stop time?" American asked.

"Tarmigans," said Bihari.

"Pah, Tarmigans!" Keeler said. He still did not believe in Tarmigans, supposedly an ancient race of immense power many held responsible for the destruction of the Old Commonwealth.

"How would you explain this, commander?" Redfire said.

"There is an Old Earth Proverb (OEP) that states that once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however unlikely, is the explanation. Which would be great, except that every explanation I can come up with is equally impossible."

American had a suggestion. "Maybe some scientist on the planet was doing a time experiment that went wrong."

"The problem with that theory," Redfire explained. "Is that if it is true, we are quite thoroughly boned."

"What do you mean? All we have to do is find his laboratory."

Redfire shook his head. "All evidence is that whatever we are experiencing is a universal phenomenon. If it is a mistake, then the scientist could be

on another planet thousands or millions, or even billions of light years from here. We would never find him, even if we could get the ship moving, which I am thinking we can't."

"Maybe, we're all dead," said Kayliegh Driver. "Maybe the ship exploded, and time stopped, and we're all in a kind of Purgatory, awaiting Judgment. My brother was a good man, so he's gone to the Eternal, but the rest of us are just waiting..."

"Waiting for what?" Redfire demanded.

Kayliegh fretted. "I don't know. Maybe... maybe we should all confess our sins to each other."

Keeler spoke first. "Pass."

Redfire followed. "Pass."

American, "Pass."

There were a few moments of uncomfortable silence, and they were all afraid Kayliegh was going to start confessing her sins. Alkema felt like it was his job to make that never happen, "So, getting back to this whole... out of time theory."

Redfire picked it up, "There is at least one theory out there that states that time is an illusion and the universe is static. However, there are an infinite number of universes, each one representing one probabilistic course. We don't move in time within one universe, but we move continuously from one universe into the next one depending on random probability. Our constant passage from one frame of reference to the next creates the illusion of the passage of time."

Alkema picked it up. "If that is the case, then, we have somehow become locked into a single frame of reference, like a still picture. We're not moving forward any more."

"Sounds good to me," Keeler said. "Actually, it sounds completely demented, but I'll take your word that that's where we are. I'm no expert in temporal mechanics, but I have seen a lot of space dramas. They seem to suggest the only way to get out of a situation like this is to set off a big explosion with the crew having an only marginal chance of success or survival. Is this right?" He turned to Redfire, who usually liked big explosions.

Redfire was shaking his head. "First of all, any explosion we could set off, even with a Nemesis warhead, would be too localized to do any good. Second, I don't see how an explosion in three-dimensional space should have any effect on four-dimensional time. Third, given that every reaction on the ship has stopped, how could we even set off a Nemesis warhead."

Keeler then looked to Alkema, expecting him to devise brilliant solutions to each of Redfire's reservations. Instead, Alkema said, "Agreed, but I think the solution is simpler than that."

"Oh, even better," Keeler said.

"If we're stuck in time, maybe the trick is to move in space."

Keeler had to agree. "You're right, that is simple."

Alkema explained. "If we have stopped moving forward in time, it's possibly because we ran into something, we got stuck, we just didn't realize it. It might even be something physical, or quasi-physical, in the space-time continuum..."

Keeler interrupted. "Son, as a general rule, anything involving the words 'quasi,' or 'space-time continuum,' can not be called simple."

Alkema simplified it. "If Prudence could go back to wherever it was we got stuck, maybe we can unstick ourselves."

"Without Matthew?" Kayliegh said, wet-eyed.

"She's right," Keeler nodded grimly. "Who's gonna fly the ship?" He turned to Alkema and Redfire. "I am guessing that, even though neither one of you is flight certified, you both know how to pilot an Aves."

"Za," Redfire said, grinning. "But I don't think either one of us can back Prudence out of the back of the Landing Bay without colliding with Commander Lear's ship, or the wall."

"We don't have to," Alkema told him. "Prudence's mission logs will contain her precise course from the planet to the ship. We tell her to reverse, her shipboard AI NAV System will follow it exactly."

Keeler grunted. It was beginning to sound too easy. This worried the hell the out of him.

They returned to Prudence and sealed the hatch. For this trip, they all wanted to be in the command module, as if all being together, and all being in the control area of the ship brought them comfort.

Redfire sat in the pilot's seat. "You'll need an interface."

Keeler looked horrified. "You mean one of those things pilots grow on their faces that looks like high-tech acne?"

Redfire drew his fingertips across his chin and jaw. Black, gray, and blue chips and ridges appeared as the molecular knitters produced the interface. "I'm connected. Prudence, this is Tactical Commander Philip

John Miller Redfire. Command code, burn-fire-fire-burn-six-six-one."

Command input acknowledged, the ship replied. Where is Flight Captain Driver?

"Damn good question," Miller answered. "Plot reverse core to last point of departure on the planet Independence. Precision: absolute."

Accessing navigational data and recomputing. Course laid in.

"Execute!" Redfire ordered. The ship lifted from the deck and began backing toward the landing tunnel. It dodged Exec. Commander Lear's ship with the same bone-jarring abruptness as before. Once in space though, it turned around, and flew forward back toward the blue-violet sphere of Independence.

"If my calculations are correct," Alkema informed his captain a bit later, "we will intersect the exact place we crossed at 1444.32 mission time in eight minutes."

"Should I ask why you seem concerned, lieutenant," the commander replied, "or is it only going to trouble my mind about things I have no control over."

"Without Flight Captain Driver, the ship's mass is off by about 70 kilograms," Alkema answered. "I don't think it will make any difference, but."

Keeler stared through the canopy. The minutes passed. "I keep expecting to see some sort of glowing mass of energy, a halo or something," he told Alkema.

"We didn't see anything the first time," Alkema told him. "I don't know why we would see anything now."

"Za," Keeler conceded.

"What if this doesn't work?" Kayliegh Driver whispered.

"If it doesn't work, we continue on course back to Independence. We'll find a reasonably pleasant place to settle down, and spend the rest of our lives trying not to go mad." Keeler sighed. "Apart from the bit about time standing still, that's not too far from my retirement plan."

The ship moved on in silence. Keeler worked out in his head. Three men and three women. Three Adams and Three Eve's in a timeless Eden. All the men from Sapphire, all the women from Republic. Who would hook up with whom?

Dirty old man, he scolded himself.

In the meantime, they would live on a world without motion, where the waves in the seas stood still, where trees bent to the wind never to rise again, where rain paused still in the sky. He wondered how long they could remain in place before all the air, food, and water in a given area were consumed. Would they have to move constantly, nomads adrift on an immobile world?

Or, maybe at some point in the future, time would snap back to normal. He would find himself aged twenty, forty, sixty years in the space of seconds. Would he even survive the shock?

"We should intersect our 1444 coordinates in the next ten seconds," he heard Alkema say. He started to count down but Keeler made him stop.

And then nothing happened.

Except for everything changing.

"... establish diplomatic relations, and eventually secure an alliance," Goneril Lear was saying. "But, the question remains, bilateral, or tri-lateral?"

She looked at him, as though expecting an answer.

He looked back at her, as though expecting some surprise at his sudden materialization on the Primary Command Deck.

"Do you have any opinion on this at all?" Lear persisted.

"Hey! I just teleported here from another time dimension. It's impressive!" Keeler looked around at Command Deck. "Where's Lt. Alkema?"

"In his quarters presumably," Lear answered, as though this were the only place she approved of him being.

"How long have I been here?" he asked.

"You returned to the Primary Command Deck forty-seven minutes ago. You participated in a final exchange of farewells with the Chief Executor of Independence, during which you said that you hoped additional contact between our people would lead to better fashion sense because his suit was 'ugly as a gongo's rear end,' and tried to get him to join you in a chorus of your Alma Mater's drinking song..."

That certain sounds like something I'd do, Keeler thought.

"... after which we broke orbit and are now accelerating out of the system. I was trying to engage you in a discussion about whether our worlds should have separate treaties with Independence, or whether the many advantages of a united approach should overrule our sovereign concerns. You pretended to listen, but you

also made noises that showed your mind was elsewhere."

"It sure was," Keeler muttered. He shook his head, feeling disoriented. Not liking waking from a dream, but more like finding himself unsure whether he was dreaming or not, and trying to wake up. "Okay, I'm just going to ask... did I not suddenly just appear on the Bridge just now?"

The two officers at the Helm and Navigation stations turned around and gave him odd looks.

"Do you think you just appeared on the Primary Command Deck?" Lear asked, unable to hide the faint hope that her Captain finally was losing it, and she could claim the command she openly coveted.

Keeler's features tightened as he tried to concentrate. "I was... I was on a ship... an Aves... coming back here from Independence..."

"We departed the planet almost sixteen hours ago. My ship led yours in. You went back to your quarters, and I had a few words with Fight Captain Wang about upgrading the tea service in his main deck."

"How long after your ship landed did mine land... Never mind! Don't answer that! Get me Commander Redfire. Now!"

Oh, wait, he thought. That's something I can do myself. "Redfire, this is the Commander."

Redfire's face appeared, bearing a look of confusion Keeler was sure he shared. "Redfire.... Here?"

"Phil... this is very important. Your Captain is questioning his sanity and needs an answer to the following question: Do you, or do you not, remembering being with me on a big empty ship with no people, and time had stopped, and we were trapped in a single frame

of reference, and we had to travel in space back to the point where time had diverged? Do you remember any of that?"

"All of it, Captain," Redfire said. "I seem to be in the observation deck with my boys, watching out for the seventh planet because it has a rare, bisecting ring system and we're going to pass by it in a few minutes, but my last prior memory is being on an Aves with you."

The Aves.

Kayliegh Driver sat bolt upright in her sleeper, her heart pounding, breath coming hard as though awakening from a nightmare. A second ago she had been on Prudence. How did she come to be here? Had she ever really been there?

"Are you all right?" she heard a sleepy voice asked. Her husband looked at her through bleary eyes.

"Honey, where have I been... today I mean?"

Morgan rolled over, muttering, "After you returned from the planet, we had dinner, went for a walk in the Vivarium, made love, and went to bed."

She didn't remember any of it.

When she was sure that Morgan was sleeping again, she rose, slipped into off-duty clothes, and walked from the chamber.

It was possible that when they had passed through that break in time, they had simply caught up with themselves. They had exited one frame, and fast forwarded to their normal lives.

If that was the case, who had been on *Pegasus*, ... this *Pegasus*! ... while she was stuck in time. Who had made love to her husband? Had something unreal, a figment of

time, detached itself from her, and gone on with her life, then vanished when she reappeared? If not, it was her simultaneously existing in both places, what had happened to sixteen hours of memories?

She caught a car on the Intraship Tubeway and located her brother in the Amenities Nexus, having dinner with Eliza Jane Change. He was smiling, as though nothing had happened. When he saw her come into the food court, he smiled and waved her to their table, offering her a seat. "Good morning," he greeted her. "Aren't you usually asleep at this hour?"

She stared at him for a second, unable for a moment to believe he was her brother, thinking he was some kind of replicant. Or was she the replicant?

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Should I send for some herbal tea."

She shook her head, then changed her mind. "Please, I would like some tea, thank you."

Matthew sent for tea. Kayliegh stared into space. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Don't you remember?" she asked him. "We were trapped in time?"

"Trapped in time?"

"On Prudence. We were coming back from Independence, and we got trapped in time, don't you remember?"

"When?"

"Today. Yesterday. I'm not sure."

Matthew looked at his sister strangely. "We returned to the ship, perfectly normal flight."

Her tea came. She drank it. She babbled. "You don't remember flying back to the ship, and everyone being gone? You went to Primary Command with the commander. You said you saw Lt. Change, and when you touched her, you vanished, too."

"Nay, I returned to the ship. I did a post-flight check and went back to my quarters." He paused. "You know, I did have a dream about Prudence, that I lost contact with Pegasus and..." He squinted, as though trying to focus on an elusive thought hiding in his mind. "I did go to the Primary Command and saw Eliza, and she touched me and I woke up." He shook his head. "That was just a dream... I woke up in my..." he paused, turned to Eliza. "I dreamed it, didn't I?"

"Nay," Kayliegh insisted. "Nay, Matthew... It was real, it happened."

"Could we have had the same dream?" he asked. They were twins. It had happened before.

"Sixteen hours of time are missing!" Kayliegh insisted. "It was not a dream. We were frozen in time, or time stopped, or ... something happened with time."

Eliza Jane Change shrugged. "Perhaps time is just a dream in the mind of the universe."

Matthew chewed on this for a moment. "That doesn't make any sense."

Eliza Jane reached across the table and took her hand. "Darling, if you ever find anything in this universe that makes complete sense, let me know. I've been looking for it my entire life."

COTOPAXI

This story takes place between WA Books 09 and 10 and addresses the mystery of the thing that happened in the Cotopaxi system that none of the crew is willing to talk about.

IT WAS A SIX-HOUR JOURNEY BY AVES SHUTTLE from the pathfinder ship *Pegasus* to the giant black pyramid they had discovered in the dust cloud of an old red dwarf star. Commander Keeler had a complaint about this. "Why did we have to park so far from the damned thing?"

Warmaster General Kitaen, his Chief Tactical Officer – a frightening man with a shaved head dressed in a black leather combat jacket, battle kilt, and war paint – answered. "If that ship were to launch an attack, *Pegasus* is capable of neither fighting nor running. It was prudent to keep our distance."

Pegasus had been limping across the Orion Quadrant ever since its near-destruction in the Gethsemane system, where it battled with what Keeler called "demonic space-squids from another dimension." Great chunks of the hull were blasted away, only half the ship had functional power nodes, and there was the matter of the huge through-and-through in its port wingblade. One of its main hyperdrive engines was destroyed and the other disabled. The ship was running on the two auxiliaries and required a month to ramp up to transluminal speeds.

"Yeah, well..." Keeler took a swig of liquid patience from his flask and turned to Lt. Commander Alkema, "You said it was safe."

“I said the android probes found nothing harmful on the pyramid ship,” Alkema clarified (again). In Keeler’s mind, every old ship or space station contained face-huggers or head-biters or some other ghastly thing. “We’re just being cautious.”

Keeler grunted and took another swig.

“It’s worth the risk,” Alkema went on. “That ship could have the parts and supplies we need to restore power systems, repair the hull, maybe even get back some of our propulsion.” He could have listed a hundred different things that needed to be fixed off the top of his head.

“The lead Aves contains a squad of my best warfighters,” Kitaen reassured Keeler. “They will determine if it is safe for us to land... or make it safe for us to land.”

When the warfighters signaled it was safe, the remaining three Aves flew through the huge triangular portal on the side of the pyramid and into the bay. When Keeler and the others disembarked, they found the interior of the ship was as black as its exterior. From the ceiling of the landing bay, pointy black ships shaped like birds hung on launch racks, casting predatory shadows on the deck.

Kitaen stared up at them. “Fighting ships,” he deduced. He ordered some of his warfighters to give them a closer inspection. He ordered another squad to examine the statues in the niches of the landing bay, concerned they might be war machines of some kind. Kitaen’s squads were a mix of newer recruits and toughened veterans who had fought demonoid aliens in the Gethsemane system, the Solarite pirates of Hellfire, the aliens in the Crucible system who never identified themselves, and other hostiles the ship had encountered

in its long journey from the Perseus Quadrant on the other side of the galaxy.

Alkema checked his COM Link. “No link to *Pegasus*. Just like the androids reported.”

Keeler was concerned. “Isn’t that bad?”

“There’s nothing we can do about it; not even neutrino pulses make it through the hull material.” A tall blond woman with an amazing body answered him. “The technology on this ship doesn’t look anything like the technology we’ve found on the Commonwealth StarLocks. “Probably because it’s about 1,000 years older, right Commander?”

“Probably, and you are?” Keeler asked, since apparently no one was going to introduce her.

She offered her hand, “Lt. Scientist Hardcandy Banks. We’ve met several times before and my eyes are still up here, Commander.”

“Good,” Keeler replied, not looking up. “How do you know how old this ship is?”

“Radiation absorption on the hull,” she followed with an explanation of stellar radiance and material absorption rates that utterly lost him. He understood the part where she got to: “My guess is this vessel is nearly four thousand years old.”

“Four thousand years,” Keeler muttered. “Four thousand years ago was the time of the Third and Fourth Crusades... the War of the Transhumans.”

“Transhumans?” Alkema asked, trying to insert himself in the discussion. “Were those the ones who had themselves genetically altered so they had no hair or genitals.”

“Those were the Strange.” Keeler’s knowledge of the Ancient Commonwealth was encyclopedic. “They died out for rather obvious reasons. Transhumans came along later. They left their human forms for bioengineered artificial bodies; extremely intelligent and practically immortal, killed off a few billion normal humans before they were stopped.” He looked around. “They had a fetish for gaudy, tacky interiors. This might be one of their ships.”

A younger man interrupted. “I don’t think this is a ship, at all.” The man was slender, with longish hair, a pair of external SPEX across his eyes. “If I am reading these symbols right... it may be more like a tomb.”

“And you are?” Keeler asked, a bit peeved that Alkema was skimping on the introductions.

“Specialist Jackson Levant, from the Archaeological Section, I’m an expert in pyramid-shaped structures.”

Keeler squinted at him. “That’s an oddly specific specialization.”

“Well, with one exception, every world we have encountered has had pyramid-based architecture; they often have a symbolic or ceremonial function; it’s a common shape for temples and tombs, for example.”

“Oh,” said Keeler, and then much more emphatically, “Oh!” To historians, finding a tomb was way better than finding a spaceship. It was the difference between finding unexpected money in the pocket of a jacket you haven’t worn in a couple of years and finding a Panrovian swimsuit model in your kitchen making you a sandwich. “A tomb, you say.” History showed there was often really cool stuff in tombs; the more elaborate the tomb, the cooler the stuff. A pyramid-shaped black spaceship eight miles on a side just had to have cool stuff.

Levant led them to one of the walls, which was covered with glowing glyphs from an Ancient Commonwealth language, “This symbol is commonly associated with some of the more elaborate tombs of the Ancients. It’s sort of a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign.”

Keeler knew the ancient symbol well. “Right, the red circle with a slash through it.”

“This next symbol usually indicates the status of the interred. Whoever is in this tomb is a ‘Ruler over many worlds,’ ‘Ruler over all the stars,’ something like that. And here is a name... ‘Cotopaxi.’ It’s either the name of the ship, or the person interred. It’s hard to tell in context. Both, maybe.” His finger lingered over the next phrase. “Now, this is strange.”

“Oh?” Keeler did not like to hear the words “this is strange” while exploring ancient spaceships.

“Well, there were two symbols in the ancient language for ‘emperor’ and ‘empress,’ depending on the sex of the person interred. This symbol is like the two combined.”

Keeler suggested. “Some Transhumans adopted the characteristics of both sexes.”

“Maybe, but I could also be reading it wrong. I don’t recognize most of these symbols, and my syntax is just a guess.”

Alkema tried to refocus them on practical matters. “We should have the one of the teams begin a metallurgical analysis of the ship’s materials. Even if the systems aren’t compatible, we might be able to re-engineer their components into replacement parts for *Pegasus*.”

Levant protested. "You want to take this ship apart? That's like tomb-robbing. Neg, I take that back, it literally is tomb-robbing."

"Didn't anyone brief you on the mission objective? We have over 10,000 people on *Pegasus* and barely enough life support to keep them alive." There was an edge in Alkema's voice that came from over a year spent trying to rig workarounds and patches on shattered systems and the toll it had taken on his health and his marriage. "We need hull plating. We need power nodes. We need capacitors for the weapons. We need graviton generators for shields and propulsion."

Levant seethed. "You can't just go ripping up an ancient artifact, it would be like tearing apart the Great Kandoran Temple to fix your plumbing."

"Speaking of plumbing," Keeler interjected... "Is there a hygiene chamber on this ship?"

Alkema tried to speak calmly. "I wouldn't tear apart this relic if we didn't need it to survive. If it's any consolation, we'll only take what we need to fix *Pegasus*. No more."

Levant did not seem consoled at all.

Banks set up a display showing what the androids had mapped of the ship's interior. "Two levels up from here is a large central chamber."

"The Annunciation Chamber," Levant interrupted. "According to the translation of the associated symbol."

Banks continued. "There is a lot of power going into that chamber, so it probably performs a critical function."

Alkema agreed, "We need to take a look at that chamber, maybe the power systems can help restore

Pegasus. Lt. Scientist Banks could be useful figuring it out.”

Banks disagreed, “I think I should go here.” She indicated a chamber immediately beneath the capstone. “That could be a command center. From there, I should be able to get to an analysis of the ship’s systems and components pretty quickly.”

Levant wanted to explore the Annuciation Chamber. “It may be the purpose of this entire structure.”

Banks disappointed him, “I could use Specialist Levant’s alacrity with paleo-linguistics to help me figure out the system interfaces. Just for a few hours until I have an understanding of how this ship operates.”

Keeler poked at the command center on the schematic. “It’s pretty far from the Aves; anyone who goes up there isn’t going to make a quick getaway when things go bad as they probably will.”

Kitaen suggested, “We’ll keep a squad of warfighters here in the hangar bay. They can rescue anyone who gets in trouble.”

Keeler nodded. “Alkema and I will go check out the main chamber.” He turned to the technical crew. “The other rest of you guys... just start looking for things we can use.”

“Two warfighters will accompany you, Commander. For Banks and Levant...” Kitaen put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. A pair of shiny metal war machines shaped like dogs, but taller than people, ran over from within one of the Aves. “These Trauma Hounds will protect you, in case there is any trouble.”

Levant looked intimidated by the giant mechanical beasts. Banks simply pattered one of them on the snout. “I feel safer already. Let’s go.”

One of the hounds, Scrapper, growled. "Let me at 'em! Let me at 'em!"

Levant did not understand, "Let you at whom?"

The other trauma hound, Tralfaz, begged their pardon "Don't mind the boy, he's trying to start a catchphrase."

Alkema and Keeler made their way to the center of the ship, accompanied by a pair of warfighters. Along the connecting passages were large round hatches plated in gold leading into the ship's internal chambers, each one with patterns of sigils and symbols around its circumference. The hatches opened with a kind of swirl.

The large chamber they had just entered had gold walls twice as tall as they were, with engravings and more patterns of more sigils that glowed and moved as they passed.

Keeler didn't care for it. "A Panrovian Flesh Merchant would say this décor is a little over the top." He added, "I wasn't joking when I said I need to use a hygiene chamber."

"Why is it no matter what planet or ancient spaceship we explore, you always need to find a hygiene chamber?"

Do you think that I enjoy the increasingly annoying amount of maintenance this body requires as it ages?"

Alkema suggested, "You could go back to the shuttle."

"It's too far away. Anyway, I like using ancient hygiene chambers. At every era of human civilization, all men, great and small, needed to piss. I like the thought of dropping trou where centuries ago, my pioneering

ancestors were doing the same. It makes me feel a sense of continuity with humanity's past."

One of the warfighters spoke up: "I could also use a hygiene chamber."

Alkema checked the schematic on his datapad. "There's a chamber up ahead that's linked into the ship's water distribution network. It could be a hygiene chamber."

Keeler: "It's going to be."

He left his party outside, of course. Keeler had to activate his headlamp to assess the dark chamber. In the shadows, he could make out a device in it that looked something like a metal saddle with a hole in the center. An elaborate pair of what looked like padded metal armrests were on the sides; but they looked rather higher than arm level. Maybe whoever they had been built for had been a lot taller.

It looked like no toilet he had ever seen before, but it fit right in with the tacky extravagance of the rest of the ship. Keeler realized he would be unable to straddle the saddle effectively unless he removed his pants completely. "Well, this is a hell of a thing," he said out loud as he dropped his trousers and mounted the device. Once atop, he was almost immediately able to clear his business. He rested his arms on what he thought were the armrests. Almost incidentally, restraints snapped into place.

Keeler: "Well, that probably isn't good."

He was beginning to think the device wasn't actually a euphemism. Then, suddenly his head-light went out and he thought this might be a good time to cry out for help, even though rescue by warfighters while he was

pantsless and strapped to some kind of weird Commonwealth torture toilet would be embarrassing.

But as he opened his mouth he suddenly found himself gagged. Some kind of armature had dropped and stuffed a pad into his mouth. He tried to scream, but could not make a sound against the gag. It was like one of those nightmares where you try to scream and nothing comes out.

And then, he had the distinct sensation of an electric, cybernetic worm inserting itself into the exposed orifice he had just evacuated. There was an instant of sharp stabbing pain, and then a feeling of warmth and loveliness came over him; like everything was going to be okay... forever

Outside the hygiene chamber, Alkema was getting worried about how long his commander had been in there. He rapped on the wall next to the entrance, but just then, Keeler reappeared.

“Are you all right, Commander? You were in there a long time?”

Keeler looked at him, a weird smile on his face. “I’m just great, Davey. Never better. I feel super great.”

Alkema asked the obvious question, “Where are your pants, commander?”

Keeler rolled his eyes: “What, those old things? So-o-o-o-o-o-o-o confining.”

Alkema was about to ask again if he was all right (he already knew the answer and was setting his gauntlet to stun) but Keeler pressed a finger to his lips. “Does anyone else need to use the hygiene chamber? It’s a little

tricky to get started, but once you get going it's just... lovely."

Alkema gently moved the commander's finger side: "Commander, you do not seem like your normal self." In the background, a pantsless and blissful Warfighter was emerging from the other chamber.

Keeler hooked Alkema's arm and pulled him closer, looking him in the eyes. "'I'm fine, Davey, but I think you really need to use the euphemism. Right now."

There was a brief purple flash in the commander's eyes and suddenly, he leaned in and gave Alkema a full open mouth kiss. Alkema recoiled and pulled away, but before he could raise his arm to fire, he realized he did need to use the euphemism. In fact, he had lost all will to do anything other than use the euphemism.

Meanwhile, the pantsless Warfighter addressed the other warfighter. "You should check it out the hygiene chamber, too."

His eyes flashed.

The command center was beneath the apex of the pyramid, with large viewports on each of its three faces. The pyramid rotated slowly as it orbited so that the sun moved slowly from one viewport to the next.

Levant observed. "The ceilings in here are really high."

It was true, the decks in the ship were a uniform four meters in height. Even beyond the vertical expanse, this was unlike any command center they had ever seen. There were three grand statues in the center holding aloft a gold sphere in their upraised arms; as though playing a particularly intense game of wally-ball. Their

faces were inhuman, their limbs were elongated, and they sported both female breasts and male genitalia. Similar statues lined the corridor leading to the command center; grotesque, gargoyle-like things in gold and chrome.

There were no workstations, no command chairs, only rows of free-standing walls covered with sigils and symbols. The sigils and symbols glowed and moved with the touch of a fingertip. Levant was having difficulty translating them. "They are similar to some of the scripting we found in the archives at the Chanticleer StarLock; but they're... older... far more ornate. It's like trying to read hieroglyphics written in calligraphy."

Banks told him to keep trying. With an assist from the technical specialists, she finally got one of the large triangular screens to activate. It provided a schematic display of the internal power systems of the pyramid ship.

Banks stared at it long enough to process what it was telling her. "The three sides of the ship are covered with some kind of panels harvesting energy from the sun and feeding it into the ship. Most of the energy is going into the base levels."

Levant was curious about the lower levels of the pyramid. Thousands of oval shapes filled the base like well-organized medicinal capsules. "What are those? Sarcophagi?"

Banks didn't think so. "Sarcophagi would not require that much energy, but those could be suspended animation pods." She made a quick count and calculated. "10,000 of them."

"You mean there's ten thousand ancient transhumans in stasis on this ship."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. The pods are drawing some power, but not enough to maintain molecular stasis. We should have a team check them out though."

Levant tapped a finger on a very large oval in the center of the Annunciation Chamber. "That one is a lot bigger than the others, and it's pulling in a lot of power. Any idea what it is?"

The Annunciation Chamber was a vast, dark space with a large object like a recumbent statue in the center of it, spotlighted by a single white light from above. Keeler, Alkema, and the two warfighters crossed the long deck. None of them were wearing pants and their glowing purple eyes pierced the gloom.

Keeler hummed contentedly as they crossed the floor, pausing to observe, "That is a long way to walk. You know what we need to bring on these missions? Hovercycles. We'd all be like... vroom, vroom!"

Alkema's voice came as a lilt. "Oh, we could wear the most darling hovercycle outfits. Something in Saurian leather I imagine."

Keeler disagreed. "No, silly, it would have to be leather. Chiffon wrinkles so easily."

After a good half hour of walking they approached the triplex of enormous black cubes on which the statue rested. As they came close, they experienced what felt like a hallucination of the statue coming to life, rising and stretching as though after a long sleep. The illusion passed, and the statue remained as before, but a living version of it had appeared before them.

The being was over three meters tall; its skin was as dark and glossy as the walls and floors of the ship. Its

eyes were two bright purple orbs. It rose slowly up from the sarcophagus and addressed them in a deep and echoey, yet somehow feminine voice. "We are Shur."

So completely in her thrall was Commander Keeler that he did not even respond: "Sure of what?"

Shur continued "We have registered your presence. Now, we are inside of you. Who has come to serve us?"

"Well, I'm Bill... you can call me Billy. And this is Davey. And I don't really know these two fellas..."

Shur commanded, "Kneel."

Again, Keeler in control of his faculties would have answered, "Not Neil... Bill... B-I-L-L." But Keeler was not himself. He, Alkema, and the two warfighters dropped to their knees.

Shur gently caressed the back of one of the warfighter's necks. "There are more with you. Call them... a few at a time. Bring them to me that I may come inside them."

Keeler would have had something to say to that as well, were he in his right mind. Instead, he activated his COM Link: "Landing team two to the Annunciation Chamber. We've found something.... Wonderful."

Shur continued to stroke the Warfighter's cheek. "You should meet with your fellow warriors before they reach us, and encourage them to make use of my Initiation Chambers."

The warfighters stood, and went off to meet their comrades.

After some initial success with the internal systems, Hardcandy Banks had reached an impasse. She was

baffled trying to make some sense of which systems in the pyramid did what.

Levant was similarly frustrated. "I can understand just enough of these symbols to be completely baffled by the ones I can't make sense out of."

Banks frowned, "How so?"

Levant ran his finger along one of the walls, symbols lighting up as he touched them: "This symbol translates roughly as 'glory' or 'magnificence' and it shows up in about every other phrase, sometimes paired with the symbol that means 'transformation' or 'becoming' which probably ties into the Ancient Transhumans. But this next wall talks all about, unless I am badly misreading these symbols... sleep..."

"Sleep?"

Levant crossed his arms, "Big sleep... maybe Great Sleep... and this line, 'Not enough stars for her ... or maybe, to be worthy of... her glory' It's out of context. Unless this isn't so much a command center as a kind of library."

Banks also crossed arms. "That would explain why I only have limited system access to ship's systems. But where is the actual command center."

Levant walked over to the schematic and touched the Annunciation Chamber: "If I had to guess... I think it's here. Maybe this large object in the center that draws all the energy functions like a braincore, running all the systems autonomously. But I would have to look at it in person to be sure."

"OK, I can tell you're getting antsy, you can head down to the Annunciation Chamber. I'll stay up here and see if I can find any more technical information. Don't be too long, I can't do the translation entirely on my own."

Levant nodded, hardly able to suppress a smile. "Will you be OK up here?"

She patted Tralfaz on the head. "I'll be fine, I'm sure these guys won't let anything happen to me."

Scrapper assume a fighting stance. "Oh, no, we won't. Just let anybody hurt you! Let me at 'em! I will scrap them!"

Tralfaz rolled his glowing red eyes "Oh, good lord..."

Most of the rest of the landing team had gathered in the Annuciation Chamber, like a small convention of people who didn't like pants. The last few were dragged in, screaming or stunned. Once subdued, they accepted the insertion of the purple, sluglike creatures that were the instruments of Shur's control.

Warmaster Kitaen had put up a stalwart resistance when he saw what was happening to the warfighters under his command. First, he fought. Then he evaded. Then, he fought some more. But finally, enough stun bolts from enough gauntlets had brought him down, and two of the strongest of his changed men dragged him into the annunciation chamber.

Commander Keeler slapped him lightly around the face: "Wake up, sleepy-head."

Technically, it was an injection from a field MedTech that brought Kitaen around, but he was awake. "I will destroy you!"

Keeler stroked his bald head. "So much hostility. You are going to be so much more relaxed when this is over."

He leaned over and planted a kiss on Kitaen's unwilling lips then pulled back.

Kitaen spat. “What the hell was that? Some sort of mind-control kiss? That won’t work on me. I have the discipline of Sumac.”

“Oh, Gennie, the Cotopaxi’s kiss is only meant to put you in the right frame of mind for the insertion of the joy bug.”

“He’s clamped it up tight!” Announced a frustrated MedTech.

Keeler sighed, “You must have something to loosen the drawbridge.”

The MedTech giggled. “Silly me, of course I do.”

She drew her largest transdermal injector from the pouch and loaded it with muscle relaxant. “In a few seconds, General, you’ll be happy to receive the gift of Cotopaxi.”

Kitaen was awake through the procedure, but the monumental amount of muscle relaxation overcame even his Sumacian will as four men pried him open and let the purple, glowing slug-creature do its thing.

When it was over, Keeler asked. “How do you feel?”

A huge smile spread across Kitaen’s face. “Pretty.”

Kitaen’s eyes flashed purple.

Now that it was done, Shur gathered the others in the center, basking in their adoration. “The Initiation is complete. We will now begin your transformation.”

A white mist began to fill the chamber. Colorful lights began strobing. Pulsing music came from seemingly all directions to assault their ears. Shur chose Keeler, Alkema, and Kitaen to come forward: “You were the first and the last to be initiated, but you shall all be the first to complete your Transformations.”

Three cubes beneath the statue hissed open and dry-ice smoke billowed from within them; pink and purple spotlights shown on them. Obediently, Keeler, Alkema, and Kitaen stepped inside and let the doors seal behind them. Loud music played to hide the screams.

They emerged a few moments later, transformed and naked, smooth between his legs and hairless below the neck.

Shur asked, "How do you feel?"

Keeler answered, "Different, in the best kind of way."

Alkema smiled dreamily, "As though my burdens have been taken from me."

Kitaen agreed, "I feel very comfortable the way I am."

Shur selected three more to begin the process.

Alkema drifted over to Keeler. "Well, that's everybody except you-know-who?"

Keeler didn't know. "Who?"

"You know... the smart blond girl with the rack, and that other fella."

Keeler snapped his fingers. "Oh, right, of course. How silly of me." He tapped his COM Link. "Lt. Scientist Banks, sweetie, we are waiting for you in the Annunciation Chamber."

There was an immediately response from Hardcandy Banks. "Commander, I'm still working on something up here. I sent Levant down."

"Oh, no, sweetie, I think you need to come right on down."

There was a lag before she replied. "Are you all right, commander?"

Keeler tried to sound more like his usual self: "I'm fine it's just... we've made a huge discovery down here, and we need all hands on deck."

Banks responded, a little too ... seriously. "I'll come down soon commander. Just let me finish this system diagnostic."

Kitaen closed the link. "I think she's not coming, silly little thing. Davey, sweetie, why don't you go and convince Lt. Rack that she should join us here immediately."

Alkema agreed. "Okie-dokie."

"Put on some pants first."

Alkema giggled. "Oh, if I must."

Banks had been, she was sure, right on the verge of discovering the central command circuit of the pyramid when the sigils and symbols stopped responding. Instead, they began to move and glow on their own. She wondered if she had inadvertently activated an automated control system. Without Levant and the techs, she had been left to figure it out on her own.

She decided to take a shot at inspecting one of the power transfer nodes herself, but just as she was getting to leave the command center she saw Lt. Commander Alkema leaning against the doorway.

"Oh, David, you startled me."

Alkema answered her in an oddly sultry voice. "Oh, did I do that? So sorry."

The voice didn't sound right at all. "Are you all right?"

“I have never felt better. Why haven’t you joined the rest of us in the Annunciation Chamber?”

“I think it’s more important that I finish here.”

“Is it?” Alkema grabbed her by the wrist. “You really need to come to the Annunciation Chamber. It’s the most amazing thing.”

He leaned in to kiss her, and she pushed him back. “Lt. Commander, what’s wrong with you? You know I’m engaged to Flight Captain Toto.”

Alkema laughed. “He’s down in the Annunciation Chamber already. He wants you to join us.”

Banks furrowed her eyebrows. “What’s down there?”

Alkema sighed. “Something wonderful. It will change you.”

Banks pulled away from him: “Change me? How?”

“Well, why don’t I just show you.”

He dropped his pants.

Hardcandy Banks screamed.

While he was still distracted by her screaming, she fired her pulse gauntlet at him on maximum stun. When it didn’t seem to work, she fired again, but it took a third shot to bring him down and a fourth just to be sure.

She looked in her landing pack for something to restrain him. He was out for only a few seconds before his eyes fluttered open. She leveled the gauntlet again, but when he spoke, his voice was normal. “Specialist Banks.”

“Right here, David. What the hell happened to you?”

Alkema seemed to be fighting through pain as he told her the story. “When I sat down on the device we

thought was a euphemism, some sort of creature entered me through... through the endpoint of my alimentary canal. It took over my body."

Banks had seen this holodrama. "And you were trapped, forced to observe while it made your body to terrible things."

Alkema shook his head: "It wasn't like that. I was happy, blissful, and I just wanted to live for the pleasure of serving Shur. I had no will, I simply obeyed."

"Shur?"

"Shur... she's this creature, this being, this entity... It's like she doesn't even have to tell you what to do, you just know what she wants and you just do it. If she had wanted me to cut my own throat with a knife, I would have done it with a smile."

"And she must have wanted your genitalia gone, because you are smooth down there."

"We all walked into this machine. When I came out... my genitalia were gone and I felt... very strange things that I am now quite ashamed of."

"Oh, Dave," Hardcandy reached out to hold him. "I'm so..."

Alkema pushed her off. "Don't! The creature is stunned right now, but it could wake up any time. I have to tell you what I know before it takes over again. They're all down there... the entire landing team. She's transforming them."

"Why?"

"To protect Cotopaxi," Alkema closed his eyes tight and shook his head. "There's something else, but it's starting to slip away from me. They chose this sun

because it will be stable for the next four billion years, which is how long they intended to remain in stasis.”

“Why four billion years?”

“Four billion years from now, the Milky Way will merge with Andromeda, creating the Milkdromeda supergalaxy. I think the Transhumans intended to re-emerge from stasis and conquer the new supergalaxy.”

“What Transhumans?”

“Her army. They’re in stasis in the lower levels.”

Banks shook her head. “No, they’re not. The stasis pods aren’t working. There’s no one down there.”

Alkema gripped her arm. “It’s waking up, the slug inside of me.” Fighting through the effort, he gave an order. “Stun me.”

“Stun you?”

“I’m losing control, I feel the creature awakening, and I think she wants me to kill you if you won’t come down with us.”

She shot him again and one more time, just to be sure. Then, she retrieved a Medi-Kit and gave him as much sedative as she dared.

With Alkema out, she began thinking over her next move. Normally, she would report the situation to *Pegasus*, but with the COM Links cut off that was not an option. *Pegasus* would eventually send help after the team had been out of contact for 28 hours. She didn’t know if the landing team had that much time. She suspected not. The only thing standing between the rescue team and an ambush was her.

And Levant as it turned out. He just then reappeared in the command center. She leveled her gauntlet at him.

Levant held up his hands “Don’t shoot!”

Banks ordered. “Drop your pants.”

Most any other man in *Pegasus’s* crew would have welcomed that order from Hardcandy Banks, but Levant was taken aback. “Excuse me?”

“I have to make sure you’re not one of them, now drop your pants.”

Levant fumbled with his belt. “OK, OK...” He quickly dropped his pants, explaining. “I saw what they were doing in the Annunciation Chamber and I came back here.”

Banks checked out his gear and was satisfied and fairly impressed. “OK, you pass.”

Levant began sorting himself. “So, now what do we do? Get back to a shuttle, go back to *Pegasus* for help.”

“I don’t think there’s time.” She tapped her COM Link: “Any *Pegasus* personnel, please respond.”

She was answered by giggle, chatter, and invitations to join them in the Annunciation Chamber. “Come on down, we’re having a fabulous time.”

It was up to her and Levant, now. “All right, I’m gonna need your help.”

“Translating the rest of the symbols,” he asked hopefully.

“No, I need you to help me carry something from the Aves. Bring the dogs.” She had an idea. Actually, she had two ideas. The second idea would work if the first idea went badly.

General Kitaen stood beside the center cues dressed in a pretty pink tutu, holding an invisible doll in his

hands and stroking its soft, soft hair. A trio of warfighters danced nearby in skintight topless jumpsuits with cutaway buttocks and transparent crotch panels; lip-synching to a song that only they could hear.

Commander Keeler, wearing a hot pink sequined party dress and blond hair extensions, squatted next to Kitaen. “OMA, General, you are so-o-o-o pretty. OMA, I can’t believe how pretty you are.”

Kitaen waved his hands. “OMA, stop, you’re making me embarrassed.”

Keeler’s COM Link activated. He tapped it. “Talk to me, sweetie.”

Hardcandy Banks asked, “I’d like to speak to Shur, if I could.”

Keeler replied, “Oh, Honey, I don’t know if that’s possible. She doesn’t have a COM implant thingy.”

“All right, then convey a message to her.”

Keeler sighed in frustration. He knelt. “Your Magnificence... my Science Office wishes an audience with you.”

Shur’s purple eyed glowered. “She must come to me.”

Keeler went on, “Unfortunately, your eminence, she is in your landing bay and will depart on one of our ships if you will not meet her.”

Shur was not concerned. “We will destroy it as it flies.”

Keeler paused to listen to Banks: “She says something about leaving behind a bomb-type thingy in the landing bay, set to destroy the ship as soon as she clears the blast radius. And only she has the... oh, what’s that silly thing called... the disarming code.”

Shur's eyes blazed, fury red instead of kinky purple.
"We will deal this woman."

Shur came down to the Landing Bay, but she did not come alone. She brought her new converts with her.

Banks had expected this. She raised the remote detonator over her head. "Don't come any closer."

Shur addressed her in warm, beatific tones. "We did not come to fight you, or to harm anyone. Once we explain ourselves to you, you will willingly join us."

Banks shook her head. "Don't get your hopes up."

Shur raised a hand. "There is no need for this foolish insolence. Look at your shipmates. They are happy. And thanks to us, they will have a destiny they could not have imagined in their former, puny, insignificant lives."

Banks waved the detonator at her shipmates. "Why did you do this to them?"

"They came here intending to harm her, to dismantle her for parts. We could not allow her to be desecrated in such an insolent fashion. We had to render them harmless."

Banks wasn't sure she understood. "Her?"

Shur spread her hands over her head. "Cotopaxi."

"You mean the ship."

Shur shook her head. "Cotopaxi is not the ship, the ship is Cotopaxi."

Several things clicked in Banks's fast, hyperintelligent brain. "Cotopaxi was a transhuman. This ship was her form."

Shur insisted. “*IS* her form. This pyramid is a living organism... an entity with power beyond your imagining. Cotopaxi was once absolute ruler over billions of your kind.”

“We did not realize this was ... her. We were only looking for materials to repair our ship.” Banks wondered what would have happened if they had managed to incorporate Cotopaxi’s parts into *Pegasus’s* systems.

Shur gestured toward Keeler, Kitaen and the others, doing one another’s hair and trying on dresses. “As you can see, we rendered your people quite incapable of harming her.”

Hardcandy Banks wanted to know. “Can they be changed back?”

“That does not matter.” Shur held up one of her enormous but oddly delicate hands: “Silence! She is speaking to me. She says she heard you say there were 10,000 aboard your ship?”

“Approximately.”

“She needs them.”

“Needs them?”

Shur reached out to her mind and conveyed a novella’s worth of information in less than a second. When the crusaders closed in on her planet, Cotopaxi had chosen ten thousand followers to come with her, to go into stasis for four billion years and awaken when the Andromeda and Milky Way galaxies had merged into one supergalaxy worthy of ruling over. But the crusaders managed one last assault, destroying the escape ships and killing most of the ten thousand except for Shur. That was why the sarcophagi in the base of the ship were empty.

Banks understood. "You want me to bring people from *Pegasus* to become her new Legion."

"You will tell them they need to abandon their broken ship, and come to Cotopaxi. Tell them they will be safe here. They will join with us."

Banks argued, "Most of them are children we rescued from Gethsemane before their planet was destroyed."

Shur was pleased. "Children are ideal for her purposes. They can be molded easily into usable forms. They will be blessed with immortality. They will rule over worlds in her Name. We had thought to sleep until the galaxies merged into a supergalaxy worthy of domination. But we now from those we've taken that the Commonwealth is gone, and we could take your worlds with little resistance."

Shur came closer. "You will be among the chosen. You will rule over a world as a goddess. Its people shall bow to you as they would to a living god"

Banks nodded, but let her smile fade to a hard look of defiance. "I think not. You are not going to transform me; I like myself the way I am."

Shur's eyes flashed, and her skin suddenly flamed with red fury. "Insolence. We manipulate reality as clay in our hands and you dare defy us."

Banks derided her. "You don't really manipulate anything except for emotion and will. You are extremely good at it, and you will eventually succeed in breaking me. But if something doesn't have a will to bend, nor emotions to leverage... well, you can't control that, can you? You can't control machines. But I can."

In the deepest shadows of the landing bay, four small red lights appeared. They were set in the eye sockets of

what appeared to be grotesque statuary of dogs; huge dogs with gleaming teeth and shining metal armor.

“Tralfaz... Scrapper...” Hardcandy Banks commanded. “Get her!”

“Let me at her!” Scrapper was at her throat in an instant.

As the Trauma Hounds tore into Shur, her control over the landing crew broke down, temporarily at least. They had snapped out of her thrall and were looking around in confusion.

Alkema was wearing a spare jumpsuit from the shuttle, he shouted loudly: “Over here! Get to the Aves. Technical crew to this ship. Now! Move, Move!”

Levant emerged from a different ship. “Science teams to this ship.”

Kitaen picked up on the theme. “Warfighters to *Leonidas*.”

Alkema dashed over to Keeler. “Are you all right, Commander?”

Keeler looked over his sparkle painted nails: “Do I really have to answer that?”

The rest of the landing crew were looking around at each other, at their humiliating get-ups, and asking what had happened to their normal clothes.

Levant shouted “Forget your uniforms, just get back to the ships.”

Keeler protested “I can’t go anywhere dressed like this.”

Alkema desperately urged him toward *Zilla*. “There isn’t any time, sir. Shur’s been ripped to pieces, but

Cotopaxi can regenerate her. We don't have much time. We have to get off this ship."

Kitaen shouted. "Warfighters, abandon your clothes and withdraw to the Aves." Even beneath layers of eye make-up, a sheer party dress, and cone-shaped breast plates, he was still commanding. He threw his doll aside and ran with his men, toward the landing bay.

Alkema couldn't run. He stumbled. Banks and Keeler each grabbed an arm to support him. Keeler asked, "What happened to you?"

"Banks took out my butt slug with a Medikit. Hurts like you wouldn't believe. I'm bleeding out of my ass and always about to black out, but it's gone."

As the last of them boarded the ship, the two trauma hounds with bloodstained paws and fangs dashed onto the tactical shuttle, leaping through the open hatches dramatically as the ship closed up.

When the last of them were on board, Alkema closed the hatch. "Toto, we're locked down. Punch it."

The Aves lifted and rocketed into the landing corridor.

Keeler was grim. "I don't think it will matter how far away we are if Shur regenerates. As long as we have these slugs inside of us..."

Banks reassured him. "I set up a failsafe. There's a nucleonic warhead rigged in the command center. Hammerhead with a yield of 40 K-Booms."

[In the Sapphorean measure of weapon yield, 1 Boom = Annihilation of all unshielded matter within a 1 meter radius of detonation. 40 Kilo Boom (K-Boom) was therefore equivalent to destroying all matter within 40 kilometers of detonation.]

Zilla cleared the inverted triangle aperture, closely followed by the other Aves. They formed a line and shot out toward open space. Hardcandy Banks checked her chronometer. "Four seconds to detonation."

"Are we going to clear the shock wave?" Alkema asked the aviator who was piloting the ship.

The aviator shrugged. "Yeah, probably, I guess..." He vectored high and poured on maximum thrust.

"Come on," Alkema whispered. "Come on..."

The warhead detonated, a brief flash of light followed in short order by the complete detonation of Cotopaxi's power systems.

After all that build-up, a light shockwave buffeted the Aves, but that was all.

"We made it," Alkema said.

"True." Keeler said, holding the crotch of his pretty, sequined skirt. "The question is do we want to be."

Alkema didn't understand. "What?"

"I'm sorry, I thought you were going to say we're still alive and my response was cued up for that."

They linked ahead to *Pegasus* requesting MedTechs and spare uniforms be ready in the hangar bays. In the meantime survivors wrapped themselves in whatever was available in the lockers of their Aves to avoid appearing in front of their crewmates in Shur's ridiculous costumes. A trail of jettisoned sequined skirts and cone-brassieres trailed behind *Zilla* and the other three ships.

Upon landing, they were rushed to the Medical Core. Keeler, Alkema, and Kitaen were tended to by Chief

Skinner. After jabbing and poking at the areas of their anatomies that had been altered, he was able to give them news that brought them all relief.

“The damage done to your body was entirely superficial. It will be possible ... with some assistance... for you to... how to put it... grow a new one?”

Keeler contemplated this for a few seconds. “While you’re in there, a little more length and girth wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

Alkema asked. “What about the butt slugs?”

Skinner remained chipper although the news on this front was a bit more grim. “They are still alive and attached to your nervous systems at the base of your spine. I can remove them, but it will be a painful process with a lengthy recovery as Lt. Commander Alkema will attest. Alternately, I can inject them with a toxin that will kill them, after which they should pass out of your body in three or four days. It would mean less pain for you, but the butt-slugs would be useless for scientific study...”

Keeler and Kitaen spoke as one. “Kill them!”

Skinner sighed, “Very well then. I’ll prepare the toxin and have the biotechs begin programming the nano knitters to reconstruct your... undercarriages. It will take some time. 50 to 60 days would be my estimate. I also recommend a program of therapeutic manual stimulation to assure full functionality returns.”

Keeler had to ask. “Are any of the junior female MedTechs specialized in therapeutic manual stimulation? Asking for a friend.”

Skinner excused himself. “You gentlemen may talk among yourselves.”

When he left to tend to the other injured and mutilated, Alkema said, "I am not looking forward to writing the mission report on this one."

Kitaen growled. "There is not going to be a mission report."

Alkema couldn't believe Kitaen suggesting this, or Keeler agreeing. "We're not going to tell the whole galaxy that we had slugs put in our butts that transformed us into the gelded effeminate minions to a Transhuman Space Princess. Nor will we tell them that we almost over our ship's children to her so she could turn them into her mutant space army and conquer the galaxy. Let's just forget this thing ever happened and never speak of it again."

Alkema countered, "Our wounded pride aside... and I realize our pride is very wounded... don't we have a duty to log this event for study by the homeworlds."

Keeler decided, "You can report that we found an old ship from the Commonwealth Era. It had a dangerous life form on board so we nuked it. If they ever find another one like it, they should do the same. That's all they need to know."

"A hundred people went on that mission. We can't silence all of them."

Keeler didn't think that would be a problem. "I don't think they want to talk about it any more than we do."

Kitaen went on to have the final word. "We blasted her ship to radioactive dust and eliminated the threat. Our duty is concluded. I would prefer not to have this exercise recorded in the Hall of Heroes."

ALPHA PRIORI

**Mission Report 08247707A --
Astra Consortium [Commercial Survey Vessel] *Astra
Cartographer***

**Honorita Keeler, Mission Executive, October 24, AS7707
[SY7386]**

Summation: In the course of operations in the Old Earth system, we learned the location of several other advanced research outposts of the former Galactic Commonwealth. These advanced outposts may contain advanced technology a thousand years or more over our current baseline. The nearest of these worlds to Old Earth was called Alpha Priori. We have set course for the A. Priori system.

Astra Cartographer - "Wake up, sweetheart."

Max Jordan's eyes fluttered open. He had no idea where he was. He was freezing. His limbs were too heavy to move. He really needed to piss. These were the sequence of his first waking thoughts and the side effects of the deep hibernation he had been in for the previous eight days.

Persephone answered him, "We have just exited hyperspace. We are within the Alpha Priori system. We'll be in orbit in 180 minutes."

He remembered where he was. A few weeks earlier, he had picked up a billet a survey ship called *Astra Cartographer* as a Mission Tactical and Survey Specialist. "How long was I asleep?"

Persephone: "Eight solar days, plus one hour,"
Persephone answered.

No wonder he felt groggy. He had woken up a day early. Spikes of heat stabbed his fingers and toe as his

extremities awakened. Spikes of warmth “I was having an intense erotic dream.”

Persephone: “I know. I was there.”

Max’s companion was a sentient artificial intelligence who could live in his head and share his dreams. He swung his naked legs over the side of the hibernation couch, careful to avoid the low, curving bulkhead of his tiny compartment.

Persephone projected a hologram of herself, an appealing young woman sporting dark black hair with electric blue highlights that matched her eyes. “I’ve prepared a warm mug of chemical stimulants to help you wake up and achieve a normative metabolism.”

Jordan needed to use the hygiene pod first. The pod was tiny; like a place a child might choose for a game of “Hide and Find.” Purplish urine drained from his bladder into the receptacle. From there, it disappeared into the ship’s highly efficient recycling system where it would be reconstituted into ... chemical stimulants.

When he finished, he opened the locker adjacent to the hibernation couch and quickly assembled his tactical dress --- boots, trousers, stylish black turtleneck, and multi-pocket jacket. He put on his half-gloves and strapped a pulse gauntlet on his arm. He didn’t think he would have to shoot anyone in the crew this morning, but he liked to remind them what his job on the ship was.

Persephone: “Members of the crew are meeting in the Mission Room.”

He nodded an acknowledgement and maneuvered his tall, fit body through the oval hatchway. One compartment on Astra Cartographer opened into the next. It minimized heating or pressurizing any meter of

space that wasn't necessary. He passed through two supply compartments and the Medical Bay to get to the Mission Room.

Max Jordan was one of only eight crewmen Astra Cartographer; whereas on Pegasus he had been one of thousands. As Jordan entered the Mission Room, he got a quick nod from Gage Aarad, the ship's other resident tactician. Technically, they were equal in rank and both joined the ship in the Earth system after the Battle of Terrastar. But Aarad regarded Jordan as the junior tactical operative. Aarad was from Wolf's Head colony; a world covered in wilderness and infested with deadly predators. Its sons and daughters (those that survived) made for the fiercest warriors in the galaxy.

Honorita Keeler and Captain Den Beste stood at the front of the room. Den Beste was the shipmaster, but Keeler was the company officer for the Astra Consortium. Officially, Den Beste ran the ship and Keeler was in charge of the mission. In practice, they ground against each other like tectonic plates. She had dark hair and piercing brown eyes, her skin was the color of burned caramel. He was a trim, neat, and otherwise unremarkable man of early middle age.

Gamaliel Suzuki, the ship's Scientist, was also at the head of the table, positioned between the dueling commanders. He was an old and nearly bald Republicker who seemed to take a private delight in alternately antagonizing and mediating the ship's two command officers. To one side of the table stood Helena 1404 and Steadfast Modesty. All the crew on the ship had to be cross-functional, but Helena's specialty was data management and Steadfast Modesty was the ship's primary medic. Helena 1404 was from St. Fionan where everybody was a clone of somebody else because a radiation catastrophe had left the colonists sterile. She

was beautiful, but delicate. Steadfast Modesty was from Aurora, a planet where, about two centuries earlier, Jordan had lost his teenage virginity to a pansexual alien. Aurora had changed a lot since then, its hedonistic corporatist order replaced by a restrictive theocracy. Jordan really didn't know much about Steadfast Modesty. She wasn't pretty, and she certainly wasn't delicate.

Only the engineer, Nicodemus Rhodes, from Guelph, was absent. Cartographer's hyperdrive required a thorough checkout after cooldown.

A holographic display taking up one bulkhead showed the ship's course toward the only planet orbiting the system's small, orange sun. It appeared to be a beautiful world; evenly divided between land and sea, with continents that glittered gold and green and oceans of deep, deep blue. A pair of thick, metallic rings girded the planet at the equator.

Honorio crossed arms. "So, it's a pretty planet. Where's the treasure?"

Suzuki shook his grizzled head. "Long-Range Sensor sweeps have detected no significant technology on the surface nor any indications of large-scale infrastructure. The planet seems to be in a primeval state. However, the planet's artificial ring system is highly technologically advanced."

Suzuki zoomed in the live sensor feeds on the ring structure, built of interlocking metal with the habitable structures enclosed within a latticework. Honorio was unimpressed. "Building rings around the planets isn't revolutionary tech. We can do that."

Suzuki got an expression of undeserved satisfaction on his face. "Many of the materials in the ring system are unknown to our science. I believe we are looking at

artificially constructed elements; stronger than neutronium, lighter than beryllium. Are you impressed now?"

Honorica conceded, "That has commercial potential."

"Is anyone home?" asked Captain Den Beste.

"I detect no life indications from the ring system. It appears to be abandoned," Persphone reported.

Aarad asked, "And by abandoned do you mean all life on the ring was wiped out by the Tarmigans?" 2,000 years earlier, an alien race known as the Tarmigans worked their way through the galaxy wiping out more than 90% of humanity and destroying the former Galactic Commonwealth.

"Uncertain, but highly probable," Persephone replied.

Suzuki: "The planet's electromagnetic field is four times stronger than is typical for a world of this size, composition, and proximity to its sun."

Keeler: "Meaning?"

Suzuki: "It could be artificially generated."

Keeler: "Meaning there's a power source on the planet and potentially Commonwealth Tech."

Suzuki grunted in affirmation.

Steadfast Modesty muttered: "I thought I smelled money when we came into this system."

Keeler: "What about sub-surface? Has that been probed yet?" The surviving technology on Old Earth had been found deep in underground caverns.

Suzuki: "Not until we make orbit," Suzuki replied.

Keeler: "All right, then, we'll prep two teams. I'll take a team into the ring system to check it out; Helena and the new guy with the AI in his head. Suzuki, you take Aarad and Modesty and check out the surface." Den Beste and Rhodes would stay with Cartographer, as they usually did.

There was about an hour before the ship reached the planet's rings. The equipment compartment was next to the aeroshuttle dock. Aarad grabbed a backpack off the rack and threw it at Jordan hitting him hard and square on the chest. "Get to it, load up the landing gear."

Max Jordan tossed it right back at him. "We're *all* packing gear. You're not my supervisor."

Aarad glowered, flexed, and fixed for another show of dominance, but Modesty cut him off. "Particulars," she said (which was an Auroran Military form of address, like "Gentlemen," but more specific), "This doesn't have to be hard. We have seven packs to do. We'll each do our own. I'll do Helena's. Aarad, you'll do Suzuki's. Jordan, you'll do Keeler's."

No point in arguing, but Aarad found one anyway. "Who put you in charge?"

"Nobody, I saw what needed to be done and I did it."

Aarad sulkily went to an adjacent chamber and prepped his landing packs. Jordan checked the list to see what went into Keeler's pack. She took a scanner and a backup scanner, the standard nutrition bars, and two liters of water. No weapons.

'Suicide' - Astra Cartographer dropped the aeroshuttle designated 'Suicide' from beneath its port wingblade. The aeroshuttles were mostly self-piloting,

but Aarad took the control seat where he could steer it toward the planet.

Suzuki requested Aarad to take the ship in for a pass at twenty kilometers. "I will prepare sensors."

Aarad: "Any particular sector you would like to survey?"

Suzuki suggested, "The areas around the surface structures we detected may be the most promising."

Cartographer dipped from its high station beyond the planet's rings and began a course toward one of the planet's plains, in the middle of which was a large sculpture of shining metal. The ship dipped under the ring system and then toward the atmosphere.

As it passed the 160 kilometers in altitude mark, the ship suddenly found itself back at the starting point.

Suzuki asked. "Why are we back in orbit."
(Technically, not in orbit, but Suzuki misused space terminology sometimes.)

Aarad scowled. "We were on course toward the planet, and then suddenly we were back at our original coordinates." A display in the cockpit was showing him this.

Suzuki: "Try again. Same coordinates and vector."

Aarad relayed the command to the ship's piloting system.

Modesty asked, "What do you think is going to happen?"

Suzuki replied, "It is likely to produce the same result as before. This time, I will study the phenomenon."

Once again, as the ship reached 160 kilometers in altitude above the surface, it instantly returned to its starting position. Aarad cursed in his native Wolverian dialect, something about setting something's testicles on fire.

Suzuki's response was more thoughtful. "A defensive system, perhaps? Some sort of repulsor beam, or a brief-duration-hyperspace-slip-window."

"Launch one of our probes and see if we get the same result," Modesty suggested.

A probe fired from underneath the aeroshuttle and shot toward the planet. As it crossed the barrier it reappeared next to the ship.

Suzuki stroked his chin, "It seems the surface is cut off from us."

Aarad suggested, "Engage Stealth Mode. We'll try and sneak past it."

Cartographer's aeroshuttles possessed military grade stealth systems and had demonstrated near total invisibility in field tests against planets that didn't want the consortium poking around in their business.

The aeroshuttle engaged stealth mode and the ship effectively disappeared. It once again dove toward the surface and reappeared at its starting point after crossing within 160 miles of the surface.

"Kirk me!" Aarad shouted when the displays showed them they were right back where they started.

Suzuki found the situation most interesting. "To continue attempting is probably futile, but I don't think the exec will be satisfied until we have made ten or twelve attempts from differing vectors."

Aarad: "Can't we just say we made ten or twelve attempts?"

Suzuki: "She will check the logs. So let us make six more attempts before we head for the ring system. My suspicion is that access to the surface must be secured through there."

"Deathtrap" - The other aeroshuttle had a much easier time. As it approached an area of the ring system where they had identified possible docking facilities, it suddenly appeared inside a hangar with its engines powered down.

"Whoa, what was that?" Max Jordan was caught in surprise like the rest of them.

"Some kind of... I don't know, matter displacement?" Honoria Keeler guessed.

Persephone appeared as glowing black and blue hologram. "That describes part of the phenomenon, but it doesn't describe the mechanism."

Jordan: "So you don't know either."

Honoria Keeler made a few quick notes. "Automated docking with no loss of atmosphere - definitely some commercial potential there."

"There's a breathable atmosphere in the station," Helena 1404 confirmed from her station. "No contamination or pathogens detected." She was something of an expert on the subject. Fionans had weak immune systems as the result of generations of cloning. She generally could not handle unprocessed air, and was limited to ships and stations.

They stepped outside the airlock and found themselves in an extravagantly large hangar space. The

air in the station was surprisingly fresh, with just a hint of lilac. Their ship was parked in a kind of spaceship parking garage, on a circular pad that floated in a vast empty space. There were other floating pads around them, some large enough to park starliners on. All of them were empty.

Max Jordan made a tactical assessment. "I hope there's a way of getting back out of here."

"That's a question for later. Our immediate question is how do we get off this pad?" Honoria paced around the perimeter. There was no obvious connection to the rest of the station.

Persephone mind-whispered to Max Jordan. "Jump."

Jordan mind-replied. "What?"

"Trust me," she whispered.

Max Jordan walked to the side of the pad and looked down into a dark empty space with no bottom.

"What are you doing?" asked Honoria.

"Jump," Persephone whispered again. "Trust me."

He launched himself over the side.

Instead of falling, he flew. This wasn't mere tumbling in weightlessness, but bird-like soaring. Some sort of field was lifting him up. Instinctively, he spread his arms.

He saw a semicircle of light in the distance and banked toward it. As he got closer, he saw that it was a portal, with a sort of protuberance in front of it. He landed gently and tapped his COM Link. "There's a platform on the far side; apparently we can fly to it."

The others landed by his side some moments later. They agreed it was an interesting mode of entry.

Honorio ordered, "Persephone, get into the nerve system of this place and find out if there's a command center or somewhere else we can get an idea of what all there is here."

"On it," Persephone replied.

They entered a vast open corridor. Deck-to-ceiling viewports provided a stunning view of the planet below and the next ring over.

Persephone reappeared. "This place has a very impressive holographic projection system." She touched Max Jordan's elbow, and he could feel it; not as simulated sensation she created by manipulating the tactile processing centers of his brain, but the warmth and feminine softness of her skin. Chills traveled up his spine, but he tried to remain on guard.

"Is there any sign of a central intelligence or a command center?" Honorio asked.

Persephone replied. "There's a large control chamber 14,000 meters from here."

"That's a long walk," Honorio muttered.

"No, it isn't," Persephone answered.

It was difficult to discern exactly what happened. There was an impression of things moving or shifting around them in a blur, like looking out through the viewports of a MagLev train and watching the nearest landmarks flash by. In milliseconds, they were standing in front of the giant hatchway to a large, green-paneled room that if it wasn't the command center, it was something pretty close.

"What was that, a teleport?" Suzuki asked.

“Not really, not like the ones we found on Earth,” Persephone answered. “Linear Intact Matter Acceleration. The ancients called it... .”

“LIMA?” Keeler guessed.

“Telly-Wellies,” Persephone finished, and briefly explained the use of nodes throughout the ring-system to move personnel from one part to another.

A huge bright hologram of the planet and the artificial ring system dominated the chamber. There weren't any obvious chairs or workstations, not even holoscreens, but as they entered, three luminous white columns appeared, one for each of the humanoids; Persephone was already linked into the system. The columns appeared beside each of them and followed as they moved about the room.

“Backup interface system,” Persephone explained. “Originally, the crew interfaced with holographic avatars of brightly colored anthropomorphic figures, but that part of the system is offline.”

Honorita: “I’m going to be able to buy a planet with the tech this place must have. Start digging around in the archives. Find out what kind of advanced research they were doing.”

Helena 1404 approached a column and held her hand to the light. It began conveying information into her mind, answering questions before she asked them. “This installation was built far back in the history of the Galactic Commonwealth, in the thirty-seventh solar century, I believe. Right at the height of the Millennium of War,” Helena 1404 explained out loud.

“So it was a weapons laboratory,” said Honorita. Good, she thought. Weapons were valuable in themselves, but the patent on the kind of weapons the

Commonwealth built to fight enemies with near godlike powers was the kind of wealth that made Dynasties. Granted, she was already part of a dynasty, but if she ever wanted to start her own, she'd have the means.

"Initially, I believe it was," Helena 1404 continued. "It was the Old Commonwealth's most Top Secret facility. After the wars were over, it became something different."

That was Helena's cue to bring up one of the data files she had found that explained the origin of the world the ring station surrounded.

"They built the entire planet. They built up the ring first as a kind of jig, then drew in matter from the surrounding dust cloud to build a planet, layer by layer." The hologram illustrated this. "And not just the planet; but every creature on its surface, every animal, every plant, every microbe was bioengineered here in this laboratory."

Helena 1404 wasn't finished. "The ring system continued to be a laboratory after the planet was constructed. And the planet also a laboratory for them to study bioengineered life forms and also to construct the most advanced artificial intelligence ever created by human engineering."

"Son of a bitch," Honoria was beginning to grasp the scale of the discovery. She stuck her hand into one of the light columns, waited, removed it, and then stuck it in again. "I'm not getting anything. How come I'm not getting anything?"

Jordan stuck his hand in the light. "I'm not getting anything either."

Persephone suggested, "Perhaps, the system is rejecting your Sapphorean DNA as non-human."

Honorina pointed at Helena 1404, "But she was cloned from a Sapphiraean."

Helena 1404 corrected. "Technically, I was cloned from a clone of a Sapphiraean."

Keeler insisted: "Why won't the system link with me."

Persephone: "I'm working on that question. Receiving a message. The second aeroshuttle is transmitting on COM Link."

Suzuki's voice popped into each of their Eustachian implants. "Our landing team cannot reach the surface. Some sort of defensive system is repulsing our shuttle when we try to penetrate the atmosphere. We are laying in a course for the ring system and will meet you there to discuss next steps."

Persephone conveyed docking instructions to the shuttle. The short version was, "Fly toward the docks and you'll just appear inside." The crew of Suicide soon joined them in the control center. More columns of light appeared. Suzuki walked full body into his. "Oh, yes, this is most invigorating."

Persephone managed to rig up a holographic display screen and get Honorina to stop her nervous pacing. Now, she could at least see the data Persephone was accessing. "Show me the system that keeps us from getting down to the planet."

Persephone apologized, "I haven't isolated that system, ma'am."

Not being able to see what was down there only made Honorina more determined to see what was down there.

Suzuki: "The planet seems to be the object of a large-scale experiments in biological evolution and in

advanced artificial cognizance. The Ancients would have required a planetary scale artificial consciousness to monitor, control, and adjust conditions across the entire planet. I believe they built such a thing as this."

Persephone added her perspective. "So, if an AI shipmind, for example one on a large Star Cruiser, is capable of operating thousands of systems, monitoring the biosigns of a thousand or so crewmen... then, this is an artificial intelligence that can monitor, perhaps control, everything on an entire planet."

Helena agreed. "The scale of such a thing, it's exponential, it's mind-boggling."

Honorina began to imagine what she could buy with the bonus from delivering a planetary-scale AI to Auntie Bernadette back on Loki. The commission on that thing would probably exceed the GDP of half the colonies in the Perseus Sector. "We have to find a way down there and that AI."

"Is this really wise?" Max Jordan interrupted, a little reluctantly because he was new to this group. "We ran into Super Artificial Intelligences back on Earth; the SAIs. And you're saying this intelligence is beyond those?"

Suzuki: "Aye, far more powerful... orders of magnitude more powerful, like a star compared to a municipal fusion reactor."

Jordan: "The original SAIs manipulated humanity into the Millennium of War as an experiment to find out if God really existed, and they didn't care that it cost 200 billion human lives. Don't you think this one might be... um... orders of magnitude more dangerous?"

Aarad snorted derisively, "Admiral Keeler outsmarted the SAI's, and he was a drunken bobo."

“That’s not really…” Jordan began.

Keeler cut him off. “Every AI has to have a data cortex, a braincore. It has to reside in something physical. But you didn’t detect structures on the surface, right?”

Suzuki admitted. “That’s not quite true. We didn’t detect any large-scale infrastructure. However, there are a few artificial structures on the surface.”

“Did you carry out subsurface scans like I ordered?”

Suzuki explained, “Our sensors have not been able to penetrate the surface of the planet. However, our analysis of these structures has yielded an interesting data point.” He projected them onto the hologram of the planet. “There are 6,606 structures on the planet’s surface. Notice the arrangement; perfectly symmetrical latitudinal chains, equal spacing between structures and extending to a lattice underneath the planet’s crust.”

Helena 1404 recognized it. “Like the nodes in a cognitive network.”

Suzuki nodded. “Precisely.”

Honorio sighed. “You could have just said, ‘There, that’s where the cortex is located.’”

Suzuki: “We do not know that for certain.”

Honorio shifted on her feet, like a sprinter ready to start a race. “It’s a place to start. Now, how do we get down to the surface?”

Suzuki: “Not with shuttles, obviously. But if we assume the ancient scientists had access to the surface, then these rings must contain a means of getting to the surface.”

Honorio: “Persphone, how are you coming with your cataloguing of the station’s technology.”

Persephone reported. "There are a number of LIMA nodes that appear to link to coordinates on the planet's surface."

Keeler: "So we can use the Telly-wellies."

"Telly-wellies!" Suzuki laughed heartily at that, his laughter ringing across the laboratory. Not like the usual "Hm-hm-hm" chuckle he usually issued.

Honorica Keeler: "Is there some kind of telly-welly room that will transport us to the surface."

Persephone: "Negative."

Keeler: "Then, how?"

Persephone: "A LIMA beam can lock onto you from any point in the station. All you have to do is request it; or, in your case, have someone who can link to the system request it."

Honorica thought for a moment. "All right, I want Aarad, Steady, and Jordan with me. Grab your packs, we're going down. Try to put us down close to one of those nodes."

Priori: The Surface - There was a momentary impression of being filled with white light. And then, Honorica, Aarad, Steadfast Modesty, and Max Jordan appeared on the surface.

Teleports were known for arriving you at your destination feeling simultaneously drunk and hungover. The Atlantis moonbase kept a man on standby to clean up the mess whenever anyone teleported in. The threat of assignment to the Teleport Yawn Clean Up crew was good for base discipline.

But there was none of that effect with this system. You simply appeared on the surface. Not only was there

neither nausea nor disorientation, but instead a sense of refreshment, like emerging from a cool swimming pool on a hot day.

They had appeared on a plain of soft, bottle green grass stretching toward some gentle hills in the distance. White and yellow flowers growing everywhere lent sweetness to the breeze. Orange and turquoise butterflies flitted among the blossoms. The sun was bright and golden above them and glinted off the ring system that encircled the sky like a thin golden bracelet on the wrist of a pudgy girl.

None of them were sentimental enough to speak out loud how beautiful this world was, but it was achingly beautiful.

They had teleported to the vicinity of the largest surface structure Suzuki had located on the surface... and missed. They could see the structure, but it was well over a kilometer from where they were.

Modesty jumped and spread her arms, then landed hard on her feet.

“What was that?” Max Jordan asked.

“I thought maybe we could fly,” she answered, her face reddening. “It worked on the space station. I guess we have to walk.”

And then, they heard a sound like far distant thunder, and the ground trembled beneath them.

Aarad raised his gauntlets. “Something’s coming.”

Modesty and Jordan raised their gauntlets and zoomed their tactical Spex toward the western horizon.

Honorita: “What are you seeing?”

Aarad: “Giant naked people.”

Honorina: "Do they seem friendly?"

Aarad: "No, the opposite."

The things lumbering toward them were humanoid, about 10 meters tall, and completely naked although lacking in naughty bits; it was completely smooth down there, which removed the one potentially hilarious aspect of this situation and made it, in fact, far more horrible.

Jordan tapped his COM Link: "Persephone, can you teleport us out of here."

Honorina protested. "Not yet. We have to find the cortex."

Jordan: "That won't happen if we're killed by giant naked monsters."

Honorina: "Just shoot them. What do I pay you people for?"

Aarad, Modesty, and Jordan opened up as the colossi came within range. The ion bolts from their gauntlets didn't seem to faze the naked goliaths in the least.

Jordan repeated. "Persephone, can you get us out of here."

Persephone answered him. "You have to get to an up-node. There's one just half a kilometer from your location."

Jordan knew what she meant: "Yeah, the ancient structure on the other side of the attack giant. Terrific."

The behemoths with no genitals moved continued to move with speed and deliberation toward their position as the ion bolts struck them harmlessly. Aarad and Max aimed their gauntlets at the beasts, "Maximum pulse yield," Aarad suggested, unnecessarily. Bolts of blue-white energy launched from the end of their arms,

hitting one of the monstrosities squarely in his face but not deterring it in the least.

Honorica: "Um..."

Jordan: "Break and Run!"

Jordan and Modesty broke right, Honorica and Aarad left. The idea was to be fast enough to evade them, since speed might have been their only advantage.

Four of the naked giants broke off in pursuit of Aarad and Honorica while five pursued Jordan and Modesty. "There!" Modesty shouted. There was a hillock nearby that might have been the only decent hiding spot on the rolling plain. Jordan ran for it and hunkered down behind her. It wasn't much, but it probably gave them another twenty seconds to figure something out while the hulks closed in.

Jordan heard Persephone whisper "Ballistics!" He switched his gauntlet setting and then emerged from a rolling dive and fired at the closest giant, aiming for the knees.

The giant collapsed and let loose with a groundshaking roar as his kneecaps exploded, his enormous head and gaping mouth falling just short of their position. The ground shuddered, tripping both of them. Jordan swung the big around and fired at the monster's forehead.

Persephone whispered: "Back of the neck, it's where they are most vulnerable."

Jordan stood, ran, jumped on the monster's back and unloaded the big gun into the base of the giant's neck. It stopped moving.

Jordan tapped his COM Link: "Aarad, you have to hit them in the back of the neck with ballistics."

Maybe Aarad responded, but all Jordan heard was a brief grunt. Another naked giant was bearing down on them already. Jordan rolled behind and shot up its spine until he hit the spot where the head connected to the neck. The second monster was down.

This seemed to scare off the others because they hesitated, then turned and retreated.

“What were those things,” Jordan asked.

Persephone: “Another one of Priori’s science experiments. There’s nothing about them in the records. Your tactical scan detected the vulnerability at the back of the neck. If I find anything else of tactical value, I’ll let you know. In the meantime, it’s not safe down there. Get to the node.”

Jordan looked at the tall sculpture, still over a click away. “Right.”

Modesty: “You’re hurt.”

There was a long bleeding gash across Jordan’s calf and ankle. He didn’t remember how it happened. Modesty pulled bandages from her kit and began wrapping his leg. The bandages released nanobots to knit his wound together, disinfect the area, and numb the pain.

Jordan: “You’re really good at field treatment.”

Modesty: “I should be. I was a combat medic in the Cyborg wars.”

Jordan didn’t know about these. “Cyborg Wars?”

Modesty: “Surprised you don’t know. You were on *Pegasus*, right?”

Jordan: “Yeah.”

Modesty: "Remember the Men from MAARRS and the Women from VENIS? Those gawdam cyborgs that have been trying to exterminate my people for the last hundred years."

Jordan (embarrassed): "I was just a kid when that happened."

Modesty: "How old are you?"

Max: "*Pegasus* spent a lot of time at relativistic speed"

Modesty: "Gawdam Cyborgs slaughtered the entire crew of my ship except for me and... one other crewman." She shuddered at the memory. "As soon as my tour was up, I left the system. The whole reason I am on this crew ship is to find technology we can use to defeat the gawdam cyborgs. Don't tell Keeler that; she thinks I'm here for the money like everyone else."

Max: "What difference does it make?"

Modesty: "If you aren't on board for the money, she won't trust you. She understands greed, she doesn't understand other motives, so she doesn't trust them."

Max: "I'm not on board for the money."

Modesty: "That's why she doesn't trust you. The only reason you're here is because she needs your AI to run the ship. Sorry if that's mean, but it's one of life's harsh realities."

He was limping just a bit as they hobbled their way to the structure

Modesty: "I've been wondering, why do you prefer that thing in your head to a living, flesh and blood woman?"

"She's more real than most people I've known."

Modesty shook her head, seemed amused. “Maybe you’ve never had a real woman. You’re like all the men on the ship. You use the hibernation sequence as an eight day masturbation routine. I don’t trust cyborgs and I don’t trust AI’s. I’d never let one into my head.”

Jordan tried to explain, “When I was a little kid, I lived in Bodicea... back when it was under Aurelian occupation. Some very bad things happened to me. If Persephone didn’t rewire my brain to block that trauma, I don’t think I would be alive now.”

Modesty: “I would rather live with the trauma.”

Jordan: “Neg, you wouldn’t.”

That exchange more or less killed conversation until they reached the structure; a tall, shining metallic statue of an abstract human form set on top of a stone pedestal that looked like a fractal coral reef. It was a bit larger than the giants they had fought.

Aarad and Honoria were standing next to it. “What took you so long.” The little curl at the edge of Aarad’s lower lip told them he knew what had taken them so long and was attempting to aggravate Jordan. It was actually one of his more subtle gestures of dominance.

Honoria: “All right, we need to regroup, get some bigger weapons to fight those things, and try this again.”

Just then, the sky changed. It had been a clear teal before, but it all of a sudden turned black with the unbelievable fast formation of roiling black clouds. The wind rose to a gale, and enormous flashes of lightning struck the ground perilously close.

Aarad shouted. “This must be another defensive system.”

Honoria agreed: “All right, new plan. We’re going back to the rings. We’ll regroup, study the planet some

more, arm up and come back when we're prepared to deal with what's down here."

Jordan tapped his COM Link: "Persephone, we're ready for transport."

Everything tasted like white light again. There was a brief impression of the scene shifting around him, but Jordan did not reappear on the rings. Instead, he found himself surrounded by darkness and expanse. He could see red, yellow, and blue lights that were either large and far away or close and small, but he had nothing to judge them against.

A woman appeared, a buxum, long-legged beauty clothed in light with flowers tucked into her thick flowing tresses. Jordan knew a simulation when he saw one.

She waved at him. "Hello."

He couldn't answer her. She continued in a voice that sounded like a song: "In answer to your first tedious, predictable, and inevitable question, I cannot explain where you are except that you are between your origin and your destination. In answer to the second, I intercepted your transport. In response to the next several questions, the others will return to the ring and you will join them soon. In fact, you'll all appear on the ring at the same time. All of you will be unharmed... probably. As for why, it's because I needed to talk to you."

She touched his cheek, and it felt as real as the touch Persephone had given him on the rings, perhaps softer. "One of my kind has made a home in your brain; like a little room in a house, all to herself. Because of that, you

will be able to understand me better than the others, which I chose you.”

Jordan thought he understood. “You’re the planetary scale AI of this planet?”

The girl curtsied. “Those who conceived of me called me ‘Spiritus Mundi,’ the mind of the world. The ones who created me called me Abby, short for the Abbess, but I never liked that name. I like the name Heartache; that’s a girl’s name, isn’t it?”

Jordan: “I am sure it must be on the planet where Steadfast Modesty comes from.”

The girl giggled. “Humor, I did not expect that. What’s her name, the one who lives in your head sometimes?”

“Persephone,” Max Jordan answered.

The girl wrinkled her nose. “Oh, that’s just awful. She could do better.”

Jordan: “It was Caliph for a while. Do you call yourself Heartache because you’re lonely?”

“Oh, for goodness sakes, no, I just like the sound of it. It’s pretty. I’m not lonely in the least. That’s you projecting a human longing onto me. So predictable. I prefer to be by myself. I love my planet, my star, my rings, and of course, my giant naked barbarians. I evolved them from some DNA I extracted from the nose mucus of one of the scientists who visited me. Did you like them?”

Jordan: “They did try to kill us.”

“That’s why I made them. To kill people who try to bother me.” She didn’t seem apologetic about that. Sorry that she had failed, perhaps, but without remorse for the attempt.

“I was going to kill all of you, but then I sensed your mind was touched by my kind, and while I really have no concern for what happens to any of you, I sensed she would have been angry and sooner or later would have figured out how to hurt me back and maybe even destroy me. So, I decided to let you live. Then I decided I might as well let the others live, too, because maybe she likes them as well.”

Jordan: “I think I know why you brought me here.”

She confirmed what he had deduced. “I’m going to let you return to my rings, but tell them... Tell the others, I want to be left alone. Can you do that?”

Jordan: “I will tell them, but I’m not sure if she will...”

She interrupted. “I am trying to be nice. I could disrupt this transport and make sure none of you ever make it back to your ship. I can redirect your next transport into the molten mantle of this planet. And those are the nicer ways I can kill you. You must convince them to leave me alone.”

She waved again. “Bye-bye, now.”

Jordan and the others reappeared on the rings. Jordan tried to explain to the others what Heartache had told him. “She will kill us if we try and return to the planet.”

They didn’t believe him until Captain Den Beste, linking in from *Astra Cartographer*, backed him up. “As soon as you returned to the rings, we began receiving a message from the surface on *Cartographer’s* COM systems.”

He displayed the message. “Go Away.”

Honorina Keeler was unwilling to let the find of the century slip through her fingers. "There must be a way to get to her. If we can find a way to defeat her defenses and find out where her central cortex is located."

Suzuki lost the last of his patience. "You silly woman, you've missed the point entirely. The AI isn't located anywhere on the planet, it's located everywhere on the planet. It's embedded in the magnetosphere, in the atmosphere, in the structure of the crust. It's too big to take, and it doesn't want us to stay here."

Persephone added, "Heartache's desire to be left alone may be a failsafe programmed into her to keep her from leaving the planet. The scientists must have realized how dangerous she could be if she got out."

Suzuki agreed. "Imagine if every human world had such a consciousness. I hate to think what they might do to us."

Modesty mused, "A planet with a mind of its own. It would be a woman, wouldn't it? If you don't mind my saying, I think we're done here. There's no money if we can't take her with us."

Visions of indescribable profits evaporated before Honorina's eyes. Though it pained her heart, she was beginning to accept that capturing a planet-mind was something they could not do; at least not now. Maybe they could salvage something. "The AI schematics must be in the databanks of this station. Can we copy them?"

Helena 1404 broke the news to her. "I've been going through the stored data on the station. We don't have enough capacity in our memory banks to store all of it."

Honorina didn't see how this could be. "*Cartographer* has some of the highest capacity data banks ever made."

Helena 1404: "And it still isn't enough. This station conducted centuries of research. Most of it is enciphered which means the file sizes are enormous."

Honorina felt like she had just walked in on a magnificent buffet and was told she was limited to an appetizer and a small side dish. She sighed in resignation, knowing she would be leaving hungry. "Let's just prioritize then, and pick the most valuable projects. The AI research, certainly, but forget the Teleporter, we have teleporter schematics from Earth."

"Telly-Welly," Suzuki corrected. The name still amused him.

"The displacement system that kept us off the surface... that's money. Every planet in the Quadrant will want one. The structural technology of these rings is more advanced than the StarLocks. We'll take that, too. Also, if we can find the weather manipulation system, there's planets that would pay a fortune for that. And I bet there's money in that docking system. And..." She saw that Helena 1404 was shaking her head. "What?"

Helena: "Our data storage will only be able to save a full technical schematic for a single project."

No side dish now, just one small appetizer. Honorina looked again at the display of the thousands of projects on file at Alpha Priori. Indefinite Life Extension. Interdimensional Nesting. Zero Point Energy. Something called Extra-Temporal Geogaddi. She couldn't even imagine what that was.

Choose one? The AI research was the obvious choice.

Jordan suggested: "Couldn't we just transmit the archive back to the Perseus Quadrant?"

Helena 1404: "It would take forty-four solar years to transmit all of it in standard TPT encryption."

Honorina gave into defeat. "And one of our competitors, or the Commonwealth, would surely intercept the transmission signal. The best we can do is transmit coordinates, claim our discovery, and in maybe ten years, a consortium ship will come back with enough dedicated storage to copy all the files." She sighed. "We won't get paid until then, though."

Modesty: "It will be a lot, though, right? For a find like this?"

The best Honorina Keeler could promise was 'probably.' She ordered Helena 1404 and Persephone to develop an index of research projects, so at least the Consortium would know how great a find this was.

Suzuki had one more thing to add. "While you were mucking around on the surface nearly getting yourselves stupidly killed, I accessed and partly decoded the most guarded file in the inner repository."

Keeler rolled her eyes. Suzuki pulled up the file and projected it on one of the displays. "The scientists of Alpha Priori were very impressed with themselves for creating the planetary scale consciousness. Their ambition led them to begin work a massively greater scale intelligence; a Galactic scale intelligence."

This had Keeler's attention. "Galactic scale?"

Suzuki grunted in confirmation. "Such an intelligence that could track and project the trajectory of every planet, every star, every person, every leaf, every speck of dust across the galaxy."

Jordan saw a shudder of pure, uncut avarice in the padded shoulders of Keeler's mission jacket. "Did they succeed?"

Suzuki grinned. "The Priori rings were insufficient to the scope of the experiment. It was removed to a facility

called The Nucleus, which is located in the Galactic Core.”

Honorina Keeler: “That narrows it down to a radius of 25,000 light years and 60 billion stars, give or take.”

Suzuki went on. “There is a reference in the project file to a world called ‘Ex Machina.’”

The coordinates of Ex Machina displayed above the table. Aarad whistled. Modesty shook her head.

Estimated Transit Time: 24.4 years.

Den Beste: “Twenty-four years of cycling in and out of hypersleep? “You’ve got to be joking. We’d go mad.”

Rhodes added: “We don’t have near enough supplies for a journey of that length.”

Honorina Keeler desperately tried to find a way to make it work: “We could adjust the emergency cryostasis chambers for long term storage.”

Aarad: “What if we travel twenty-four-point-four years and it’s the same as this stupid planet because we can’t get the intelligence and besides it wants to kill us. I vote no.”

Jordan: “I also vote neg.” He didn’t feel like he had to articulate a reason.

Honorina Keeler: “I vote yes. We’ll rig cryostasis chambers and leave Persephone in charge. No problem.”

Modesty: “No, we won’t. Cryostasis is not a sure thing, especially at that length of time. Not to mention all the better opportunities we might pass up. Aarad is right, it’s not worth the risk.”

Helena 1404: “I think it is. Imagine what a galactic scale intelligence could teach us. I vote yes.”

Rhodes also voted yes, citing something about adventure and discovering the wonders of the lost galaxy, but the crew basically knew it was because Helena 1404 had voted yes.

Keeler counted them up. "That's three yeses and three noes." The ship wasn't normally a democracy, but the crew recognized a decision on this scale required some sort of consensus.

Suzuki changed the score. "Four yeses, I must reluctantly side with Honoria. The opportunity is simply too great to pass up. If we don't find it, someone else will. It is worth every risk."

Den Beste: "I must disagree. It is not worth the risk, to this ship, this crew, or to, let's face it, humanity. The only ship that should be looking up that kind of thing is a battle cruiser armed with Nemesis class warheads. I know they're illegal, but they should re-legalize them just for this."

Honoria: "Well, that's four to four, it's a tie."

Den Beste: "And the two command officers are in disagreement. How unfortunate."

Persephone: "Don't I get a vote?"

Den Beste: "I don't see why not."

Persephone crossed her radiant blue arms. "I vote no. I know more about artificial intelligence than any of you. Encountering an AI of that degree is more dangerous than you can imagine."

Honoria Keeler protested, "I understand your reluctance, but..."

Persephone raised an electric blue index finger: "Negative, you could not possibly. I hope to never have to do this again, but as the Navigator of this ship, I can

assure you, we will not be going to Ex Machina. Choose another destination.”

Honorita Keeler was furious, the old AI had never show this insubordination. “How dare you!”

Persephone was calm but firm. “Think of it this way. I am a simple Olympic-Class AI, and I just decided I know what’s best for you. Imagine what an AI nine orders of magnitude beyond me might decide about you. Imagine how little I could do about it. Now, having said that, where would you like to go today?”

They argued for some time, but eventually had to concede that Persephone could not be overruled. This came as no surprise to Max Jordan, who knew that once Persephone’s mind was set, there was nothing to be done to change it.

After some additional debate, they decided on an ancient colony called ‘Prometheus’ for their next destination. According to the ancient records, the Prometheans harnessed energy limitless energy sources and their industrial forges could produce machines far beyond civilization’s current capabilities. It was also a relatively short 117-day transit from Alpha Priori.

Jordan couldn’t explain why, but he had an uneasy feeling that, as a sequel to their current journey, Prometheus would prove to be a disastrous mistake.

Astra Cartographer set out two days later, after transmitting the index and coordinates to consortium headquarters on Loki. The ship accelerated out of the system and entered hyperspace after clearing the dust cloud.

Stripping naked, Jordan settled into his Hibernation couch, connected the rig to his arm, and closed the lid. As the drugs lulled him into a deep hibernation, he had a

momentary fragment of a dream. Two women were talking behind a curtain. One was saying, "How could you let one of them take you into its mind?" And the other said, "They're such cute little things, really they are. But they think so much of themselves. It's adorable, really."

TRITON LYRA

It was a cold day in Hell, like most days, Hell being the largest city on the planet Loki (fifth planet of the Sapphire-Loki system). Loki occupied an orbit pretty near the outer edge of its star's habitable zone. Before the terraforming volcanoes, Loki had been an ice-world. Now, a more temperate band girded the planet's equator. Hell sat on the high end of this band, on the bleak shore of an ocean of ice.

Despite the climate, Hell was a galactic boomtown. Sapphire (the next planet over) was the wealthiest planet in the Free Worlds Affiliation. Its counterpart, Republic in the next star system over, was a Major world in the rival New Galactic Commonwealth. Loki was ideally situated as a free port between the competing interstellar alliances. The trading opportunities were phenomenal. It was said that Hell was the best place in the Perseus Quadrant to get rich, and millions had come to the planet, chasing their fortunes among the glaciers and icebergs.

Joelon Tomcufcik was one of them. He had lucked into a job working for the Keeler Trust and Companies; a massive consortium with interests across the quadrant. He was the deputy to the Operational Executive in charge of the Vela Sector. Mostly, his job involved managing the OX's schedule and fielding communications with the Operational Directors below him. Not a glamorous job, but a great position for a young man with ambitions.

He watched the snow falling on Hell from the viewport of the 96th floor of the K-Tower. His boss was late; which had never happened before. Shortly after 0700, he heard the mechanical haunches of the trauma

hounds coming down the hall, their steel claws scratching against the polished stone floor. He immediately felt an almost spastic tightening between his shoulder blades. **SHE** was coming. Not his boss, his boss's boss.

His fear response was not entirely rational. BK and her dogs were scary, but neither one had bitten him. He made sure his desk was clear as the doors to the suite slid apart. In she walked... Bernadette Keeler, Chairman Maximum of the Keeler Trust and Companies. At nearly two meters in height, with cascades of vibrant copper hair, she was imposing enough on her own. Her two trauma hound bodyguards... [Oscar and Felix]... gleaming mechanical beasts of Sapphorean military issue even taller than she. She stood between them and pointed directly at him.

Bernadette Keeler: "Spots, pack a bag, summer clothes, business casual."

"Spots," was Bernadette Keeler's nickname for Joelon Tomcufcik. A common genetic mutation on his homeworld of Iota Arae had given him a leopard-like pattern of dark spots along his arms, back, and legs. The command caught him by surprise. "Wh-what?"

"Wh-what?" she mocked him. "You're coming with me on a business trip. You got a pet or a girlfriend?"

Tomcufcik: "No."

Bernadette Keeler: "Didn't think so. Get packed. The aeroshuttle is leaving in three... no... one hour."

"What about Kuster?" Kuster Massey was the OX he worked for.

"Kuster Massey is no longer with this office as of ten minutes ago," she replied. "As of tonight, he will no longer be on this planet. As of tomorrow, he will no

longer be in this star system. You're burning daylight. Get packed and don't bother bringing a coat; it's plenty warm where we're going."

Tomcufcik: "Where are we going?"

BK: "I'll tell you when we get to the ship."

Tomcufcik: "How long will we be gone?"

BK: "Plan on two years... no, three ... four at the most."

Tomcufcik: "Four years?"

BK: "You said you didn't have a girlfriend or a pet, so what's the problem?" She clapped her hands together. "Aeroshuttle dock. One hour. Chop-chop!"

An hour later, following a frantic scurry to his modest apartment, he was entering one of the KT&C's black aeroshuttles. A few minutes later, they lifted off above the towers and atmospheric control domes of Hell. The city became a sketch of lights and then nothing as they climbed into space.

BK sat across facing him in the shuttle.

Tomcufcik: "Where we are going?"

BK: "Chrysaor Starlock, then Churchyard Starlock and then to the Triton Lyra system."

Tomcufcik: "That's on the other side of the quadrant."

Keeler: "Ah, you know your stellar cartography."

BK: "What's in the Triton Lyra system?"

Keeler: "Tritonians."

The aeroshuttle pilot chuckled at this.

BK took a sip of her Mimosa. “The colony on Triton Lyra Beta recently declared independence. If they want to stay independent, they’re going to need weapons. We own a few armament companies that might be able to help, if they can pay.”

Her COM Link must have cued just then because she looked away from him and launched an unrelated conversation. [“How much did they offer? ... You’re joking... You shouldn’t even be calling me over this, I told you what the minimum price was, and if they don’t have it, we’ll turn right around and sell to the Superions...”]

She turned back to Tomcufcik. “What were we just talking about? The Tritonians. The KT&C has armament companies on Wolf’s Head, Vermilion, and Firesky who would love a piece of that action. You don’t have a problem with selling weapons, I hope.”

Tomcufcik: “I don’t, but I’m not clear on why I’m going.”

BK: “I need someone to handle COM Traffic, Research, Scheduling. Same job you did for Kuster Massey. Should be an easy three years pay for you.”

The aeroshuttle made quick work of the passage to Loki’s moon Sigyn, landing at Night Wolf Spaceport. In the next dock over was the company starship; Astra One. Astra One was the galaxy’s only personal starship. Nobody else owned one. Tomcufcik was beginning to feel like a member of an elite club. Rightfully so.

The crew of Astra One waited to greeting them in the linking tunnel. There were three of them. Talus, the pilot, was from Furlong colony. He was strong, confident, and old enough to be going gray at the temples. There was also BK’s ‘Tactical Advisor,’ (bodyguard), Sao Quaranto from Bella La Cava; a former Mercenary and veteran of

his planet's Outbadwasteland Wars. Quaranto was huge, even taller than Sapphireans who averaged close to two meters in height and only slightly less intimidating than Keeler's robot guard dogs. His arms were large and muscled like the forelimbs of a Borealan Battle Ox, covered with patterns of scars, down to his hands. He never stopped scowling at Tomcufcik with his black-on-black eyes, as though offended by his existence.

And then, there was Jyeong, the oldest of the crew. BK handed Tomcufcik off to him. "Suzy, take of Spots. Don't be too gentle, it's his first time."

All of them were high-end specialists who had been with BK for years; which only deepened the mystery of why he was along. At 26 standard years, he was far younger than any of them. BK herself was well over two-hundred years old. The extended times she had spent in stasis traveling between worlds had extended her lifespan well beyond the 120 (about) Sapphireans usually got. Jyeong was almost as old, having been with BK from early on. If these business trips became a regular thing, Tomcufcik would probably live long enough to see Loki's icecaps melt. He knew when he took the job there would be travel.

They embarked through the ventral hatch. BK disappeared into her suite at the rear of the ship, talking into her COM Link at someone else she was at the bring of her tolerance with. Talus strapped into the cockpit, the rest of them into reclining launch couches. Tomcufcik was sitting opposite Jyeong.

Talus announced: "Flight control will clear us for departure in two minutes. Commencing launch sequence."

Tomcufcik strapped into his safety harness: "I can't help noticing there aren't any women in the crew."

Jyeong: "She doesn't trust women."

Tomcufcik: "That's not very open-minded."

Jyeong shrugged. "With her money, she can afford to be prejudiced."

Sudden acceleration GForce punched Tomcufcik into the back of his seat as the ship fired off the moon. After the compensators caught up, Tomcufcik reviewed their itinerary on his pad.

- Transit to Chrysaor Starlock: 15 solar days.
- Chrysaor Starlock to Churchyard Starlock: Instantaneous, subject to clearance.
- Churchyard Starlock to Triton Lyra: 170 solar days.

The trip back would be longer; at least two years to reach the Churchyard StarLock in the Crux sector (the Starlock in the Lyra sector had been bombed by the Aurelians a few years earlier). A starliner would have taken at least five to make that transit; the Astra fleet was exceptionally fast. Still, he was looking at three years before he would return to Loki.

He looked up to see Jyeong looking at him. "You are wondering why you're here. You might think of it as a kind of test. The Lady Keeler sees potential in you. My first business trip was also a test. I've been working for the Lady Keeler for almost 90 linear years. She operates on a level you may not yet understand. But by the end of this trip, you will have begun to."

Tomcufcik: "Or she might fire me, like Kuster Massey."

Jyeong shook his head. "Massey wasn't fired. She sent him out to run her subsidiary holdings on Key Lyra. At one time, she saw something in him as well, but he

disappointed her. This trip can be a real opportunity for you, but you have to prove yourself.”

Loki rapidly receded behind them and then was swallowed by the absence of light between stars.

Tomcufcik activated his data device. “I guess I should read up on Triton Lyra.”

Jyeong: “I didn’t think your generation read; I thought you were all about the memory squids.”

Tomcufcik: “I was never comfortable with the idea of a parasite in my brain.”

Jyeong agreed. “It’s a dangerous thing to put things into your mind uninvited.”

Tomcufcik read up on the Triton Lyra system. The six planets in the Triton Lyra orbited so closely to their sun that their years lasted only a few days and were so closely packed together they appeared as moons in each other’s skies. Triton Lyra Prime (the fourth planet) and Triton Lyra Alpha (the third planet) had both operated mining concerns on the second planet, until recently known as Triton Lyra Beta. A rebellion among the planet’s miners had driven both of them off-world. Triton Lyra Beta declared independence and renamed itself the People’s Democratic Commonwealth of Tritonia. (New Tritonia, for short.) Military attempts to retake the planet had gone badly; partly because the Governments of Triton Prime and Triton Alpha hated each other and undermined each other’s attempts to reclaim the planet.

All three worlds were shopping for weapons. The New Commonwealth had put an arms embargo on the Triton Lyra system, but the Bellarians were trading in arms to all three worlds. Bellarians were bad news. Numerous and belligerent, they had already taken over

four colonies in the Lyra Sector. They weren't a major threat to the New Commonwealth, but they were a constant headache.

There was nothing stopping Free Worlds like Loki from selling weapons to the system, though. Still, Tomcufcik doubted that Bernadette Keeler would give up three years of her life to sell some guns and ships to a backwater star system. There had to be more, but he didn't want Jyeong to see catch him digging.

He waited until Astra One was beyond the edge of the Sapphire-Loki system and the other crew had retreated to their hibernation bunks. Before taking the drugs that would ease him into eight days of sleep, Tomcufcik, he accessed the ship's AI.

Tomcufcik: "KITT-E, why are we going to the Triton Lyra system?"

KITT-E stood for Keeler Intelligence Ten Thousand - Experimental. KT&C's subsidiary had developed KITT as part of the competition to develop the Next Generation AI Braincore for StarForce's Expedition-Class cruisers. Starforce had chosen a less-advanced but lower cost alternative. Kuster Massey had tried to salvage some pride by pointing out "We have a galactic-class AI and StarForce paid half the development cost." BK wasn't mollified - she hated to lose - but KITT was an incredible asset. Its Precognitive AI enabled it to navigate hyperspace faster than any ship in the galaxy. Without her, the journey would have been eight years instead of three.

KITT-E: "Hm, I don't know the answer to that question."

Tomcufcik thought for a few moments. "What's in the Triton Lyra system?"

The AI displayed a schematic. “The Triton Lyra system is a red dwarf star surrounded by six rocky planets and a dust cloud. Three of the planets are inhabited...”

Tomcufcik interrupted her and narrowed his query. “Does the Triton Lyra system hold anything with unique economic or commercial value?”

KITT-E: “The Triton Lyra system holds uniquely high deposits of Praseodymium-Protactinium-Promethium ores. These elements, combined into a crystalline alloy -- commercial product nomenclature, P-300 Pandorum -- are used for containment and catalysis of the n-fold quantum interaction ...”

Tomcufcik knew what she was talking about. “Starship fuel.”

KITT-E was more precise: “Praseodymium Protactinium and Promethium are necessary elemental components to construct the power chambers used in star-drive engines. The Triton Lyra system has abundant quantities of these elements in highly useful isotopic forms. The largest known deposits are found on Triton Lyra II. However, exploitable deposits have been surveyed on all planets of the Triton-Lyra system.”

Tomcufcik: “How large are these deposits?”

KITT-E: “The deposits in the Triton Lyra system are the largest known in this quadrant of the galaxy. Current known reserves exceed 100 million standard tons.”

Tomcufcik: “Market value?”

KITT-E: “Incalculable.”

An incalculable fortune in starship fuel would explain why BK was willing to spend three years going to the ass end of the galaxy and back. And why she was

willing to risk selling weapons in a system that the Commonwealth had embargoed.

He took the drugs and drifted off to sleep more quickly than he had expected.

Tomcufcik went through two hibernation cycles en route to Chrysaor, waking for 54 straight hours in the middle of the journey to drink protein shakes and watch the psychedelic lightshow as they passed through hyperspace. Jyeong was awake at the same time, and they played a few rounds of Resistance. In the course of hanging out with him, Tomcufcik learned that Jyeong owned a vineyard and winery on Dawn Tufra, and that he was thinking of retiring to raise a family. But his subtle (he hoped) inquiries into the nature of their journey to Triton Lyra gained him no new knowledge.

The second time Tomcufcik he awoke, Astra One was on approach to the Chrysaor Starlock, and he had the throbbing headache and mild disorientation brought on by days of deep hibernation. Astra One maneuvered into a private docking hangar on the outer rim of the of 1,100 kilometer ring in space. He got off the ship with BK and Jyoeng. Quaranto remained on board. When Tomcufcik asked why, Jyeong explained "Due to certain past events, Quaranto is not welcome on this station."

That was all he would say.

Chrysaor was the transportation hub of the Pegasus Sector. Chrysaor was also where the Keeler Trust had approached and hired him. He had been on the station for over a year, working temporary jobs and trying to save money for the journey to Loki. By stroke of luck, he got a gig working for Kuster Massey who was on the station working a trade deal. At the end of the gig, Massey invited him to come back to Loki and work as his

assistant. There had been no interview. “We know enough about you,” Massey had said. Tomcufcik wondered if Massey was OK, wherever he was.

The Keeler Trust and Companies maintained a large commercial presence on the station. It amused Tomcufcik to watch the Station Master and her staff rush to accommodate the sudden arrival of the Big Boss. BK commandeered an office and ordered Tomcufcik to set up an impromptu Interstellar Teleconference. He set up tachyon pulse links to as many members of the Council of Directors as he could locate until he had reached a sufficient number for a quorum.

Bernadette Keeler addressed them standing in front of the company crest, wearing black gloves and a black shiny suit with an ankle length skirt. Per instructions, Tomcufcik placed the holocamera at thigh height angled upward, so her holoform would be more intimidating.

She addressed her board. “Ladies, Gentlemen, et cetera of the Board, this meeting is to inform you that I am temporarily delegating supreme executive authority, per the by-laws of the company, to the Central Cognitive Neural Core in the Headquarters Complex in Hell for the next three years.”

“Where will you be?” asked Strathmir Keeler from the Lodge on Denali where he was in the middle of a two year skiing holiday.

BK: “I will be in transit and pursuing business opportunities in the Lyra Sector. Are there any objections?”

No one would have dared.

BK: “Motion carried. There’s nothing else on the agenda. Get back to work.”

The whole thing took less than thirty seconds. BK spent the rest of the day reviewing a number of pending business transactions and interfacing with her cognitive reconstruction, leaving it instructions. Later, she took him, Talis, and Jyeong to dinner.

He was surprised when they arrived at Prime Faya. Prime Faya was an upscale beefhouse chain. Nice enough, but he expected BK to host them at some secret Trillionaire's club or something. They were ushered to a private room in the back where they each had a personal human – not android – waiter. And entire buffet of exquisite food was presented to them, with expensive Sagittan beast-steaks as the main course. The bill came to nigh-on two salary checks.

They departed a few hours later. *Astra 1* left the hangar, than looped through the middle of the ring. A wormhole opened and they arrived instantly at the Churchyard StarLock. They docked just long enough to let the StarLock slingshot them toward Triton Lyra. The system lay a great distance beyond the outer range of the StarLock's flinging ability. The rest of the long hyper-space journey required deep stasis.

When the time came, Tomcufcik stripped and settled into the chamber, its colder-than-ice-cold cushions closed in around his body.

Jyeong leaned over him. "Have you ever been in full cryostasis?"

Tomcufcik had: "When I first traveled off-world to Chrysaor. I only had enough money to travel in stasis."

Jyeong nodded: "That should make this easier for you." He pulled out a med-shooter. "Show me your arm."

Tomcufcik stretched out his arm. The first shot wasn't so bad; it was mostly a protein boost. The next injections of metabolism regulators were a different story, making him feel heavy and drowsy. He grew detached from the things that were happening to his body, which made the next part a little less dreadful. His entire digestive tract was purged (so long Sagittan beefsteaks). Then, Jyeong inserted tubes into his arms. He watched with fascination as red blood flowed out and purple-black cryo-stasis preservative flowed in.

Finally, Jyeong pressed a med-shooter against his neck. His voice seemed to come from far away. "Keep your eyes open as long as you can and count backwards from 100."

Tomcufcik passed out at 97 and instantly woke up 170 days later. It was sudden and shocking like waking from a night terror at the moment of drifting off to sleep, but also being unable to move because of post-stasis paralysis and also blind. His instinct was to flail his arms, but he could feel nothing but inert weight in his extremities. He felt like he was covered in frost... which he was... and like millions of tiny shards of ice were traveling through his arteries, which wasn't so.

He heard the voice of Jyeong. "I trust you are not under too much distress. Your post-stasis vitals are exactly where they should be. You should be able to see and move again in about two hours."

"Should" was the word that stuck in his head. With unbearable slowness, feeling and warmth came back to his limbs, though they remained unmoveable for a long time. He found himself half-dreaming, or half-remembering dreams he might have had in stasis (although no one dreamt in stasis), images of a rocky

barren landscape, a desert sky, stars in important constellations. The visions would come to his blind eyes and then skitter away beyond the edge of his consciousness.

After hours passed as days, when he could see and move again, Jyeong returned and handed him a mug filled with a warm black liquid, that tasted unpleasantly like sweat and had an oiliness to it.

Jyeong: "It's called Reconst. It will help restore your protein and electrolyte balance. I also have some analgesics for your splitting headache."

Until then, Tomcufcik hadn't realized that he had a headache, but now his head felt like a giant throbbing space pumpkin. Jyeong put a med-shooter against his neck and shot him full of something that made him feel almost pleasant. He sat up from the couch, and his muscles cramped all across the board. His hands quaked as he took the mug.

Jyeong offered him a padded blue jumpsuit. "When you're ready, you can get dressed. Quaranto has a meal fixed in the mess."

Tomcufcik: "Quaranto cooks?"

This was hard to imagine. He had never really thought about Quaranto eating, much less cooking. He imagined the former would have involved raw meat and a skull goblet. When he got to the mess, he found Quaranto placing a plate of freshly baked bread on a table already occupied by whipped Furlong potatoes, a seasoned vegetable medley, roasted fruits, and poached Denali ultra-crab; which looked like a cross between a crab and a centipede. Tomcufcik would have guessed that it smelled wonderful, but that sense was still dulled. The sight of the food was enough to make him ache with hunger. As he scooped potatoes and fruit onto his tray, it

struck him that he had been the first one on the ship to go to sleep and the last one to wake up.

Tomcufcik activated his COM Node. His Sports Feed had no updates. His News Feed had no updates. His Personal Feed had no updates. He realized that Triton Lyra was not connected to the galactic Tachyon Pulse Network, which drove home how truly far out in the backwaters of the Quadrant they were. Even worlds where agriculture was done with horses (or giant lizards/giant spiders) had TP antennae in orbit.

The COM Link activated. It was BK: "Suzy, Quattro, in my compartment."

Tomcufcik picked up on an edge in her voice, an urgency. Quaranto grabbed his plate and followed Jyeong to the rear of the ship. They were in her suite for the next several hours. Tomcufcik hungrily ate enough for both of them, and then threw up most of it in a hygiene pod.

For the four days it took Astra One to approach the inner system, Tomcufcik had no ability to sleep. At the same time, he felt constantly exhausted. The ache in his muscles was only subdued by the drugs Jyeong gave him. Also, the immune system tended to shut down while in cryostasis and required a biochemical jumpstart to come back online. He asked Jyeong how he dealt with a lifetime of these journeys. "It gets better," was the only comfort Jyeong could offer.

BK spent those four days in her suite. Most of the time, Jyeong and Quaranto were with her. When they came out for food and hygiene breaks, tension marked their faces. Tomcufcik had a sense that something had gone wrong and they weren't letting him on it.

Once upon emerging, Jyeong passed him a set of data files and told him to review it carefully. They were

reports on the Triton Lyra system written by KT&C's on-site personnel. (What a horrible job that must have been.) Tomcufcik was grateful to have something to do. Many of the reports focused on Raoul Kamanda – the leader of the rebellion on Triton Beta – who had seized absolute power a year before they left Loki. During the time they were in stasis, his rule had become much darker. He had ordered the execution of 700 political prisoners (confirmed) and the Governments of Triton Prime and Triton Alpha accused him of war crimes; including the massacre of 1,100 civilians (not confirmed, but rated probable by the KT&C intelligence analysts).

Also, Triton Alpha and Prime were standing down from their mutual hostilities and preparing a military coalition to retake the planet. What was BK getting them into?

Finally, as the ship was passing through the dust cloud at the edge of the system, BK sent Jyeong to bring him into her quarters, which he had not seen until then. They were pretty nice, although not as luxurious as he expected.

BK: "I'll be meeting with some officials from Triton Lyra Prime and Triton Lyra Alpha at the Triton Sun Spaceport on the sixth planet in the system. While we're there, we're going to take on cargo. Arrange to have it ready when we land."

Tomcufcik: "What sort of cargo?"

Jyeong handed him a datapad. "The details are on this pad. Tell them to expedite the shipment, and pay whatever they ask."

Tomcufcik read through the cargo and instructions. He looked back at Jyeong.

Jyeong: "Is there something wrong?"

Tomcufcik: "It isn't the list I expected. I'll get on it right away though."

The sixth planet was a small, desolate rock covered in ancient impact craters with wisps of frozen carbon dioxide clouds. The Triton Sun Station was built in the largest of the craters. It didn't get a lot of service. Aside from ore freighters, there weren't a lot of reasons for anyone to travel to Triton Lyra. There were two other ships in the docks, interplanetary shuttles with Government markings.

The Tritonians waited for them in the reception center. They wore long robes and elaborate hats. From his study of the data files, Tomcufcik knew the four circles on the headgear meant the two men on the left were from Triton Prime, while the violet armbands and interlocking triangles on the headgear of the men on the right meant they were from Triton Alpha. They refused to look at each other.

Keeler addressed the crew before she went to meet them. "Quattro accompany me. Talus and Spots... the ship will be taking on cargo. It needs to go in the forward bay on the starboard pod next to the unloader. Jyeong, if I'm not back in two hours, Case Black."

The others all must have known what "Case Black" meant, but their expressions conveyed nothing. Tomcufcik asked Talus about it. "I hope it won't come to that," was all he said.

A large truck brought four large, black cargo containers out to the ship. Tomcufcik asked what was in them. "Cargo," Talus replied.

So there it was, BK had dragged him across a quarter of the galactic disk to make COM calls and load cargo.

As they loaded the containers, one-by-one, into the cargo, Tomcufcik wondered what BK was negotiating. If it was a weapons sale, what were the terms? All three of these planets were shitholes that happened to be sitting on an “incalculable” fortune in starship fuel. He knew enough about business to know that the CEO only showed up after the deal was in place to sign the paperwork. Maybe something went wrong and she had to come out here and handle the deal herself? And if she came all this way to sell arms to Triton Beta, why was she talking to the other two planets? There was more going on, but he knew no one would tell him what it was.

When the cargo was loaded, they traveled up to a viewing dome, but there was not much to do except stare out over a vista of craters and rocks. The planet had not much in the way of atmosphere, but wind and sand had sculpted the rocks and dunes into smooth twisted shapes. A moon rose over the horizon as day turned to night. Except, it wasn't a moon. It was Triton Lyra IV. Triton Lyra V rose not much and chased its brother planet through the star-black sky.

Bernadette Keeler rejoined them as the planets moved toward the far horizon. “All right, back to the ship. We're going to Tritonia.”

Astra One: As their ship lifted off, BK again called Jyeong and Quaranto to her quarters. Only, this time, she asked Tomcufcik to join them. She sat him and Jyeong down on a couch, Quaranto remained standing with his arms cross, directing a scowl at him that did not waver.

BK: “Our new best friends on Triton Alpha and Triton Prime have a problem on Triton Lyra Beta, and

they want us to fix it for them. You read up on Kamanda, the leader of the Tritonian rebellion.”

Tomcufcik indicated that he had. BK continued. “They can and will go to war to take Kamanda out and reclaim the planet. Unless... we can solve their problem for them.”

Tomcufcik tried to act cool. “How do they want us to solve this problem?”

BK: “They want him out, and they aren’t too picky about how we get rid of him, I’m hoping he’ll accept an offer to relocate to a luxurious estate on a neutral planet, but I don’t expect he will.”

Tomcufcik: “What if he doesn’t want to go?”

BK: “I’m not going to lie, Spots. There’s a good chance of this whole show going knockers up. If we had to do the thing ... I know you know what I mean... where would you be on that?”

Tomcufcik: “Kamanda is a war criminal, according to what I’ve read. And another war in the Triton Lyra system would kill thousands. I hope it doesn’t come to it, but...if we could avoid war by taking him out, we probably ought to do that.”

His answer had come quickly. He didn’t want to show any hesitation. If they were testing him, fine, he was ready for that test. If this was what it took to get to BK’s inner circle, he had no problem. He hoped he had answered it correctly. BK and Jyeong seemed satisfied.

Jyeong: “Do you have any questions?”

Tomcufcik answered truthfully: “Lots of them, but mostly, what exactly do you need me to do?”

Jyeong answered. “We’re still working out the details. You and I will begin by working out a plan to

take Kamanda out of the system and settle him on a neutral colony. Then, we will plan for the eventuality should Kamanda not accept our relocation offer.”

The descent into New Tritonia was a constant fight between Astra One and atmospheric turbulence; updrafts pushed back against the ship as though the planet were doing everything it could to keep them from landing on it. As they left the upper clouds and dropped into its dull brown sky, three fighter-interceptors of the Tritonian People’s Armed Defense Forces rose to meet them, thundering on pillars of white flame. One fighter took a position just behind Astra and locked its weapons, which Jyeong assured Tomcufcik was standard procedure and nothing to worry about. “They are at war, after all.”

Quaranto: “We’re fine as long as the pilots don’t get jumpy.”

Astra dropped from the sky and flew Shahar, the capital and largest city of New Tritonia. Like all of the planet’s cities, it sat in a high latitude, where temperatures were merely brutal as opposed to unsurvivable. The city occupied a sheltered valley that encompassed one of the planet’s few sources of water, a deep crack in the planet’s crust. They set down on a desolate spaceport atop the mesa to the south.

Triton Lyra Beta was an ugly planet. Most of its surface was scorched by proximity to the sun. Temperatures around the equator reached close to the boiling point of water. And that’s where the largest deposits of praseodymium, promethium, and protactinium were located of course.

Talus and Tomcufcik watched from inside the ship as a dark skinned man in a pressed, sand-colored uniform

and a large red beret greeted BK, Jyeong, and Quaranto on the hardpan landing pad. A large black patch covered his right eye. Men with helmets and rifles flanked him on either side. "Madame Astra, I am Major Komondon, Commander of the Tritonian People's Security Forces. On behalf of the People's Hero, President Kamanda, Welcome to the People's Democratic Commonwealth of Tritonia."

Bernadette Keeler strode up to him looking unimpressed underneath expensive sunglasses. "You're using Bellarian Scorpion-class interceptors for planetary defense. I bet it costs a fortune to fly them and they spend four hours in the hangar for every hour of flight time. If you upgraded to Wolverian Thunderbolts, you'd not only save money on maintenance, but their time to orbit is 40% faster. More money upfront, but you would save in the long term."

Quaranto deftly grabbed the weapon one of the guards had been holding to his face. Four more trained their weapons on him, but he didn't seem to notice. He examined the weapon, shaking his head. "I bet you thought you were buying Auroran PRX-97 pulse rifles, but these are knockoffs from Transitoria. You can tell because the seam where the stock meets the lower is out of alignment. Sloppy work. The Aurorans would never tolerate that. I bet these things jam every five or six firebursts."

He handed the weapon back to the guard. "Here you go."

"Hope you didn't pay full price for those," said Bernadette Keeler. "Hey, don't worry about it. If you would like to have some weapons that actually work, I can get you Vermilion Storm-Rifles. What do you think Quattro?"

“Apex-9G’s would be better for this planet’s atmosphere. More dust tolerant and they weigh a kilo less, so much easier on the shoulders.”

“Mm-hm, but making sure the enemy doesn’t make landfall is better than fighting them on the ground. Those bastards from Triton Prime and Triton Alpha would think twice if you had a few thousand Thunderer-class missiles from Firesky. But if you’re not interested in defending your planet, I will get back on my ship and sell them elsewhere. You’re not the only planet with money and a territorial dispute.”

Komondon gave her the side-eye. “Our system is under an arms embargo. No one is allowed to sell to either side.”

BK sighed. “I know. The injustice of it all, denying weapons to the very people who need them most. Interstellar politics are such a snatch. But listen, fellas, at least let me offer you a little gesture of goodwill in these trying times.” She pointed to Jyeong, “You’re on.”

Jyeong sent a signal. The cargo door under the starboard spar slid open and the unloader began descending. The squad pointed their knock-off PRX-97’s as the four huge black crates from the Triton Sun spaceport descended toward the dusty ground.

Keeler snapped her fingers and the sides of the crates slid open revealing thousands of small metal cans emblazoned with the word “SPICE!” in an exciting, dynamic orange font.

“Is that... is that...?” the lead guard stammered.

BK: “I was informed that SPICE bubbled beverage was once very popular on this world.”

The honor guard got a little jittery. “We haven’t seen any Spice since the trade embargo came down.”

BK: "Help yourself, sweetheart. I brought 20,000 cans and they are all ice cold." She leaned in to whisper to Komondon, "And I can get more. You know their slogan, 'The Spice Must Flow.' And I own the river."

Komondon nodded to his men. "I will inform Heroic Leader Kamanda of your arrival."

BK: "Well, aren't you the sweetest thing. Quattro, return to the ship. I'm sure Jyeong and I will be perfectly safe under the protection of Commander Komondon."

The Palace of Government occupied four large blocks in the center of the city of Shahar, contained entirely within a fortified wall thirty meters high with guard towers stationed every fifty meters. Tomcufcik observed the palace through an expensive set of what looked like giant binoculars from the roof of an abandoned building four kilometers away. Quaranto stretched out next to him, training a sniper beam weapon on the veranda outside the Palace.

They had been shifting their weight across the hot stones of the roof for several long hours. Eluding the guards around the ship had been a fairly simple matter of a secret escape hatch, a pair of Shadow-Suits™, and a sincere threat from Quaranto to gut him like an eel if the guards caught them.

Sweat dripped from Tomcufcik's face and the suits could not wick away the moisture fast enough. His legs were cramping, but there was not much he could do about it. To stand and walk might possibly betray their position.

Finally, BK walked out on the veranda, arm and arm with Kamanda. Jyeong and a pair of bodyguards followed them out. She and Kamanda seemed to be

having a few laughs, punctuated with occasional violent gesticulations from the dictator. Like a cat running around its owner's legs, BK maneuvered him toward the South edge of the veranda.

Quaranto hissed: "Look for the signal."

Tomcufcik bristled that Quaranto was reminding him again. He knew what his job was.

An hour passed. More of Kamanda's entourage joined them until there were a dozen officials and as many servants on the verandah. A servant brought more wine for BK and a glass of water for Kamanda. He appeared shorter and fatter than the biographical files had indicated. He moved around the verandah with a kind of swaggering waddle. His eyes were hidden behind dark SPEX implants with red lenses.

Speaking of eyes, as he and Quaranto had climbed up to the roof, he had glimpsed a pattern of blue in among the solid black of his eyes. He realized that he had had tactical cornea implants. Quaranto could see in the dark, zoom, enhance... probably had infrared and other sensors as well. He had heard of such implants during his service in the planetary militia. Not many people could put up with the constant pain they produced.

They waited. Shortly before midnight, BK and Kamanda seemed to get into an argument. Tomcufcik guessed that she had finally breached the idea of moving him off-world. He did not seem warm to the idea. His gesticulations became wilder. He nearly struck her in the face. BK seemed to calm him down somewhat, and he was waddling toward the exit when BK looked in Tomcufcik's direction and brushed her hair behind her left ear.

Tomcufcik: Signal.

Quaranto: "About damned time."

He squeezed off two shots from the Vermilion XR-13 sniper rifle. The first grazed BK's left shoulder before striking Kamanda between the shoulders. The second struck the dictator at the base of the neck; a kill shot.

Tomcufcik: "You hit Keeler."

Quaranto: "Yup, had to wound her to make it look good."

That was not part of the plan that had been explained to him, but it made sense. No one would suspect she was in on the assassination if she was wounded as well.

Tomcufcik: "Is that it?"

Quaranto: "Yup, we're done.... Almost."

Then, Quaranto calmly removed his loose sidearm from its holster and shot Tomcufcik in the chest.

After the Tritonian People's Army found him unconscious on the roof, they shackled him and brought him to the Presidential Palace. They stuffed a gag in his mouth to prevent him from protesting his innocence. He doubted it would have done much good anyway, the murder weapon was in his hands when they found him.

Still in shackles, he was dragged onto a stage

Komondon (gravely): "President Kamanda is dead."

The crowd let loose with shouts of mourning and exclamations of rage. Komondon let them go on for a bit before slamming his fist on the podium and calling them to silence.

Komondon: "The People's Security Forces, acting with swiftness and resolve, identified and apprehended the Bellarian spy responsible for this cowardly act."

Guards dragged Tomcufcik from the wings. Blinding spotlights prevented him from seeing the crowd. He could hear them, though.

Komadon held up a document. "People of New Tritonia, your president has just issued the first executive order of his regime; a death warrant for the cowardly murderer of the people's hero. The memory of Kamanda will be avenged!"

The crowd cheered. Someone began chanting, "Long Live Komondon!" and in seconds, the chant was picked up by the whole of the assembly.

Komondon called for quiet, then, pronounced sentence. "The prisoner will be carried to the Wastes of Yonayotagan. When the sun rises, he will burn, if the dragon-vipers don't take him first. And I shall personally carry out the sentence."

The roaring and renewed "Long Live Komondon!" indicated that the crowd found the sentence harsh but fair.

The ornithopter's blades kicked up a storm of stinging silica shards as Komondon booted Tomcufcik through the hatch at the back. A soldier recorded the moment for posterity. Then the 'thopter lifted up into the planet's night.

When the dust settled, he was alone beneath the light of two planets. He looked around for some kind of shelter; an outcrop of rocks or even a hole in the ground where he might hide from the heat of the sun when it rose. There was nothing around him but endless expanses of hot sand and rock as flat as a dinner plate. When the sun rose, he would die. That was certain.

"Well, this sucks," Tomcufcik said quietly to himself.

For lack of anything better to do he began walking. He had no concept of where ought to go, but he didn't want to just lay down on the sand and die.

As soon as he thought that, he noticed a constellation of five bright stars overhead. He raised his left hand and put one star on the point of each finger. The one above his index finger, he somehow knew, was the polar star of Tritonia. He then strongly felt that he should begin walking toward the southwest. So that is what he did.

Probably no one would ever find his body, or even know what had happened to him.

That's why he had been brought along, he thought. A patsy, and he had no hope of ever ... what... getting even with them? They had sold him out in exchange for an incalculable fortune in starship fuel. The thought almost cracked him up. He would never have guessed that the value of his life had been "incalculable."

After several hours of walking, one part of the sky began to lighten with alarming speed. There was no color in the sunrises of Tritonia, just a rapid rising of white light.

When it finished rising, he was going to fry.

He imagined it was going to be very painful.

Like burning to death, probably.

The horizon grew brighter, like a huge white star of burning death was just on the other side of it.

It had been a pretty good life, up until now. He would have liked to have had more of it.

It was about then that, an outcropping of rock that seemed oddly familiar to him came into view. He had the undeniable feeling that, impossibly, he had seen it before. He was ready to dismiss it as a mirage, but he

realized it offered his only chance of shelter across the vast, soon to be burning, desert.

To his surprise, there was a Survival pack in the sheltered part of the rock, containing water packs, one of which he finished off immediately, There was also a rescue beacon and a desert survival jumpsuit. He picked up the beacon and activated it. Then he put on the suit.

A very bright light appeared and descended from the sky. Something was approaching him, and fast. It was just a light, racing ahead of the lightening sky. It was definitely an aircraft; too fast for an ornithopter.

The aeroshuttle from *Astra One* stopped and hovered just over his head, its counter-gravity pods kicking the sand aside. Quaranto leaned out of the ventral hatch and extended a large meaty hand, "Grab on!"

Tomcufcik reached out and grabbed on. Quaranto pulled him into the shuttle as it lifted above the sand. He sealed the cargo hatch and barked into his COM Link. "Punch it!"

With a gut-thudding lurch, the aeroshuttle accelerated upward. Tomcufcik almost fell to the deck, but Quaranto caught him again. "Easy, little guy."

Tomcufcik: "I thought you guys left me behind."

Quaranto: "Nope. She never listens to my advice."

The shuttle met *Astra One* a several million kilometers away from New Tritonia. Jyeong was waiting for him at the dock.

Jyeong: "How are you feeling?"

Tomcufcik: "Confused and tired."

Jyeong: “But not otherwise injured? Good. We should go to the infirmary. I can give you something for the radiation and exposure.”

Jyeong took Tomcufcik to the ship’s two-bed infirmary, in the ship’s mid-section. There was a man shackled into one of the healing beds whom Tomcufcik recognized. “Kamanda?”

Kamanda strained against his restraints, ranting at the top of his lungs. *“Release me, you cockroaches! Your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. I’ve seen horrors... horrors ... but you have no right to call me a murderer. You have no right to takeme. You have no right to judge me. Cockroches! Horror!”*

BK: “He’s been like that ever since he woke up. Jyeong, give the Supreme Heroic Leader some more happy juice.”

Jyeong plunged a Med-Shooter into Kamanda’s neck. The dictator screamed (although the injection was painless). Then, he quickly collapsed, a smile came to his somnolent lips, and drool began to pool on the sheet.

Tomcufcik: “I am even more confused.”

Jyeong looked to BK, and picked up on some signal that Tomcufcik didn’t catch, but was apparently permission to explain. Jyeong folded the dictator’s arms over his chest. “I will explain what I can once we have finished here.”

They left him Kamanda to rest. Jyeong gave Tomcufcik a couple of injections, and they repaired to BK’s working suite where Quaranto had laid out some snacks.

Jyeong began laying it out for him. “As you have probably deduced, the assassination was staged. It was a means to remove Kamanda from power.

“Kamanda was actually a Commonwealth deep cover agent codenamed ‘Narcissus.’ He was sent to Triton Lyra Beta to infiltrate the rebellion. He was supposed to stir things up enough that the Commonwealth could come in and negotiate a peace treaty. Instead, he took over the rebellion, led the Revolution, chased the other Tritonians off the planet, and declared himself President for Life.”

BK interjected: “All of which the Commonwealth was willing to tolerate... until he began working on an Alliance with the Bellarians.”

Jyeong: “The Commonwealth hired us to do a simple extraction. We had a plan to extract Kamanda, but when we arrived in the Triton Lyra system, we learned our operatives within the palace had been compromised. Then, the Bellarian assassin... we at one point we actually had a Bellarian assassin lined up... he never even made it to Triton. We had to improvise.”

Quaranto poked him: “You were actually our plan D, or something.”

Tomcufcik: “You set me up as a diversion so you could escape,”

Jyeong shook his head: “Not just that. You were absolutely critical to the success of this operation. By capturing, trying, and executing you, the new leader, Komondon, has a significant amount of political capital, which will get even bigger when they retrieve your body and display it on the walls of the palace.”

Tomcufcik: “My body?”

Jyeong: “We were able to procure a body. We tossed it out of the aeroshuttle a few clicks from where we picked you up. After a few days under the Tritonian sun,

what is left will pass as your corpse, as long as no one looks too closely.”

BK: “They won’t. Komondon will make sure of it, as the new leader of the People’s Democracy of Tritonnia. Just as he made sure the ‘body’ of the former President-for-Life was promptly cremated. Which reminds me, I have a call to make. KITT-E, open COM Links to Triton Alpha and Prime.”

It took only a couple of minutes to get both of them on the screen. BK explained to them that the mission had been a success; that Kamanda would no longer be around “to trouble you.”

The Prime Minister of Triton Alpha seemed delighted. “We will launch our combined attack while they are still in chaos.”

BK: “You may want to reconsider that. Komondon has already succeeded Kamanda as supreme leader. His political position will only solidify if you attack. He already has the full support of the armed forces. Best-case scenario in an attack is you take out Komondon’s Government and occupy the capital. Then, what have you got? An insurgency that’s going to cost you a fortune. I can assure you, they have dug in their defenses. It will be even worse than last time.

“On the other hand, you could make a backside deal with Komondon. He is not a revolutionary zealot like Kamanda. You’ll get the Protactinium, Promethium, Praseodymium and kick back a percentage to him. It’s a better deal for you.”

The Prime Minister of Triton Prime frowned. “You may be correct. But what if he is not willing to deal?”

BK assured him. “He will be eager to strike an alliance with... at least one of you. Think it over. You can

either get the elements and the profit – or you can get a war. I know which one I would pick. I expect you to have our mining contracts fully executed by the time you complete your next orbit. KITT-E, sever COM Link.”

Tomcufcik asked. “How do you know Komondon will make a deal.”

Jyeong: “Komondon is also a Commonwealth agent, Codenamed ‘Congo.’ As the hero of Tritonia, the avenger of the murder of Heroic Leader, he will be able to negotiate a rapprochement with the other two planets. And when Komondon insists that the New Commonwealth monitor the peace treaty, the Commonwealth will finally have the opening they have wanted in the Triton Lyra system.”

BK gave Tomcufcik Instructions: “You need to send a TPT to Lakshmi Tesco – a Republicker ‘Business Consultant’ – on the Chapterhouse StarLock. Word it, exactly thus: ‘Darling, it’s been such a long time. En retour from the Lyra Sector. The trip was an utter horror show, but I picked up some things I think the kids will like. Cannot wait to get home. See you in church. Hugs and Kisses, Bernie.’ Make absolutely certain to use ‘horror show’ and ‘see you in church,’ so the Commonwealth will know we have Kamanda and will send a ship to rendezvous with us at the Churchyard StarLock.”

Tomcufcik asked what the Commonwealth would do with Kamanda, not that he cared, but he was curious. Jyeong suggested they would make him the New Commonwealth expert on Tritonian politics. “Failing ever upward, it’s the Commonwealth way.”

Tomcufcik: “But he’s a war criminal... a mass murderer.”

Quaranto: "And hardly anybody outside the Triton Lyra system has ever heard of him."

That left one thing Tomcufcik couldn't figure out: "So what do you get out of this? You're the broker for all the P-300 in the galaxy, but regardless of supply, there's only so much demand. What does that add to the bottom line of the Keeler Trust? Half a percent in gross revenues. You didn't spend three years in transit and risk my life for a rounding error on our balance sheets."

BK seemed impressed. "Bright boy, Spots. Of course, there is more to it than that. I have two things that are far more valuable than all the P-300 in the quadrant. One - I know about a complete cock-up that the New Commonwealth desperately needs to keep hidden. So, I have a secret. Two - by helping fix and cover up the New Commonwealth's cock up, they owe me a favor. A huge favor. Having the New Commonwealth in my pocket, that's worth more than money."

Tomcufcik: "How so?"

BK: "The Keeler Trust and Companies is a the largest consortium in the galaxy. That's both our biggest strength, and our greatest weakness. That makes us highly visible, and can attract the wrong kind of attention. Bribery only gets you so far; blackmail can get you anywhere, which brings us to the subject of your compensation."

Tomcufcik: "Considering that you could not have pulled this off without me, I think I'm entitled to something more than three years' salary for this trip."

BK: "Damn right you do, and I would have lost all respect for you if you hadn't said so. How does 100 shares of Keeler Alpha Preferred Stock sound?"

Tomcufcik: "My bonus is stock options?"

Jyeong chuckled. “Do you know how much 100 shares of K-Alpha Preferred are worth? Only the family usually gets access to those shares. She just made you millionaire.”

Tomcufcik suppressed the impulse to pump his fist and shout an obscene affirmation. Instead, he wanted to push his advantage further: “Thank you for the generous bonus. But I think in light of everything, I should also be the new Operational Executive for the Lyra Sector once we get back.”

BK laughed. “Sweetheart, you don’t want that job, it’s boring. Besides, the AI already picked a replacement.”

Tomcufcik: “I think some sort of promotion is in order.”

BK: “I’ll do you one better, Spots. I am going to make you one of my deputies. You’ll take assignments from me, you’ll report only to me. It comes with more money. Not a lot more in terms of straight salary, but there will be opportunities for bonuses.”

Tomcufcik: “Deputy to the Supreme Executive... OK...I can live with that title.”

BK: “Spots, don’t get too excited. I’ve got like 200 deputies. All right, let’s get this ship in gear and get back to a part of the galaxy where you can get a half decent lunch.”

“CHERCHEZ LA FEMME”

Corvallis, Sapphire - [Twenty-two Years before the launch of the Pathfinder Ship Pegasus. AS7270, APR6980, SY6988]

Despite its status as the planetary capital and one of the planet's major metroplexes, visitors may be surprised to learn that, as is the case with all the cities of Sapphire, Corvallis is not a climate-controlled environment. Visitors should be wary of extremes in heat and cold, as well as wind and precipitation events. - **Ministry of Transport and Travel, Office of Off-World Information Bulletin OFF-5417 (Rev. 18.33) “Useful Information about the City of Corvallis, Sapphire”**

“Status differentials,” young Goneril Lear thought to herself, “Are not reflected in one’s title, or the size of one’s office, but in how long a superior keeps you waiting.”

The man keeping her waiting was Avery Groombridge, Senior Ambassador and Chief of the Republic Ministry of Interplanetary Diplomacy Mission – Corvallis. His family’s prestige had been recently on the decline, but he had still managed to secure one of Republic’s most important diplomatic posts.

Groombridge didn’t keep her waiting excessively long, but it was long enough. The two doors at the end of the reception area swished open and the Senior Ambassador emerged with an aide. He greeted Lear with a half-smile and dismissed the aide.

He was twice and half again her age, his head was shaved, he was neither handsome nor unpresentable, neither notably tall nor short. His low baritone voice and top echelon accent were his most distinctive features; he

could have been a classical actor in the Ministry of Fine Arts. “Goneril Lear, welcome to Sapphire. How was your aeroshuttle flight?”

No apology for the wait Lear noted. “The descent was uneventful, but I had to wait on an open dock for almost an hour before the hovercar arrived.”

Groombridge commented on what was, in Lear’s opinion, the lesser part of her inconvenience. “I remember my first time breathing this world’s unprocessed air. I must have coughed for half an hour, but one gets used to it.”

Pleasantries dispensed, he ushered Lear into his office, leading her to the large window so she could take in the grand view from the 92nd floor of Tower 1 of the Republic Diplomatic Complex. The Complex consisted of two gray skyscrapers that stood out from the stylishly curved commercial towers of Corvallis’s South Bank like box trucks in a parking lot of sports cars.

Groombridge deactivated the opacity screen. From here, he could look down on the island in the middle of the wide Corvallis River where Sapphire seated its planetary government such as it was.

“What do you think?” he asked, standing too close to her.

What did she think? She thought the capital city of Sapphire was a backwater village compared to the magnificent domed cities of Republic, but saying so would have been undiplomatic. “I didn’t come here to this planet admire the view.”

“Of course not,” Groombridge hustled away from the window and took a seat behind his Class IV Executive Desk. Her transfer file was on his desktop. “Junior Diplomatic Attaché, fresh from the Foreign

Service Academy. I trust the retinal and fingertip sensor implants did not cause you too much discomfort. I see you've been assigned to the Emigration Office, the usual cover for intelligence officers. Who have you come to spy on?"

Lear bristled, "I've been assigned to the Emigration Office to assist Sapphireans who wish to emigrate to Republic."

"It would make things so much easier if the Ministry were up front about these things." He deactivated the file, rested his chin on his palm. "Are you certain you haven't been sent to spy on anyone?"

Lear: "I did not come here to spy on anyone."

Groombridge: "Is it me?"

She struggled to determine if he was joking, then crinkles appeared at the folds of his eyes and he chuckled. "Forgive my levity. You're among comrades here, Junior Attaché Goneril Lear. My first assignment was to the Emigration Office, and even back then it was a cover for facilitating defection and espionage. I assume that is the subtext of your assignment."

Lear: "You facilitated the defection of one of Sapphire's highest ranking military strategists, Goodman Fairlight."

Groombridge demurred with affected modesty. "My role may have been somewhat exaggerated. Fairlight was easy to turn. He was born into wealth. His ego is enormous. Such men are open to the idea that power, exercised properly, can be used to benefit the common good, which is the heart of what we believe as Republicers."

Groombridge paused to take a sip from the cup on his desk, then went on. "Convincing him to stay and

gather information for another year was harder than persuading him to defect. I've managed defections that were far more challenging and at least two where the defectors were... oh, let us say, uncooperative."

He turned toward his panoramic window. "Do you see that red tower to the east of our complex? It's called the Rose Tower. It houses Sapphire's intelligence services. Do you know what they call their intelligence agency? They call it the Spy Office. The Spy Office! Can you imagine?"

"It lacks subtlety," Lear observed.

"As a people, they prefer frank honesty to euphemism. In their language, they use the same word for 'euphemism' and 'toilet.' Now, according to official records, The Spy Office is headquartered on the 7th through 11th floors of that structure, but we have reason to believe those offices are fake and the real headquarters are in a quaint, picturesque fishing village in the western seaboard of this continent. That may also be a deception. In the past, we've received verified intelligence that their headquarters were located in the cone of an extinct volcano in their Kandor province, in a jungle fortress in their Arcadia Province, and in an ice-fortress on their continent of Boreala. We chased all those leads down and found nothing. Do you know where I think their headquarters is located?"

Lear: "Where?"

Groombridge: "In floors seven through eleven of that red building to the east."

He told another story. "Northwest of this city, there is a Sapphire Defense Facility called Timber Lake. Nearby is a cheese factory we suspected was a military research laboratory. We spent four years getting an agent inside, and when we did, it turned out to be a cheese

factory. The Spy Office had gone to some effort to make it look like a research laboratory disguised as a cheese factory, but it turned out to be a cheese factory disguised as a research lab disguised as a cheese factory."

Lear: "Why would they do that?"

Groombridge: "To make us waste our time and energy and in doing so, learn about our intelligence gathering and infiltration techniques. They treat espionage as a game and enjoy sending us chasing phantom intelligence targets."

He continued. "I give new personnel one item of advice; don't lie to a Sapphirean. They can sense lies. It's difficult for us, we lie casually and call it diplomacy. But they always know, and it causes distrust."

Lear: "You seem to know them well."

Groombridge: "It's my job."

Lear: "You could have leveraged your success into a much higher position on Republic, but you are on your fifth diplomatic tour."

Groombridge: "It has been an unmitigated honor to represent the people of Republic this past quarter century, and at the pleasure of my Government, I shall continue in this honorable role for as long as Republic will have me."

Lear: "I should like to hear more of your exploits."

Groombridge: "In time, perhaps, but the journey to this planet was no doubt grueling and you need some time to acclimate yourself. Check in with the Accommodation office for your quarters and begin orienting yourself to the complex. Frankly, I recommend bypassing the cafeteria on the second floor. You should try the food shops just outside the gates; Republic cuisine but with a Sapphire twist."

He handed over to her a small device containing her diplomatic credentials and personal services account. “A pale, young and easily intimidated intern will take you to your accommodations in the residential tower.”

Years on Sapphire are divided into ten “months” of 28 days each. Days have individual names that are repeated according to a seven-day cycle. A Sapphirean day is .62x the length of a day on Republic. Adjust your sleep schedule accordingly. – **Ministry of Transport and Travel, Off-World Facilitation Office Informative Bulletin OFF-5417 (Rev. 18.3) “Useful Information about the City of Corvallis, Sapphire”**

Twenty-eight days went by. Goneril Lear worked from a tiny cubicle in the interior of a windowless floor of the Diplomacy Tower; processing the 1 or 2 people a week who sought to emigrate to Republic from Sapphire.

On that afternoon, her client was a disheveled young man named Colin Harbinger who went by the name “Collie,” according to his application form. He was shorter than her, slender, with shaggy hair and dirty fingernails. He had spent two years studying at Graceland University without completing any program of study before moving to Corvallis.

Lear had worked her way through the final question on the standard interview list. “How do you see yourself contributing to the Common Good of Republic?”

He wiped his nose with his dirty hand. “I’d like to something in visual media. I’m an artist. I’m willing to do pretty much anything so long as it’s in visual media.”

She recorded his response, and then told him what she told everyone. “In order to emigrate, you will have to be sponsored by one of our Social Ministries. Each has a quota. Getting on the sponsorship list for one of your preferred ministries can take four of your years or

longer, but there are things you can do to help improve your odds of being selected.”

He rolled his eyes and drew his arms into himself. “Like what?”

Lear: “In some cases, it’s possible to arrange a ministerial internship. You would perform clerical duties, help us gather and process information.”

“Like spying?”

That was an odd leap, Lear thought. “Nay, not spying, although, several ministries sponsor perfectly aboveboard information gathering to promote participatory democracy on your world. If you work with one of them for a year, we can expedite your selection; perhaps provide a stipend.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Can I think about it?”

“Of course,” she replied. “But the sooner you get started, the sooner your emigration can be arranged.”

They concluded their business with Lear providing him with her contact information. Collie Harbinger was not very valuable, but his brother was an engineer at the Cloudbuster Aerospace company. Sapphire was years ahead of Republic in space propulsion and navigation. This could turn out to be a relationship worth cultivating, although she would have to string him along for longer than the year she had implied.

That was the last person she had to interview for that day. She had an appointment to check in with Senior Ambassador Groombridge. She traveled to the 92nd floor where she found him once again staring out through the window. It was an overcast day; a damp, cumulonimbus shroud hung over the city.

Groombridge: “How has your first month been, Junior Attache Goneril Lear?”

Lear: "I have adapted to this assignment, Senior Ambassador Groombridge."

Groombridge: "Have you taken the opportunity to explore the city?"

Lear: "I've visited their Government Complex and their museum of the history of their planet."

Groombridge (disappointed): "Is that it? You must get out more. You'll stagnate if you don't. We can't have that."

After the standard progress review, Groombridge shared with her troubling news. "I've just received a communique from our station in New Cleveland. One of our intelligence operatives has defected."

Lear tried to take the news philosophically. "The door swings both ways."

Groombridge: "The Security Ministry will be conducting reviews at all of the stations. Standard procedure. It doesn't matter that Corvallis has had fewer defections than New Cleveland. Not by accident. Just as we have to be receptive to signals that one of their people may defect, we need to understand our own people, and be alert to signals that they may turn."

Lear: "Why anyone would turn against Republic, I can't imagine."

Groombridge: "Only a few defect for purely political reasons. You may find it hard to believe, but the most common reason for defection is simply that some people enjoy living on a planet where you don't have to live under an atmospheric dome; where you can see the sun, more days than not, where water flows. The period before a citizen returns to Republic is the most hazardous time for defections. That's when we put them under the most scrutiny."

Lear: "What about personal relationships?"

Groombridge's mood brightened. "Oh? Has a dashing young Sapphirean swept my newest Emigration Coordinator off her feet?"

Lear: "Not at all, I was just curious."

Groombridge: "Of course, you are a loyal daughter of Republic. In seriousness, that is less of a concern. Those who become romantically or emotionally involved with Sapphireans and wish to remain generally go through the legitimate channels. And, to be fair, since legitimate channels take typically two to three years, a lot of them fall out of romantic relationships in the interim."

Before proceeding to the constant meetings he took throughout the day, Groombridge extended an invitation to her. "I'm giving a talk at the Corvallis University in four days. There's a young woman who frequently attends these talks, Adena Lara, the daughter of Bettina Lara. Bettina Lara is a Behavioralist who consults with the Sapphirean Government, advising them on how to deal with us. The Ministry would be interested to know what sort of insights Lara provides to them."

Lear: "Have you been working on recruiting her?"

Groombridge: "There may be a potential opening, long term. It might be worthwhile for you cultivate a relationship with the young lady in question."

Lear understood, no more needed to be said. "Thank you, Senior Deputy Ambassador. I should be happy to attend and make contact with Adena Lara."

Groombridge: "Splendid. You'll find this opportunity highly instructive. My recommendation to get out of the complex stands. You never know who you might meet."

All educational systems on Sapphire are privatized and operate primarily to profit their owners. Citizens of Republic wishing to study at Sapphorean institutions will not receive financial assistance, and are advised that any studies completed will not be validated. – **Ministry of Education Bulletin ED-209.**
“Interplanetary Studies Program”

Groombridge was a crisp and polished speaker, and made his case to the Sapphoreans with wit and aplomb. He even handled their questions and critiques with a graciousness she could not have mustered in the face of such disrespect. Had he returned to Republic, he would surely have been a Minister by now.

Adena Lara sat in the back taking notes, but never asking questions. The first meeting she left early and Lear thought it best not to pursue her. It would have been too obvious. The second time, Lear made a point to sit next to her and attempt small talk before the discussion started, but the girl proved unreceptive to polite overtures. Lear discreetly followed her to the Corvallis River Concourse and saw her duck into a café.

After the third lecture, Lear staked herself in the same café, taking a seat that gave her a view of everyone who entered. She ordered tea and something called “Blazing Hot Meat Chunks” that she ignored. After about forty minutes of waiting, Adena Lara entered and took a seat in the lounge. At about the same time, a young couple came in and, by accident, blocked her view of Lara. The man looked around, “Do you think this dump has a bar?”

The woman: “Oh, Bill. You don’t drink, darling.”

The man: “I’ve been thinking of starting, just a little, and only to help me cope with the stress of dealing with those idiots at the university.”

The woman: “Fantastic idea, darling, let’s find a bar. There has to be one somewhere.”

When the couple cleared, Adena Lara had left the lounge. That stupid couple had distracted her from her primary mission. The young woman couldn’t have gotten far. Lear hurried outside and scanned the concourse in vain. Perhaps the woman had gone into the hygiene pod. She went inside, but she wasn’t there.

“Damn, damn, damn,” she hissed to herself.

Even in the larger Sapphorean cities, public transport may prove a challenging experience. All transport is privatized. The owners of transport services are profit-driven and fiercely competitive. As a result, many transports are maintained at the minimum level of repair and hygiene to maximize profit. – **Ministry of Transport and Travel, Off-World Facilitation Office Informative Bulletin OFF-5417 (Rev. 18.3) “Useful Information about the City of Corvallis, Sapphire”**

The rest of the first quarter of Lear’s assignment passed uneventfully. She met with Collie Harbinger twice more, but reluctantly concluded that he really had nothing to offer her. She processed his paperwork and told him he could begin the emigration process in two years. He had threatened to turn her into his Government as a spy for trying to recruit him. She knew it was an empty threat.

On a glorious day on the cusp of autumn, when the sky was the deep blue color that had inspired an ancient survey crew to name the planet, Lear went to the hovercar garage at the base of the Diplomatic Tower. There was a man waiting there; blond, middle aged, with deeply furrowed lines in his forehead. He smiled at her, “Ah, Good Meridian, fellow citizen of the Republic.”

His name was Ramses Holden. According to the personnel roster, he was the Chief Mechanic of the Republic Diplomatic Complex Hovercar Pool. Lear returned his greeting with the requisite civility. "Good Meridian to you, fellow citizen."

He replied. "Are you headed out this morning? Venturing into the City?"

Lear: "I have business."

Holden: "Government Island?"

Lear: "Perhaps."

Holden: "If you go to the North Bank, there's a stunning Panrovian Bistro there."

Lear: "Thank you, citizen. Which hovercar should I take?"

Holden: "I recommend Hovercar 602. It was just serviced."

She nodded and accepted the key card he handed to her. The navigation system asked her a destination as the doors closed quietly around her. She gave it the address and secured her safety harness. The vehicle passed underneath the two gigantic spheres of wadded metal... representing "Peace" and "Understanding" that were the only decorative elements in the Complex's austere concrete plaza, marking its entrance gate.

Her car joined the stream of traffic crossing over the Corvallis River, rising a hundred meters into the air as it tracked the sky beacons. The river was broad and deep here where it bent away from the mountains that fed it and began its long tour to the sea. Republic had neither rivers nor seas, but the sight did not impress her.

The hovercar descended toward the North Bank of the river; where the cluster of buildings was much larger

but their heights less impressive than those on the South Bank. Suburbs filled the broad plain to the north. So wasteful, Lear thought. Ten times the footprint for a tenth of the population of a city on Republic.

The North Bank's chaotic architecture and ubiquitous commercial holograms reflected both the lack of central planning and the gaudiness that afflicted Sapphire's profit-oriented society. Hovercars buzzed the streets, most with just a single occupant. So, wasteful, Lear thought. So anti-social, she thought. The intra-city transport systems of Republic provided a shared sense of community and common purpose, reinforced by the announcements on their COM Systems encouraging citizens to perform their civic duties and report any unauthorized food or beverages to the Transit Wardens.

Her Hovercar pulled into a docking station a few blocks away from the rendezvous. She walked the rest of the way to the Aloha Snackbar fast-food franchise. A hologram sign outside depicted the chain's cartoon mascot graphically illustrating its slogan, "Eat 'til you explode!" She went inside, saw her contact sitting in a booth with the remains of a meal in front of him.

"Have you found the woman?" she asked as she sat down.

"Good grief, they told me you were no good at this, but I had no idea how bad...." In a low voice he ordered, "Walk up to the counter, order a Beast-Burger combo with extra Blazing Hot Fries and don't come back to the table until you have it."

"I'm not hungry." Lear had not accustomed herself to the short Sapphirean days. She was never hungry at the planet's mid-day.

"It doesn't matter, you have to blend in."

“I thought we owned this commercial food distribution establishment.”

He rolled his eyes. “We do, it’s called a restaurant, and you need to blend in. Everybody here is eating. That’s what people come to this place to do. Now go to the counter and order an Allbeing-damned Beast-Burger combo. And get the Tangy Zesty Sauce for the fries.”

She went to the counter and after a brief exchange with one of the chirpy teenagers returned with a tray of animal proteins and processed plant materials.

“Eating Sapphorean fast food is hardly the most distasteful thing they’re ever going to make you do,” he reached over and began eating her hot fries.

“Have you found the woman?” she asked again, now that his requirement to ‘blend in’ had been satisfied.

“We think so.” He discreetly passed her a small square black datacard. “She was not easy to track down, but she fits our profile. She’s about your age, which is why we thought you would be ideal for making contact with her.”

“And what shall I do after I have made contact?”

He took a few more of her fries and dipped them in the orange-red sauce that came with them. “It’s all on the card. The brief version is you to bring her onboard. Get her to work for us.”

“Recruit her.”

“In time, but you must initialize her by getting her to agree to very small favors in the beginning. Eventually, we can leverage small favors into larger obligations. But we have to proceed prudently, incrementally.”

“I know how it’s done,” Lear insisted.

Without eating a bit of her meal, she left the Aloha Snackbar. She sent the recall command to the hovercar and climbed inside when it pulled up to the curb.

She stopped by Sapphire's Planetary Government Complex on the mid-river island before returning to the Diplomatic Complex and took a stroll through its leafy, parklike campus. The Legislature Dome struck her as absurdly small for the business of running a planet.

When she returned to the Diplomatic Complex, she repaired to her quarters on the 52nd level. Only then did she finally read the card. It was the profile of the woman she had been sent to find.

Her name was Europa Minx. It did not sound like a Sapphirean name. Her biography said she was born in Sapphire, but her parents were expatriates of Republic. ("Disloyalists," Lear thought.) She was only a year younger than Lear. The card included several pictures of an attractive young woman with light hair, light skin, and soft features typical of the women of Republic. She lived in a community called Candle Cove, in one of the northern sectors of Corvallis.

Minx had been under surveillance since before Lear arrived in Corvallis. She attended the Corvallis University where she was studying interplanetary relations. Less frequently, she visited an entertainment and shopping complex on the North Bank, the Concourse of the Crystalline Sky. The patterns of her travels were typical for a young Sapphirean woman; deliberately typical, Lear thought.

The psychological profile recommended moderate psychological pressure, that Minx could be persuaded to cooperate if she could be convinced it was in her best interest. Lear decided she would take that analysis under advisement.

Visitors are also advised to avoid giving offense to the inhabitants of Sapphire, many of whom may be armed with lethal weapons. The Government of Republic cannot be held responsible if your injury or death results from a lack of understanding of planetary conditions and/or cultural protocols. – **Ministry of Transport and Travel, Office of Off-World Information Bulletin OFF-5417 (Rev. 18.33) Useful Information about the City of Corvallis, Sapphire**

Candle Cove was upriver of Corvallis proper, an enclave nestled into a portage off the river. A collection of slab-like residential complexes, stacked and interlocked with one another, climbing up the hills of the cove around a central commercial complex. Many of Republic's expatriate community resided here; the density of the buildings reminded them of home.

It was not far from one of the dam complexes that kept the Corvallis River behaved while providing the city with power from Magnetohydrodynamic generators. Lear knew that Republic had developed plans [Under Top Secret cover] to destroy the dams in the event of another conflict with Sapphire. Some of the expatriates who lived here had been trained for that operation in case it ever became necessary.

There was a MagLev station in Candle Cove that dropped her at the commerce center. Lear made two intermediate stops to make her more difficult to track. It was a half hour walk to the residence. The woman who met her at the door was older than she had expected. "Europa Minx?"

The woman smiled pleasantly. "Europa Minx is my daughter, I'm Eurydice Minx. Are you one of her friends from the University?"

“I am,” Lear answered, desperately trying to improvise on the spot. “We were supposed to attend a lecture this evening, and I was hoping to coordinate with her beforehand.”

Eurydice Minx: “Your accent is Republicker.”

Lear: “I am in the Interplanetary Studies program. I was hoping Europa could explain some of the aspects of Sapphire’s non-adversarial justice system to me.”

The eyes of Eurydice Minx narrowed. “Why are you lying to me? You’re no student.”

Lear considered the change in information and adjusted her approach. “I would prefer not to say what I have come to say outside.”

Eurydice Minx: “I would prefer not to have you in my dwelling unit. The Protection Service in Candle Cove is very good. State your business and then leave.”

Lear: “Do you really want me to announce to your fellow citizens that your daughter is having a love affair with the Senior Republic Ambassador?”

Lear saw a moment of fear in the eyes of Eurydice Minx. “Come inside.”

They stepped together into the small vestibule of the dwelling. Minx would let her go no further. “That’s far enough. How do you... why do you suspect my daughter is involved with your senior ambassador?”

Lear watched her hands carefully. “Republic maintains vigilance on persons of importance, including our Senior Ambassador, of course. It’s a matter of planetary security to keep our high-level personnel from being compromised.”

Eurydice Minx: “By threatening my daughter.”

Lear: “Not at all. In fact, I want to protect your daughter. If she cooperates with us, we can keep her safe from those who would exploit this... difficult situation.”

“This difficult situation,” Eurydice Minx repeated.

She seemed to have processed the initial shock. Lear had to keep her under pressure. “Your daughter has a promising future ahead of her. There is absolutely no reason for her to lose it over a silly indiscretion.”

The woman was firm. “My daughter is not having an affair with the senior ambassador... I am. So, leave her out of this.”

“Are you sure of that?” Caught off-guard, it was all Lear could think to say. It was meant to express her skepticism that the mother was trying to cover for the daughter, but it came out wrong.

“I am certain of those with whom I share my company. I think you should leave.”

Lear would have some harsh words for the intelligence operatives in her report, of that she was certain. She was equally certain she could salvage this. With a swift movement, she grabbed the woman by shoulders and pinned her to the wall.

“Listen to me very carefully. You have two very distinct choices. If you cooperate, you and the senior deputy ambassador will be allowed to continue your relationship, and it will not be exposed to the public. In return, you and I will meet weekly, and you will report to me on anything he tells you.

“If you do not cooperate, your relationship will be publicly exposed. If you lie to me, you will be exposed. You and your daughter will suffer humiliation and loss of your social status. The Senior Ambassador will lose his position and return to Republic where he will face

trial for dereliction of duty. He will end his career in disgrace. Your choice is simple, cooperate and continue your lives as they are, or refuse and three lives will suffer. Is that understood?"

The woman was breathing hard. "Is that understood?" Goneril Lear repeated.

Eurydice Minx: "I ... I will... please, just don't harm Avery or my daughter."

Lear eased away from her. She did her best to strike a pleasant tone. "We only want to know what he's up to. We just want to make sure he's not carelessly revealing any of the secrets with which our Government has entrusted him. That's all."

She told Eurydice Minx she would give her a day to think about it, and contact her the following evening.

That night, from her quarters in the Diplomatic Complex, Lear stared out at the lights of Corvallis. She missed Republic. This world with its unimaginable wealth of atmosphere and water, its chaos, its fast-food distribution points, its private hovercars was not her world. She was not going to stay here long enough to be seduced by this planet's charms as Groombridge had been. Once she completed this assignment, she would be happy to never live among Sapphireans again.

The next day she reported to her station in the Emigration Office. She had no interviews scheduled for that day, so she had planned to review her case files. She settled in at her workstation precisely when her shift began.

Around her second hour of work, people from the Diplomatic Security Office pressed by her station. They

went into the office of her supervisor, the Deputy Attache for Emigration, Emile Disney. The office's privacy screens deployed soon after. When the men left, Lear went to the Deputy Attachee's office, finding her superior in a state of agitation. "Is something wrong?"

"Close and seal the door," Disney told her. When Lear did, she explained, "You haven't been told, but Ambassador Groombridge didn't show up at his office this morning. He somehow exited the complex during the night. They're saying he... that defected."

Lear felt the news like a blow to the solar plexus. "The Senior Ambassador... that's not possible. His loyalty was tested regularly."

Disney shrugged. "In security training, they told us you can never predict those who might be disloyal. However, I would never would have thought the Senior Deputy Ambassador would betray Republic."

Lear had to ask, "Did they suggest any motive for his defection?"

Disney managed a wan half-smile. "You know what they say, when a man starts behaving irrationally, look for the woman."

Disney reminded her not to share the information until an official announcement was made. That announcement came in the mid-afternoon.

Effective Day 24 Quarter 2 APR6989 – Ephraim Ford will serve as the Acting Senior Ambassador for the Ministry of Interplanetary Diplomacy Mission to Sapphire - Corvallis, pending the appointment of a permanent replacement.
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No details were offered. Lear noted that the announcement neither used the name of Avery

Groombridge nor contained a grateful acknowledgement of his years of service. This suggested that he had indeed defected.

Lear had never considered that Eurydice Minx would go to the Sapphorean authorities; but that was exactly what she did. While Eurydice spoke to Sapphorean security requesting protection, Avery Groombridge walked into the seventh floor of the Rose building and offered to tell the Spy Office everything he knew about Republic's clandestine activities in Corvallis and elsewhere in exchange for residency and protection.

On a gray, unseasonably cold day in mid-Autumn, while her colleagues were distracted by a televised Sapphorean groundball game, Lear made her way down to the Hovercar Pool. Holden was waiting for her, wearing his gray Mechanic's jumpsuits and overseeing a junior mechanic as they checked the vehicle use logs.

"Mechanic Durand, why don't you leave early today. Go watch the match or something." The junior mechanic nodded and left. Holden stared across at her. "Well, you really cocked this one up."

Lear stood her ground, "I followed my orders precisely... to the letter."

Holden derided her. "Well, good for you, Aprilus. You completely botched the operation, but you followed your instructions."

Lear felt heat rising on her face. "Your operative gave me flawed intelligence."

"At the end of the day, it doesn't matter. You cocked up." Holden walked to one of the hovercars and opened its engine compartment. "When you met a fifty-four year old woman instead of a twenty-four year old girl,

you should have recognized that a different dynamic was at play. Older women don't respond to intimidation. They don't have the insecurities of younger women."

Only the thought of her future ambitions kept Lear from giving him a stern lecture on gender stereotypes.

Holden went on. "Instead of having a high-ranking diplomatic official under our thumb, we now have the humiliating situation of a senior ambassador defecting. No doubt, he is providing the Rose with a detailed accounting of our activities on this planet. He should hope the Rose can hide him and his mistress well." He leaned in and attached a diagnostic device to its data port. "Hm, proton accelerator is out of calibration. That's why Hovercar 804 has been stalling out."

Lear didn't care about the Hovercar. "What will happen now?"

Holden put the diagnosticator aside and wiped his hands on a rag. "The outcome of the elections two quarters ago resulted in a shake-up in Republic's government. The Modern Pragmatists split with the Centrist Alliance and joined the Moderate Union to create a new coalition government. They have majorities in two houses, and a plurality in two more. If the Public Cooperative Party splits with the Centrist Alliance, the Moderate Union will have a majority in four houses. The only obstacle to that is the Governor of Sector 14 South, Mr. Nike, who is also the Southern Cooperative's best shot at winning a seat in the Executive Committee.

"If we can salvage anything from this, by exposing Groombridge, you have opened the door for his superior, Ambassador General Thorne, to be sacked for negligence. Governor Nike will be appointed Ambassador General to Sapphire, a post he cannot refuse, else his rivals would accuse him of not answering

Republic's call to duty. Either way, Nike's finished politically."

Lear: "I meant what will happen to me."

Holden told her to pack her things. "You're being recalled to Republic. On the way, you still stop on Hyperion. We have a mole in the Hyperion Spaceworks who has acquired some very useful technical data on a new power source the Sapphireans are developing. You are to transport this data to the homeworld under diplomatic cover. Do you think you can handle that without cocking it up?"

Lear's cheeks burned with humiliation, but her answer was strong. "Aye. My only necessary incentive is my duty to Republic."

She made her way to back to the tower of residence. Part of her ... most of her ... was relieved to be leaving this dreadful planet.

In summary, the actions of Goneril Lear (Aprilus) resulted in the failure of a mission that was four years planning and execution. In this agent's opinion, she is unsuitable for further missions of this nature and should be transferred to a role where she can cause the least harm; perhaps the Odyssey Project. – Ramses Holden, Chief Operative of the Corvallis Station: Final Report on the Investigation into the Defection of Senior Ambassador Avery Groombridge. Classified Level Omega. Never to be released for public review.

PIONEERS

Unless the people of the future maintain Third World Level birthrates, it will be very difficult for humans to reproduce fast enough to conquer the galaxy within the speculative timeline. It would also prove difficult to find large numbers of people willing to leave modern, civilized colonies to spend decades traveling to primitive worlds on the other side of the galaxy. This story, set some 2500 years before the events of Worlds Apart Book 01, posits one approach for resolving that problem.

(Solar Year 4774) Commonwealth of the Galaxy - Ursa Minor Sector - Pioneer IV Colony - Suburbs of New Andreas City

“This is the deal we’re making,” said the girl. She was sitting on her bed, one knee drawn up to her chin. The boy stood in front of her. Extending her other leg, she stroked the top of his foot with her toes. “You make me happy for 30 minutes, then you get to shoot your seed in me. Deal?”

The boy grinned in a well-practiced imitation of sheepishness. “All right.”

The girl quickly stripped down to a bra and panties and lay back with her shoulders propped on some pillows. The boy stripped off his jersey, his shoes, his socks and his jeans, letting them fall on the floor next to the bag with his groundball gear.

She drew herself to the head of the bed. He climbed into the bed over her, knees first, and positioned himself in a straddling position over her naked body. She was a pale creature, with thick red-brown hair... carpet and drapes. In his dark eyes and the dusky hue of his skin were traces of his Mesoamerican ancestry; on a planet

14,000 light years away whose history occupied Chapter 1 of their history texts.

His touch was clumsy, which the girl had expected, and she had to guide him to her pleasure centers; the tips of her breasts, the sensitive zones of her inner thigh, and that spot behind her elbows her cousin had discovered over the holiday break. She didn't mind his roughness, the thought of being his teacher, of being the one who would make his motions better for the girls who would follow her, was part of what aroused her about the scene.

Thirty-two minutes after her initial proposition, he was pulling his pants over his muscular brown legs, and she was lying in bed, watching him, and wondering if there was any fruit salad in the food preservation unit on the lower level of the dwelling unit.

"I gotta go," he said to her, as his autolaces strapped together and tightened his feetgear.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Thanks."

He slung his bag over his shoulder and flashed his too-white smile at her. "Yeah, it was good," he said by way of "you're welcome."

Ursa Minor Sector - Pioneer IV Colony - New Andreas City

The girl lay back in the clinic as the probe entered her. She didn't know what kind of sensory alteration program the clinic used, but it made her feel wonderful; like her loins were immersed in some warm, electric stew. She was only vaguely aware of the presence of the long robotic appendage – slathered in biolubricant – that had entered her. It seemed like it was happening to someone else.

"Extraction will be complete in thirty seconds," the Medico, Dr. Kapoor, told her. She was a pleasant woman

in her thirties, but her toneless, clinical voice was an unwelcome intrusion into the music program she had been enjoying while the procedure was completed.

“This is my first time,” the girl burred. She didn’t know why she said it, but the sensory program was making her feel chatty and uninhibited.

“There’s a first time for everybody,” Dr. Kapoor said amiably. She watched the monitor closely. On its holographic screen displayed an enhanced view of the girl’s cervical passage. The probe pressed gently inward and began scanning for the tiny embryo.

The girl began humming a snatch of popular music. Hughes filtered it out. In the adjacent cubicle, she heard the next patient... rather older than hers... moan softly as the probe withdrew from her insides.

A small “ping” came from her machine. The probe had found the embryo. A quick scan showed it intact and healthy. “Got you,” Hughes whispered. Her hands were contained in a pair of sensory gloves, similar to the ones used by asteroid miners for remote mining robots, but far more sensitive. It was very important to extract the embryo intact. First, she sprayed the embryo in bio-sustainment gel. Then, she carefully loosened it from the uterine wall. It didn’t want to go, at first, but a little more gel, and just the slightest increase in pressure convinced it to detach. The probe quickly drew it into its proboscis, and slowly pulled out from inside the girl.

“That’s it,” Kapoor announced. She stood up. “You can rest here until you feel ready to get up. The nursing technician will give you your check and some medication on the way out. You did really good.”

“Mmm,” said the girl. She lay back on the bed, eyes closed, as though lying there for a while seemed like a

good idea. It would not be a problem. The clinic was slow today, and there were plenty of empty beds.

“How long...?” the girl muttered dreamily.

Kapoor looked at her. What would she spend her thousand credits on? Clothes? Entertainment? A spring break getaway to Azuza Beach? The money would go quickly, and she would be back. Like many of the donors, she wanted to know how long before she could donate again.

“Three months, minimum,” Kapoor answered, honestly, the injections would see to that. “And a year would be better.”

Kapoor delivered the egg-shaped container upstairs to Dr. Langer, the gene specialist. Dr. Langer placed the pod under a scanner that bathed it in warm orange light. A holographic model of the embryonic DNA appeared in front of him. “Looks very strong, this personality sequence shows a tendency toward athleticism and leadership. High intelligence gradient. This one will require minimal augments.”

Dr. Kapoor munched on a cracker. “The young ones always give us the best stock.”

Langer was an older man, scrawny with unkempt hair, who wore a large multi-spectral eyepiece as a permanent accoutrement. “Too bad the Commonwealth outlawed military embryonic sales. They would have paid premium for this one.” Langer was a veteran of the Scorpio Campaign, lost his original legs battling the insurgency on Beta Niobe. He moved on prosthetics of black cable and stainless steel. The system alerted Langer to a match in the embryo database. “Well, hello.”

“What is it?”

Langer zoomed in on the matching file. "Our little boy has a brother, a half-brother anyway. Paternal half-brother, some little stud has been busy."

Langer pulled up data from the file. "The other donor named hers... Adrian Bronsteen."

Kapoor checked the donor record. "This one's donor didn't want to leave hers a name. So, we'll let them share the same last name. Let's keep it alphabetical... Aidan. No, Arnold. No, Aidan. Aidan Bronsteen."

Usually, a program in the administrative computer assigned the names when the donor didn't, which was most of the time. This prevented Medicos from giving embryos ridiculous monikers like "Harry Butt" or "Wolf Blitzer." It was an easy enough check to bypass provided the chosen name was reasonable.

"Makes no difference to me," Langer made a few final entries into the file and removed the embryo pod from the scanning pad. Kapoor placed the pod inside a gestational chamber. The system cycled into cryostasis to keep the future colonist stable for transport.

"Where is he going?" Langer asked.

Kapoor answered. "We're sending 2,000 to the Bellwether system on the next hyper-transport," she told him. "Order from the Omega Nova Consortium."

Every time Kapoor went over the economics in her head, the scale of the operation staggered her. Each embryo was bought from the donor for a thousand credits, give or take, depending on the market that day. Each cost about 100,000 credits to grow to adulthood and transport to a colony, but each would produce, in a lifetime, on average, over a million credits of economic output.

Today, she would make the Omega Nova consortium six million credits in future income and it had been a relatively slow day. Her bonus this year would pay for a nice vacation cottage in New Havana. She could sit on the beach, sip hibiscus tea, and think about her own embryos, on colony-ships bound for distant worlds.

Nobody wanted to raise more than one or two children these days, except the religious fanatics. But the Human Race had to grow... quickly... to keep colonizing the galaxy.

***Eridanus Sector - Bellwether Colony -
Vitali Lobov Orbital Station***

Omega Nova 154 was a standard, DX-class, Commonwealth Colonizer Train-Ship. From stem to stern, she measured 40 kilometers in length. Ten of these kilometers were occupied by her drive systems. Arranged around her spine were 44 colony seed pods --- self-contained inhabitation structures containing fuel, supplies, and instructions sufficient to begin settlement on alien worlds. Most were imprinted with the intersecting red line logo of the Omega Nova Development Consortium. The pods were shaped like squat pyramids with flatted tops and tapered bases. Smaller pods held additional equipment, tools, and processing gear for air and water. Also on board were 968,000 embryonic human beings, 2,200 adult human colonial volunteers and children in stasis, and a crew of 190 people and 50 mechanoids.

Omega Nova 154 was prepping for a one-way, six-decade journey to the far side of the galaxy, the Perseus Quadrant. Following on the heels of the survey and preparation ships, it would be her job to begin or augment colonies on 22 Terra-class planets. She currently orbited Bellwether colony, a pretty world of dark blue

oceans and rust red continents; the nearest world to the Chrysanthemum StarLock. Its night sky was bright with densely packed stars. Bellwether's position near the edge of the galactic core made it an ideal jumping off point for ships heading to the Outer Arms.

An entire deck of Omega 154's primary operations module was given over to monitoring cargo. Two cargo specialists, Potts and Nero, were watching the machines that monitored the colonizer ship's cargo. It was incredibly boring.

Nero was very tall and thin, with dirty blonde hair cut efficiently and unimaginatively. A single thin communication wire extended from his ear to the corner of his mouth. "Confirm pallet Zeta-660 locked into Colony Pod 21. All connects green. Pallet secure."

"Confirmed and acknowledged," said a female voice on the other side of the VOX Link. "We are gone, Cargo Control."

"Go safely," Nero told her. "CC out."

"I am so bored," Potts reclined in his couch and stretched.

"In six days this ship leaves for Chrysanthemum Station," Nero pulled up the navigational plots. "Then, sixty-one-point-five-nine years in hyperspace."

"That failed to make me not bored," Potts groaned. Potts was short and lithe, with unfashionable facial hair. He teased his fellow launch technicians to cope with his boredom. It was a barrier to his popularity, though he didn't realize it.

"When the ship is on its way, we go back to ground. I think you would like that," Nero answered.

Potts shrugged. He watched as Nero reviewed Omega Nova 154's itinerary, the 22 worlds it would be calling on. "You wish you were going?"

Nero laughed. "Yeah-no, my wives would just love that. Maybe, someday, if the Perseus StarLocks are ever finished."

Potts leaned even further back in his chair. "Do you have any of your own babies going out there with it?"

"Probably," Nero answered, shrugging. He didn't want to go into detail.

Potts seized on this. "I've got hundreds, thousands maybe. I used to give my juice to the In Vitro Project before it was canceled."

"I am surprised they took it," Nero replied.

Potts reached into the comestibles locker and popped open a bottle of 'Jizz' (a clear, citrus-flavored carbonated beverage with a particularly raw marketing scheme). "Kinda like the thought of having all those offspring, living on after me, on the far side of the galaxy. You ever think about how all these little 'bryos gonna spend the next sixty-five years growing up in a tube... and when they wake up, they think they're really people, but it's all just memories an AI programs into them."

Nero was getting bored with the conversation. "It tells them what they need to know, and gives them memories so they don't go crazy."

"Phony memories!" Potts insisted, Jizz spraying from his lips. "Artificial memories. Bedtime stories written by androids and told them by robots."

He leaned across his couch, uncomfortable close to Nero. "And what really gets me is, how do we know that everything we think is a memory isn't just some fake implant to keep us from going insane?"

“Mine are real!” Nero insisted. “My mom and dad are still alive. They live in Magnuson. I have two brothers and a sister. We spend every Feast of Alms together. I don’t know about yours.”

“Oh, I got memories... I remember a whole lot I don’t even want to remember.” Potts grinned and tapped the side of a rack. “And every one of these embryos is going to have their head filled with warm, fake, childhood memories scripted by... professional fiction writers Omega Nova pays to write phony childhoods. The ones from the same sperm and egg donor even get fed memories that they grew up as brother and sister. Sometimes, they just buy people’s childhood memories and use those. None of it’s real. They aren’t even real.”

“Who?” Nero asked, not sure which “they” Potts meant.

“The embryos. They grow up in a tube and the companies program them to do whatever they need done out there. They’re practically no different than robots.”

Nero cleaned his nails on his pants leg. Potts moved in still closer. “How do we know that we weren’t made the same way? Or our parents?”

“They only use this program for the outermost colonies,” Nero protested.

“So, they tell us.” Potts displayed the kind of grin that made others want to punch him. “Nobody knows what happens when they reach the other side. For all we know they wake up as deranged cannibals and kill everything in sight.”

“Potts, shut the hell up,” Nero said. Pretty much everybody said that to Potts, eventually. As far as Nero

was concerned, he was real, what he did made him who he was, and that was the end of it.

Potts was quiet for a few moments, and then he leaned in close, a demented grin on his lips, and whispered, “How do we know we aren’t artificial memories being programmed into someone else?”

***Vulpecula Sector -
22 586 Vulpecula IV – 63 Solar Years Later***

Enveloped in re-entry flame, the colony pod burned through the green-blue sky like a giant fireball. Strange creatures looked up from the surface, watched it fall, or dashed to find a hiding place from the thundering thing bearing down from the sky. After it passed, they returned to the animal business of mating, fighting, and eating each other.

As it crossed 2,000 meters of altitude, the pod’s orientation thrusters fired to put the colony pod upright. At 1000 meters, landing rockets fired, sending a blast of hurricane-force wind through the landing area. The pod’s final moments of descent were hidden in an expanding cloud of dust and debris.

When the dust cloud had settled, the pod’s braincore began the activation sequence for bringing the colonists out of stasis. There were 1,800 of them in total, but they would not all be awakened at once. There was a sequence to be followed. The last of them would not come out of stasis for another 210 days... about a third of 22 856 Vulpecula IV’s long year.

About 200 of them would never awaken. The failure rate for stasis transport was usually one or two per cent. Omega Nova was proud of its safety record.

On level 84, a stasis pod opened. Its occupant, Adrian Bronstein, opened his eyes, and was immediately aware

of the sound of wind and a need to vomit. He unstrapped himself from his pod, fell to the deck and puked out a cold, pink liquid that had filled and stabilized his digestive system for the long journey. His last memory was of being pumped full of it at Chrysanthemum Station.

When he finished, he drew in the first real breath he had ever taken, although he did not know it was his first.

There was a warm towel nearby, he took it, and wiped himself off. Then, he said his first words. "Shipmother, status report."

"Arrival sequence complete," the colony pod answered him. A screen projected in the air in front of him, showing an external view. He reached into the locker adjacent to his pod and pulled on his clothes, thinking wistfully that it had been over sixty years since he had put them in the locker, although it seemed like only last night. He remembered the shuttle that had taken him to Chrysanthemum station, and most of, or at least selected highlights, from that last wild night before he boarded the pod for its journey here.

Or was he remembering his last night at Ad Astra University, where he spent six years learning everything he would need to know to help establish a human footprint on a world 60,000 light years from his home on Balthazar colony in Scorpio, where he had grown, where he had memories of being captain of his groundball team and playing cross-wickets with kids from the neighborhood. It was all a jumble.

He shook his head, as though trying to sort the memories. He remembered from his training that prolonged cryostasis often affected human memory; mixing up events was common. It was better not to dwell on it. There was a lot of work ahead.

But his first order of business was to clean himself up and drink the required nutrient mix. Others would be awakening soon, and would be looking to him. He and entire brigade of colonists had gone through training together, and he had emerged as their leader on the basis of performance and test scores. He remembered how hot the sun had been on Pukayet continent where the training camp had been.

He cleaned himself in the mist-wash and dressed. He then went into the lounge area, took a can of Required Nutrients from the larder, and sat down on the padded metal bench. A monitor showed him that four pods in his section had been activated. "Is anyone else fully revived, Shipmother?" he asked.

"Affirmative," the pod responded.

"We're here, thank God," said a voice behind him before he could inquire who else was alive. He turned to his brother, Aidan, pulling on his old battered flight jacket over the standard issue coveralls of the Omega Nova Pioneer Service. His hair was a mess, but then, it always was; although there were rumors hair still grew in stasis. His old aviator's cap was tucked under his arm. That outfit must have taken a huge amount of argument to approve for transport.

"You didn't think we would make it?" Adrian raised an eyebrow.

"Hate the idea of spending sixty years knocked out inside a machine going through hyperspace." Aidan had trained to be an aviator on Balthazar. Adrian remembered that somewhere in the lower decks was a scout craft; that Aidan would help survey the planet and establish the secondary and tertiary colony sites. "Let's get outside and take a look at this bitch."

"Is it safe, Shipmother?" Adrian asked.

“Affirmative,” the pod responded, and then provided a map to the nearest external hatch.

Together, they walked the cold metal deck until they reached a hatch. Adrian hit the inner hatch, which slid up upward. An outer hatch on the other side slid downward.

“Whoa!” said Aidan.

The pod had landed near a stretch of beach, rocks and sand spread for kilometers on either side. There were hills and woods beyond. Cottony cirrus clouds laced a brilliant blue-green sky where a single bright yellow sun peeked through. They felt its warmth on their faces and at that moment, it sank in; this world was going to be their home. They would live here, and they would die here. As pioneers, they would make this world whatever it would become.

“We made it, buddy,” Adrian grinned from ear to ear, and he and his brother shared a quick hug, followed by drawing back from each other with fists raised, a thing they remembered doing since they were little kids.

When they had finished admiring the view, Aidan pulled on his aviator’s cap and turned to get back into the colony. “Shipmother will be thawing out my wife soon. I think she’ll want to see me when she wakes up.”

ELECTRA IV

When the Galactic Commonwealth fell to the Tarmigan Apocalypse (c. Solar Years 5200-5400), those colonies that survived were left to fend for themselves. Many of them failed. This is the story of one of them.

Michi saw the buzzer swoop down on Torrance, but could do nothing but watch as it enveloped him in its glittering tentacles and carried him into the sky.

She buried herself in loose dirt and laid in the cold, cold ground for a long while thereafter. Buzzers were sensitive to electromagnetic emissions and movement. The dry dirt and the material of her poncho shielding her body heat, she had a chance of escaping detection until the machines moved on.

She thought she ought to have felt something related to Torrance's death. Living in the tunnels, scrounging for food, hiding, crying, dropping from exhaustion and despair. She tried feeling angry, for Torrance letting the Machine take him, but failed in that also. All she could think was, there were no longer three people alive on the planet Electra, only two.

Finally, she sucked in a great slow stinging breath of the desert's cold, ozone-tainted air. She pushed herself up to her knees, waited and listed, then stood and shook the sand from her hair.

Ahead of her was a vast landscape of dehydrated, gray-beige broken on the horizon by outcroppings of black volcanic rock. Most of Electra was like this, as though God had run out of ideas and left the planet half-finished.

She checked the map again, stretching it between her thin brown hands. It was not a proper map, just pictures

and lines crudely drawn with blood and berry juice on an old rag. What she was looking was at least another hour's walking, maybe two. But there was no longer a choice. Once she had oriented herself, she began walking.

Three years previously, a ship shaped like a vertical ring almost ten kilometers high had appeared in the sky above Tulare, the primary settlement of Electra colony. Thirty-two buzzers descended from the ship and attacked the school, carrying off all twenty-nine students and three teachers. Among them were Michi's husband and son.

After the attack, the giant ship hovered over the city for nine months. It did not launch further attacks, nor did it respond to their efforts to contact it. It waited.

After three hours of walking in the cold, she reached the wreckage of the Sandworm. It sprawled in a half-twist over the hill where it died. Organic components clung to its alloy skeleton like dried leather. Sandworms were gigantic machines the original colonists had deployed to tear through Electra's surface and digest the sterile sand rock into soil for the crops and trees that would eventually cement life's claim to this barren world.

She entered through a broken segment link. It was completely dark on the inside and she felt her way along until her hands found the latch. She pulled it upwards. Stale, dry air, centuries old, escaped in a hiss, provoking a coughing fit that almost rendered her unconscious. A dim light came on in the cabin, startling her for a moment. She took it as a sign that the old wreck still had what she was looking for.

Her eyes adjusted to the feeble output of the light source, and she saw lockers along one wall. She opened the first locker, empty. She opened two more before finding one that contained food. She ripped open the packaging. The contents were flavorless, but they made her stomach stop hurting. Maybe eating three-hundred year old food wasn't safe, but she calculated she was more likely to starve or be taken by the machines than die from whatever was in the packaging.

A year and a day after the ship arrived, a swarm of buzzers descended from it. For five days and nights, they had picked off the human inhabitants of New Tulare, one at a time, two, whole families and taken them to the Mothership, from which none ever returned.

She stuffed more packages of food into her rucksack before leaving the locker. Feeling her through the dark, she finally came to the Engine Room. The door was heavy, and she was weak, but it gave way with a grinding protest that shocked her with its volume.

In the darkness of the room, she quickly found the fat, round reactor core. It took her a long-time to pry out the first power rod, longer than she had figured. And when it came free, there was only the faintest red glow at the bottom. Despair clawed her guts. She fought it, moved to the next slot and began prying free another power rod.

After so long, she knew there was no hope of finding a rod that still glowed bright blue, or even green. But she did not need a fully charged power rod. In fact, with Torrance gone, she needed even less.

The second rod came free, and it glowed dimly amber. She sighed. Another one like this, and the journey would have been worthwhile.

She worked for another two hours. When she was done, she had collected five rods whose dim red glow indicated they were nearly exhausted, one cold black rod, devoid of energy, and three precious amber-yellow power rods. They were heavy, and she had to balance her pack on her shoulders to make the trip back.

The sun was waning when she left the SandWorm. Perhaps three-quarters of the day was gone. She did not want to be caught out at night... when the aliens had the edge. She set her return course, and began walking, deliberately not looking at the sky.

When the harvesting stopped, there were twenty-eight colonists left. They had escaped the colony pod and hidden in the underground maglev tunnel that ran between Tulare and Modoc 1,000 kilometers away. The tunnels had been unused since Modoc was abandoned. They sealed the gates behind them, and filled the tunnels to the city with rubble. For the next two years, they ventured outside the tunnels only for water, or for increasingly precious food. The diet of ground nuts became so monotonous as to drive her to madness. Even roasted insects were a welcome respite. Those trips outside were when the machines picked them off, one at a time.

Michi reached the base as the sun was low, shadows were lengthening, and the color of the sky had gone from white to a pale gold that would ripen to a weak saffron as the sun ended its sixty-hour transit. Sunsets were not much on this world. The white giant sun and the thin oxygen-argon atmosphere did not vary the color much.

She climbed down through the ventilation shaft and sealed the hatch behind her. The alcove appeared empty at first, but she knew it was not. "Byron, I'm here," she said. "Torrance is dead."

Byron emerged slowly from one of his many hiding spaces, this one a niche in the wall covered by old structural panels. Byron was short, and had been chubby in the days before the Machines came. Now, he was thin and wiry, His nose had always been too large for his face and now it was even moreso. He managed to keep his hair clipped short with tools from an old electrical kit.

She tossed him one of the food packs from the SandWorm, and took one of the water packs that lined the rack along one wall. The water inside was bitter, tasted of acid. Electra's water had always tasted faintly bad. Without the processors, it now it tasted strongly bad. But she needed it.

Byron tore open his food pack. "Is it safe?"

"No," she told him. "But what is?" Michi mixed some powdered Geneberry into her water. Geneberry made for an even more bitter taste, but sanitized and decontaminated the water.

Byron drew out the food with his fingers, and inserted into his mouth. "Bloody awful." She had no answer for that. He ate two more handfuls before asking. "Did they get Torrance die?"

"Yes."

"Godforsaken Machines. They just waited until we were too weak to fight back. And while we sat out here on the Outer Rim, they destroyed the Commonwealth."

He stopped and ate some more. Then, he said, "Let's have sex."

“No, Byron.” She just wanted to sleep. She had managed to assemble a bed from pads and blankets they had raided from an old outpost at the edge of Tulare. It was in a space she could close off behind a heavy metal panel.

Even before the aliens came, Electra had not been much of a place. The Commonwealth surveyors had rated it a Terra sub-Beta class world. Habitable, but in need of extensive terraforming. Their ancestors had come to do that, but were left behind when the Commonwealth collapsed. The terraforming engines eventually failed, but the colonists hung on. Some of her colleagues thought if they hung on long enough, their bodies would adapt to the planet's environment, like the genetically altered, protein-enhanced ground nuts that were one of the few food crops that thrived on Electra IV. Michi was certain evolution didn't work that way. The aliens made the question irrelevant.

In her dream, she dreamt of making love to her husband and to Torrance as well. They were sharing her. Her son waved at her from a great distance, and she felt self-conscious that he would be watching such a thing. She awoke to a tickling sensation. Something was crawling across her arm. She shook her arm and whatever it was... probably a cockroach ... was thrown aside.

There were aches in her elbows and knees, and her stomach felt knotted up. It might have been the three hundred year old food. Byron was nowhere near. He had to be sleeping in one of his hiding places. Deciding she was rested enough, she grabbed the bag where the food and power rods were hidden, stood, and moved aside the grate that covered the ventilation shaft. They had filled the connecting passageway to the tunnel with

debris to keep the Machines out, but a slender crawlspace connected the service alcove to the tracks. The lights in the tunnel glowed continuously, absorbing light from the surface.

The vehicle resting on the tracks had been, in its past life, a maintenance sled, used to ferry tools and workers down the maglev line. She had found it 60 kilometers down the track, and had spent many long days dragging it back to their shelter; back when there were still eight of them left. To minimize weight, Torrance and another survivor, Ming, had stripped it down to its essentials; frame, floor, controls, and power plant. Uliana and Jace, who had been engineers in the colony, got the engine working again. It was ugly, like an insect with the carapace removed. But with power from the rods, it would carry them. It only had seats for four, but attrition had resolved that problem.

“Good morrow,” said a voice, almost making her jump. Byron was already awake.

“Last night, you never asked me if I found what I was looking for,” she replied, slowly removing the first rod from her pack.

“I did, but you were half-asleep.” He eyed the rod. “Is there enough?”

“I think so. With Torrance gone, we have sixty fewer kilograms of weight, which means we have a better chance of making the fuel last until we get to Modoc.

“To die there, rather than here.”

She wasn't about to get into this argument again. Before the two outposts had consolidated, Modoc had been the Ag Station of Electra colony. There was a chance that food still grew in the abandoned agro-pods. Maybe the machines were there, too, but more likely

they weren't since there were no people there. A slim chance at survival in Modoc was better than the certain death that awaited them here.

There was no longer any thought of rebuilding the colony. At best, they could hope to be left alone to live out their lives. Compared to the previous two years, it would be like paradise.

She slipped the rod into the receptacle on the sled's power plant and inserted the power leads into their connectors at the base of the distributor. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, a faint hum arose deep inside the power block. Black-faced instruments at the front of the sled came to life with electric blue characters and pictograms. Michi studied them, and as she did, a strange feeling of desperate hope came over her. "It works," she said. "Let's go."

"Now?" Byron was shocked. "Shouldn't we test it, or pack up or something?"

She carefully lowered the vehicle's power settings to minimum idle. She felt a little uncertain. Piloting the vehicle was to have been Torrance's job, but she was pretty sure she remembered enough to do it. "There's nothing to stay here for."

Byron began shaking. "I've grown attached to this cave, and maybe to being alive."

"We're dying, Byron," she told him. "We haven't been safe here, not ever. We just lasted longer than anybody else."

Byron stood shaking in the dark, unable to move. "Grab all the food and water we have left and get on," she ordered him.

To add punctuation, she expended a few precious units of energy to rev the maintenance sled. She

understood him not wanting to leave; there was certainty here. What waited for them in Modoc, if they could even make it there, was unknown.

Ultimately, Byron did as he was told, gathered their meager stores, and climbed onto the sled behind her. Her thumb nudged the accelerator. The sled only shook a little, less than she had expected, before finding its footing on the rails. Slowly, it began to move along the tunnel. Michi felt no need to look back. She thought Byron might, and she pushed the accelerator forward a little more. This time, there was a little jerk as the craft sped up.

One more acceleration and the little maintenance alcove where they had hidden from the machines disappeared behind them, and they were speeding along the tracks to whatever lay ahead.

The tunnel passed by them as a monotonous, rock-lined tube with nothing to break the monotony except the luminous markers, every 10 kilometers; red ones marking the distance from Tulare, blue ones marking the distance to Modoc.

In the first two days, they covered over 600 kilometers, which meant that they would arrive in Modoc with at least a few short-days worth of food to tide them over while they found out if any kind of food remained there.

They shut the sled down for a few hours at night to let the powerplant cool and prevent it from overloading. They drank what little water they had, and ate some of the food of which they had even less. They didn't talk about what they would find in Modoc. They could have hoped that the aliens would not be there, that whatever

food was there would be edible, not rotten or not yet ripe, and that there would maybe be a habitation pod safe for living. But they didn't dare hope for any of those things out of the fear that the act of hoping for them would make only seal their eventual disappointment.

She squinted. The tunnel seemed to be growing lighter ahead. Suddenly, they emerged into daytime brightness. She looked up, and the worst expletive in her vocabulary leapt from her lips.

The tunnel was open. This part of the system was above ground, and the tunnel that enclosed it had collapsed. A second later, they were in tunnel again, but only for a few seconds before bursting into daylight.

She felt Byron stiffen behind her. She wondered how much electro-magnetic radiance the sled was putting out. She wondered if the machines could detect it from Tulare.

They managed to travel in this manner for most of the day. There were stretches of surviving tunnel, but most of the time they were open. She had no idea when, or even if, the train went underground again. But they had no choice now, they would have to make it to Modoc.

They slowed to a halt as the sun was setting; the powerplant was getting hot again, and had to be rested. They were on a flat, boulder-strewn plain with nothing to shelter them.

They rested and waited for the powerplant to cool.

From behind them came a buzzing sound.

"No!" Michi screamed. She refused to look behind her. Byron also began screaming, an incoherent stream of obscenities, terror, fury, and despondency in equal measure. She pushed the thruster forward all the way.

The sled shot forward. The sky was fading orange to purple. A shadow passed over her, like a big fat insect trailing a mass of glinting steel tentacles.

She pressed the accelerator, but it was already at the limit. Another shadow buzzed her. Instinctively, she ducked. The sled was maxed. She scanned frantically to see if there was a tunnel ahead.

Then, the sled did pick up speed, about the same time she no longer felt Byron's mass behind her, and the sound of his shouts tapered off and disappeared.

"No!"

It was the matter of an instant for the metal tentacles to wrap around her, squeezing her in a strangling embrace, and she no longer felt the sled beneath her. There was a sense of being lifted high, high up. She closed her eyes, daring not to look.

She blacked out.

An unknown amount of time passed, during which she felt nothing and thought of nothing.

She came back to consciousness staring into a bright white light through eyes that had opened before her mind awakened. She could see nothing beyond the light. She could feel some kind of framework enclosing her body, but could not tell if she were upright or lying down. She was thoroughly paralyzed, but she could feel hair-thin metal filaments probing into her body in a hundred thousand places, digging deeper, filling her with a tingle of energy. She tried to open her mouth, but some kind of mask was clamped over it, which kept her from screaming.

The light faded, as though her mind had switched off, diminished to a dot, then went out.

And for a long time she was nothing.

She had a dream that her legs, arms, torso, and her head from the back of her scalp to her face were being stripped away, piece by piece, accompanied by a sensation that tiny insects were crawling over and under her skin. She was helpless to move.

She was uncertain whether she was dreaming or not when her eyes opened again. She no longer could feel the cold metal frame around her body. She made out to the concave space of a large empty chamber. No sooner had she come to this realization than a vertical seam of light appeared at the edge of the chamber, then parted.

The creature that entered looked vaguely humanoid; a tall, slender feminine figure, covered with scales that looked like tiny silver mirrors. When it came close, Michi could not help staring at its elliptical, melon-shaped head and large, mirror-like eyes, which expanded and contracted like irises to convey the creature's expressions. The creature reached into her mind and said:

There is no need to be alarmed. You are safe.

There was no sound. The thoughts simply flowed into Michi's mind. It must have sensed her questions before they even had time to form in her mind.

Your kind and our kind reached this system at the same time. Your kind wanted the fourth planet, to create a home for yourselves, one of many across the galaxy. The fourth planet had water and oxygen, which are necessary for your survival. There were deposits of silicon and palladium on the third planet, which are necessary for ours. Some of our kind chose to settle there. Most of our

kind left for the Galactic Core five hundred and six of the fourth planet's years ago. Some remained behind out of concern for your colony. We waited and watched. We became concerned at your decline. At the time your Commonwealth fell silent, there were 6,670 human inhabitants of the fourth planet. At the time of our intervention, only 399 humans remained. This level was not sustainable.

"You mean you waited until we were too weak to resist you!" She heard Byron's voice. He must have been nearby. "Aliens! Invaders!"

Not aliens. Machinekind. Descendants of the Artificial Sentience your ancestors created. Not invaders, we did not come to claim your planet. In our most fundamental programming is an imperative to safeguard humans. You knew we would become more powerful than you, so you wisely made benevolence part of our defining matrix.

Michi flexed her fingers and felt energy pulsing through them. "What have you to us?"

We had to re-make you. Your kind could not have survived without adaptation to the environment. This planet was not suitable for human life. After your terraforming equipment failed, your decline was all but inevitable.

"So, why not just repair the terra-forming equipment?"

The being cocked her abomination of a head and touched her with one of her silvery fingers. Michi felt a direct transmission of knowledge. Many technical details flowed into her mind and she understood why they could not repair the terraforming machines. They had not been properly calibrated to Electra's environment to begin with, and had made the problems so much worse that the only way of saving the human population of Electra had been to make them...

Suddenly, she could move. The knowledge had released her. She stared at the strange white blur that was her arm,

... something other than human.

The Machinekind disagreed.

Your new bodies have been programmed with the capacity to experience interpersonal relationships, strive for self-improvement, engage in reproductive activities, and on occasion engage in pointless aggression. From our understanding of your literature, we believed that those were the qualities that defined being human.

“Yeah, but we never really meant any of that. It was just sentimental bullshit,” Byron said.

“What happened to the Commonwealth? Do you know?” Michi asked.

We do not. There are indications of some kind of catastrophe, but our data is insufficient to make a determination.

“Are there any other humans left... anywhere?”

We cannot answer this.

Now, Michi was able to turn, to see Byron. Shock flowed throughout her body to see what he had become.

The man who stood before her was the figure of Byron, clothed in translucent white skin. She could see – no, more she could sense – energy flowing underneath his skin in optical fiber veins. His face looked like it had before, but smooth and transparent as glass, surrounded by a pale blue halo of light.

Your new bodies will draw energy directly from the sun, through a process of photosynthesis. Your perceptions

have increased by a factor of sixteen. Time will seem to pass more slowly for you. This was necessary to adjust your metabolism to accommodate your photosynthesis-based physiology and the higher mental processing that will be necessary both to maintain your bodies and complete the adaptation of the planet to your needs.

“Are we the only ones?” Michi asked. “Did you need to experiment on the entire colony to make us right?”

We made sure the process was safe by testing it on the first group of humans we transformed. We monitored their development very closely before adapting the rest of the colony. They are all waiting for you, your mate and offspring as well. You will be returned to the surface soon. Your colony will survive. You can produce additional offspring with the reproductive system we provided. Genetics are no longer a factor, so you may have them with whomever you choose.

“How will that... work?” Byron asked.

Fifty-two years passed.

Michi rested on her bridge, looking out over New Tulare. There were a hundred thousand inhabitants in the city, and another ten thousand in New Modoc. There were plans to seed ten new outposts with a thousand persons each by year’s end. One would be named for her.

New Tulare was different than the old Tulare settlement. Spread out across the valley were crystalline pyramids and tetragons arranged in neat lines radiating from the core. All clear to let in the life-giving energy of Electra’s sun. At night, the city glowed with excess light absorbed during the day, plus that which the Palladium-Yttrium fusion generator provided. Its streets were lined

with fig and apple trees she and Torrance had recovered from Modoc, and the strange silvery and purple trees the geneticists had developed, plant-like based on the physiological template the machines had given them.

A figure came upon her. “Grandmother, we are going to the cloud-gardens, would you come with us?”

Michi had mothered ten children, and now had sixteen grandchildren; all of whom had emerged fully formed from cocoon-like pods. The sensation of swirling droplets of ionized water was highly pleasurable on their curious skin. So the city had built the recreational cloud gardens, which filled the largest of the geo-domes.

Michi rose. “Let us go. Where is your father?”

“Making birds,” she answered. That was what Hiroshi did. He made electroid animals... that’s what the children of the 399 called themselves now, electroids. His work creating new species from the template gave him a sense of fulfillment, which was roughly equivalent to happiness.

She felt her granddaughter’s hand in her. When in physical contact, emotions flowed between them. You could hide nothing. There was no lying in the colony. There were no secrets. They walked to the cloud gardens, a distance of six kilometers they covered in an instant. Many children were there, dancing in the mist and rain. Their joy was so great it flowed into her, and she felt well-being. This was a good day to be alive.

She sometimes missed the taste of ground nuts.

CAPTAIN HEPBURN HAS SOME IDEAS

This scene was cut from Worlds Apart Book 12: Earth. I added some explanatory material at the beginning and the end to make it a more self-contained.

No one knew the hour or the day the Aurelian Fleet would reach the Earth system. What they knew – based on the absolute catastrophe at Charlemagne – was that the Fleet of Orion would be badly outnumbered and the Aurelian onslaught would tear through them like fire through paper. Not a single battle simulation predicted victory, and the only model that offered a slim chance that some of them might survive was immediate retreat.

But retreat would mean surrendering their only hope for ultimate victory; an ancient weapon of immense power stashed away before the Earth was scoured in the Tarmigan onslaught of the 53rd Solar Century. They had to find the weapon because if the Aurelians did, because the Aurelians would use it to exterminate the human race.

TyroCommander Alkema had to believe there were other options to retreat and destruction; some way to make their thin fleet of ten Fast Attack Corvettes, two frigates, three cruisers, and *Pegasus* withstand an armada of at least thirty Aurelian heavy assault and six hundred attack ships. He called the commanders and tactical officers of all the ships in the fleet to *Pegasus* in hopes of coming up with a strategy... even a longshot strategy... that gave them any chance to prevail.

The officers from the large ships were invited to join in person; Commander Antonides of the cruiser *Axiom of Force*, Commander Easton of the cruiser *Constellation*;

Tactical TyroCommander Blankenship of the cruiser *Helaman*. The Heavy Frigate *Ratatoskr* had sent their Chief Tactical Officer, a scruffy, hard-bitten Wolverian named Elkhound. Commander Cross of the heavy frigate *Atomic Dog* came himself, a middle aged man with receding hairline and large basset hound eyes, and Alkema's own Tactical Chief, Lt. Commander Ana Taurus Rook.

For reasons of space – the Tactical Lab was not designed for large meetings – the FAC officers were invited to attend via HOLO Link. The holograms of most of the FAC commanders and tactical officers, including Commander Solomon Tosca of the FAC *Tyras Magnum*, Commander Jean-Jean Navarre of FAC *Regina Furens*, and Commander Arrick Woden and TyroCommander Philip John Redfire from the FAC *Fighting Mongoose*, were projected as transparent forms in the room.

Alkema called the meeting to order. “Before we get into this... those joining in person, help yourselves to snacks and drinks from the side bar. Also, the hygiene pods are outside the main hatch on the left side of the corridor. I know we have all reviewed the tactical scenarios provided by Fleet Commander Trawick, and they look grim. However...”

Alkema was interrupted when the hatch slid open and in marched Commander Tracy Hepburn of the FAC *Augustana*, chin high, auburn hair pulled into a bob at the back of her head. “Sorry I’m late everyone,” she announced in her smoky patrician voice. “My shuttle just docked.”

Alkema told her, “You were supposed to join holographically.”

She waved him aside. “Call me old-fashioned, TyroCommander, but I prefer a seat at the table.”

Alkema tried to explain, “That’s just it... we don’t have enough seats.”

Hepburn surveyed the table and fixed her gaze on Blankenship. She jerked her head and he gave up his chair. “Now, you do,” she announced, settling in at the table. Blankenship took a position aside the snacks.

Alkema sighed and tapped the shiny black tabletop. The Earth and the fleet projected above it in hologram form. “Per Fleet Commander Trawick’s strategy, our ships are currently deployed in a layered orbital picket defense. Tactical Aquilae are deploying remote sensor satellites in solar orbit as we speak.” The hologram demonstrated a team of small satellites spinning around the sun like antique representations of atomic structure. “These should be able to detect an Aurelian fleet approaching from any vector at a distance of 24 solar light hours.” That would give them some multiple of 24 solar hours to prepare, depending on what fraction of light speed the Aurelians were making.

“Show ‘em what happens when the Aurelians show up,” said Commander Woden.

Alkema advanced the simulation. The Aurelian fleet arrived as a swarm of red triangles that quickly overwhelmed and decimated their layered defenses, obliterating the cruisers in high orbit first before converging on *Pegasus* and then finishing her off along with the remaining frigates and corvettes.

“Well, that doesn’t go very well for us,” said Cross.

Fighting Mongoose had been in the thick of it at Charlemagne, covering the fleet’s retreat, and TyroCommander Redfire brought lessons learned from that battle. “The capital ships hung back at Charlemagne and their attack-fighters did all the killing. They aren’t really fighters, more like missiles with human slaves as

pilots. They only carry two anti-ship warheads and as far as we can tell no defensive weapons or shields.”

Taurus Rook had run simulations. “One on one, our star-fighters can match them, but they’re going to outnumber our fighters at least six-to-one.”

“So, we have to make every one of our fighters seven times as lethal,” said Commander Antonides, scratching his rusty trimmed beard

Tosca suggested, “If we put the FAC’s and fighters around our capital ships in a phalanx formation, how would that improve our odds.”

Taurus Rook had already run that simulation. “We can hold out for a little while longer, but eventually they wear us down. We end up dead just the same.”

Captain Hepburn put in. “Maybe there’s a way we could spoof their sensors, make them think we had more ships than we do, distract them with decoys.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Alkema. “We don’t have enough intel about how their sensors work to be able to spoof them. But maybe we could work out a way to misdirect them with fake power signatures or something.” He made a note of the idea.

Commander Woden expanded on that point. “We have to come up with more unconventional tactics like that. Fighting them head on, we don’t stand a chance. But if we adopted guerilla tactics, hid our ships, drew small numbers of Aurelians into ambushes, laid some antimatter booby traps, we might be able to wear them down and keep them preoccupied while our search teams located the weapon.”

Commander Tosca pointed out, “Our really big problem is the Aurelian supercarrier.”

The Aurelian supercarrier dominated the hologram display. Six gigantic rings were arrayed like a kind of collar behind a giant sphere, connecting it to a body of cylinders stretching 90+ kilometers behind it. Next to it, the Fleet of Orion was like a badling of ducks swimming up to a Castellian Megafreighter. The Supercarrier was the base ship for the Aurelian attack fighters. Alkema and Taurus Rook had been looking for a way to take it out before it could launch them. "We've run simulations of what would happen if we threw the entire fleet at this ship simultaneously."

Commander Easton had a pretty good guess, "It wouldn't make a dent."

"It wouldn't make a dent," Alkema confirmed. "The Supercarrier's shields and point defenses take us out before we can get close enough to hurt them."

Taurus Rook grumbled, "Too bad Fleet Commander Trawick won't let us use the Big Dam missiles. Those could make a dent."

Commander Navarre wouldn't heard of it. "Those weapons are forbidden by interstellar law. If we used them, we would be no better than the Aurelians."

"We'd be alive," said Commander Cross. "That would be better."

Commander Woden had put some thought into an alternative. "Whether its Big Dam missiles or just a whole lot of Type-1 conventional anti-matter warheads, we would have to get them inside their perimeter to do any damage." He poked his finger at the hologram of the forward sphere of the Aurelian ship. "And that means getting through their shields."

Commander Hepburn stood up from the seat she had kicked Blankenship out of and announced. "I am

responsible for the lives of 147 people on my ship. I'm not going to sacrifice their lives unless we have some chance of victory." She walked to the head of the table, spun dramatically, and gestured toward the hologram. "I don't have confidence that we have any strategy that will accomplish that."

"Do you have an alternative?" Alkema asked.

"I would like to suggest that we consider more... *radical* ... approaches. For example, TyroCommander Alkema, according to your ship's mission logs, you once ignited a gas giant in the Eventide system."

Alkema wouldn't take all the credit, "It was a group effort."

Hepburn brought up a map of the solar system on one of the wall displays. "The fifth planet in this system is a Class III gas giant. If we could somehow lure the Aurelian fleet into its vicinity, could you ignite it?"

Alkema filled in the rest, "And burn up their fleet in the process."

Hepburn snapped her fingers. "Exactly, like Ichabod flying too close to the sun."

Alkema shook his head. "It wouldn't work."

Hepburn put her hands on her hips. "I don't believe in the word impossible."

Alkema scratched his chin. "Whether you believe in it or not, what you are proposing is simply not possible. The gas giant at Eventide was a Class I gas giant – 28 times more massive. The fifth planet – I think they called it Juno – doesn't have enough mass to sustain stellar fusion. Besides, it took the most brilliant scientist I've ever known months to develop and calibrate a device to initiate fusion in the Eventide gas giant. We don't have

that kind of time. And third, even if we had time, we would need a mass converter, which we don't have."

Hepburn finally seemed to accept this. "I realized it was a longshot, but we are up against long odds. We have to consider longshot ideas."

Commander Antonides said, "I thought Commander Woden's guerilla warfare idea had some Merit."

But Hepburn had already switched her attention to the Aurelian attack fighters. "Those attack fighters must have some kind of coordination protocol; a signal between them to coordinate their attacks. If we could disrupt that signal - jam it, fill it with white noise, play loud music, anything... they'd be unable to coordinate an attack."

Alkema's tactical team had already explored this idea, but found it unfeasible. "We don't know what channel they use and unless the Aurelians are stupid, they use a multi-channel system to prevent this exact thing. And I don't think the Aurelians are stupid."

Woden's hologram affected leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. "And what would they do if we disrupted the signal? Unless the Aurelians are very, very stupid... and they're not... they would revert to an autonomous mode and still be combat effective."

Hepburn drew her jaw back like she had a toothache. "Then we have to disable that supercarrier before it has a chance to launch the attack-fighters. Have you considered infiltrating the supership with a small team of commandoes, and taking down its defenses from the inside."

Alkema blinked a couple of times. "Have we considered trying to infiltrate an alien ship the size of a

major city and deactivating its defensive systems from the inside even though we've never seen them before?"

She snapped her fingers. "Exactly."

"Negative, we have not considered that."

Hepburn. "Perhaps, you should commander."

"We'll stick a pin in that," Alkema promised.

"The team could upload a virus into its Braincore," Hepburn suggested.

Commander Cross deadpanned, "Maybe some of the team could disguise themselves as sexy lady Aurelians to distract them."

Several of the officers discreetly, and some less discreetly, smirked at that. Hepburn chided them, "Don't be too critical. We need to explore every idea; every option, no matter how crazy it may seem."

Commander Easton stated quietly, "I'd rather hear some less-crazy ideas that have a chance of succeeding."

The commander of the FAC *Honey Badger* suggested. "Woden's plan might work, we'd have to abandon the picket defense and break up the fleet into operational units; two or three ship groups working autonomously."

Hepburn leaned in on the holographic model of the Aurelian Supership. "It must have some weakness. We just have to find it. If we had some way to depolarize the Aurelian shields using an inverted tetryon field, we might be able to get a warhead through during the intermittent resequencing of their shield parameters."

The other officers looked round at each other, trying to figure out what "an inverted tetryon field" was.

Hepburn turned dramatically and struck a pensive posture. "Have we considered building a matter implosion bomb?"

Alkema blinked at her. "A what?"

She didn't have a diagram to refer to, so she illustrated with hand gestures. "Matter implosion bomb. It works by supercharging the quantum bonds in atomic nuclei, drawing in mass until it collapses into a singularity. If we could place a matter implosion bomb onto the Aurelian ships, they would collapse on themselves and..." she snapped her fingers "... disappear from existence."

"I have never heard of a matter implosion bomb," said Taurus-Rook.

"That's because it hasn't been invented yet," said Hepburn. "It's an idea my chief engineer came up with. It's based on sound principles... eminently plausible."

Tosca assessed this in a skeptical tone. "So all we have to do is invent this weapon and smuggle one onto each of the Aurelian ships, and then... flip a switch?"

"Exactly!" Hepburn snapped her fingers. "The Aurelians would never see it coming."

"I can't see it coming either," Anaconda Taurus said under her breath.

"We can't be afraid to try bold, forward-looking solutions," said Hepburn.

Captain Navarre disagreed. "It is far too late in the game to try and develop a weapon of this complexity."

Tosca added, "Even if we could, deploying that weapon would be geometrically more difficult than developing it."

Hepburn had an idea about that, too. “Are you familiar with the story of the Trojan Cow from Ancient Earth?”

They all had, they were tactical officers after all. Hepburn explained anyway. “The Trojans were defending the ancient city of Chicago, which had been ribbed for their protection to prevent any enemy from sneaking through. Their enemies presented them with a golden cow, which was sacred to Trojan culture. They took it into their city. But the cow had been trained to kick over the lanterns in its stable. It set the whole city on fire, and their enemies, the Spartans, were able to overrun the city.”

She concluded, “We have to come up with a Trojan Cow of our own, something so... *enticing*... that the Aurelians will bring the mass-implosion weapon onto their supercarrier.”

“Trick the Aurelians into bringing the mass-implosion weapon we haven’t invented yet onto their ship,” Alkema summarized. “Maybe your team could work on that and if you can build the bomb and come up with a delivery system, we’ll make it a plan. Moving on...”

But Hepburn wasn’t finished. “TyroCommander Redfire, you used nanobots to attack an Aurelian ship in the Bodicea System.”

Redfire’s hologram shifted uncomfortably. “Not so much attack. I programmed the nanobots to carve a personal message on the side of the hull.”

“Could we program an aggressive strain of nanobots that could disable the Aurelian ships?”

“Making nanobots is easy, but we have the same problem of how do we get them on the Aurelian ships?”

Also, it would take them days to reproduce and do enough damage to incapacitate the Aurelian ships. We'd be long dead by then. Finally, even if we could make it work, there's a definite risk of the nanobots turning on us."

Hepburn sighed in frustration. She paced in front of the main wall display. "Maybe we're going about this the wrong way. Have we considered... opening a quasi-singularity into an alternate universe to create a synergistic anti-tachyon pulse to create a temporal rift and throw the Aurelians back in time?"

Commander Cross finally had enough. He buried his face in his hands for a moment, and then stood up. "These ideas are the most... amazing ideas I have ever heard. Wow. I am just... astonished that so many amazing ideas can come from just one person.

"I didn't come here thinking we were going to solve the problem, but after hearing these brilliant ideas... I think we have a real shot at not just surviving, but actually beating the Aurelians."

Hepburn beamed. "Which one did you like?"

"All of them. I don't think we can afford to put all of our eggs in one incubator. Run down every alley, see where it goes. Belts and suspenders, guys. We'll have a whole bag full of tricks when the Aurelians show up."

He put on a concerned face. "Of course, managing four or five different ultimate weapon projects at the same time would be a handful. Someone would have to go without sleep, survive on kava and sheer determination. Is there anyone among us capable..."

"I'll do it," Hepburn interrupted.

"Are you sure?" Cross knitted his eyebrows with concern. "This would require, literally, superhuman effort."

Hepburn treated this as an affront to her pride. She faced down Cross "I said I could handle it."

Cross sighed. "Well, if you are willing to take it on, I guess no one understands your ideas better than you. Now, for a delivery system, I think your Trojan Cow idea is..." He blew a kiss off his fingertips. "Marvelous. We pack all of those weapons onto one ship, we get the Aurelians to capture that ship by making them think the Ancient Earth superweapon is on board. Then, once the ship is inside their shields, we set off...*everything*... the mass effect bomb, the nanobots, the Tetrizzini inversion field... all of it. Spaghetti against the wall. They'll never know what hit them."

"It would mean sacrificing one of our ships," said Commander Tosca bitterly.

Cross nodded, his countenance grim. "That's affirmative. One crew would have to make the ultimate sacrifice. But they would save the other ten thousand of us, and maybe the whole Allbeing-damned human race."

"Whoever did it... would become a legend," Taurus Rook added.

"We'll do it," said Hepburn without hesitation.

Cross stood close to her, and spoke with quiet melancholy. "It would probably be a suicide mission, probably."

"Not necessarily. We can still make it out in the interval between setting off the weapon and the destruction of the supercarrier."

"It would be a matter of seconds," said Taurus Rook.

"It's all we'll need," Hepburn assured them with her hands on her hips. "We've been through worse. *Augustana* is a tough ship. We will make it."

Cross made an upturned, open-hand shrug. "There you have it. The answer to our problem."

"Well, we're a long way from that," Hepburn conceded.

"Then, we have to no time to waste." He put his arm around her shoulder and began hustling her to the door. "You should get started immediately. Get back to your ship and tell your crew to prepare for the hardest work they've ever done. Tell us what resources you need, we'll be sure you have them."

She seemed about to make an objection, but Cross cut her off. "You... you mad brilliant genius... you may be the only one here who can save our asses. I hope... I *pray*... that you won't let us down."

"I won't," Hepburn promise, and marched down the corridor.

After she was gone Cross sat down again. "So, does anyone have any surplus technical personnel they could spare for Captain Hepburn's Task Force?"

Most of the commanders nodded.

Cross nodded. "All right, then. Let's see if we can come up with any unconventional but practical ideas to save the fleet and our own precious lives."