

INDEPENDENCE

A *Worlds-Apart* Story.

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. Its passengers spared the sprawling capital city below one last look, before the ship shot into space at a speed that put bullets to shame.

Behind her, the excellent metropolis 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.

Her speed might have given the impression she was glad to be rid of the place, but it was only because this was the speed she had been designed to fly. Seven people occupied the generous space afforded by her main deck, and their consensus was that the planet had been spectacular.

"No one on that whole planet tried to kill us," Captain Keeler sighed, wiping a tear from his cheek. "God bless them all."

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 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 houseplants and women dressed like boys. He appreciated finding the first civilized world in *Pegasus's* two years in space, but he was looking forward to well-earned time off.

The Captain prattled on. "Maybe, we've finally reached the Galaxy's better neighborhoods. It was wonderful, although far from perfect. Was it just me, or did the people impress you as being a little bit too loud, and 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, 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 Captain repeated, shaking his head in wonder.

His Third-In-Command, a lean, red-haired, intense officer named and titled Tactical Commander Philip J. Redfire, leaned forward. "Didn't that make 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," the Captain 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. They were even preparing to undertake their own interstellar voyages, using sub-light ships and stasis chambers, when *Pegasus* arrived.

"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. Her primary field was climatology, but botany was her secondary interest. She leaned over her seat and craned over to address them. "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 the new 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 double the acceleration of *Pegasus's* Aves and defensive missiles.

What would happen next? Keeler knew, as he stared out his viewport and watched the world become a curve and then a sphere, far below and behind of him. World by world, *Pegasus* would find the colonies of humanity, and begin reconnecting the delicate strands of civilization that had once joined the stars.

So, now it was on to the next one, and hoping their luck held.

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.

"*Prudence*, hailing *Pegasus*. *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.

Something was wrong, something he could not place at first. He turned away from the image for a second. "*Prudence*, recall the frequency for communication with the planet Independence and open a channel."

The ship did as it was told. "Independence, this is the Aves *Prudence* from the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*. I have lost communication with *Pegasus*. Are you receiving my signal?"

Prudence informed him there was no response from the planet. He turned back to the image. It had not changed position. Something else. *Pegasus* was luminescent, glittering with thousands of lights set in a hull that gave off its own bright glow. None of the lights moved, none blinked. It was like looking at a still photograph.

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 Station. 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 communication 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* 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.

"Captain Keeler, Commander Redfire, we have a situation," she said, not turning around. They were across from her, speculating as to why certain acolytes of Independent Buddhism died their hair pink. They crossed to her side, accompanied by Alkema.

"What's up, American?" Redfire 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. Redfire ticked off the results. "Energy output, zero. Life signs, zero. System cognizance, zero."

Alkema translated for his Captain. "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. "Were we attacked?" he asked.

"Are there any ships or energy readings in the area?" Redfire asked.

American answered him. "Negative, no other vessels and no energy signatures are in the area. *Pegasus* is hanging dead in space.

"All the lights are on, but nobody's home," the Captain muttered.

Alkema frowned thoughtfully. "If the lights are on, how can there be no energy signature?"

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

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

"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 told them, looking through the canopy. "There's still billions and billions of them out there."

"Billy-uns, and Billy-uns," Keeler corrected. "It's pronounced, Billy-uns and Billy-uns."

Redfire, Alkema and Keeler migrated up to the Command Module, and were standing behind Matthew Driver's piloting station 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

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."

Redfire 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 small 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. His jaw dropped, his eyes went wide, and 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, who were standing, 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.

"Executive Commander Lear's ship landed ahead of us, and was still in the Passageway when we came in," Matthew explained. "We almost collided with it."

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, arrayed, or hanging over the hangar area. 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 be checking the ships on the deck. Goneril Lear should have been complaining to her pilot that her tea was too hot. Instead, there was no one to be found, and no one who responded on the intra-ship comm-links.

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

"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." Happy Fun Ball was used in an eponymous game on the planet's surface. The ball had a unique property in that it conserved all of its potential and 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 be 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 herd-beast," Redfire said.

"What does that mean?" Shayne American asked. A native of the planet Republic, a planet largely devoid of enormous, herbivorous, nomadic quadropeds, she was unfamiliar with the expression "acknowledge the herd-beast."

"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 400 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.

"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 our technology to them, 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," American 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. He knew in his heart there had to be something wrong with Independence. So far in their journey, anything that seemed not too horrible to be true probably wasn't. "Why should they?"

"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're with me."

"I would also like to go to the Inhabitation decks," said Dr. Bihari. "My son, the 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 captain 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."

"I meant, why the Bridge?"

Keeler shrugged. "I just feel I should go there. Besides, if *Pegasus* had any inkling as to what happened, there might be some clue in Primary Command. 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, Captain," said Alkema. He could see it all now. The doors to PC-1 slide open. The bridge is filled with horrific green and purple insectoids, buzzing around with fangs and tentacles, Keeler shouting, "Captain? Who? Me? I'm just the Kitchen Staff Supervisor."

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

"If we lose contact, we'll all meet back here in ... three hours?" Keeler suggested.

"Agreed," said Redfire.

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 like large, chunky, almost pyramidal blocks of suites arranged beneath an artificial sky and divided by landscaped walkways of flowers, grass, and trees. 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, chose a dwelling unit and pressed against the hatchway until it finally gave way. Beyond it 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, these are my quarters," Redfire said. "And these are exactly how they're supposed to look."

The women regarded him skeptically. He explained. "I find furnishings and decorations distracting. This way, I get out more often. My question is, are these quarters what any of you expected?"

They agreed that they were not, and Redfire led them down the corridor. He stopped before another hatch. "These quarters belong to Tactical Specialist Aliss 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 Aliss Mandelbrot's 400 sq. meters of assigned living space divided into four rooms. This main room contained a pair of Odyssey Project-issued couches (in an unimaginative teal and gray check pattern) and chairs, an interactive self-entertainment suite, and the other basics.

Redfire ignored them, and looked at the personal touches, beginning with the holoposters that hung from the walls. Carpentarian folk art depicting, mainly, simplistic drawings of mining equipment, ore processors, spaceships, and old-style robots. "Quaint," he muttered. "Exactly what I would have expected."

He turned from the artwork and 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. "Bodicéan cameos," he said. "Mandelbrot did take some shore leave on Bodicéa, 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. "Borealan sushi," he explained.

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

"Neg, neg, you don't get it. 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?"

"Neg, that's not it. Besides, 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 what I'm getting at?"

"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 know. 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 Captain," 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 bon mots, my amusing anecdotes, my stories that go no where and serve no purpose."

Alkema examined the displays. Crystal clear. He passed his hand through them, 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 of the second largest continent on Independence, called Liberty. The view showed lightning flashing from cloud-to-cloud.

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 all of our chronometers stopped ... and the same time Flight Captain Driver said his communication links went down. Isn't that right?"

Driver was standing in the forebridge staring into the corner.

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

Keeler raised his weary head. "He asked you a question, Captain."

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. It's like a holo-image, badly transmitted. I can barely make it out... it flickers on and off, but she's here. 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't explain it but I know 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. She sat in a technicians' lounge with Bihari, who 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.

"There is only one thing that explains our situation," Redfire announced. 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," the Captain 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."

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

"Perhaps the ship's gravimetric propulsion field insulates it somehow," 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.

Dr. Bihari elaborated. "We're breathing, and CO2 concentrations are building up in this Landing Bay."

Alkema added. "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.

She was answered in a chorus. "Tarmigans."

"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, Captain?" 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."

"That 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 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 Heaven, 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 in front of them. To cut her off at the pass, Alkema spoke up, "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. The universe is static, no motion. However, there are an infinite number of universes, each one representing one probabilistic course. We don't move within one universe, but we move from one universe continuously 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, she'll 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." Alkema said tracing the line of the interface across his cheek and jawl.

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

Alkema drew his fingertips across Redfire's face. Black, gray, and blue chips and ridges appeared as the molecular knitters produced the interface. The commander touched it with his fingertips. "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, "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 captain 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 78 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 was pretty much my plan for the rest of my life anyway."

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.

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 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... I did not suddenly just appear on the Bridge just now?"

"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 Captain."

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 the 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?"

Magnus 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 Magnus 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 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 and Magnus 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."

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

Her tea came. She ignored it. "You don't remember flying back to the ship, and everyone being gone? You went to Primary Command with the Captain. 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 any kind of sense at all, let me know. I've been looking for it my entire life."