

Medea

A world's Apart Story

Part One --

“...point-four-oh light days from the outer margin of system 12 822 Equuleus.” Lieutenant Navigator Eliza Jane Change reported. The rest of the bridge crew might have detected a note of satisfaction in her voice, but no pride of accomplishment was betrayed by the slightest play of a smile on the firm line of her mouth, or even a flash of light in her dark, almond-shaped eyes. The engineers and theoreticians who had designed the navigation systems for the Pathfinder ships predicted the ships would emerge 30 to 90 light days outside a system 90% of the time. She had beaten them, three for three now, and this was her closest approach yet, but to betray too much pride would have been a breach in the aura of seriousness she wore like armor.

“Well done, lieutenant,” said *Pegasus's* Commanding Officer, Captain William Keeler. One hand was still bandaged from their last exploratory mission, to the very bizarre and dysfunctional world called Eden. In the course of his visit to the renowned hospitality planet, he had been attacked by winged guardsmen, ferocious beasts, vampires, and, worst of all, a breed of vile creature that had been driven to extinction on his own world millennia before ... politicians.

In the Captain's good hand, he held his trademark ancient walking stick; a long thick pole of some strange alien material, covered with mysterious alien runes. As a weapon, the stick had served him well on that world. The crew had had their doubts about Keeler when he had been given command of their ship only a few days before launch. They had known only that he had been the chancellor and professor of history at the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland, that he was a Keeler who could trace his ancestry to the founding of the colony, and that he had turned down a place in the crew earlier when he had been passed over for command. He looked the part of the sinecured academic, large, almost middle-aged (a few wisps of gray at the temples), his gray eyes sparkled with intelligence. Two missions under his leadership had proven him to be more than any of them had expected.

The slim figure of Executive Commander Goneril Lear stood high on a rail over-looking the rest of Primary Command (PC-1); a seldom-used vantagepoint. To the crew, she was more Keeler's rival than First Officer, and the direction of the ship was almost a battle of wills between the laid-back former professor and the hard-charging Ministry bureaucrat. She was receiving a fresh report from Astrogration Survey, confirming what Eliza Jane Change had just reported. They were just outside a star-system whose primary had a spectrum identical to 12 822 Equuleus, less than half a day away at light speed. The bright hot star beckoned to them.

Lear reported crisply. “Initial scans indicate we are 8.3 degrees off the plane of the system. If the

University of Sapphire at New Cleveland Navigational Reconstruction team have come through for us again, we should find the ancient colony of Medea here.”

“They haven't let us down yet,” Keeler said, confidently. He looked up to his blond first officer, and wondered if her mention of his alma mater was an unusually unsubtle occasion of flattery. As usual, her expression was inscrutable. Whatever machinations were in progress behind those gray eyes he could not imagine, nor did he want to.

“Shall I begin preparing the Surveyor probes?” Lear asked.

“Say pretty please,” said the Captain, and he waited for her response although he knew she never would. He turned back to his navigator. “Lieutenant Change, lay in a course for the inner system. Commander Lear, you may prepare your probes.”

Lear gave the order to the specialist at the science station to prepare four probes for launch. Surveyor probes were long missiles, needle tipped with three large fins at the aft end around their ion-drive engines. They reminded Keeler of a device used in recreational lawn games on his own world, and illegal for millennia on Lear's.

Keeler's world was called Sapphire, a warm blue planet that was the original home of nearly half the crew. Lear's world was a cold gray one called Republic, original home to nearly the other half. Neither half of the crew ever expected to see their home world ever again. They had left on a one-way to find the lost colonies of the Great Commonwealth, established during the three thousand years when a triumphant humanity ruled over the galaxy and seeded every constellation with new communities of humankind.

Before the Commonwealth had collapsed, it had taken a world in this system, planted a colony here, and called it Medea. Of course, that presupposed that their historical data was accurate and this was the right system for the Medea colony.

Keeler had done some research, while in hyperspace transit, on the origin of the name “Medea.” Medea was a mytho-historical figure of ancient Earth; a witch and the wife of a powerful, charismatic, and deeply corrupt monarch, whom she had brought to power through her witchcraft. The Monarch had carnal relations with a chubby courtesan, and had her killed to keep the truth from getting out. Challenged by the Court to account for some of his evil activities, the King explained that as horrible as his crimes were, letting his enemies come to power would be worse. Medea bewitched the court and the people into agreeing with him and the Monarch was absolved.

Eventually, the Monarch grew old and it was his time to leave. The Monarch's chosen successor was appointed to replace him, but the Monarch's enemies usurped him. Medea and the Monarch fled in a chariot, drawn by winged dragons, pursued by their enemies. In order to delay the pursuit, Medea killed her two daughters and cut the bodies into pieces, scattering the parts behind them. The pursuers had to stop and collect the dismembered bodies in order to give them proper burial, and so Medea and the Former Monarch escaped.

Medea continued using her sorcery, beguiling the populace into giving her a place in the Imperial Senate. Her husband, the monarch, left her for another woman. Medea got revenge for the desertion by killing the new bride with a poisoned robe and tiara that burned the flesh from her body. The monarch died as well when he tried to embrace his dying bride. Ultimately, Medea became queen and brought ruin to her country.

Keeler could not imagine why anyone would want to name a colony after such a figure, but who was he to judge?

Until the ship found some evidence of current or previous human inhabitation, he would have little to do. (In a way, the ruins of a failed colony might be even more interesting than a surviving colony, he thought, not knowing how much he would regret the thought later.) He left science to his capable science teams, and operations to the ship's capable technicians. His command abilities were only needed when some human intelligence made things complicated. His presence at this stage was primarily ceremonial.

The Captain looked at the forward part of the PC-1, where the holographic display showed what was outside the ship, which, at the moment, was nothing. Travelling sixty odd light years and emerging within a day's flight of your destination was really impressive from a statistical point of view, but it still meant a long dull lapse between emerging from hyperspace and mapping the nearby system. He looked around PC-1, and saw thirty or so people, earnestly attending to their critical functions. As usual, it was what he did not see that stood out most.

"Where's Phil?" the Captain asked.

"Tactical Commander Redfire?" Lear repeated, not for clarification, more out of her Republic-bred disdain for informality. Tactical Commander Philip John Redfire was the ship's Chief Tactical Officer. Like all of them on the ship, he had answered that call to challenge the unknown. He had the explorer's heart, the adventurer's soul. Missing an emergence was almost unthinkable. Yet, standing at his post was Specialist Shayne American. A slim, dark skinned woman with close-cropped blond hair from the planet Republic.

It was American who answered the Captain's question. "Commander Redfire remains on personal leave."

Keeler stared at her for a moment. "Still?"

"Indefinitely," Lear put in, disguising her glee less effectively than Eliza Jane Change her pride.

Don't be so confident, Keeler thought, and tapped his walking stick. "I would pay him a visit, but the last time I tried, he told me to go away or he'd lock me in an escape pod with a couple of mechanoids and make me watch bad holo-sensory fictions."

"Threatening a superior officer?" asked Lear.

"I don't think he meant it," Keeler sighed. "Although, it is the kind of threat he would follow through on."

At Keeler's side was a young operations specialist named David Alkema, a handsome piece of work, with ruddy cheeks, full lips, a slightly upturned nose, and thick black curls. Alkema, too, wore bandages from their adventure on Eden, although his wounds had been considerably less than the Captain's. As usual, Alkema had insight into what was up with Redfire. "The ship's rumor says something very bad and very personal happened to him on EdenWorld."

"Actually," American muttered, "I heard it was when he got back from EdenWorld that the excrement met the ventilator."

"No gossip on the bridge," Lear said, quietly but sternly. The ship had been twenty-five days in transit through Hyperspace. Redfire had requested personal leave very early on, and had kept to himself ever since. Rumor had seen him talking with a Theologian Spiritual Advisor in one of the ship's garden areas. Rumor had seen him sparring with an and/oroid in one of the ship's gymnasias. Rumor had seen him sleepwalking naked through one of the Landing Bays. Rumor had seen him in an agro-botany bay sitting in a tree eating bananas. Rumor, apparently, had seen more of him than anyone in the crew.

Everyone in the crew had seen the reports from EdenWorld, of how Redfire had rescued escaped slaves and made the acquaintance of a strange exotic woman. They knew Captain Keeler's landing party had suffered over 50% casualties. They knew of the beasts and guardsmen and monsters and it came as little surprise that something on the sick, sad little planet might have bitten Lt. Cmdr. Redfire in the mind. From what they had learned of Eden, there were so many freakish and terrifying things on that world that sooner or later, one thing or another was bound to give you the boogins.

At the moment of emergence, the aforementioned Tactical Commander Redfire was three hundred twenty one decks below the bridge, in what originally had been a tertiary auxiliary holding tank for contaminated water. It was being converted into a gathering place, where the crew might come to socialize, listen to bad music, eat worse food and imbibe unhealthy beverages; in short, a dive.

Redfire sat cross-legged on the floor, holding a crayola wand, staring at a blank corner of a wall that was covered with a vast mural of very unhappy-looking people. The detail of the scenery, the clothing, and the inanimate objects depicted in the mural was exquisitely realistic, in sharp contrast with the faces of the people, which were highly stylized, with exaggerated expressions of anguish and rapture. Even the ones who were supposed to be laughing looked like they were they were laughing out of dementia rather than joy.

The proprietor of this would-be dive was a young former technician third class who was determined to turn this into a meeting place for those in the ship's company who craved less structured and aesthetically calculated entertainments than the ship's recreation lounges provided. He had already persuaded some of his former colleagues from the landing bay to form a band, and he was planning on live cayenne music twice a week. Someone (a rather straight-edged and unimaginative Flight Core type) had also suggested singing contests using popular music from which the vocal tracks had been removed. It sounded barbarically uncool to Eddie Roebuck.

Three ship-days after *Pegasus* had entered hyperspace, he had been surprised when the ship's Chief Tactical Officer had appeared at the hatch with a crayola wand, asking if he could paint a mural.

The same officer had earlier signed off on his request to use the space. As much as he wanted to refuse, that would have been rude and ungrateful. Besides, the officer in question was a Master of Pyrokinetic Art. Prior to becoming the officer in charge of all the ship's weaponry, he had made a name for himself traveling around the planet Sapphire, destroying buildings and bridges, setting cities on fire and starting avalanches; holding a mirror up to nature and then smashing it, finding beauty in the shards. What was the worst that could happen? At least he had at least not asked to blow up the place.

Now, Eddie stood back, looking over the mural. The Commander had done the faces last, but Eddie Roebuck had seen the direction this was taking for at least the last two weeks. He had spent that time working out precisely the most tactful way to convey his critique of the work in progress. He had settled on the wording last night. "Beauty, that is one brutal painting."

"It's been a long time since I have worked in paints and colors, rather than explosives," the commander replied. "Not since I was a boy – thirteen years old – on the side of my father's barn. I did a trompe de l'oeil; milkbeasts and alfalfa. Looked pretty good. Cost me a month's dessert and after-school privileges. In retrospect, I should have asked first, which is why I asked you before I began this time."

"Yeah, well," said Eddie Roebuck. He found the mural difficult to look at. "You don't think a painting like that is going to make people, you know, spider-freaked, do you?"

"Spider-freaked?"

“You know, like when you see a spider in a room and it freaks you out. Even after it's gone, you're all twitchy because you keep thinking there's a spider around. Spider-freaked.”

Redfire gave a slow nod, then returned to his work.

Eddie bit his lip, wiped his nose with the back of his hand, and tried a new and completely unpracticed approach. “What's it supposed to be anyway?”

“It's a Graceland folk legend, a tale of betrayal and regret.”

“Za, that sets the right atmosphere for a pub.” Eddie pointed to one particularly unhappy figure. “Who's this guy who looks like somebody smelted his puppies?”

“Lysander Grove, the key figure of this particular legend. A mask-woman stole his wife's form, confused his mind and bedeviled him until he betrayed his marital vows. He was overcome with regret and threw himself into a well. His sons, because they had no father, grew up to be foolish and reckless, and lost all his lands.”

“Any drinking, or singing, or other unrespectable tavern-house behavior in this story?”

“Za, that's how the foolishness of the sons is expressed.” He indicated the figures to the right of the middle of the mural. Three young men, one nearly passed out from booze, one surrounded by women, and a third recklessly steering some kind of vehicle into disaster as a small pork-beast leaped out of the way.

“So long as its topical,” said Eddie Roebuck. “Maybe you can paint something happier on the other wall.”

“Maybe.” Redfire turned back to the mural.

“You could do Land-Monsters playing quoits. Everybody loves that.”

“Maybe,” Redfire repeated.

Eddie sighed. This was about as much conversation as Redfire was typically good for. He hated the mural, but what could he do? Without Redfire, he would have no permit to operate the dive. He walked back to the bar and began unpacking glasses.

A few minutes later, the front hatch hissed open, and a woman walked in who, if she had shown up in any bar in New Halifax (Eddie Roebuck's hometown on Sapphire) would have walked out owning the place. The flight suit she wore, normally no compliment to the human form, hugged all the best parts of her body in the best possible way. Her legs were long and slender and looked more like sculpture than anatomy. Her hips were sumptuously full, her breasts deliciously ripe, and the stretch between lithesome and slim. Her hair was thick and blond and framed a face that God Himself could not have improved upon. She was the kind of woman men would pay just to look at, if that type of enterprise had existed in his culture.

With only the slightest gesture of acknowledgment to Eddie, Flight Captain Jones slipped quietly into the room behind Lt. Cmdr. Redfire. Redfire knew she was there, but he pretended not to, kept silent, feigned utter absorption in his work. She came beside him, spent a few seconds scanning the mural, and then crouched next to him on the floor.

The slight smack her lips made as they parted to let her speak cracked into his head like the first close thunder of a summer storm.

She said, "You missed the emergence."

"I didn't miss it. I just didn't happen to be in PC-1 when it happened."

She studied the mural, from the far edge of the wall, her eyes alighting for a moment on each figure.

"You haven't painted in a long time."

"I find redemption in creativity."

She leaned back, arms crossed. "It reminds me of Brainhammer."

His cheeks flushed red. His eyes narrowed. "Kirby Brainhammer was a jack artist. You know he pretended to be dead for thirty-six years. Told everyone who came to the house he was just a ghost. Insisted he was haunting them. Used to fling objects around. What an idiot."

"I always found his work interesting."

Redfire tried to decide whether she was provoking him deliberately. If so, he would not give her the satisfaction of any further discourse on the jack-artist Kirby Brainhammer.

She rose again, and cast her eyes around the space that would be 'Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam 'n' Jam Mark I.' "Is this where you've been hiding out?"

"One place."

"You haven't been in your quarters, and you haven't been in the guest suite."

Redfire didn't say anything. He took the wand away from the wall, and mixed some red into the brown.

"I remember this story," she said, nodding at the mural. "A little obvious for you, I would think."

He ignored her and continued painting.

Lowering herself, again, she crouched next to him. "You can stop punishing yourself, Phil. I have forgiven you."

"I haven't forgiven myself."

"Do you think it was easier for me to let go of what happened? I'm your wife, I'm the one who should be aggrieved."

"It's different. I betrayed you and I betrayed myself. I have your forgiveness but not my own."

"You couldn't control yourself."

"Exactly. I lost control. Just like in New Sapporo. I lost control and I hurt you because of it."

She sighed, scowled, hesitated. New Sapporo was supposed to have been dead and buried forever. They had both pledged never to speak of it again. She was angry that he brought it up, but she was not going to let him use her anger to avoid her. "This was nothing like New Sapporo," she said, sounding more flinty than she would have liked.

Redfire sighed, and looked up toward some spot on the ceiling, away from her. "After New Sapporo, I vowed to never let my animal side take over. While you were off at the Flight Academy, I found a Theologian Master to teach me self-discipline, to help me achieve the mastery of my higher self over my

lower self. I fasted for days. I learned control of mind and body. I put myself through that because of the look of hurt on your face that I never wanted to see again on the face of anyone I loved. I saw the same look again when you discovered me on EdenWorld. I failed you again. I failed you.”

She sighed. “I was hurt and angry at the time, as angry and hurt as I have ever been, and you know the story of my life. I wouldn't be here now with you if I still felt that way. I saw the landing team reports, ... that woman, or whatever she was, altered your mind, Phil. Pheromones, Dr. Reagan called it. It could have been anyone. It could have been me. I can't hold something you couldn't control against you. You can forgive yourself, Phil. I am the one who was hurt, and I have forgiven you. It's all right to forgive yourself, now.”

He shook his head. “That would be the easy way out. I won't allow myself the easy way out.”

She looked at him, shaking her head slowly, lips slightly parted. “That is such beastshit. You know what's really going on here. You just dove into a deep, stinking pool of self-pity, and you don't want to come out.”

Her voice grew harsh, a tone he recognized as leaving no room for argument. “Don't deny it, because you know it's what you're doing. You don't even enjoy this, but you're all wrapped up... neg, not wrapped up. I was right the first time, it's a warm deep pool and you are sunk to the bottom in it, and you're thinking, this is what shame is like, this is what it feels like to have betrayed the woman I love ... again. I really hate myself, I'm disgusted with myself. I've opened up a part of myself I don't see very often, and I have to keep it open. This is a really deep emotion. You're thinking, 'this is the kind of emotion I need to harness to make my art transcendent. I have to turn my shame inside out and let everyone see it. It will make me a better artist.’”

“So, you sit down here, enjoying your misery, harnessing it... and to hell with the rest of the ship, to hell with everybody else, to hell with me.” She reached down and snatched a crayola wand, a grassy green shade and drew a long, jagged line across the middle of the painting.

Redfire put down his wand and turned to her. “I think you better go, now.”

Flight Captain Jones stood.

“I hate it when you get like this.”

She turned, and said it in a different way, “I hate *you* when you get like this. You're a self-absorbed bathwater drinker.”

She left.

Eddie spared a brief, sad look at the man crouched before his painting, thought what a fool he was, thought about the basic injustice that governed the relations of men and women, and went back to polishing the ale mugs.

Phil Redfire picked up the green wand, reversed the action, and removed the ugly streak from his painting.

Four Surveyor probes were lowered onto the electro-magnetic rail-guns and hurled from the front of the ship at nearly a quarter the speed of light. Before their courses could be laid in, *Pegasus's* own sensors had begun to explore the system, searching for the points of gravity that indicated planets, sniffing for the indications of warm, life-giving atmospheres, and listening for the electronic whispers that hinted at intelligent inhabitants, so as to guide them to the most promising balls of rock.

Pegasus sent them a continuous stream of all the data the ship's sensors collected about 12 822 Equuleus to help guide their courses. All six of the worlds in this small system were terrestrial-type, great spheres of rock. The two innermost worlds were barren, their atmospheres having been burned off into space by the expansion of their sun in the turbulence of its youthful T-Taurii stage. Worlds four, five, and six were covered by thick, toxic atmospheres. If there were a human colony in this system, planet three was the most likely place.

The probes adjusted their course, sling-shotting past the fifth planet at close fly-by range. They looked deep into its thick atmosphere of hydrogen, methane, and suspended particulates, and mapped the crust of rock underneath, 100,000 kilometers thick. The dust suspended in the atmosphere gave the planet the appearance of a tremendous, spheroid dust-devil in space; collisions in the atmosphere producing lighting that covered entire hemispheres; very unlike anything in their own systems. Even if 12 822 Equuleus did not yield a colony, it had at least provided one curiosity.

The fourth planet was far out on the other side of the system. The probes crossed its orbit, but left its exploration for later. According to *Pegasus*, 12 822 Equuleus IV was only a third the size of Republic, and was scoured by an atmosphere that was 60% concentrated sulfuric acid; not a promising prospect for human colonization.

Shortly thereafter, the probes passed through a cloud of gaseous, highly charged particles that ringed the sun and made a barrier between the inner and outer parts of the system.

They closed on the third planet. 12 822 Equuleus III was the money planet. Its spectral profile said water was here, and oxygen, temperature within the habitable range for humans. It was the one planet in a million readily available for human colonization. The four probes zeroed in on it like giant space mosquitoes, and transmitted coordinates to *Pegasus*. If this system bore a colony it would be here. Probability said it must have been. Only one star-system in thousands held an Earth-like planet. Statistics were against this world being an unknown, uncolonized planet in a star-system arrived into by navigational error.

The seas of the planet glowed purple beneath the furnace-like glow of its orange-red sun. Its landmasses were a paisley stain of moldy pink across barren expanses of sickly white. The probes made their orbits, two running east-to-west, two running north and south, 12,000 kilometers above the surface. The probes then set about measuring and plotting the planet's geography, cartography, topography, and meteorology from space, and whispering their results back to the star-ship, a day or so behind them.

Pegasus cleared the inner cometary ring and passed inside the orbit of the outermost planet. A science officer from the Geological Survey Core, Specialist Mikhail Goodrich was briefing the senior officers.

"The third planet, according to our sensors, has a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, about 72 percent of the atmospheric density of Sapphire at sea level, much higher water density. Much more humid than the Captain or Commander Redfire are used to. Still, the planet appears amenable to human colonization. So, at 2600 hours last night, ship-time, we directed the probes to converge on the third planet."

"The probes had been in orbit for only about two hours at this point." He brought up a holographic display. Parts of the planet were sharply defined, but large areas were blurry or not filled in at all.

"Since then, we have received some additional data, but, unhappily, we have not picked up any indications of human habitation on the surface. No urban areas, and no large structures, not yet, but, at twelve thousand kilometers up, they would be hard-pressed to find urban structures on Sapphire or Republic, and we really haven't begun looking yet."

“While we’re comparing, one might say Medea and Republic are like mirror images of each other. Republic is a planet where life never got much further than lichens and sea-plants because it’s just at the edge of its star’s thermal margin, but in another two or three hundred million years, more advanced plants and maybe animals might have begun to emerge. Humans just got there first.”

“According to the analysis from Astrographical Survey, it looks like humans got here a little too late. At one time, this world had a huge number of plant and animal species. Then, a few million years ago, its sun underwent a change... it swelled up and cooled down. The climate of the planet shifted, it became drier and cooler, the spectrum of sunlight diminished to a kind of perpetual twilight, and most of the species died off. Anyway, it still retained a reducing atmosphere, and the sun was stable in its new state...”

“If humans settled here.”

“In terms of suitability for human habitation, it was a very good prospect. Oxygen atmosphere, water, fertile soil, warm, low surface radiation. If the Commonwealth found it, there’s no reason to believe they wouldn’t have planted a colony here.”

“How much of the planet has been examined to 1 meter resolution?” Lear asked.

“About nine percent.”

“Have they detected anything promising?” Lear asked impatiently.

“Not as of yet. It’s possible a human settlement may be undetectable from space; especially on a lightly populated colony, 200 million souls or less. Also, the colony might have been built underground, or tightly blended into the eco-system, which would make it difficult to detect. From the surface, we think this sun might be only a third or forty percent as luminous as our own, which would tend to encourage development along those lines. We would have to go much closer to find evidence of that type of colony. Until then, we are examining surface density and albedo to detect evidence of possible roadways and some rocky, regular expanses that could be cities.”

“...or could be regular, chunky rock formations,” Keeler appended.

Goodrich indicated the projection of the planet’s largest continental landmass. “First, we have to make a detailed geophysical and topographical survey of the planet. When we have finished, we’ll identify natural harbors, river confluences, inland lakes adjacent to arable plains. These are the kind of areas most suitable for settlement. Within twenty-eight hours, we should have isolated some of the best prospects and we can send in two of the probes for a closer look.”

Lear took over the meeting. “By that time, *Pegasus* will be in orbit of the planet. Three primary landing teams will be deployed to the surface. I will lead the Primary Contact team, Lt. Conesco will lead the secondary team, and Lt. Firewalker will lead the science expedition. Three Aves are being prepared in the landing bays.”

“What do we know about this world,” Keeler asked, drumming his fingers on the conference table.

“I refer you to the abstract I provided to you last week,” said Lear, she sent a copy to Keeler’s display. “In APR 3908, a few families were transported to Republic from Medea colony. They worked in the crystalline processors of Sector 18 South and returned to their colony twenty-two years later. They described the world as warm, humid, and sparsely populated. This behavior, coupled with the one existing contemporary account indicates that they lived apart from the other workers and kept to themselves.”

“Unconfirmed accounts suggest that most of the Medean colonists were refugees from a failed colony in the Cassiopea Sector. There are two additional records indicating that agricultural products and botanical specimens from Sapphire were trans-shipped to the colony. The cargo manifest of one ship indicates that soil processors were trans-shipped there as well.”

“Our best model was that Medea was a small agriculturally-based colony with a very insular culture, possibly one that splintered off from another colony because of social, cultural, or religious differences. If that is the case, they may not be welcoming toward outsiders. On the other hand, they may also possess well preserved records of other colonies.”

Keeler drummed his fingers thoughtfully. He had skimmed over her report, but he recognized misguided historical bunk when he saw it. Assumptions piled on bunk, to be more precise, but all in the service of not admitting that they knew next to squat about this world. “This was one of the worlds the Odyssey Project sent a probe to in advance of the Pathfinders. Lieutenant Alkema tells me there is no sign of the probe.”

“Specialist Alkema,” Lear corrected. “The probe may have suffered a navigational failure.”

Or the inhabitants, being hostile to outsiders, blew it to pieces and through it into their blood-red sea, Keeler thought. “We will just have to investigate for ourselves,” he said aloud, smiled, and hoped no one could read his thoughts.

Upon receiving the command from *Pegasus*, probe number one made a brief good-bye to its cohorts, dipped its nose toward the atmosphere and began a long arching descent to the planet. It left behind the cold vacuum of space and began bouncing through the first soft wisps of the planet's uppermost atmosphere. Oxygen, in mono-atomic form, and belts of gamma radiation, stung the surfaces of its tail fins. The probes left above the planet continued mapping the surface. They had spotted the indications of hundreds of settlements. They had also found a strange pattern of pockmarks across the skin of the world that *Pegasus* would not see for an hour or more.

The air became thicker and warmer, the black of space became a glowing purple sky, and the curvature of the planet became an expanse of ground colored and textured like moldy and rotting cheese.

The probe was directed to an area at the head of a delta of the world's fourth longest river system. Sensor returns showed there were tall outcroppings of rock that stood out from the surrounding countryside. They radiated heat differently than the surrounding rocks. Their density did not match the composition of the surrounding landscape. It was a promising return.

Closer and closer to the surface of the sphere, the probe passed over a purplish ocean that looked unpretily like clotted blood beneath a bright orange sun that seemed to fill a quarter of the sky, but somehow provided less than half the light of the sun on Sapphire. The probe passed from violet sea to moldering continent and up the coast. Water vapor coalesced over the hot engine, was shed, and boiled away, making a long pink-orange contrail over the still silent world. No one looked up to see it.

The probe passed lower. The air thickened to a great shockwave that boomed across the land but went unanswered. There was no sound but the wind over the plains, over field where crops had grown; now over-run and choked with native weeds.

As the probe closed on the settlement, it saw that the geometry of the rock-shapes was far more regular than what was ordinarily found in nature. They were hollow inside, sheets of rock supported by internal skeletons of metallic and composite alloy. They described cubes, cones, rhomboids, hexagons -

Euclidean shapes of no interest to nature, but basic to human architecture.

Probe One approached its destination, and slowed to the speed of a leisurely stroll, finding an orderly vista of buildings, streets, and housing blocks, empty of any activity. It traveled down a broad avenue near the center of the city. On either side, windows stared out from buildings, blind and vacant. Lozenge-shaped vehicles lined the streets, empty and abandoned; some crashed into each other and buildings. Broken power cables fell into the streets among the vehicles, trees, and other broken bits and pieces of civilization.

The probes transmitted to *Pegasus* the bad news, that she would not be arriving at a surviving outpost of humanity, but too late at the scene of a crime.

(Part 2)

Pegasus had made orbit 100,000 kilometers above the ravished, murdered, annihilated world of 12 822 Equuleus III, halfway between the planet and her one insignificant moonlet. The mighty ship glided above at a safe distance, as the sphere beneath her turned silently, gray-blue continents and smallish violet seas veiled by a mourning veil of dusky diaphanous clouds.

At one time, Medea had been a vibrant world, with perhaps as many as a billion inhabitants. (Probably not, but possibly if they lived a little more densely than the models suggested.) There had been hundreds of cities spread across its landmasses, connected by highways, airports, and seaports. Its people had engaged in commerce, diplomacy, and the business of living. They had raised children, prepared meals, wrote novels, danced to their own music and composed theories on how it all fit together.

That was one time. At another time, all that had come to an end, suddenly, bitterly, remorselessly. The music had been stilled and the dancers fell never to rise again. Cities burned. Bridges collapsed into the rivers. Books rotted in libraries, and whatever wisdom they contained became dust and food for molds.

At the time Pegasus found the butchered world, there was no left to hail her arrival. In the empty cities, a ceaseless wind blew scraps through abandoned lots and alleyways. Abandoned buildings towered over silent streets. Swings and carousels sat rusting in silent playgrounds. On the highways that linked the settlements, vehicles lay abandoned, strewn, forgotten with their colors fading beneath the weak orange sun. Purple seas lapped beaches of powder pink sands as the ships that once plied their waters turned over and sank in desolate harbors.

Outside the cities lay long expanses of irrigated farmland. The fields had been contoured to the landscape, describing vast ovals, crescents, and whorls, the fingerprints of agriculture representing rows of corn, rice, beans, wheat, triticale, tarriga, nalafia --- one hundred and seventy distinct crop strains were identified from orbit. All the croplands were choking with overgrowth, now, itself an echo of humanity's voice. Trees, grass, and flowers had never evolved on this world, or at least, had not been a part of the ecology when humans arrived. The colonists had brought grass and flowers, but there were still no trees, and no one to hear should one fall in an empty forest. Many of the hills were covered with thick, leafy, moss that had been the atmosphere's oxygen generator. A probe tasted a sample of the moss and suggested it might have been laid down as part of a terra-forming scheme.

Even though the humans had gone, their transplanted vegetation would remain to grow, and eventually, perhaps, spread across the surface of this world.

In his conference room, Captain Keeler reviewed the holographic imagery the probes had collected on the planet. Behind his back was the observation portal, where the planet hung, accusingly, over his shoulder, like a ghost demanding vengeance. His top officers, at least the ones who had some expertise

to offer, gathered around the table, looking grave. Keeler stood up, turned toward the planet where so many lives had ended without memorial, and gave them a kind of eulogy.

"The inhabitants of this world were our brothers. Their lives were not so very different from our own. They achieved a level of human civilization to rival our own, and there isn't one of them left alive to tell us about it. We owe it to them, and to the rest of humanity, to find out what became of them."

Keeler turned the meeting over to one of the ship's chaplains who offered a prayer as the Captain took his seat. A gray and white tabby cat curled up on the table near his left arm, sometimes asleep. In the seat on his left was his first officer, Ex. Cmdr. Lear, looking annoyed at the presence of the cat. They had never gotten along. On Keeler's right was David Alkema, who got on just fine with the cat as he did with everybody else in the crew. With them were eleven officers from Tactical, Cultural, and other disciplinary Cores to try and explain the data the probes were sending them. Absent was Commander Redfire, whose tactical judgment Keeler wanted the most.

"The best evidence suggests there was a war," It was up to Marine Lieutenant Honeywell, Redfire's subordinate, to give the post-mortem to the ship's senior officers. He was a largish officer, with straight, steel gray hair and a face that was hard, with a slight excess of chin.

Honeywell continued, a display of the planet illustrated his comments. "There are nine hundred thirty-five large craters on different areas of the planet, some closely spaced, a few isolated. Over a third of these have patterns of roads and highways leading to them, suggesting these were once the location of cities, destroyed by thermo-nuclear or, possibly, anti-matter weapons."

A ship's geologist, Lieutenant Jol Cianega, a tallish, stocky man with straw yellow hair and a face that was almost perfectly oval, suggested the alternative. "We also can not rule out a planetary bombardment by asteroids."

Honeywell rolled his eyes, but Cianega persisted. "Only 37% of the impacts were over populated areas. I don't believe a deliberate attack would have hit so many uninhabited areas."

"It's still far too high to be random," Honeywell said, as though he had made the point a hundred times before already. "And the size of the craters is too uniform for a meteor storm."

"I only meant we can not rule it out," Cianega said. "We shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"If it was an asteroid strike," Keeler said, with strained calm, "then, it's not of concern to us. It's an act of nature, but I don't see how an asteroid bombardment could have killed everybody. There should have been survivors. If someone deliberately destroyed this planet, then that is something we need to worry about. We could be next."

"Tarmigans?" Lear inquired, raising one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

Captain Keeler shook his head. "Those weapons would have been as primitive to the Tarmigans as stone knives and eye-pokes would be to us." If the Tarmigans ever even existed, he added to himself.

"Isn't it possible that the technological capabilities of the Tarmigans have been exaggerated through the centuries?" Lear asked, in the condescending tone to which they had become accustomed.

The rear hatch to the conference room slid open, and Commander Redfire entered. His jacket was open to the front, and looked a little more disheveled than usual. Without a word, he took a seat at the rear.

"The Tarmigans," Lear continued, brushing some gray and white hairs from the front of her uniform,

"were known for wiping out entire colonies."

"The Tarmigans were said to wipe out entire colonies," Keeler corrected. "Obviously, no one who was attacked by the Tarmigans lived to tell about it. All we know of them is legend. In any case, presuming up front that it was the Tarmigans, or any other aliens for that matter, is putting forth a hypothesis before we have a thorough review of the evidence. Lt. Honeywell, you my continue."

Honeywell activated a holographic projection of the planet that was far more complete and detailed than that of a few days ago.

"We know at least three hundred eighty two cities were destroyed, and there is extensive evidence of combat having taken place in other areas."

"Evidence?"

He highlighted several areas. "These areas have burned landscapes, blasted equipment, skeletal remains, and evidence of explosive discharges; typical of what you would find after a battle. In addition, we have found what appear to be large dedicated military facilities at coordinates 41° 19' N by 90° 21' W, 35° 22' N by 131° 44' W, 16° 44' N by 64' W, 37° 34' S by 67° 09' E... " He might have read the whole list if Keeler had not stopped him.

"What is our current status of exploration?" Keeler asked.

Lieutenant Kennecott from Geological Survey brought them up to speed. "We have put probes in ten of the remaining settlements. We're still parsing the information sent from the surface, but from what we can put together of the Medean language, we don't think the planet was unified, or even necessarily peaceful. The large cities show evidence of at least nine regional centers of government, each with distinct dialects and independent defensive capabilities."

"How do you know they were centers of government?" Keeler asked.

Kennecott deferred to a Specialist from the Anthropology Core, who explained. "Architectural studies. People design government buildings differently than commercial or residential ones. You find more colleges and libraries and monuments in Government centers. We have seen different patterns of crests, flags, signage. "

"So they had a war, but they left centers of government intact?" Lear said. "How curious. That doesn't make any sense unless someone attacked them from space who did not know the difference between normal cities and centers of government."

"Or, if the bombardment was random," Cianega put in, a little desperately.

"They might possibly have done this to themselves," Honeywell protested. "Government centers may have been left intact for strategic purposes. If the enemy is not decapitated, he can still negotiate, sue for peace."

Lear asked, her gray eyes burning, voice like shards of ice. "I just can't believe that humans unleashed weapons of mass destruction on other humans."

"I am saying it is one of the possibilities," Honeywell said. "I don't see any space debris in orbit, and I don't see any non-native technology left behind on the surface. We don't know nearly as much as we need to know to make a determination."

"What else have our probes shown from orbit?" Keeler asked.

Kennecott activated a hologram representation of the planet, a two-meter sphere projected in the center of the table. "The southern hemisphere shows evidence of flash irradiation, as though the entire area was blasted with an instantaneous burst of intense gamma radiation. This would have incinerated all life down to the microbial level."

"When did this happen in comparison to the bombing of the cities?" Honeywell asked.

Kennecott shook her head. "I can't say as yet."

Honeywell persisted. "Are there craters in the irradiated area of the southern hemisphere?"

"There are."

"Are they also burned, or has sub-surface strata been shot around their margins?"

"Also burned."

"Then, the bombing must have come first. Compare residual radiation levels at detonation points inside and outside the zones. Calculate a decay constant based on general surface radiation. You should be able to calculate the difference within three years."

Kennecott, to her credit, kept her cool. "Right. We'll do that."

"Lieutenant, we are getting a little off the track here," Lear interrupted. "It would appear our best bet for learning what happened here would be teams on the ground. How long before we can dispatch landing parties to the surface."

"We have just dispatched a half dozen bio-probes to the surface. Radiation doesn't appear to be dangerous except at the impact craters themselves. We are going to check for pathogens before we can approve human contact. If everything checks out, you can leave in six hours."

"And if not, seven hours," Keeler added.

On Pegasus bow, several hatches opened, and from these hatches sprang forth additional machines. Some were shaped like darts. Some looked like simple wings. A few looked almost like the Aves shuttles Pegasus carried, but smaller, chunkier and with stubbier wings. Carried in the bellies of these probes were small land probes; some that looked like spiders, some that looked like insects, some that looked like dogs, and some that looked almost vaguely human. They were sent to scan the ground with their tiny little eyes, sniff the air with mechanical sniffers, and transmit their data back to Pegasus.

A few of the machines powered down on the edge of what had been a city. Its buildings were intact, and they rose into the lavender sky as multi-textured pillars and columns. Such had been the dominant architectural style of the world. Although the architecture here was more plain and unimaginative than they were accustomed to on the home worlds, it still looked more familiar to the crew than that of the other worlds they had visited. The taller and larger buildings were cut through with raised streets and walkways, connecting them on many levels, like the mega-towers of Republic.

The walkways were hung with faded signs and flags covered in pictographs and many angled and curving symbols that had constituted the local alphabet. A number of these had fallen to the streets at ground

level, where they quivered in the thin dry wind and banged against the sides of abandoned transport pods.

Probe M-9011 glided along the ruined street, stopping as it was commanded to in front of one of the dead Medean vehicles. It sent out a scanning beam and examined the vehicle closely. As Biology Core had suspected, the vehicle was tightly sealed, and there were human remains inside. Although the seal was not airtight, it was enough to preserve the contents almost as they had been on the day all this had ended.

The probe extended a feeler to the vehicle's window, attached itself, and drilled a small hole through the glass. Extending a tube inside, it sucked a bit of the air inside into its internal analysis chamber, and began to identify and sort out the molecules inside.

In one of the lower levels of the command tower, Deck +25 to be precise, was the Secondary Telemetry Laboratory. This was where the biological data collected by the bio-probes was received and analyzed. The probes were sniffing about the planet at surface level, taking in air, water, and soil and passing it through sensor arrays that tested for viruses, microbes, bacteria, or residue of the foregoing.

When the probe isolated a specimen, it made a scan of it at the molecular level, and transmitted the data to the Deck +25 STL, where the molecular data was assembled into a three dimensional model. From this model, the sample could be matched against existing models for protein and nucleotide structure. The native samples from Medea could be isolated from microbes humans carried with them throughout the galaxy such as E. Coli.

Samples the analysis did not recognize were examined in detail against known models for bacterial and viral behavior and interaction. These could predict how the virus or bacteria would interact with human physiology. This enabled Biology Core to predict whether it was harmless, would give one a mild illness, an allergic reaction, or if it was fatal.

A microbiologist in the Deck +25 STL was processing data on one of the microbial organisms recovered from the atmosphere from the planet by Probe M-9011. Her attention was drawn to a specimen pulled from the sealed air of the vehicle. The structure displayed before her was highly unusual, looking like a great latticework sphere with spikes protruding from the interstices. It was twice the average size of the other organisms the probe had picked up, and a lot scarier-looking.

The Biological Survey braincore had never seen anything quite like it, but suggested it might be a kind of viral pathogen. The microbiologist performed an analysis and then ported the findings into a modeling computer, to see how this organism would interact with a human anatomy.

When she saw the result, she uttered a brief scream and nearly fainted.

Keeler strode into the emergency command meeting dabbing a towel on his wet hair.

"Did we get you out of the shower Captain?" asked Alkema, moving out of the Captain's seat.

"Neg."

"A swim?"

"Neg."

"Ill-fated practical joke?"

"Maybe," Keeler answered. Lear entered at that moment, trailing four specialists and Lieutenant Biologist Kyrie Mastermind from the Biology Core. The Executive Commander walked to the head of the conference table, tension and authority radiating from her. Her mouth was in a tight closed line, and her eyes seemed ready to shoot deadly radioactive heat beams at anyone who looked at her the wrong way.

Lt. Honeywell was there as well, and an earnest Medical Technician named Jersey Partridge had been called to represent the ship's Medical Core. In the far-most corner of the room. Commander Redfire slumped in a chair, looking sullen and difficult, but, for once, at least sort of interested in the proceedings.

Lear activated the holographic projectors, showing the pathogen from Medea in the full glory of its malevolence.

"Three hours ago, A bio-probe operating at site seventeen up-linked data on this viral-form organism to our Telemetry laboratory. Forty minutes ago, we determined the nature of this organism."

"What you see represented here is a highly potent viral pathogen, designed for simultaneous assault on the human nervous, circulatory, and respiratory systems. It attacks these areas and begins reproducing rapidly. A person exposed to it would feel symptoms within 20 seconds and be dead within four minutes. The pathogen would continue to consume human tissue until nothing remained but the skeleton, making copies of itself that disperse into the atmosphere to infect further victims." This was demonstrated by a two-dimensional animation. There had not been time to develop a three dimensional construct or add an appropriately maudlin soundtrack.

"Has this pathogren been detected elsewhere?" Keeler asked.

"Preliminary identification at four of the other sites, we will have to confirm it," Lear said. "I suspect we will find it throughout the planet's eco-system. It's burned through all the animal life forms, but we suspect it can lie dormant in the air and water indefinitely before infecting a new host."

"I don't think we'll be sending any landing parties," Keeler said, very, very quietly.

Lear agreed. "Our recommendation is to declare 12 822 Equuleus III a Maximum Contagion Quarantine Zone. All equipment currently in the planet's atmosphere or on the surface will be left behind. No ships, no landing teams to the surface."

"That seems prudent," said the Captain.

"If you agree to the order, it goes into effect permanently," Lear reminded him.

He would be closing the door on this planet forever. "Is it absolutely necessary?" He directed his question at the Lieutenant from Exo-Biology.

"There is no chance that the pathogen could survive traveling through the vacuum, radiation, and cold of space," the Lieutenant sort of answered him. "Nevertheless, I also recommend that the planet be placed under quarantine, and we abandon all the probes we have sent down there. If even one example got through, it could wipe out the ship."

"All right. I'll approve it." He found himself a little in awe of his own power. On his order, an entire world was being sealed off from all human contact, probably forever.

Just for the record, the computer noted that 14 Class One Probes, Eight Class Two probes, 42 bio-probes were already on the surface. Alkema made a note to remind the Captain to have the artificatories produce replacements for this equipment.

"We will need to study the pathogen further," Lear interjected, thinking the moment was right to focus their attention elsewhere. "It would be foolish not to devise a counter-agent, knowing what it can do."

"Can you do it without live samples?" Keeler asked.

Lear shook her head. "We could never build a totally reliable counter-agent without testing it on the real thing. We will assign a team to it."

"Agreed, we will make it our prime objective."

"It will be necessary for us to bring back an actual sample," Lear added.

"Absolutely not," Keeler told her.

"We have protocols for this, Captain. We simply isolate the pathogen in a highly secure environment. We could refit an Aves as a mobile laboratory, isolate it from the ship. At the end, the team abandons the ship in escape pods and we send the Aves back to the planet, or better yet into the sun. The crew decontaminates for forty-four hours and we jettison the escape pods. It would be extremely safe."

"Negative. Oz has spoken."

"Captain, this pathogen is virulent and deadly. The fact of its existence warrants extreme measures. We must develop a counter-agent."

"I said, 'Oz has spoken.' You will have to make do with remote data from the probe. We can test the counter-agent on the surface."

"We can't reliably develop an antigen without a live pathogen," Lear protested.

Alkema had the answer. "And/oroids."

Keeler and Lear looked him. "Explain."

"A surface team of and/oroids with a sympathetic link to technicians on board Pegasus can achieve the same thing as bringing samples of the pathogen to Pegasus, with zero risk to the crew."

"Sympathetic link?" Keeler asked. This was a new term for him, probably referring to something technical that he, as Captain, usually did not need to concern himself with.

Alkema explained. "A person on the ship can establish a sensory link with an and/oroid on the surface. Everything the and/oroid sees, feels, hears, and smells, the person on the other end of the link would as well. The link was designed for work in extreme environments, repairs on the external hull, or recovery missions on planets with hazardous atmospheres. It could work on this planet, too."

"The and/oroids go down, they never come back?"

"Just their sensory data."

Keeler liked the idea. "Should ought to be enough. I'll authorize it."

"Ghosts," Commander Redfire muttered quietly from the rear of the room.

"Excuse me?" Keeler said.

"We'll be like ghosts, haunting a dead world, moving about, seeing, hearing, feeling, but not really being there, and never leaving." Redfire said.

"That is a romantic way of thinking about it," said Lear, "but not a useful one."

Keeler wiped a cowlick from his forehead, depositing a few drops of water on the table. "Don't make me have to separate you two. Redfire's attitude may be sentimental, but it's proper. This world was murdered, destroyed, it is nothing less than a tragedy ... that gives lie to any way we could have to express it. Let us not go in like scavengers and pick their bones, but let's try to give them some honor. We owe it to the colony to develop a thorough record of everything we can learn about it. We will have to explore the surface by proxy."

He looked around the room. "Lieutenant Mastermind, well-done. I want you to begin on this immediately. You're dismissed. Dave, Lieutenant, I mean, Specialist, Alkema, will assist you when the rest of us are finished here." He pointed to Partridge. "Doctor-guy, you too, you're dismissed."

Mastermind and Partridge left, leaving Keeler alone with a group of people small enough, expert enough, and with a range of opinions wide enough, to help him sort out the big question on his mind. Lear looked suspiciously at Alkema. Why was this young pup sitting in on this meeting. She decided not to challenge his presence. The commander himself has requested that he stay. Who was she to argue.

Keeler spoke gravely. "Correct me if I am wrong, but based on limited knowledge of microbiology, I am assuming there is no way this pathogen was part of this planet's natural environment."

Lear was quiet for a moment, and looked distracted. She took a deep breath. "Captain, if what Lieutenant Mastermind tells me is true, this pathogen has characteristics that make it look... very doubtful that it occurred naturally."

"Frankly, if this were natural part of the eco-system, I don't think they could have built a billion-level civilization here." The words were out before he was aware he was speaking out loud. "I apologize. We are talking about an engineered pathogen... a bio-weapon. It fits in with the war scenario. Lt. Honeywell, am I correct in assuming that this makes the alien attack hypothesis more probable?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"So, we have crossed a hundred and seventy light years of space to find a human colony, one of our worlds, has been bombed, irradiated, and finally sterilized with a deadly artificial pathogen. Now, I have to ask you, and I really need to know, who did this? Was this an internecine conflict that got out of hand, is this a new enemy, or could it be that some of our alien acquaintances are also awakening after a long sleep."

"Whoever unleashed this weapon wanted to make sure all human life was annihilated," Honeywell said. "That strongly suggests aliens to me. There is speculation that in the last days of the old Commonwealth, humans went to war against a vastly more powerful alien species known as the Tarmigans, and the Thean Wars are well-documented."

"No kidding," Keeler deadpanned. "The attack seems too direct for the Theans, remember, they

remained in orbit of Sapphire for nearly twenty years and never fired a shot."

"The Irradiation of the southern hemisphere reminds me of the attack by the Tarmigans on Hyperion," Honeywell suggested.

"But that was 6,000 years ago. We have not heard from the Tarmigans in all that time." If there ever were any Tarmigans, Keeler thought again. He could not help it. His doctoral dissertation had been the Tarmigans were just a myth. "How long ago do you estimate this war happened?" Keeler asked.

Honeywell had been trying to chase that down himself. "We are still trying to estimate the exact date of the attack, but we have narrowed it down to between one hundred sixty five and one hundred eighty-five years ago."

Keeler was stunned. "That's practically nothing," he said. "In space terms, we were a moment too late... just a moment."

Lear cut in sharply. "If the attack was that recent, we need to send warnings to the Republic Defense Directorate and the Permanent Sapphire Defense Situation."

"I know we can count on you to cover that Executive Commander Lear," the Captain said drily. That Ex. Cmdr Lear sent clandestine reports back to her government was one of the ship's most well-known secrets.

Honeywell drummed the top of the desk. "Everything I've seen so far tells me that the bombings and the fighting started years before this pathogen was released. It's like the war kept escalating until somebody decided the war wasn't going to work out the way they wanted. So, somebody released an ultimate doomsday weapon and killed off the entire colony."

"What if it wasn't aliens?" Keeler mused. "We only knew of a handful of alien races, but there were a lot of other human colonies. Maybe they were attacked from space, but by other humans."

Alkema was almost floored by this. "I can't believe humans would do that to each other."

"They did that and worse during the Crusades," the Captain assured him.

"Za, but we were so much more... primitive then." Alkema's voice fell off by the time he got to the end. The savagery he had witnessed on EdenWorld had proven that not all humans lived in the state of grace enjoyed by Sapphire and Republic.

"The first thought that occurred to me was the aliens at Meridian. Perhaps they tried to colonize this world as well," Alkema said. "Perhaps the Medeans caught on more quickly, and fought back."

Keeler turned to Redfire. "What do you think of Dave's theory?" He was surprised that Redfire had not yet jumped right in with a counter-analysis.

"It doesn't look like Meridian," Redfire said.

"Could you elaborate?"

Redfire sighed, as though half-distracted, as though annoyed at having to explain something they should have considered for themselves. "Meridian was about infection and colonization through transformation. Meridian provided the main requirement for the alien infiltration, the vector, if you will, by having a centralized computer system. There is no sign of such a central network on Medea. Furthermore, there is

no sign of an alien probe, such as the kind that carried the alien contagion to Meridian. It doesn't look like beastshit, and it doesn't smell like beastshit, so it probably isn't beastshit."

Keeler found himself both relieved that his Chief Tactical Officer was contributing again, and annoyed that his tone remained sullen and irritable. He addressed him like a difficult student at the University where he had once taught. "Commander Redfire, could you tell us what you make of the pattern of destruction here."

Redfire stood and walked slowly toward the observation window. Once there, he zoomed in on the planet, so that it was four times larger and more detailed. He highlighted a pattern of one hundred and sixty seven craters on the surface. "This is an orbital bombardment pattern, not from a surface exchange."

He highlighted a different area. "Then, there is a second wave attack, about ten years later. Another twenty-six cities are destroyed, across the planet, but the bases remain intact. Five years later, the southern hemisphere is flash irradiated."

"Then, we have this third wave of attack, much larger, and with higher-yield weapons than any of the first two. Then, it's quiet for a while. You can see evidence of rebuilding in the cities the orbital bombardments partly, but not completely, destroyed." Redfire highlighted some other spots on the planetary map. "We reasonably believe these twenty-five positions are all military bases of operations. We have looked at eleven of them up close, and all of them were constructed just before whatever happened happened, each one near a major population center. Even when the population centers were destroyed by weapons of mass destruction, the bases came through without a scratch. Nations at war don't attack cities and leave military bases intact."

"We also see evidence of extensive destruction in between the orbital bombardments." He highlighted another area of the map identified as Medea Landmass Kappa. It was an Island sub-continent in the temperate zone of the planet's northern hemisphere. It was shaped like a portion of the human digestive system with a very serious ulcer. "There were forty-seven settlements here and six more that had not survived the initial bombardment of the planet. The remaining towns ranged in size from 4,000 to 163,000 people."

He brought up imagery from orbital and lower atmosphere probes. "We see the same pattern of damage in every settlement; every window shattered, the upper floors of each building splintered to bits." They looked like tree trunks that had cracked in the middle, leaving sharp spikes of wood sticking up into the air. Most every street and roadway was cracked like parched earth. Even the rocks had split in half.

"You may be asking, 'what could account for the pattern of damage?' I will tell you, focused sonic disruption. Very loud, sustained noise at a precise frequency. Shatters everything, including human bone. I never tried it myself. Way too dangerous." His voice sounded almost wistful.

"Finally, twenty or thirty years after the first bombardment, by my estimate, the pathogen is unleashed. That's when it ends. All human... all animal life on the planet is wiped in ... at the most... a day."

"The pattern I see is a steady escalation of conflict that went from atomic weapons to quantum weapons to anti-matter to flash irradiation and finally total annihilation, punctuated by lower level battlefield conflicts. It went on for years, getting worse and worse until somebody unleashed the ultimate weapon, which tells me it wasn't human. Humans would have stopped at some point, if not out of self-preservation then at least because their society was too wounded to go on fighting."

"So, you think the attackers were from off-world."

“They had to have. I’ve been sure of that since the first probe data came back. It didn’t make sense to me, though. Why would somebody cross space to come to this planet, fight a long-drawn out war, exterminate the population and then leave without a trace? That makes no sense. Not if your intent was conquest.”

“What other motive could there be?” Lear asked. “Animus toward humanity? Genocide?”

“If they just hated humans, they would have begun with the pathogen, or kept bombing until everything was leveled. Those bombardments not only destroyed cities, they kicked dust in the atmosphere, they poisoned the water, they killed the crops. They could have wiped out this colony with the first attack, if they had wanted to. So, why didn’t they?”

He paused. He saw that he had their fully committed attention. You could have heard a neutrino collide with a neutron in that room. “If you were an alien culture, and you wanted to see how humans would respond and how long they were willing to fight, you might unleash a steadily increasing series of plagues and see how humans fought back, and how they rebuilt.”

Keeler was stung by what his officer was suggesting. “Are you suggesting this world was like alien target practice?”

“I’ve looked at the tactical reports from every angle and I keep getting back to that. The pattern of weapon use, the sequence of events, the total annihilation ... that’s the explanation that fits the evidence best. If you want to call it target practice, then call it that, but, I think these humans were systematically annihilated. The pathogen was only the final blow.”

“As for who carried out this experiment,” Redfire continued. “Five thousand years is ample time for other civilizations to arise. A species that was just learning to forge iron when humans colonized the galaxy could develop hyper-drive spaceships and world-killer weapons while we were sleeping. Now, they move out into the galaxy and find out we have all the good planets, and the only way to get them is to get rid of us.”

He looked around the table for a bit. “I’m finished, if anyone has anything else to add.”

“Assuming you’re correct,” Keeler said, “How do we go about finding out who they were. How do we test your hypothesis?”

“Send down more and/oroids and have them concentrate on the military installations. That’s where the tactical data will be. See if we can find out who they were fighting.”

“We have three probes exploring probably military areas right now,” Honeywell said. “We should be getting data shortly.”

“We should also put the ship into a state of higher alert,” said Lear. “Whoever attacked may still be around, or they may return.”

Keeler nodded. “Put all stations at Alert Situation 3 until further notice.”

(Part 3)

The one-way ships dispatched from *Pegasus* to the surface were reconfigured lifepods; oblong cylinders

narrow at one end, wider at the other. Each carried four and/oroids and a complement of less anthropomorphic probes. And/oroids mimicked the human shape, but would never be mistaken for people. Their skin gleamed like liquid metal, they had no eyes or faces, and no souls. *Pegasus* had launched six and/oroid quartets, to the surface, and was selecting the most promising locations to dispatch at least four more. One special team in a mobile laboratory, mind-linked to the Pathogenic Laboratory on *Pegasus*, was examining the pathogen, in hopes of developing an antidote.

Per Tactical Commander Miller's suggestion, one pair of and/oroids was exploring one of the areas determined to be a possible military facility. A silvery one and coppery one made their way through a large fortified complex laying forty kilometers west of the nearest city. They had been directed to an underground set of buildings, sealed behind heavy blast doors, that was guessed to be a reinforced command bunker of some kind.

The and/oroids had gained access by attaching an energizer from their transport pod to the power feeds on the exterior of the structure, providing enough energy for lights and doors to work. (Across the planet, more energizers were being attached to buildings and data terminals, in hopes of retrieving more information about Medea, its inhabitants, and its killers.)

The and/oroid team entered an oval chamber and stumbled over some object on the floor. The coppery one went to night vision and raised the object into its field of view to examine it.

A human skull gazed back at it from empty and hollow eye-sockets. The and/oroid gently replaced it on the ground and continued working its way inward. The bunker was cut through with a labyrinth of chambers and hallways. Humans would easily have become confused, but the and/oroids created maps as they traveled, never doubled back, never got lost, and never quivered in fear of what lay in the next darkened chamber. For forty-two hours, they made their way deeper and deeper into the core of the building until, 200 meters underground, they could go no further.

It was on this deepest level that the two man-machines came across a medical laboratory. The skeletal remains of six individuals lay on the floor, around a huge and frightening lab table, surrounded by instruments for cutting flesh and bone, for collecting fluids, and probing into cavities. On top of the lab table was something not human.

Its flesh was thick, mottled green and black (although this may have been a natural state of decay) and dried like old leather left in the sun too long. Before it had died, the skin had been peeled back from one corner of its large, neckless head, revealing a shining metal plate that covered half of its skull. An artificial eyepiece (not unlike their own, but less advanced) wrapped around the left part of the head, covering the eye and ear and attached to electronic devices that occupied nearly a third of the volume of the skull. The portion of the skull that had been cut away was not to be found.

The arms of the creature were long, and ended in thick four-fingered hands. The outer digits were opposable, the middle two digits hyper-elongated, without fingernails, but with hardened points covering the tips. Its brain, soft tissues and organs had been eaten away by the pathogen.

"The face of the enemy," Honeywell said grimly, as the image of the alien intruder stared back at them from a display in the forward conference room.

"Alien... bi-pedal, cranial structure with sensory organs clustered near the brain, apparently augmented by cybernetic enhancements," Lear was saying with a certain drama.

"Except for the bones and the outer dermal layer, all the tissues were destroyed by the pathogen. We couldn't even recover any DNA ... if the creature even used DNA," Specialist Mastermind offered.

“From where the creature was found, we theorize that he was a specimen, captured by one of the planet's militaries,” Honeywell offered.

“Is there anything like this in the historical records,” Lear asked.

“Sure... fictions, legends, myths, and really scary campfire stories,” Captain Keeler said. “I think we can definitely qualify this creature under the genus 'booger man.' When it comes to alien encounters in our historical records, it's very difficult to sort out fact from fiction. Our ancestors were very imaginative. I think it's safe to assume, that this is something new.”

Miller was still a little skeptical. “We still haven't found any alien ships.”

“It had to get here somehow,” Keeler suggested. “Unless anyone wants to propose that it's native to this planet.”

No one wanted to propose that. Captain Keeler stared hard at the image. *So, these were the guys that trashed the place.* “We don't have a clue where they came from, or what they wanted, do we?”

Silence answered him adequately enough. Tactical Commander Miller also stared at the image, but didn't seem to be really looking at it. Again, his mind was elsewhere.

“It's a shame no tissue survived,” Lear muttered.

“Have we recovered anything else alien? Technology? Weapons?” Keeler asked.

“We're not sure if we can differentiate it from the native weapons and technology,” Kennecott answered, running her hands through her hair. She was tired. Everyone was tired. Not simply because of the overload of work analyzing the data from dozens of remote landing sites and airborne probes across the planet, but because the prolonged post-mortem was wearing down the soul of everyone who had to study this dead and dismal world.

“Our probes will continue to amass information for years,” Lear said. “Our next step should be to put a Tachyon Pulse Transmitter in orbit so they can transmit their findings to the home-system.

“At which point, the investigation will become entirely one way,” Alkema reminded them. “The home-worlds won't have the ability to transmit commands in real-time.”

“We'll lose our sympathetic link,” Keeler muttered. Then he spoke more strongly. “Still, I think our AI systems can direct the probes in our absence. I don't see the point in remaining here very long. This is a dead colony, our mission is to find the ones that survived. We leave behind some and/oroid crews to gather data. Eventually, the homeworlds will send a scientific team to study it further, meanwhile, we push on to the next world, a world where we might actually find life.”

Keeler looked to Lear and Miller to see if there was an alternative point of view. Miller shook his head and turned away. Lear's expression was inscrutable.

“Very well, then,” Keeler said. “Have Navigation begin plotting a course for the next colony. We will remain here another ten days, but I want to collect every scrap of data in that time. Double the number of teams on the surface, and work out long-term protocols to direct the and/oroids in our absence.”

More machines were coming to the surface of Medea carried. One pod, bearing identification marking “**Escape Pod EEV-49510-Pakuna Pathfinder 003 Pegasus,**” landed at the side of the fourth largest surviving city, which stretched across a vast piedmont, backed up against a worn down mountain range

and above a narrow coastal plain. The Medeans had built here because of three rivers, and three sets of waterfalls, which they harnessed for power. Its buildings faced the sea, and many, even the tallest, were faced with polished sea rock.

Two hatches on either side of the escape pod slid open, and six and/oroids stepped out. The and/oroids divided into three teams of two, and each team moved toward separate buildings. The first entered an elaborately designed structure of crystalline walls. It moved first into a great round entrance chamber, from which a glass dome cast starlight on the floor. Several halls radiated outward from this structure, and statuary was arrayed around its perimeter. The and/oroid began moving down one hallway, and was soon forced to switch to night vision. The hallway was lined with glass cases, behind each of which was a canvas covered with layers of petro-chemical based pigments.

“What is it?” asked the Specialist monitoring the and/oroid’s progress.

“An art museum,” Tactical Commander Redfire answered him. His voice startled the two technicians at the monitoring station. He had come up behind them, like a ghost.

“Good Afterdawn, Commander,” one of the technicians said.

Tac. Cmdr. Miller looked at the and/oroid feeds, which covered an entire wall of the laboratory in vivid displays from a dozen of the planet’s ruined cities. It was high noon in some places, and a red-orange sun hung serenely in a lavender sky, oblivious to the destruction it illuminated. Elsewhere, it was dusk, and the lowering sun was an unbelievable fuchsia that stretched across half the horizon.

He looked back at the board. “Would it be okay if I just linked into one of these guys and just... walked around for a while.”

Shepherd Omaha was a specialist in the Anthropological Survey Situation. He could have been the older brother of Matthew Driver, same dark curly hair, pleasingly angled chin, thoughtful brown eyes, but much taller. “Which one?”

“What have you got?”

“A lot of them we’ve put down in the largest city, the largest *intact* city. There are seventeen. 8912-KNL is in the subterranean utility tunnels taking samples of excrement for data on the vermin species.”

“Mmm, delicious.” Redfire deadpanned.

“To the Zoological Survey it is. There’s a lot of theory on dispersion of earth-native faunae and competition with local species. 6751-DEF is exploring what we think was an education complex, maybe a university. Looks like it was abandoned long before the catastrophe. 6935-DKL is exploring a communications complex. 7770-FST is in what we think was either a library, or a museum, or possibly connected to its justice system. 9213-PTB is exploring a large building we believed to have fulfilled a governmental function... oh, wait. Someone’s already linked to 9213-PTB.”

“Who?”

Omaha brushed his fingertips across a panel. “Executive Commander Lear.”

Redfire raised an eyebrow? “Really? Any way I could... cut in?”

“Neg, that would be ... that isn’t allowed. Everything she records is a matter of record for the ship.”

"I'll want to look at her recording when I'm done.... but I'll take..." he studied the holographic map of the planet, and the feeds from the and/oroids and automechs on the planet's surface. He pointed to a feed from one of the lesser cities, where night was coming on. "What's this one?"

"2527-JKW is exploring a residential complex."

"I'll take it."

Omaha handed him a headset. "Have you done this before?"

Miller nodded and activated the headset. The ship vanished around him like a morning mist in retreat, and he was standing on the surface of Medea. He was on a balcony, that stretched off 52.37 meters (according to a readout at the upper right of his field-of-vision) in front of him, fronting an expanse of dwellings, each separated by a few meters of space from the one next to it. He turned outward and saw that the balcony faced a sea a few hundred (327.02) meters away. The setting sun was dappling over choppy crimson waves.

He walked down the crossway. He could hear Omaha speaking to him, distantly, a voice on the wind. He had to concentrate to hear.

"This city was one of the ones hit by some kind of ionizing energy weapon. Every living thing was vaporized."

He nodded, and the and/oroid nodded as well. He understood devastation more than anyone in the crew. Such destruction on a planetary scale should have stirred something with him, anger, terrible awe, or contempt. Instead, he could not help but feel detached from it. As he reviewed report after report of demolished cities and broken plains, he had almost felt as though he were grading the homework of a mediocre, unmotivated student.

Something moved next to him and he nearly jumped out of his skin. He turned and saw the reflection of the and/oroid staring back at him from some kind of mirrored edifice. He raised a hand and waved at himself, (everyone who linked to an and/oroid did this, sooner or later) then looked through the wall to see what was behind it.

The building was a residential structure, nearly a honeycomb of inhabitations, almost interlocked but separated by narrow empty spaces in between. There was no obvious entry into any of them, but as soon as he thought this, a pattern enhancer showed him a millimeter-thin seam in the reflective front, outlining a doorway, hidden from view. He reached out and touched it.

Through and/oroid eyes he saw the door's internal structure, sensors were arrayed to check the identity of the whoever touched it. Tiny machines made the door slide away to the right. The power cells had long since died, but a kiss from the and/oroid's power system could revive them.

He lay both hands on the door. A pulse radiated outward from the and/oroid's palms, imparting a charge to the power cells, which slid the door open. A blast of stale, warm air escaped from the dwelling within.

Redfire entered, and/oroid eyes adjusting to the diminished light level. As he surveyed the interior, he felt a strange dizziness rise from the pit of his stomach. There was an array of small couches in a pattern of teal and blue-green arranged around a square gray table. The walls were hung with abstract expressionist prints, except for one wall, which was done in pale teal with grey figures like petroglyphs covering it from floor to ceiling. A shelf along the back wall was covered with miniature statuary, perfectly arrayed and

undisturbed.

Miller had had a friend, Roman Ov, at the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland whose student apartment was not too differently appointed. Suddenly, the reality that this had once been a living world, inhabited by people he might have known, might have sat up with at night discussing beast-shit philosophies, washed over him.

He surveyed the rooms. There was what he supposed to be a kitchen off to one side. The and/oroid wanted to go there, but Miller was interested in something other. He scanned across the dwelling. Behind a type of screen was a chamber he would hazard was a kind of office or study. Behind another screen was what appeared to be a sleeping chamber. The latter would reveal more than he cared to know about the room's previous occupant, the former might tell him just enough.

He walked across to the screen. It was actually several sheets of metal, each a tenth of a millimeter thick, cleverly interwoven to permit air pass through, but not light, and picked out in patterns of trees and exotic birds. A strange choice for a treeless world, he thought. He reached out and slid it aside.

He found himself immediately disoriented. Nothing here was analogous to anything he would have expected to find in any room on his home world. No desk, but a kind of oddly-shaped box, with several small oblong pads left across its surface. He scanned them, and found more microcircuitry inside, and display areas on their outsides.

"We have found those in every city. They are data retrieval and storage devices. Kind of like our datapads, but not quite as... advanced," Omaha told him.

Perpendicular to the wall of the box was a window. It was covered with more thin sheets of metal, but he could see that it looked out over the city. He wondered what the view would have looked like, when the city was alive with lights. On the opposite wall, were three shallow alcoves in the wall, oval shaped, framed with circuited metal. "What are those?" he asked.

"We've found them in nearly every dwelling and most of the workspaces on the planet. Near as we can figure, they're holographic communication nodes, for audio-visual communication, data retrieval, possibly even entertainment."

"Are there always three of them?"

"Always. No more, no less. Don't know why."

He turned his attention back to the box. He supposed it might have been a desk, but it only came up to his knees. It couldn't have been a couch, because there would have been no way to get comfortable on it. Its surface was irregular and hard, it would have been like sitting on gravel. "I give up. What is that thing?"

"We're working on that. We've seen them in other places. We've ruled out desk and couch. It seems to serve a purpose unique to this world."

One of the oval-shaped pads had fallen to the floor. He picked it up and could immediately see that it was different than the others. It appeared to be much older. He couldn't say how he knew this, except that its design aesthetic seemed to belong to an earlier era. He picked it up and turned it over. He used a burst of static electricity to clean the dust from its surface. It was light in his hands, even lighter than he would have guessed.

He found the power cell in the back and had the and/oroid connect to it to recharge. It took a few

seconds to power the unit, and a few more for him to figure out how to activate it. Strange characters began flowing across the screen, making words and sentences in a strange, twisting scrawl.

"It's a Mando-English dialect, but it's a little off the beaten path. The Lingotron is still working on a translation."

Redfire knew what it had to be though, as if by instinct. It was somebody's diary. "Disengage," Miller said.

The surface of Medea jerked up and to the right, then vanished, replaced by the interior of the AnSS lab. Omaha was holding the headset. *A little too personal, right commander?* Miller thought he was thinking.

"Have the and/oroid continue recording the entire contents of the data pad," Miller order.

"You bet," Omaha said, not meaning, Miller reminded himself, to sound so chipper and enthusiastic. The poor kid had no idea what it all meant.

Redfire left the laboratory, and suddenly realized he didn't know where he intended to go. He had not been back to his quarters in weeks. He had slept in garden parks, in the landing bays, and spent one memorable evening in a Null Gravity pod. Now, suddenly it became urgent to return to his quarters. He needed to be there. He needed to anchor himself again. He was through with being a fugitive from his own life. Something else he knew, Halo had been right about him. It had taken a planet full of ended lives, including the lives of people who had fought with their wives and never forgiven them, to teach him this. There might even have been someone among them who had refused to reconcile, because he thought feeling miserable was something he deserved and had a right to.

He passed the transport pod dock, deciding to walk the distance to his quarters. He had much to think about it, and part of it was the planning of something he needed to do. He was an artist, who had always used explosions and destruction to express his inner self. Ironically, his inner self had always been secure and self-satisfied in the past. Now, that his inner self was in ruins, he knew he could only rebuild it by *creating*, not *destroying*. The mural at the Slam 'n' Jam had been a beginning, but not nearly enough. Merely recording the story of this planet's people would not be enough either, Miller decided. It would never be enough.

As he walked the passageway to habitation decks, he had already begun to conceive a memorial that would be a thousand times more fitting.

The image of the alien was projected on one of the displays in his office. Keeler stared at its eyeless face. Its destruction had been so thorough, no one had any idea what the soft tissues would have looked like. There were several imaginative interpretations, each more demonic than the next.

Keeler stared at one of them, a monstrous beast with burning red eyes and boiled red skin that fairly burned with hatred and malevolence. "You," he addressed the image, "are one steel-curtain ugly shopper."

Keeler flipped through a few more possibilities, some with scales, some with fangs, all nastiness incarnate. The images reflected a certain naivete on the part of the bio-modeling crew. Evil, the Captain knew, was seldom so obvious in appearance.

His door chimed. It was Executive Commander Lear, and she had a data pad in her hand. He guessed it would be the final navigational trajectory to the next system. He had forgotten its designation at the

moment, but he knew it was relatively close. He bade her enter, "Come."

Lear came in, reflexively brushed the sides of her uniform and took a position in front of the Captain's desk. "Captain Keeler, am I correct in my recollection that prior to your assignment to the Odyssey Project, you were a historian?"

"Za," she was leading to something. She knew his personnel file as well as her own. "Your recollection is accurate as usual. Where are you going with this, Captain Lear?"

"I just wanted to know if your knowledge base included the Berserker Wars." She set the pad on his desk.

Keeler picked it up and looked it over. It was the consolidated history of the Berserker Wars, compiled and edited by a scholar at City of Temperance University on Republic. He was unfamiliar with this particular text, but smiled wanly. "It does."

"Humans fought with the Berserkers for more than a thousand years. Billions of people died, whole colonies were exterminated."

"And somewhere, there is planet called Anaconda, completely run by mechanoids, whose entire crust is the skin of a great world machine..." Keeler added. "It's legend. There's no substantial account of the Berserker Wars by any reputable, Commonwealth Era historian. It is possible they may just be an exaggeration of some events that happened during the Crusades, or, as some have suggested, a complete work of fiction. It could be no more real than the one with the Evil Empire and the 'Death Star,' that blew up planets. We thought that one was real history for centuries before Simon RaptorBoy proved it was all bunk. There were an awful lot of red faces in the History Department when that happened, I can tell you."

"This scholar believes the Berserker War really happened, or were at least based on something real. He contends that near the end of the Crusades, the Dark Forces turned loose a set of dedicated killing machines as part of a doomsday weapon when they knew their defeat was imminent. There are accounts of machines the size of planets, attacking and destroying worlds at will, then moving onto the next world. Others looked almost human on the outside, but were machines on the inside."

"The Terminators, you mean?"

"Aye, unless you think they were also 'just a legend.'"

Keeler sighed. "The Crusades were a seminal event in human evolution. They not only mark the boundary between what we were and what we are, they *are* the difference between what we were and what we are. When they were over, we knew something awesome had transpired, but we lacked the vocabulary to explain exactly what it was. Many of the records from that time have to be treated as allegory... as metaphor."

The answer took her a little by surprise. His reasoning was what Republicers had always been taught to think about the Crusades. Sapphireans, to her knowledge, usually accepted a more literal interpretation. She persisted though. "You must admit that it is at least *possible* that there is some truth to these legends. Our Commonwealth ancestors had vastly greater technology than we have now. They certainly *could* have built such devices, and therefore, it is likely that they did."

"I will concede it is possible they built such devices, and maybe probable. Even so, that doesn't mean it was used here. These colonies weren't even discovered when the Crusades ended."

“Exactly. What if these Berserker machines devastated the Inner Colonies and are just now reaching the outer rim? What if those machines are still out there, Captain?”

The answer was obvious to Keeler. “Then, we would have a big problem.”

She touched the pad again, showing him another program. “The threat to the home-worlds would be extreme, which is why I am suggesting we do not proceed to 10 255 Vulpeculus, but instead track down whatever did this.”

“*Pegasus* should go after the things that killed this planet?” Keeler asked, eyes widening as though shocked at the suggestion. (In fact, Lt. Honeywell separately had recommended the same course of action). “Do you honestly believe, if this is one of your Commonwealth Doomsday Machines, that *Pegasus* would stand a chance against it?”

“We know whoever destroyed Medea is a threat to human life,” Lear answered. “To all human life. It is our duty to identify them, or it, and destroy them.”

Keeler leaned back in his chair. “Fine then. Which way did they go? They left this system over a hundred years ago. There’s no radiation trail, no gravity wake. If we had a way to track them, I might take this suggestion seriously, but if they could be anywhere, they could be at the next star system, Vulpeculus 10 20 30 or whatever you said it was called.”

Lear was also aware of this. “We have discovered some other tactical redoubts (she meant bunkers) elsewhere on the planet. They might show us some...”

“They might... if we wait around long enough, years, decades, to find and translate them. We’re just now getting a workable language matrix on a few of the dialects. We only have bits and scraps of the language to go on. We could spend years here studying this world, but that isn’t, strictly speaking, our mission. We are a ship of exploration. We find a world, give it a quick once-over, then pass it onto the Phase II ships.”

“We never expected to discover anything like this.”

“Didn’t we? I am sure there is a protocol for this somewhere in your charter.” Republickers, after all, had a protocol for using the hygiene pod.

“The charter states that in the case where a colony has been found to be attacked or destroyed by hostile forces, we are to make every effort to identify those forces and advise the homeworld.”

“Every effort? That’s vague and open-ended enough to commit this ship to that task for decades, and I am unwilling to do that,” Keeler argued. “We can’t even send teams down there because of the pathogen danger. We’ve made no progress whatsoever on that front.” Keeler sighed, and brought up a report he was sure Lear had seen. “Tactical Core believes the home-worlds are capable of defending themselves against the level of technology demonstrated by the patterns of assault, especially with advance warning from us. And/oroids guided by AI can continue the investigation until the Phase II ships arrive. We, however, are obligated to push on, and to keep pushing on, to the next system, and to the system after that. That’s our mission, and we’re sticking to it.”

Lear met his gaze with a look just as hard and strong as his own. “Then, I request we triple the number of probes and and/oroids on the surface, establish a larger dedicated laboratory facility to examine the pathogen, and, once again, if we are leaving, we need to secure a sample of the pathogen.”

Keeler leaned back in his chair. “You can have the probes. You can have the laboratory. You can have

the and/oroids, but no one, and let me make this clear, no one is going to bring aboard any pathogen that could wipe out this ship and everyone on board. I will not only not permit this, but if I learn that anyone is even *thinking* about bringing that pestilence on board my ship, I will ... I will..."

Lear raised an eyebrow.

Caught, he punted. "I will devote every free moment to devising the most humiliating and demeaning form of punishment I can possibly conceive of. Maybe I don't know what that is yet, but I know it will involve demotion, removal from duty, confinement, pantsing, large quantities of foul-smelling goo, and quite possibly the use of one or more bodily orifices. Do I make myself clear, commander? There will be no killer pathogens on my ship."

Lear acknowledged him curtly. "You could not be more clear, Captain. My report will include an official dissent, of course."

"I am glad we had this talk, Executive Commander," Keeler said politely. As she left, and the ritual was completed, he wondered exactly how she was planning to get the pathogen on board, and where she was going to keep it. He hoped she was smart enough to realize that he had made no idle threats, here.

Pegasus's top officers met one last time before departing Medea. The faces were the same as at the previous meetings, but there was an air of faint relief hanging in the room. It was time to go, and the crew was glad of it.

They were watching as a deployment crew made the final adjustments to the Tachyon Pulse Transmitter they were placing in orbit about 50,000 km above the planet. Its iris was a long, pointed antenna surrounded by metalwork and scaffolding. Fourteen solar power arrays encircled the array like the petals of a daisy. A pair of Aves shuttlecraft hung in the sky nearby, ready to evacuate to deployment crew when their duties were finished.

"The transmitter will be ready for activation within two hours," Lear reported. "At full operability, it should be able to transmit a report to the home-worlds every hour."

Honeywell added, "We've positioned a number of probes throughout the system. These should act as an early warning system should the aliens come back."

"What is the status of our surface probes?" Keeler asked.

Lear answered him. "We have put two Class III AI braincores on the surface to direct the activities of the and/oroids. Their primary task is to study, and develop a defense against the pathogen. Their secondary duty is to investigate the tactical aspects of the planetary attack, to find any information the Medeans left behind about their attackers. They will also look for additional examples of alien technology or ... specimens of the aliens themselves. Their tertiary duty will be to catalog every artifact of Medean culture for further study."

Keeler sighed. He would have preferred the and/oroids devote themselves primarily to the third task, but he understood what was at stake. Whatever had committed this atrocity against a human world was dangerous. Countering it had to be the top priority. "Are we prepared to conclude our business here?" the Captain asked.

"There is nothing more for us to do," Lear told him.

"Actually, there is," Redfire interrupted.

Lear regarded him warily. "Rather late in the process to be suggesting anything additional."

"It's taken me this long to work out the parameters. It's very important," Redfire assured them. "As important as any of the other tasks we have set out, maybe even more important."

"Perhaps, you should have brought it up sooner," Lear rejoined.

Miller was not about to waste time building up to his argument. He decided to lay it on the table. "I want to rebuild this world." He announced softly. "Studying this world is all fine and good, but it would still leave this planet a monument to human failure. That isn't enough for me. Their civilization was vibrant and thriving for 5,000 years. Shoveling dirt on their graves hardly does honor to what they achieved here. We can bring this world back."

"This world is uninhabitable," Lear argued, with that voice of condescending patience. "It's worse than uninhabitable, it's a threat to human life. We've informed our worlds that it should be quarantined."

"I wasn't speaking of the re-introduction of human life. I am talking about re-establishing a civilization here, but not a human one."

Captain Keeler looked intrigued. "Explain your proposal, Ranking Phil."

Redfire stood. "I want to introduce one-hundred forty-four additional and/oroids to the planet's surface. Twelve each in each of twelve major cities. They would be given a general directive to re-build the planet's infrastructure, recreate Medean civilization, and uh... repopulate the surface."

Keeler smirked, "Be fruitful and multiply."

Redfire persisted. "The planet has the necessary resources and technical base to support mass and/oroid reproduction. Within a few centuries, maybe less time, they could establish a population level approximating that of the previous human civilization."

"A whole planet of and/oroids?" Keeler repeated, as though taken with the concept.

"Za, a whole civilization of and/oroids. It would be unique. We've always assigned and/oroids a role within our civilization and limited them to the service of *our* wants and needs."

"There is a reason for that," Lear argued. "Long ago, our ancestors fought any number of wars against machines that had grown beyond our powerful to restrain them."

"A lot of people have speculated what a benign and/oroid civilization might look like... but... no one's ever done it. We could do it here, on a planetary scale."

"If I approve this," Keeler asked, "How will you guarantee our safety? An and/oroid civilization might one day be hostile to humanity."

"They would have a deadly pathogen at their disposal," Honeywell pointed out.

Miller answered them. "With help from certain cybernetic and AI experts, I have developed some protocols that will keep the and/oroids under control. First, they will make their first priority the eradication of the pathogen, and once they have done so, all knowledge of the pathogen. Second, they will be forbidden from developing space travel or any kind of offensive weaponry."

"What about cooperation with humans?" Keeler asked. "Could you build that into their programming?"

“What if humans come with the intention of doing them harm?” Miller returned. “They would be unable to defend themselves. I thought about this already. I can inhibit their will to harm humans, but it has to be balanced with their own self-preservation.”

“And/oroids can’t possibly handle the complexities of building a civilization,” Lear protested.

“They’ve never been given the opportunity,” Miller argued. “We’ve confined their programming to serving our needs. We’ve never given them the capacity to recognize their own needs and ambitions.”

“We haven’t,” Lear reminded him. “Be cause if we gave them free will and self-awareness, it would create ethical dilemmas. It is one thing your world and mine agreed on; that creating sentient machines would be creating something we could not control.”

“We can create an and/oroid that recognizes its needs but stops short of self awareness. Besides, if they are confined to the planet, they won’t be competing with us, and they won’t be a threat to us.”

“Isn’t there a threat to the ecosystem?” Kennecott asked. “After all, and/oroids don’t need plants or clean water or breathable air.”

Miller had considered this. “First, there’s not much of an eco-system left. Second, we can program them to preserve the biosphere of this planet.”

Keeler was doubtful, still. “If you turn loose a bunch of and/oroids with instructions, essentially, to multiply, rebuild, and sustain, are they really going to create anything other than factories, power plants, and warehouses?”

“They can be programmed for more,” Miller said. “At first, they would mimic the lost Medean Civilization, based on the data they find, but eventually, they could develop a civilization of their own.”

“Dedicated to what?” Keeler asked. “Besides finding a cure for the plague and restoring this planet. Eventually, they will finish with those tasks.”

“There are several theoretical protocols for allowing deviations from the norm to enter into and/oroid programming. One of the most basic is to give them an undefined want that they would continuously strive to define and fulfill...”

“Exactly the sort of protocol that is illegal on our worlds,” Lear interrupted.

“I would not give them that, but you can give them a kind of ... pseudo initiative, for example, a heuristic that would encourage them to develop architecture and social forms according to a mathematically-defined aesthetic, a random deviation that compels them to operate outside and beyond their basic operating parameters.”

“It almost seems like the more protocols you build into them, the less genuine this civilization will be,” Keeler said. “Unless your intention is to create some kind of animatronic memorial to the lost colony of Medea.”

“It is more than that!” Miller pounded his fist on the conference table. “I will program our and/oroids to be creators, restorers, preservers... they will rebuild Medea.”

There was a long, heavy silence at the table, broken by Keeler. “How many and/oroids on the surface now.”

“Forty-Two,” answered David Alkema.

Keeler looked as thoughtful and conflicted as ever he had before. He rubbed the bandage on his hand thoughtfully, as it had begun to throb in the heat of debate. “Let me consider this. If I am persuaded that your plan is safe, and that it provides a meaningful and respectful memorial to the people of this world, I’ll approve it.”

Redfire was watching from one of the aft observation decks as Medea slowly fell behind the ship.

In the end, Miller had gotten most of what he wanted.

Keeler added one more condition to Miller’s protocol. The population of and/oroids would be limited to three hundred million, and they would be forbidden from leaving the planet. He was unsure whether the planet would sustain three hundred million and/oroids, but it would support more than enough to make a civilization.

Of this three hundred million, only one million would possess programming that deviated from the assigned missions of studying and eradicating the pathogen, and rebuilding the planet. These deviants would have the drive to create more than those imperatives offered, not true self-expression, but an impulse to build and create beyond that which was necessary to fulfill their primary functions.

These deviants would further possess flaws in their compatibility programming that would impede their ability to interact with both normal and/oroids and other deviants.

Redfire sighed. If they did build a civilization here of some kind, it would be his greatest work of art. It would be his Taj Mahal, his *Requiem Mass*. A great work conceived from death, immortality from mortality.

If only he could think of a way to sign it.

“We left a lot of hardware back there, thanks to you,” said Flight Captain Jordan, taking a place next to him on the rail.

“We left more than hardware, we left...,” he refused to say hope. That would have been too cliched. Nor would he acknowledge to anyone this feeling inside of him, as though in creating a new civilization, at least the potential for one, he had somehow managed to renew his own spirit and heal himself.

Instead, he wondered several things aloud. “I wonder what they’ll do now. I wonder what they’ll build, and where. Will they preserve human cities or build elsewhere? They don’t need sewerage, or sanitation, or food. They need energy and maintenance. I wonder what systems they’ll construct to distribute those things. They won’t need schools, they’ll just program each other. I can’t imagine what they would do for sports and recreation, if they’ll even have a need for it. They won’t die, either, I wonder how that will affect them, especially the deviants. How will they govern themselves? What will they trade? Will they have wars? There’s so many things that go into a civilization. I wish I could be around to see what they’ll do.”

“You’re really wondering if they’ll remember who put them there, and if they’ll build a temple to you,” she said. She put her arms around him, and he rested his head upon her shoulder.