

WORLDS APART BOOK 02



EdenWorld

JAMES WITTENBACH



**Worlds Apart Book Two:  
EdenWorld**

*Have Fun, Don't Die*



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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wittenbach, James

Worlds Apart Book 01: Meridian

I. Title

ISBN 0- 0-9763384-0-8

## Chapter One

With a blast of terrifying quantum energy, the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus* tore open the curtains of normal space and time, and shot through the tattered barrier between normal and abnormal space at half the speed of light. She retracted her hyperspace sails and surged forward on waves of artificial gravity, a ship of beauty and dreams. The great shield of her

foredeck cut through the interstellar void like a sword-blade, her primary hull stretched out behind in a swan-like body topped by a pair of elegant command towers. She dazzled with lights that outshone the stars, at least the ones that were very far away, speeding through the cold ocean of space, parting waves of gravity with the grace and purpose of an ancient sailing vessel,

Her crew is ready and eager to undertake this, their second mission, to the world called Eden which, if the ancient star maps hold true, should lie in the system of the bright yellow star a few light days from her point of transition. Their last mission did not go all that well.

The planet was called Meridian. In the long absence of contact between it and the other human worlds that, 3,000 years ago, had formed the Galactic Commonwealth, Meridian had fallen under the thrall of alien conquest. Alien viruses, transmitted through space, had been manipulating the planet's environment, culture, and inhabitants into a replica (it was theorized) of the world on which they had originated – Remote control colonization. Conquer worlds without ever leaving home!

Defeating the aliens had resulted in the loss of five of her crew. A culture more accustomed to violence may have called these acceptable losses among a crew of 7000. Except that *Sapphire* and Republic, the former human colonies that had combined their resources to construct *Pegasus*, had not experienced the taking of a human life in a random act of violence in hundreds of years. The violent loss weighed heavily on the hearts of the crew, like the first corruption of childhood innocence, or a lover's first betrayal.

For some members of the crew, the scars were not merely psychological.

#### **Pegasus – Hospital Four, Deck 24, Section 72:10**

Daisy Reagan peered deeply into the cool gray eyes of Executive Commander Goneril Lear. The doctor's squint made deep furrows in a face already colored and wrinkled like dried caramel. Finally, she snorted, and put the optometric instruments away.

"Report, doctor," Lear asked in the "warm honey over biscuits" voice she used when addressing people she couldn't order.

"Ye ain't been doin' yer healin' med'tations, have ye?" Reagan said, speaking in the Hilljane dialect of *Sapphire's* Graceland province.

"I've been..." Lear hesitated. "I have tried, but my schedule makes it very difficult..."

Daisy Reagan clucked her tongue. She was very nearly 160 years old, far beyond the age at which most *Sapphireans* retired to a monasteries in Arcadia to spend their final years putting their spiritual affairs in order. Instead, she had joined the *Odyssey* project and ascended to the position of Chief Physician on the virtue of knowing more about staying alive than anyone else.

"If ye'd'a done them, ye'd be back normal right now. Yer visual acu'ty ain't more than 30%. Y'ain't been doin' yer med'tations, and ye've got dependant on yer arty-visions." She indicated the electronic eyeglasses that had been serving as Exec. Commander Lear's eyes in the aftermath of the executive officer's having looked directly into an anti-matter explosion in the closing moments of the Battle of Meridian.

"With all due respect, *dear Physician...*"

Daisy Reagan cut her off. "As a duly empowered Physician of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, I hereby relieve of command until sitch time as yer optickle nevres have completely r'gen'rated."

"That is unacceptable, We're just three days from making orbit."

"And you're about two days away from never having normal vision again. This ship is big enough to take care of itself and the crew doesn't needja. But if you don't fix yer eyes, you'll never watch those young'uns of yers grow up normal-like." She placed her palm on the data pad. "So, recorded and logged."

"Doctor," the honey and biscuits voice had returned. "Suppose I were to return to duty provisionally. I promise to perform the healing mediation and exercises. If my visual acuity isn't up to 50% by my next examination..."

"Ah really don't know why ah bother tryin' tuh explain this sometimes," Daisy sighed. "You don't understand, missy. Ah'm sayin' this ain't no suggestion and you ain't got no choice. You take off from duty or you never see normal-like ag'in."

### **Fitness Center – Deck 29, Section 79:L20**

Tactical Commander Phil Redfire traversed the empty walkway between his quarters and the Fitness Center. Earlier, he had been informed that Exec. Cmdr. Lear had been removed from duty and this news accounted for most of his good mood. Had he known the specifics of the tongue lashing Dr. Reagan had given the ship's Exec, he would have been in an even better mood.

Upon entering, he saw that the Fitness Center was occupied by one other, Captain William Keeler, the shipmaster. A decade earlier, they had been student and professor at the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland, the planet's most distinguished institution of higher learning. Keeler had been a professor of history, and Redfire had been an artist.

His Master of Fine Arts degree was in pyrokinetic art, creativity expressed through explosions and fire. He lived according to the rule that "Even beautiful things can be made interesting if they are destroyed creatively enough." Before his selection to the Odyssey Project, he had made his living traveling around Sapphire, blowing up buildings, starting fires, and causing avalanches — all in ways that made profound artistic statements about how cool it was when things were blown-up, burned, and buried in snow.

He came upon Keeler in the midst of some kind of martial arts workout involving a quarterstaff. "Trying to lose a few kilos, Captain."

Keeler grimaced. The Holiday Sequence had transpired during the twenty days *Pegasus*. "That, my friend, is why Ramadan follows Christmas; so we can fast off the weight we gained."

The Captain paused to wipe his forehead with a towel. His bangs had grown unfashionably long, but even coated in perspiration, he looked no less distinguished than a man of his learning and pedigree should. The Captain went to an effort to make sure his uniform always looked a little rumpled and his hair always looked a little unkempt, and in the beginning, that had been enough to fool people. Try as he might, though, people were beginning to suspect that below the surface was a man of some discipline who understood important things and even genuinely believed in some of them.

Redfire was of a tall and lean-but-muscular build, and wore his red hair cut close to the scalp for ease of maintenance. He gave a nod to Keeler and crossed to the kinetic free-weight rack at the back of the room. He selected a pair of ten-kilo weights, and began throwing weights in the air and catching them, using the discipline of kinetic weightlifting, while Keeler grunted and thrust his pole behind him.

When the Captain had exerted himself sufficiently, he crossed the room and watched his tactical officer. Kinetic weightlifting was not a widely practiced form of exercise. Although

good for bulding mass, form, and balance, it was also dangerous, and could be a great source of shock to the body if the weights were not caught correctly. Redfire, however, caught his weights in the precise motion of capture he was supposed to.

"Do you ever worry about one of those landing on your head." Keeler asked.

Redfire caught a dumb bell with flowing arch of his back and swept it below him, then turned. "Back in 7284, I was in New Sapporo making an ice sculpture. A forty-kilo icicle fell from someone else's sculpture and hit me as I turned up to see it, entering my cranium just above my left eye. A large portion of my skull had to be replaced with a ceramic composite, and cloned material had to be placed into my brain. I was in the hospital for the next eight months."

"That explains a lot."

"Za, I used to be a little crazy. I tend to think it mellowed me out."

"No kidding."

"For real." He laid down his weights. "Your quarterstaff regime is quite unique."

Keeler shrugged. "I just make it up as I go along."

Redfire didn't buy it. "Unless I miss my guess, your routine is based on the pole-fighting techniques of the Warrior-Monks of the Panrovian Order of Sumac."

"Older than that," Keeler answered. "Much, much older than that."

"May I see your staff?"

"Only if you buy me dinner first," but Keeler handed him the stick nonetheless. He carried it with him at all times, but did not appear to have any difficulty walking that would require its use. Redfire had been eager to examine it more closely for some time.

Redfire took Keeler's walking stick and for the first time examined the patterns of alien runes with which it was encrusted. He ran his hands along them, feeling the patterns they imparted into the — wood? metal? ceramic? he could not tell, but a brush with his fingers sent a little thrill of electricity through his body. The suspicions he had been harboring since his first days on board were confirmed. It was no walking stick. "Is this what I think it is Captain?"

"Only if you are thinking it is a Thean Battle Staff. One of nine presented to my forebear, Eccentrica, née Louisa Keeler, at the end of the Thean Siege, circa 4842 to 4863 A.S, a relic of Pre-Silence Civilization, an actual alien artifact. Only three of these are known to have survived, one in the Keeler Estate in New Cleveland, one in the Sapphire Planetary Archival Museum in Corvallis, and, this one, which is the historical legacy of the Chancellor of the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland.... or should I say... was."

Redfire waved the stick slightly and it nearly flew from his hand as the mass of one tip seem to increase dramatically even as he swung it. "Whoa...."

"Please be careful with that," Keeler said gently. "If you swing it hard enough, it could punch a hole through every deck between here and the inner hull."

"How does it work?"

Keeler shrugged. "We know it manipulates gravity, but we've lost at least three of them when technologists tried to break them apart to figure out how they work. In the process, we also lost three teams of technologists and a big chunk of New Tenochtitlàn."

"An amazing piece of work," Redfire concluded. "I wonder if the Theans are still out there, some where. I wonder why they never came back,"

"The Thean Siege was always one of my favorite courses to teach," Keeler said. "Over the centuries, the story has become so encrusted with legend and symbolism, it gives a lot of

material. It's also one of the few occasions our entire planet faced an external threat, and it is, in my opinion, the one point in history where we came closest to losing the philosophy of individual freedom that makes our way of life so unique."

"Some people think the Theans had a legitimate claim to the planet. They had established a colony thousands of years before humans arrived."

Keeler shook his head. "Nonsense. There were three bodies of opinion at the time. One was that if the Theans had established a colony, it had clearly failed and now it was humanity's turn. Another was that the Theans only wanted the minerals of the Carpentarian continent, which was the only continent they had not stripped bare of minerals during their previous colonial effort. The third was that the Theans were lying through their baleen ridges in order to stake a claim on a planet they wanted."

"Which version do you think was the case?"

"I don't think it matters. What matters was that Sapphire at the time had a human population of nearly 400,000 and a Thean population of zero."

"Some people have said over the centuries that the Thean objectives were actually Commonwealth propaganda. The Theans were a dying race, and they wanted to inhabit our colonies in order to survive."

"I've heard those theories," Keeler said. "Revisionism is an academic exercise I try to avoid. The Thean siege was nearly three thousand years ago. How can we possibly know what the truth was?"

"And the part about Eccentrica Keeler averting the way through art?"

"Is probably true," Keeler said. "I know, it's the most fantastic element of the whole story. Here you have, on the one side, the Thean siege ships trying to cut off the planet from human contact, preparing to wipe out every settlement. The Commonwealth Fleet on the other side. Ready to fire should the Theans try anything. On the planet, everyone terrified, not knowing if they're going to live or die. Calls for Martial Law in the Meeting House. Talk of Secession. Panic in some of the larger settlements. It was a perilous time."

"Then, Eccentrica invites the Thean leadership down for negotiations. At this time, New Cleveland is just a small Artist's Colony with a weird University. No one takes it very seriously. She shows the Theans how artists have portrayed them, and how cinemists have portrayed the forthcoming battle and invasion. They hear songs. They hear poetry. The Theans asked her, in their collective way of speaking. 'What is all this? You betray your battle plans to us?'"

"Not," said Eccentrica. "These are works of art, of fiction?"

"What is art of fiction?" They ask her.

"Art is when you take an object or an idea, and try to make a representation of it through the use of another medium, like paint or sculpture or song. Fiction is when you describe events that have not actually taken place."

"And you use this art-of-fiction to train your warriors and your people to defend against us?"

"Not."

"Then what is its purpose?"

"Art is how we express through ourselves the spirit of God, of the Creator," she answered them. "By creating things out of our imagination, we express that part of ourselves that

"So, it serves a religio-spiritual function?"

"Not strictly," she told them, by this time the Theans were getting frustrated. "But creation is what validates human existence. We exist to create. We need to express that spirit inside of us that

*makes us want to create, and that is what art is for, to manifest that spirit of creation."*

"All of which is completely new to them because the Theans had no concept of art." Keeler took a deep breath. "When Eccentrica showed them how things could be represented in a non-literal way, they were, as the ancients used to say, flabber-gasted. I imagine it took days to explain, but when it did, the Theans were beside themselves. We had shown them something that they had not conceived themselves. And we had shared it freely? How could they possibly make war on us now?"

Redfire smiled. Art as a weapon. What a concept.

Keeler gently removed the walking stick/battle staff from his tactical officer's hands. "Shortly thereafter, the Theans departed, taking with them the gifts of art Eccentrica had presented them, and leaving behind these battle staffs. We never heard from them again."

### **System 10 223 Equuleus – Space**

*Pegasus's* underside carried a vast array of sensors and instruments for detecting, surveying and mapping its celestial environs. It had already deduced the 10 223 Equuleus was a single star system with four planets, all of them gas giants with well-developed ring systems. It was in the process of surveying the moons of those planets for suitable environments for humans, as well as sweeping through the electromagnetic spectrum for indications of carrier-wave transmission or power generation that would indicate the level of civilization.

There was supposed to be a colony called "Eden" in this system. Its existence as referenced in several of the records recovered from the City of Testament on Republic. Testament had been rendered radioactive and uninhabitable during Republic's Wars of Unification (which Sapphire called the "City Wars") and so some of its records of the Colonial Era had been preserved, whereas the rest of Republic had been purged of almost every legacy of the colonial era during the New Renewal Movement (APR 5890-5924) and successive movements in which the colonial past was widely believed to be either an impediment to progress, or symbolic of a legacy of beliefs no longer fashionable in the circles of powers that controlled Republic.

The hatches on the front of *Pegasus's* bow opened and released three furious bullets toward 10 223 Equuleus II, the second planet, which was found to have at least one habitable moon. These were unmanned survey-probes, dart-shaped craft, with three huge tail fins, a long slender fuselage containing their small ion engines, and an instrument package at the front. Most of their acceleration came from the electromagnetic railguns that ran the length of *Pegasus*, that accelerated them to nearly half the speed of light.

They closed in a moon of the second planet; a worldlet which had given off tantalizing indications — a reducing atmosphere, surface temperature near the triple point of water, and interesting electromagnetic emissions.

### **Hangar Bay 19, Section Minus 4, Section 96:R50**

Matthew Driver stood alone in the landing bay, bathed in the blue light of the ultraviolet sterilization bath his ship was undergoing. His ship was an Aves-class Excursion Vehicle, combination transport shuttle, defensive fighter, and science platform, and he would never think of himself as alone so long as *Prudence* was in the room.

When the light faded out, he approached his ship and gently touched the underside of her forward cabin. Her fuselage was gleaming clean, and was slightly warm to the touch.

"Missed a spot," said a voice, startling him.



He turned around to see Eliza Jane Change, the ship's chief navigator, standing behind him. He had not heard her enter. "How long have you been here?"

"A few seconds. We've just cleared the outer orbital margin."

"Any signs of life yet?"

"Sensor readings are still inconclusive."

Matthew took off his protective goggles, revealing an unremarkably handsome face. Matthew was shorter than Eliza, with a build that filled out his FlightCore uniform pleasingly enough. Eliza Jane had a hard and willowy body, exotic eyes, and a mane of glossy black hair she wore bunched into a loose ponytail. As she moved next to him, and he felt that familiar but always surprising tingle in his belly that her proximity never failed to inspire. "Are you ready to launch?"

"I won't be going for a while," he answered. "Command selected the first three landing teams, and we're not included."

"Are you disappointed?" Eliza Jane Change asked.

"Nay," Matthew lied, backed up by a lifetime of Republicker civility and propriety. "I flew the first mission to Meridian. Now it is someone else's turn. *Prudence* and I are scheduled to fly Excursion 49."

"I suppose the important thing is just the opportunity to visit the planet."

Nay, it wasn't, Matthew thought to himself, but he did not let it show. "I heard you were nominated to lead an Excursion Team, but you refused."

Eliza Jane shrugged. "As I told you before. I don't much care for planets." Eliza Jane had been born to the Mining Guild and had spent almost every moment of her childhood and adult life in spaceships. Matthew chewed his lower lip for a second, then forced himself to say the speech he had been rehearsing in his head for some days. "Eliza, my sister is getting married in three weeks time. I'd like it very much if you would be my guest at her wedding."

Eliza Jane nodded, like it was some duty assignment. "Of course."

Matthew had not expected her to agree, but he also had not really expected her to decline. In truth, bringing himself to ask her had been so difficult, he had never gotten to the point of considering what kind of answer to expect, and found when she did answer him, he had not heard her answer at all. "Excuse me?"

"I said, of course, I would be happy to go with you. Are you participating in the ceremony?"

"Nay, this ceremony is strictly civil. We had the religious ceremony on Homeguard Outpost 204 before departure," he explained. He felt somewhat relieved at that. He had not wanted Eliza Jane to think he was inviting her to a wedding in order to put ideas into her head, even though that was exactly what he was hoping would happen.

"I don't understand, two ceremonies?"

"It was the only way for our dad and Magnus's parents to attend. Republic law requires a one-year waiting period before you can get married legally after declaring your intentions, and we launched before the year was up. So, Kayliegh and Magnus had an unofficial religious ceremony for the families, and the official ceremony will take place on the ship."

Eliza Jane rolled her eyes. These groundlings and their rules. "Will Eddie be invited?"

"Uh..."

She frowned. Eddie Roebuck was the third vertex of their odd little combo. Matthew still had not figured out if Eddie was a rival for Eliza's affections, or if Eliza even had any affections

for either of them to claim. Since departing Meridian, he had spent a large part of his off-duty time with the two of them. Eddie and Eliza seemed to have no interest in personal relationships with anyone on the ship other than each other, while Matthew kept at least a tenuous connection to the other pilots in his Wing, and mutual friends he shared with his sister Kayliegh.

"I'll have to ask Kayliegh," Matthew finally answered. "It's a family event, it's up to her, really."

She looked at him with that odd half-squint that he could never quite read. Annoyance? Anger? or just incomprehension.

"There won't be any ale," he added.

"So, Eddie wouldn't enjoy himself."

"Probably not."

She nodded, apparently satisfied. "I agree. We'll go then. I was just about to have a meal. Are you almost finished here?"

"Almost." He took off his goggles and gloves and stowed them in a locker on the ship's maintenance dock.

As she exited the hangar, it occurred to him that every time he posed a question to Eliza – inviting her to a wedding – which should have given him some idea of where he stood with her, she always managed to put him back at Square one. He was no closer to knowing where he stood with her than he had been when the conversation began. He wondered if and when and how this was ever going to work itself out.

### **Eddie Roebucks Quarters – Deck 15, Section 60:R40**

The alarm went off in Technician Third Class Eddie Roebuck's quarters at precisely 1400 hours. For once, he was already awake. Today was the day. *The Day!*

A few nights earlier — as he had lay in bed in his small quarters (Technician Third Class being the lowest rank in the ship's hierarchy) munching a bag of something crunchy and salty and drinking the cheapest ale the ship had to offer, and wondering what else he would need in order to be happy — an idea had germinated. There was just one thing more he needed and this small existence, would be enough to satisfy him for the next hundred years or so of his life.

He drew himself out of his bunk and, in his tight quarters, could reach to his clothing storage unit without taking a step. The doors slid apart displaying his three sets of work clothes and his slightly larger collection of off-duty clothes. All completely clean through the action of the built-in cleaners, and devoid of any of the scents that might recall a night spent on the recreation decks or a good spicy meal in the food court. He had disabled it at one point, but his friends had complained.

*Friends*, he thought, pulling on his brown technician's overalls. *I have a few friends, I have a place to sleep, I have enough to eat.* He had never thought, until a few nights ago, about how this ship had taken care of his needs in a way no one had since his mother had gestated him, and asked almost as little and return.

He pulled on his boots. He was actually going to be early for his duty-shift. (1500-2200 hours, with an hour break.) What a surprise that would be to the Senior Technician. He saw that today he was assigned to the aeration pods, which served as filters to the ship's atmospheric regulators. (A new name was being sought for those, by the way, since the aliens

who had ruled Meridian and killed five of *Pegasus's* crew called themselves Regulators.) It would involve himself and another technician and a pair of automechs — small robots of great versatility — and a lot of standing around while the machines did the actual work.

Normally, it was not a duty he would be looking forward to, but today was going to be different. He was going to report straight to the Technical Bay and secure the one thing that several nights of reflection had told him was the only thing standing between him and the contentment that had eluded ever since he signed onto this voyage. (A complete mistake, and the last time he would ever do anything just to impress a woman.)

He grabbed a warm can of something containing caffeine and pulled on his jacket. He slipped outside into a corridor filled with warm afternoon light and scented with breezes from the spice orchards in the adjacent Botany Bay. There was a transport waiting at the end of his walk and it was empty. He stepped on board and asked for Technical Bay Four.

Eddie BackBay Roebuck had grown up on the streets of New Halifax, a gritty industrial city in the tropical region of Sapphire's Carpentaria continent. His father was a loser and his mother he had never really known. The Family Welfare Situation, bless their hearts, had done their best to raise him, but he readily admitted that he didn't provide the best material. He wasn't terribly intelligent, definitely not athletic and had not cared to improve himself in either respect. He had known other kids who had come from a background like his or worse and had gone onto university or to some form of productive labor, but until his longshot selection to the Odyssey Project, his ambitions had not extended beyond an occasional job at the Aerospace Docks.

Yet, here he was. Something like a hundred light years from home, flying among the stars in a ship even he had to admit was amazing, millions back on the home planet would have eagerly changed places with him, and, he grinned, he was still young. When *Pegasus* traveled through hyperspace, it left normal time behind. He'd still be in his prime when those people he used to think of as friends back home were long in their graves... unless, of course, the ship blew up or encountered a nest of Brain-Eating Space Spiders.

He shuddered at the thought. All the more reason to take advantage of every day he had left, and all the more reason to eliminate the one true obstacle to his happiness.

He exited the transport and walked the length of the maintenance corridor to Technical Bay Four.

"Roebuck," Growled Technician First Class Cisco, his crew chief. "You're..." he looked at his chronometer in disbelief? "Early."

"Za, I am reinventing myself, as of today. Whole new Eddie Roebuck."

Cisco, an older man, a Republicker, with salt and pepper hair and a jowly face regarded him cautiously. "Oh, yeah?"

"Absolutely," Roebuck told him.

"No more showing up late?"

"I'll never be late again."

"No more hourly hour-long break?"

"Neg."

"No more disappearing to the brewery deck when the effluent processors back-up."

Eddie shuddered. "Never happen again, boss."

"No more sending MicroCams into the women's locker rooms in the recreation decks."

Eddie felt a twinge. There were some things he would miss. "Neg, sir. I'm through with all

of it.”

“Really, Roebuck?” Cisco growled.

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“No reason not to believe me. I am just never going to show up late, goof off, leave early, do a half-assed job, or program the automechs to give you a wedgie ever again.”

“So, it *was* you.”

“Za, but that’s all in the past. None of it, I swear, none of it, will ever happen again.”

“Oh, why not?”

“Because,” Eddie smiled his most dangerous smile. “I quit.”

### **Planetology and Telemetry Laboratory – Deck 64, Section 87:10**

The four probes swarmed over the largest moon of the fourth planet, two taking equatorial orbits, to taking polar orbits, circling the worldlet every forty-nine minutes. They aimed arrays of instruments at its surface; atmospheric sensors sniffed to determine the amount and concentrations of oxygen, nitrogen, argon, and methane; spectrometers looked for temperature variations from stratosphere to surface and from pole to equator; topographical mapping arrays picked out oceans, islands, continents, mountains, rivers, and plains; tiny eyes squinted hard to pick out surface details,

The data was linked back to *Pegasus* by directed neutrino pulse, and fed into the ship’s primary Planetary Survey Laboratory. There were four large screens on the walls of this laboratory, and a sphere in the center, two meters in diameter and silvery. As the probes picked out details of the moon’s surface, slices of the sphere were filled in with holographic depictions of the actual view.

Gradually, resolution filled in from one kilometer, to one-hundred meters, to one meter, and the Planetology Team began to pick out the interesting details: roadways, fields, buildings, cities.

They had found what they were looking for.

## Chapter Two

### 10 223 Equuleus II – 2, Orbital Space

*Pegasus's* skilled helmsman swung her around three different moons before orbital alignment was achieved over the planet that might have been Eden (or one of the many colonies called Eden).

A lone Aves launched from the rear of the ship. It descended to within 100 kilometers of the moon's surface, and dropped several dozen "floater" probes to drift across the face of the world, like milkweed, to sniff the atmosphere for dangerous microbes and allergens, to analyze wind currents and weather patterns, and to scout inobtrusively for potential landing zones.

They relayed their data to Geological Survey and the Primary Planetology Laboratory. A team of specialists excitedly analyzed the new data, preparing reports for the landing teams. In the Secondary and Tertiary Labs, less senior personnel carefully analyzed and catalogued the data from probes scouting the other planets and uninhabited moons of the system. Their devotion to task was more sedate, and more noble in its own way. At one time, all of these worlds had been named and mapped by human explorers. Their task was to rebuild this knowledge. Although it was a less glamorous occupation than mapping the colony itself, it was no less important to the overall endeavor.

### Taiga Briefing Room – Deck 91, Section 85:A00

The first Landing Team briefing was held in the Taiga Conference Room. Ninety-six officers and crew arranged themselves in the comfortable chairs surrounding a holographic sphere, whose cloudy sky appeared the color of dark, berry-flavored ale. Captain Keeler was there, as was Redfire, and all those who had been selected for the contact and exploration missions planned for the surface.

Specialist Kayliegh Driver, Matthew Driver's twin sister, dark brown hair in curls brushed back, showing a trim, attractive figure beneath her perfectly neat Science Core uniform, stood before a projection of the moon. "This is Eden, our next destination. Our probes have confirmed the existence of human settlements on the surface, although we have been unable to make contact from orbit. Initial assessments suggest that the inhabitants do not have the capability of communicating at our level of technology. Therefore, we will be using the Level II Surface Contact Protocol"

"Whatever that is," Keeler, seated in the first row, muttered to himself.

Driver touched a countrol pad and the sphere representing Eden shrunk to the size of a fist and swung into orbit around a much larger orange, red, and yellow sphere. "Eden, as you are well aware, is a moon of a larger planet. We don't know the name of it. Eden is a small world, we estimate native gravity to be only 37% of our own. Eden's gravitational field is strong enough to pull hydrocarbons and other gases from the upper atmosphere of the larger planet. The action of solar radiation on these chemicals creates a kind of brown haze in the upper atmosphere. From the ground, the sky appears to be a kind of amber color.

"Eden's orbit with the larger planet is syNchronized with its rotational period, the same side of Eden always faces the planet, and the other side always faces away. Eden takes eighteen

Sapphirean days to orbit its planet. If you were living on the side furthest from the planet, you would be in sunlight when you were between the planet and the sun, and in darkness when the planet was between you in the sun. You would have a 252-hour day and a 252 hour night.

"As you might imagine, this leads to fairly severe ranges in temperature on the nightside of Eden. At the equator, the temperature will rise to in excess of 60 degrees standard at high noon and fall to -20 after midnight. These extremes in temperature variations also result in extreme weather conditions. Correspondingly, less than four per cent of Eden's people live on the Nightside.

"If you lived on the nearer side, the sun would rise and, three days later, it would begin to be eclipsed by the planet. It would remain eclipsed for three days. Then, it would emerge from behind the planet, and set three days later. Through the night, the eclipse cycle would reverse, although Eden's shadow would never fully blot out the image of the planet in the sky, which itself is so bright as to keep the planet in a kind of early twilight."

Captain Keeler found himself imagining *Pegasus* orbiting Eden, Eden orbiting its gas giant, the gas giant orbiting the sun; ellipses upon ellipses, waltzing through the cosmos, Eden facing her partner for all eternity.

Eden grew back to size and replaced the image of the larger planet.

"Atmosphere at the surface is within tolerable ranges for temperature, pressure, and composition. We have detected thousands of small human habitations... villages from 100 to about 10,000 people inside, widely dispersed across the planet."

Redfire spoke up. "How many people do we suspect live on Eden at this point?"

Driver blinked at him, as though she had been getting to that and resented the interruption in the flow of her lecture. "We can not know with precision, but based on current data our estimates would indicate a population between 150 and 220 millions."

"How are they organized?" Redfire asked.

Driver referred to the detailed ground maps displayed on the four screens at the front of the room. "There's no evidence of any infrastructure to support a planetary government. Geographically, most of the dayside... the side of Eden facing the planet ... consists of very large islands separated by shallow seas. We haven't been able to determine whether each of these is a governmental unit, or if they are divided into multiple jurisdictions.

"Electromagnetic signature readings from the planet suggest relatively low levels of power generation. We are probably looking at a level of technology with electric lights, perhaps some low-level cybernetics, direct wire communication. There is too much ionic charge in the upper atmosphere to permit communication by carrier wave, so communications gear will be set to neutrino pulse transmission mode."

"That will make it difficult to track our landing parties from space," someone from the Technical Core observed.

Driver nodded. "Based on our lessons learned at Meridian, we have revised the landing protocol. We decided against sending down any landing parties before *Pegasus* made orbit. We will not send one ship to make first contact. We will dispatch three landing parties in teams of two Aves to different landing zones on the planet. Team Alpha will be under Captain Keeler and will take the Aves *Zilla* and *Yorick* to one of the planet's primary population centers, here on this small continent in the northern hemisphere. They will ascertain the planet's social and governmental structure and attempt to make contact with whatever leadership exists.

"Team Beta will be under Tactical Commander Redfire and will take the Aves *Kate* and *Neville* to the planet's nightside to conduct scientific analysis for basis of comparison to the

dayside. Team Beta will attempt to make contact with humans living on the nightside.

"Team Gamma will be under Lt. Commander Morgan and will take the Aves *Edward* and *George*. They will land on this large island in the southern hemisphere of dayside and scientifically analyze the planet's climate, geology, and biosphere. The island is relatively unpopulated, so they should be able to work in peace." She could not repress a smile. Morgan was her semi-husband, and she would join him this time. "Our probes have revealed unusually high concentrations of uncommon metals — molybdenum, titanium, cobalt, coborundum, gold, silver, and platinum — in the planet's crust. Morgan's team will be particularly tasked to study this aspect of the planet's geology.

"Executive Commander Lear had asked me to remind you, our primary goal is to make peaceful contact with the inhabitants of this planet, in particular, planetary leadership. We also need to find out if Eden maintains contact with any other colony worlds, which is unlikely given their imputed level of technology, but still possible. Our secondary goal is to acquire any information the planet has from the Colonial Period, in particular the locations of any other human colonies and/or Earth and any information that could provide an explanation as to why the Commonwealth collapsed."

The reminder was unnecessary, of course. Everyone in that conference room knew their mission, and every heart was beating faster in anticipation of landing on the surface of Eden, or whatever it was called.

### **Lear Family Suite, Deck 35, Section 70:R20**

Several decks below and forward, in one of the inhabitation zones, was one member of the crew who would not be visiting Eden, and whose heart was as dark and bitter about that prospect as the others' were excited.

"Captain Keeler has refused to overturn the witch's order," Goneril Lear snapped, she had been very snappish of late. She was sitting before her workstation, sorting through the ship's protocols and trying to find a way back to command. Eliza Jane's refusal to lead a landing team had complicated this effort. Otherwise, with all command-grade officers off the ship, she might have been able to take emergency command.

"This is a violation of the Republicers with Different Abilities Act of 5992," she growled, also being big on growling... as well as muttering, grumbling, snarling and griping ... since her release from command duties. "I can still command. All I need is a crewman, or an and/oroid to do relay the visual information to me. I can reset a terminal for direct neural feed and bypass my senses entirely."

"But that won't heal your eyes," said Augustus Lear, her husband, patiently. Augustus Lear was a burly man, and served as the ship's Assistant Chief Agro-Botanist. He was well acquainted with his wife's tempers, and knew that if he spoke in a soothing voice long enough, he could begin to subdue her rage.

Goneril Lear was equally well acquainted with her husband's soothing technique. "You don't understand. The balance of power on this ship has shifted. Keeler and Redfire are probably laughing about this. I would wager that they even put Dr. Reagan up to it."

Augustus nodded, understandingly. "If they did, I think it means they care about you. Otherwise, they would have let your vision fail, and permanently removed you from the command hierarchy, and worse. Can you imagine if you had to go through life depending on some machine to your children's faces?"

"I could make time for the healing meditations. I will admit, my progress has been slow, but I have been improving."

Augustus rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Do you remember when we took the boys to the Family Recreation Complex on Republic? Remember when we soaked in the mineral baths and took the boys to the educational exhibits?"

"Don't change the subject?"

"Goneril..."

She sighed. She did remember the holiday. Republic had few areas of natural beauty, most of its land surface being barren rock. The Recreation Complex in Sector 4 North was built on the floor of an immense impact crater left by a meteor collision. Wind and erosion had whipped some of the rocks into extraordinary shapes, with interesting mineral striations.

"I think Trajan was about eight years old. Marcus was five. It was the last time we took a vacation together as a family."

She had no answer for this. She remembered it as though it had happened last quarter. Where had the time gone?

August added. "Trajan turns thirteen next month. I've been preparing him for his Passage."

Goneril Lear had noticed her husband and Trajan reviewing the *Writings of Vesta* and *The Chronicles of Iest*. She had been aware, in the back of her mind, that her son's Passage was upcoming, but was surprised to learn how soon it would come to pass.

"I should be preparing Trajan for his Passage," she said quietly.

"Trajan's had a tough time adjusting to life on the ship," John remarked. "He misses home. His Passage should be an opportunity for him to find a place for himself on the ship."

Goneril Lear looked toward her son's room, a blur at the edge of her failing vision.

"He's in there, now," said Augustus Lear.

Goneril rose and touched her husband's cheek before crossing the room. She stood outside the entrance to his room. "Trajan, may I come in."

No answer came from inside, but the doorway slid open. Goneril Lear looked into her son's room and found it unsatisfactorily disordered; a few pieces of clothing on the floor, datacards and datapads strewn about the space in a disorganized way. Over his sleeper was a poster of Darien Postcarrier, the Olympian, as he had appeared at the games of 6160.

The boy himself was lying in bed, a RecSimSystem in his hands, his eyes knitted in concentration and tiny holographic warplanes battling in the space above his bed. *Trajan was a dambled beautiful kid*, she thought, in language no one would ever hear her utter aloud. The curls of his hair were darkening to honey-blond. His features had begun the process of resolving themselves out of childly roundness and developing smooth lines of definition along his chin, cheekbones, and eyebrows.

"Finished with schoolwork?" she asked.

"I'm on down time," he answered irritably.

She crossed over to the shelf on which he kept his various books and scribes. The *Writings of Vesta* lay untouched at the bottom of a pile of schoolbooks. She carefully extracted it and turned it on.

"May I sit down?" she asked, pulling a chair from his desk. He said nothing. "Pause the game for a moment, I want to talk."

Sullenly, Trajan did as he was told.



"Your father and I have been discussing your Passage. I would expect a young man to be excited by the prospect. It's only a few days away."

"I didn't think you had remembered."

She refused to be baited. "Do you feel prepared?"

He shrugged. "I guess so."

"I took my passage in the Triumph of Unity Mountains. I set out with a rebreather pack, three bottles of water, and The Books, I began at the place where the mountains arose from the Sea of Serenity in a line of peaks beginning far out at sea. On the second day, a winter storm blew in, and I nearly froze to death."

She could tell from the look on his face that she was boring him. Lately, he seemed to wear that expression whenever they spoke. She brought the conversation back to him. "There is a small island in the subtropical zone of Eden's northern hemisphere. Our probes show it is uninhabited and there are no dangerous animals. It would be an ideal location for your Passage."

"Mother, please tell me you did not retask a probe just to plan my Passage."

Lear smiled faintly. "It was only a small probe."

Trajan sat up. "Why did you do that? I hate it when you do that."

"When I do what?"

"When you use your position like that, to help me, to give me privileges no other kid on this ship has."

"I am still your mother, and until you complete your Passage, it is my prerogative to do everything in my power to protect and nurture you. When you complete the Passage, you can begin to be responsible for your own life and your own decisions."

"I don't even want to have my Passage on Eden," he said. "I shouldn't even be here. I should have had my Passage back on Republic, with my friends there to support me."

She looked at him and reached into his mind, gently, secretly as only a mother could. She saw what he was not telling her. There was fear inside him, but also a certain feeling that undergoing his Passage on a place he had never seen and never would revisit was inappropriate. She sensed also that he was unable to precisely articulate these feelings, and went no further. "The choice is ultimately yours, son. It is your Passage. As your mother, I will do what I can to accommodate your intentions."

"I felt you in my mind just now," he said. "You've obviously figured out what I want. Don't play games with me, mother."

"I did not reach that far," she said calmly, and they both knew he could have blocked her had he wanted to, as only a son could.

"I have already decided where I want to take my Passage. Let me show you," he said, and reached under his bed and pulled out a remote control device. He activated the screen above his desk, bringing up an active schematic of *Pegasus*. He pointed to the lower part of the ship. "Down here," he said. "I will make my Passage down here."

"The UnderDecks?"

"Aye."

"That doesn't seem very... traditional." She modulated her tones non-judgmentally.

"The tradition of taking a journey did not even begin with Vesta, it arose on a colony world called Steadfast four hundred years after the Ascension. The tradition is only that the journey be undertaken alone, in unknown territory, and that it last three days. The UnderDecks

comprise 61% of the ship's volume, and besides from a few auto-mechs, they are completely uninhabited. Think about all the kids who are going to turn thirteen on this ship when we aren't in orbit over a planet. We spend more time in transit than we do in orbit. Where are they going to undergo their passage? "

"I understand, but wouldn't you rather take a passage on a warm, pleasant isle?"

"This ship is where I am going to live out my life and probably die. This is where I should take my Passage."

Lear looked at the diagram. What her son was proposing was actually quite original and egalitarian. She admired him for that. "Very well, son. Let's begin the arrangements." Her urge was to lean over the bed, brush aside his bangs and kiss his smooth forehead, but she decided against it.

### **New Amenities Nexus, Deck 20, Section 66:00**

Ever since Meridian, Eddie Roebuck, Eliza Jane Change, and Matthew Driver had become something of an odd trio, spending a great deal of their off-duty time in each other's company. They made an odd trio because Matthew was still every centimeter the clean-cut pilot, Eliza Jane also an officer, but with an unpredictably temperamental streak, and the laid-back Eddie perpetually looked as though he had just fallen out of his sleeper.

They were surveying the new recreation complex, located in the next subsector beyond and below the place where the previous recreation complex had ended. It was intended to invoke Nickel Plate Road in the Sapphirean City of New Halifax. New Halifax had made its fortune on processing ore from space; Sapphire having been stripped of most of mineral deposits millennia before the arrival of human colonists. New Halifax had a broad deep harbor, ideal for accommodating the very large ships that carried ore and semi-processed minerals from space to the ground. It also was convenient to sources of geothermal energy and an untapped vein of platinum and molybdenum ore.

As a result, New Halifax was the nexus point for contact between mining guildsman and the ocean sailors of the Sapphirean Merchant Marine. As a general rule, these were people of whom the ancients might have said, "They knew how to party." Long centuries before, the good citizens of New Halifax had taken measures to confine the excesses of these hardy mariners to the establishments around Nickel Plate Road.

Over the centuries, however, the tavern-keepers and innkeepers along Nickel Plate Road had come to realize that tourists were more profitable than sailors and miners, and generally less destructive in their patronage. When Eddie had left, the nightlife of the actual Nickel Plate Road was a pale shadow to what had gone on in centuries past. (For that kind of action, the tourists would have to visit the Mining Guild Outposts in the outer system.)

Eddie Roebuck regarded the fixtures meant to recall the most notorious district of his hometown with unhidden disgust. "This bites," he said, slapping an open palm against the fake wall meant to recall the infamous *Crocodile Cantina*. "The actual sequence on Nickel Plate Road is 'Slit's Throat Emporium,' then 'Pete's House of Grays,' then 'Crocodile Cantina,' ... and the real cantina has actual crocodile teeth teeth."

"Sit down and drink something," Eliza told him.

"You say that like it's easy."

"So, what are you going to do now that you've quit your function," Matthew asked as they took a booth in the central plaza.

"Nothing," Eddie answered with a dismissive snort.

"Nothing?"

"I hated that job," Eddie said. "It was making my life miserable. Then, one day I just woke up and asked myself, 'Eddie, if you just decided not to show up for the next duty-shift, what would happen?' and I came back with the answer, nothing. I mean, the thinkers who run the ship aren't gonna let me starve. All I have to do is stay out of the way, and they'll go on, and I'll go on."

Matthew was insistent, duty-bound. "You can't just quit. What about the ship?"

"You know what my job was?" Eddie asked. "Supervising robots. The auto-mechs did all the actual work while I stood around and watch them. Truth of the matter, I'm not necessary. Truth of the matter is, none of us is necessary."

Matthew retorted angrily. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course we're necessary."

"Za, you like to believe that because you've been training to pilot spaceships your whole life, but the truth is, and I'm not saying this to put you down, that the ships are so smart they don't need pilots. Most of the time, your ship is piloting itself and you're just along for the ride."

The tips of Matthew's ears were turning just a little red. "How can you say that? The Flight Core saved the ship at Meridian."

Eddie rolled his eyes. "Za, maybe, but why was the ship even at Meridian? You know, I heard a rumor that while we were on Meridian, they found out the ship's BrainCore had become so intelligent it was actually its own life form. They locked it down in the UnderDecks to keep it from taking over."

"That's not a rumor," said Eliza. "That's what was in the Official Report."

"Who reads the official reports? Anyway, my point was, is, and will be instead of sending out nine huge ships with 6,000 people each, why didn't they send out ... I don't know, 6,000 ships with nine people and one super-intelligent computer on-board. It would have explored the galaxy a lot faster."

"Didn't they try something like that three hundred years ago and none of the ships were ever heard from again?" Eliza Jane asked. They were approached by an and/oroid, decked out as a drinks-servant.

"That's not what matters," Matthew said firmly. "What matters is, we're out here. We're representing our colonies, and humanity. We all have to do our duty."

Eddie sighed. "Weren't you listening when I was explaining why we don't need to do our duty?"

"Our duty is a lot more than whatever function we service on the ship." Matthew looked very perturbed, and this was surprising as he usually did not convey much emotion. "What gives you the privilege to lie around doing nothing, eating this ship's rations, without contributing to our mission?"

"Contributing to our mission? Look, there was nothing I did that couldn't be done by a good automech, or an and/oroid with a defective logic center."

"So, why do any of us even bother to do our jobs, Eddie? Why do any of us even bother to live, if all of our machines can do the job without us?"

"Because there's a bunch of big thinkers on Sapphire and on Repulsive who dreamed up this stupid idea. 'Let's explore the galaxy. Let's find Earth.' How do we even know there *is* an Earth. Don't be getting me started on that."

Matthew shook his head, as though shaking off anger. "If I were in command. I'd put you off at the next habitable world and replace you with someone who wanted to be here."

"Good thing you're not in command, then, isn't it? Hoy, man, we do not need to debate. We can agree to disagree. So long as we agree to agree that if I choose not to perform my function, I can still go on living on this ship."

"When you do that, you devalue the efforts of everyone else."

The and/oroid spoke, its voice musical, but not human-sounding. "Would the gentlemen and the lady care for a libation?"

Eliza Jane said, "Why don't you order something Matthew, I'm buying."

Matthew studied the drinks menu. "Quay Lime sorbet fizz," he ordered, and looked up to see Eliza Change and Eddie Roebuck giggling at him. "What?"

"Matthew, friend, you are entitled to ... stronger beverages." Eliza said.

"You mean something ... with alcohol?"

"Or tripolity!" Eddie enthused. "Tripolity has a wonderful kick."

Matthew hesitated. "I..."

"What are you, some kind of Saintist or something?"

"Actually, I am."

They paused and blinked at him momentarily.

"You mean, you can't drink alcohol, or tripolity, or caffeine..."

"Nay, none of it."

Eliza Jane shrugged. "My mother used to believe that if you did something you weren't supposed to, all you had to do was perform some ritual chanting and your sin would be forgiven."

"Which religion was that?"

"The one with the celibate functionaries. I forget. She didn't practice much."

"I'm just not supposed to sin in the first place," said Matthew. "How old were you when your mom disappeared? I always forget."

She sighed. Where she had grown up, the concept of years had been meaningless. "I was 8,200 hours old. That would have made me about ten and a half years old on Sapphire or nine years old on Republic."

"Hoy!" someone shouted from across the bar. They turned to see Tactical Commander. Redfire approaching, a statuesque blonde on his arm whom they recognized as Flt. Capt. Jordan of Flight Group Alpha, the Burning Skies.

"I've been looking for you," said Redfire. He was smiling, uncharacteristically festive. Perhaps he had been drinking. Jordan looked vaguely annoyed.

"Here I am," said Matthew levelly.

"That's right, there you are. You're there, aren't you?" He seemed terribly ebullient. "I just wanted to know if you had any insight into our forthcoming mission."

Matthew frowned suddenly, some of his goodwill evaporated. Eliza Jane looked at him quizzically. "He thinks I'm a pre-cog," Matthew growled.

"Why?" Eliza Jane asked.

Matthew shrugged. "Because some things happened on Meridian. I had some dreams. It was probably because of the tachyon generator buried under the city."

"Back me up on this, Roebuck," Redfire said. "You were there. On Meridian."

Eddie Roebuck quaffed another ale. "I was there, assol."

Redfire stared Matthew hard in the face, deathly serious. "Look, pre-cog or not, I want to know if you think anything is going to happen."

Jordan looked uncomfortable, and gave Redfire a tug on his arm. Eliza Jane spoke up. "Precognition is the rarest of the high gifts... and almost invariably given to women."

"The High Gifts are nothing more than the residual effects of colonial-era genetic engineering," Redfire scoffed.

"Strewth," Roebuck interrupted. "There's a lady back in Halifax, a, wha'd'ya'call'it... a seer. Has a little shop on the east end of Highborn street. Everybody went to see her, 'cos she could tell you when things were going to happen. She told Barnes Asahi to stay away from the Platinum Festival or he'd suffer ever-lasting misery."

"And what happened?"

"He met a girl and they got married."

There was silence around the table. Eddie looked from face to face. "A *fat* girl," he explained.

Redfire clapped Matthew on the shoulder. "Lt. Driver, I know you are a decent man. Your forethought might have saved our lives back on Meridian. If you do have any precognition, you have to do the decent thing and let me know if there's anything I need to watch out for."

Matthew looked into Redfire's eyes. Was he serious, or was he playing Matthew for a fool? "You want to know what you're going to experience on the planet? I'll tell you. It's going to be cold and it's going to be dark."

Redfire rolled his eyes. "We all know I'm going to the dark side of the planet. What else?"

"I don't know what else. That's what I'm trying to get through to you." He felt Eliza Jane take his hand. He turned and met her eyes.

"Come on, Matthew, give him a prediction." *Maybe he'll go away.*

He turned back to Redfire and studied him up and down. He took a sip of the lime drink the and/oroid had brought. He tried to think of something to say when he turned his attention to Flt. Capt. Jordan, who seemed as irritated by the conversation as he was. Then, he spoke in deep serious tones. "You're going to meet a beautiful, exotic, dangerous woman," he said. "And you're going to fall madly in love with her."

Redfire looked to Jordan, who had begun to laugh. Redfire steamed. "Let's go," he growled to Jordan.

"Well done," said Eliza Jane. She cast her gaze at Jordan and Redfire, as they walked away looking after them. "Are they really married?"

"I understand they are this week," Matthew answered.

## Chapter Three

### Captain Keeler's Suite

"Too bad you won't come with, kitty-cat. You'd probably like it."

Captain Keeler was talking with the creature... *one* of the creatures ... that shared his lavishly appointed living quarters. The creature in this case was a large tomcat, gray with black stripes and a white bib and paws. His name was Queequeg. Queequeg stared at him with large green eyes and flicked his tail.

The captain continued enthusiastically. "From the probe data, it looks like the whole planet is just bursting over with warm, sunny beaches for you to lie on."

"I hate to get sand in my fur," the cat said. "And your landing zone is no where near a beach. Trust me, I was lurking in the air duct when they picked it out."

"You used to run outside all the time back in New Cleveland."

"This is different. Cats are territorial, but not big on traveling... especially to new planets. You remember the shuttle that took us to the ship in the first place?"

"I remember non-stop howling until I had you secured in a sleeper unit. You're lucky I didn't put you in the cargo hold."

"Exactly my point. I am comfortable and adapted to the environment of this ship. The only way I'd leave is if it was on fire."

"We may find Earth, someday," said Keeler. "Then, what will you do?"

Queequeg lifted a paw and examined the underside. "A hundred billion stars in the galaxy, thousands of lost human colonies. I don't see us finding Earth in my lifetime, pal, if there even ever was an Earth."

Keeler would not be baited into debating the existence of Earth. They had had this argument before, and Keeler was certain Queequeg did it just to annoy him. He hurriedly packed a few last things into a carry-on. He wasn't sure what exactly to bring. The Landing Team Procedure recommended only a change of uniform, toiletries, and less than one kilogram of personal effects. Everything else would be provided, the manual assured.

"What are you going to do while I am gone?"

"Same things I do when you're here. Sleep. Eat. Sleep. Stare. Sleep. Eat. Sleep. Cat business."

"Cat business?"

"You know, running through the service tunnels, staring at the wall, checking for rodents and all that other stuff I do that you don't understand. Cat business."

The captain regarded his animal. There was a longstanding philosophical debate whether a cat with enhanced intelligence was still fundamentally a cat. Keeler shoved an anthology of colonial myths into his pack. "A dog would go with me to the planet," he muttered.

"Hey, go ahead! Get one of those slobbering, toilet-drinking, butt-sniffing, poop-dropping, dirt-rolling, excrement-licking, kibble-snarfing, drool-buckets. I bet you'll have great conversations. 'Hey, Mr. Dog, what do you think of the planet.' 'Yup, yup, yup, yup, yup, yup, yup, duh!'"

"I sense inter-species rivalry."

"You sense well-founded contempt for an inferior race." Queequeg arched his back and

stretched. "You go ahead down to the planet and do your business. I'll stay on the ship and... you know... keep an eye on things."

Keeler put his two packs on the floor next to the entrance to his quarters. Queequeg leaned forward, as though to sniff at them. Keeler petted the back of his head, which Queequeg enjoyed like any other cat.

"You know," Keeler mused, "sometimes I think three-quarters of everything that happens on this ship I don't have the slightest clue about."

"Try ninety per cent," Queequeg suggested. "But if any of it were important, I'd let you know."

### **Primary Command/Main Bridge**

Three hours before the scheduled launch of the *Aves*, Eliza Jane Change reported to the Main Bridge, or Primary Command One (both names were in common use among the crew) for her first watch as Commander of *Pegasus*. That phrase, she thought, had a really nice ring to it. Until Capt. Keeler or Tac. Cmdr. Redfire returned from the surface, or Exec. Cmdr. Lear was judged fit for duty, the ship was hers.

In the Mining Guild, commands were purchased. A lifetime of scrupulous work and saving — or unscrupulous gambling and thieving — went into the purchase price of a mining frigate, transport, extractor, or processing ship. If she had stayed in the Guild, she thought she probably would have purchased a large shuttle-craft, and earned her keep transporting guilders and small packages from ship-to-ship and from ship-to-surface, and that would have been a good life. When the Guild had coerced her into joining the Odyssey project, she had already saved more than 40,000 Guild credits. Rather than let the Guild re-absorb that money into their pension fund, she had given the entire sum to a dark-eyed troublemaker she had befriended on the Guild Outpost on the third moon of Ronin.

*Pegasus's* Bridge was large, but still seemed inappropriately small to a ship more than 4,200 meters long, with almost 7,000 people on-board and enough weaponry to blast every world in this system to gas and dust many times over. On this, the fourth watch, about twenty crewmen tended to monitoring the various stations. Most of them sported an interface, a growth of plastic and light knitted to the face or arm to provide direct neural link to ship systems. The ship created them using molecular knitters, and they disappeared when one was off-duty. In Hyperspace, when she navigated, the interface covered most of her body. She much preferred having her skin smooth.

PC-1 was shaped something like the lower jaw of a canine animal, a chunky parabola divided into an Inner and Outer Bridge, but the Inner Bridge had been little used since initial launch. Personnel on the Outer Bridge were clustered by functional area — Engineering, Science, and Environmental Control were located behind the command area. In front of the command area were the Core Stations — Navigation, Tactical, Operations, and Communications. These were the people with whom she would spend seven out of every 28 hours for the duration of the mission, and she surveyed them carefully.

At the Main Operations station sat Specialist Shayne American, a dark-skinned Republicer with close-cropped blond hair and a lithe, but fabulous, body. Eliza Jane Change knew her well. She was quick and smart and Change regarded her highly.

Navigation and Ops were occupied by the McCormick twins, Cassius and Claudius. They had been inseparable from the time the egg split in the womb. Something about them made

her uncomfortable, but so long as they performed their jobs, she found them tolerable.

Communications was occupied by Specialist Nerick Matra, a very large (but not fat), smooth-faced and oafish-looking sort. If she didn't keep an eye on him, she knew he would munching snacks at his station and leaving crumbs all over for the following watch.

"Command-on-Bridge," announced Lt. Northrop, a senior officer in the Technical Core, rising from the command chair. She was a Republiced female, a few years older than change, and as pale as most from that solar-radiation deprived planet. She handed Change a data-pad. "Here's the status report."

"You are relieved," Change said. She sensed that Northrop did not like her. She did not care. She glanced down and saw that the ship was at Tactical Condition Four. No current or potential threats to ship security. Forward pulse cannons will be off-line for forty-minutes for regularly scheduled diagnostic.

"Report, Ops."

Cassius (or was it Claudius) reported. "All ship's systems function at optimal levels. Flight Ops reports all landing teams prepped for launch on schedule. All launch systems at optimal. Final systems check-out to be complete next hour."

"Navigation, position report."

Claudius (or was it Cassius) reported. "Our position is currently 20,020 kilometers above the Eden colony. Our maximum orbital distance is 21, 530 kilometers. Our minimum orbital distance is 19, 990 kilometers. We are maintaining a pattern of gravitational force vectoring to maintain orbit." This last was necessary because of the gravitational pull of the planet Eden orbited. *Pegasus* was continually being pulled off-track by the planet, the rings, and the other moons. "Communications."

Matra reported. "No communication from the surface. All ship's systems functioning normally."

Change nodded and settled into the command chair. "All right. Specialist Matra, patch the Bridge through to the launch bays. Put them on forward monitors."

As Matra brought up the request, she accessed the list of Command Priorities Lt. Northrop had included on the Status Report. She saw that her top priority was to launch the Excursion Teams. Under that heading were a list of routine details, maintain contact with the landing teams, track Aves to the surface of the planet and ensure surface contact, and tracking mission progress. There were a few sidebar notations regarding anomalies in surface composition and atmospheric haze resulting in the inability of probes to map the surface below 1-meter resolution. This was described as an "unexplained anomalous dampening effect," which the Planetary Survey section was trying to resolve.

After the team excursion came a number of ancillary and routine duties, supporting and over-seeing the survey of (probable) Eden and the rest of the system, monitoring the functions of the ship's many interoperating systems.

Midway down on the list was a notation that made her eyes widen ever-so-slightly. "

**Disciplinary Action — Tech. 3C Eddie Roebuck. Insubordination. Dereliction of Duty."**

"No slag," she muttered quietly, and requested details.

Apparently, Eddie had ignored reprimands from three lower levels of authority, and his case was now in her lap. She wondered what her options were. The status report let her cross-reference to the ship's command protocols. The recommended course-of-action was to order Eddie Roebuck to report for his next duty-shift, or face revocation of all access privileges to the ship's amenities and confinement to quarters.



To herself, she wondered how much that would bother him.

In the Mining Guild, she had been called upon more than once to discipline crewmen, sometimes even people with whom she had a social relationship. She had always done as she was ordered. If a worker had abruptly quit, as Eddie had, she would have put him off the ship at the next Outpost and had his wages forfeited to the Guild. No hesitation.

Out here, things may have been different, but that did not matter. She made a note that she would dispatch a personal message to Eddie Roebuck two hours into her watch. She hoped Eddie would have enough sense to comply.

### **Launch Bay Alpha – Deck Minus 10, Section 90:20**

The landing teams were assembled in the Aves Pre-Launch Bays, which were set in great cavernous expanses of *Pegasus* interior, four decks deep and wide enough to accommodate a dozen of the ships at once. The mission Aves sat atop their launch platforms, looking like great powerful birds of prey, their iridescent wings gleaming and poised for take-off. The forward section was shaped like a viper's head and topped with a large, dark canopy over the command deck. The main cabin stretched behind briefly, then blended into the wings below the squat dome of the ship's primary reactor and gravity engine (GE). On either wingtip was a Shriek, great wing-shaped utility ships that could be detached and used as scouts or fighters.

The final make-up of the teams had been established shortly before *Pegasus* made orbit, and were clustered around their ships. Each team consisted of fourteen people - seven per ship. Keeler moved into the Landing Bay, accompanied by Redfire and Morgan. Keeler was staring intently at a Datapad, that displayed the breakdown of his landing team:

<b>Team Commander</b>	<b>Captain Keeler, William R</b>
<b>Flight Officer</b>	<b>Flight Lieutenant Toto, Blade</b>
<b>Tactical</b>	<b>Marine Lieutenant Honeywell, Adrian K</b>
<b>Tactical</b>	<b>Marine Specialist Buttercup</b>
<b>Logistics/Technical</b>	<b>Technician Specialist Kwasniewski, Hiroshi</b>
<b>Flight Alternate Flight Lt. Embraer, Columbine</b>	
<b>Medical</b>	<b>Medical Technician Bihari, Indra</b>

Quite a party, he thought to himself. He was passing the Aves *George*, when he saw a familiar face standing in front of it, a handsome young man with curly black hair and a touch of ruddiness about the cheeks. He halted, turned toward the young specialist.

"Specialist...."

"Alkema, David Alkema."

"I did not know you were up for ground-duty on this mission."

"I'm assigned to Lt. Morgan's team, on the *George*."

"The Hell you are." Alkema had made a strong impression during *Pegasus's* last mission, to the planet Meridian. When the ship's central braincore had spawned Caliph, who had taken over the ship and threatened to destroy the planet, Alkema had worked non-stop, devising an alternate communication network, and generally supporting all of the ship's functions with unwavering enthusiasm.

Keeler quickly glanced down his list. "Kwasniewsky," he called out loudly and

mispronounced. "Come over here, I'm swapping you out for Alkema. Nothing personal, I'm sure you're a first-rate technician-specialist, but I like the way Alkema kisses my butt."

Kwasniewski shrugged, lifted his pack, and crossed the bay to change places with Alkema. Alkema took out across the bay to take his position next to the crew of the *Zilla*. Keeler made the appropriate notation in the log and caught up shortly. He walked directly to the man who wore the dark blue trim of the Flight Core.

"Your name would be...?"

"Blade Toto, Flight Lieutenant Blade Toto of the Aves *Zilla*."

Keeler looked him up and down. If he was older than nineteen, Keeler would eat a pound of diced earthworms cold and raw. He was tall, but lanky, and his hair short except for some improbably long bangs that hung just above two sharp brown eyes. His face looked hard, and determined despite his youth. His uniform bunched at his waist and hung loose elsewhere. He wore Marine-type combat boots with his Flight Corps uniform and a patch on his jacket displayed the logo of the Fighting Wombats of Graceland A&M. Those were two obvious uniform code violations, and Keeler was almost sure he'd find more.

"How long have you been in Flight Core, lieutenant?"

"One hundred sixty-three days, ship time. I came up after Lt. Kansas died. He was my master. He died before we launched." There was a lazy drawl to his accent, lazy but serious.

"Where are you from?"

"Sapphire, sir. Crain's Settlement, in Graceland Territory."

Graceland was a province in the interior of Oz continent. The kid's twang was a dead giveaway. Keeler immediately began calling Toto "the kid" in his mind.

"How many shuttle flights have you flown?"

"Seventy-eight simulated... I was second pilot on a flight to Meridian."

The pilot of the *Yorick* stepped forward. "Captain, Flt. Lt. Corby Hughes, if you would prefer, you are welcome to fly in on my ship."

Keeler looked at Hughes. His flight uniform was neat and wrinkle-free, he looked meticulous and exacting. Keeler looked back at "the kid."

Toto shrugged. "Makes no difference to me, sir."

Keeler turned back to Hughes. "Neg, thank you for the invitation, lieutenant. I'll stay on *Zilla*." He turned to Alkema. "We'll be just fine in Lt. Toto's capable hands, won't we?"

Alkema's smile almost flickered as he gave a second glance to Lt. Toto. "Of course, we will," he answered.

The first two Aves were lowered into position on their launch pads, magnetic clamps fastening them to the launch rails. As they dropped, the lighting in the launch bay turned from white to amber, with flashing lights on the top deck warning of the imminent launch. The Aves stared down the launch tunnels and were locked onto powerful electro-magnetic accelerators that ran the length of the ship and could accelerate a fully-loaded Aves to nearly half the speed of light.

Such velocity would not be necessary to send them to Eden, a mere 20,000 kilometers below. The launch rails were set for minimum acceleration. Owing to the complexities of position and gravitational field interactions, the Aves would be launched into a looping course around the major planet and through its ring system before gliding to a landing on Eden. The pilots were referring to the course as "the Grand Tour."

In the command module of *Zilla*, a voice spoke to Flight Lieutenant Toto. "*Pegasus* Flight Operations to Aves *Zilla*, confirm rail-lock."

"Rail-lock confirmed."

"*Pegasus* Flight Operations clears *Zilla* for launch."

"*Zilla* acknowledges," Toto said, simultaneously sending the launch command. *Zilla* fired down the launch rail in a flash. In a matter of nanoseconds, *Zilla* shot from the front of the giant ship and embarked on a curving course toward the surface of the Eden moon.

## The Aves *Zilla*

In *Zilla*'s main cabin, Keeler stared out through the small portal next to his seat. *Zilla* was plying a course between the cloud-tops and the ring system. Below him, he saw the swirling golden clouds of the planet Eden orbited, and, occasionally, great flashes of lightning the size of continents. Although the window was small, he could see two of the other major moons, and the shepherd moons that guided the rings in their orbit.

He tapped the glass thoughtfully. Space travel had been a fact of life on his planet for more than three centuries and a part of human existence from millennia before then. No one gave much thought to what a remarkable achievement it was. On the far side of that transparent plate was a cold vacuum, merciless and poised to consume the unwary. Between him and was an incredible piece of engineering, solid and stable, the functioning of its complex technology taken for a certainty.

He undid his harness and stood. The ship may have been cruising through space at 100,000 km an hour, but it felt steady as a rock. He made his way forward to the hatchway that led to the flight deck, which was situated above the main cabin. A lift took him to that level.

Lt. Toto slouched lazily in the command seat, guiding the ship with one hand on his control column, looking like a teenaged kid out in a street-cruiser. Above him were projections showing the Aves course, its position relative to Eden, the Planet, and *Pegasus* (along with a schematic showing the interactions of the gravitational fields of the local bodies), showing its position relative to the other five Aves, and a systems read-out. Below him and to the left were real-time sensor scans of the Landing Zone.

"Hoy," said Keeler.

"Hoy," Toto answered, leisurely, sitting up just a little bit. "What's up, Captain?"

"Nothing much," Keeler took the second seat, sitting down with a bit of a groan. "Just being sociable. I thought I might try to get to know you a little bit before we land."

"Not that much to know, sir. I was born in Crain's Settlement. Grew up there. Went to Flight Academy." Toto shrugged, as if the rest of the story should be self-evident.

"Do you have any family?"

"Neg. I've got some brothers and a sister back on Sapphire, but nobody on *Pegasus*."

"And your parents?"

"They died."

"Oh," said Keeler. "I'm sorry."

"Everybody has to die, or, else, there wouldn't be room for more people."

No arguing with that. "Do you like being a pilot?"

"I guess."

Keeler thought he might get more descriptive answers if he provided more pretext. "I always find it interesting to know what inspired people to get involved in the Odyssey Project. As a professor of history, I'm intrigued by the prospect of learning about our human past, finding out how much of what has filtered down to us over the millennia is true and how much is legend. It's also fascinating to see how history evolved on other worlds."

"I suppose it may be."

"What brought you into the Odyssey Project?"

"Have you ever been to Crain's Settlement?" Toto asked.

Keeler had probably flown over and/or passed through it, always on the way to some place else. "Not really."

Toto nodded. "Not surprised. There's not much to do in Crain's Settlement except go someplace else. When they asked me if I'd sign up for the Odyssey Project I said, 'Sure, what the Hell?' and I got picked. Then, I ended up in the Doom Patrol."

"The Doom Patrol?"

"My flight group."

"Why do they call it the 'Doom Patrol?'"

"I guess they have a lot of accidents. Like Kansas. Remember Eurica? He died at Meridian, just after he transferred out of the Doom Patrol."

"How interesting."

The great golden globe of the (probable) Eden moon began filling the upper canopy. "You may want to get back to the main cabin. We'll be entering the atmosphere in a few minutes. It might be a little rough."

Keeler nodded. "Well, it was nice talking to you."

"Likewise, sir."

As he took the lift back down to the main cabin, Keeler wondered what it was about pilots that they always made you leave the Flight Deck before they landed the ship. Perhaps, they did want anyone to see them screaming *"Dear God! I don't know how to land this thing! We're doomed!"*

He mentally filed the thought among life's irreducible mysteries, next to why women always went to the hygiene suite in pairs. Specialist Alkema was waiting for him when he returned to his seat. "I've just learned the most extraordinary thing," Keeler said. "Did you know that the squadron this ship belongs to is called the Doom Patrol?"

"Za, actually, I did."

"I wonder why I didn't know that. Is it common knowledge in the ship's company?"

"Officially, the Doom Patrol is listed as Flight Group Delta. They choose their own nicknames."

Keeler removed a bottle of tonic from the drinks dispenser. "I'll make a note to myself to investigate where the custom arises. I suppose it promotes camaraderie."

Alkema removed a case from the storage bin above the seat. "Are you familiar with Class-L landing gear, Captain?"

Keeler set down his drink. He noticed the rest of the team was already out-fitted. "Neg, Alkema, that's what I brought you along for."

Alkema smiled, and Keeler observed that he had one of those smiles that went high, high up on his cheeks, even when it was condescending. "Class-L landing gear was designed specifically for low gravity planetary environments. It has all the basic functions ... integrated

communications, sensor suite, environmental controls, air purifiers..."

Keeler held up a hand and brought the spiel to a halt. "Just tell me how it works?"

Alkema lifted the top of the case, and lifted something like a glove out of it. "This is your sensor and tracking system, it also interfaces with your headgear to help you target your pulse cannon should that be necessary. Your pulse cannon straps around your forearm, you can fire it mentally, or by flexing your ..."

Keeler looked doubtful. "I don't think I'll be needing that."

"Pacifist?"

"Lousy shot."

"All right, let me show you the jacket." He pulled a jacket, in command white, from the pack and spread it out before him. "It's insulated and contains a coolant system to maintain a comfortable temperature. Your gear also includes a toolkit, canteen, emergency rations, emergency comm..."

"Specialist..."

"Captain...?"

"What if I don't want to wear all this... landing gear..."

Alkema licked his lips. "Well... you should wear the jacket and underjack at least. It will keep you comfortable and process anything out of the air that could cause an allergic or toxic reaction."

"Hm, I guess I better wear that then." He removed his regular jacket and slipped into the landing jacket. It was heavier than his regular uniform, and along the seams were small hard areas that he supposed housed the atmosphere conditioners.

"Looks good, Captain."

## **Eden?**

Just above Eden's atmosphere, six Aves broke formation, becoming three flights in Leader and Wingman formation, and the flights broke off as they broke through the high atmospheric layer of amber-colored smog that obscured the planet Eden.

*Kate* and *Neville* broke ahead first and streamed toward the planet's terminator, to their rendezvous with whatever awaited on the planet's lonely and barren Farside. Past the terminator, they monitored the build-up of a huge and powerful weather system, screaming winds driven by the difference in temperature from dayside to nightside.

*Edward* and *George* broke off next made their course southward, toward the dayside's largest landmass, an irregular blob of a continent surrounded by a mane of peninsular tentacles. These ships carried the pure science teams, considered the easiest mission.

*Yorick* and *Zilla* stayed a steady course north, making for a large, comma-shaped landmass in the northern hemisphere. It was the most densely populated region of the planet, the center of the world's supposed trade routes, and the site of the largest cities.

## **Zilla**

Captain Keeler watched the land coming up on the monitors beneath him. He saw the geometric arrays of fields and farms, and the long lines of roadways. The pattern was familiar to him from any number of journeys across his home planet. Seeing the signature of humanity

on the planet below gave him reassurance, because it evidenced where humans had carved out a civilization in the endless wilderness of the universe.

Keeler leaned across the seat to Specialist Alkema. "We ought to establish some kind of scale for rating the technological progress of the civilizations we encounter," Keeler told him. "Of course, societies advance at different rates across different areas, but you could assign a value to each of, say... Agriculture, Communication, Transport, Medicine... for example, assign each a score on a scale of 1-100, with our worlds being 100. You could average them and determine the relative level of advancement each culture had achieved."

"What if we encounter a culture more advanced than our worlds?"

"Well, provided they didn't dust the whole lot of us, we would rate them over 100."

Alkema nodded. The Captain had impressed him as a man who delighted in the infinite variety of character among persons, and yet, he seemed to have a driving need to make the rest of the universe orderly and rational. He did not think about this much.

Toto's voice came down from the flight deck. "We're five kilometers out from the Landing Zone at 3,000 meters. We're in touchdown mode, so strap yourselves up. We'll be on the surface in about ninety seconds."

Keeler turned to Alkema and grinned. "I hope we're not landing in the middle of next year's harvest."

Alkema nodded and secured his restraints, his mind hosting a sudden vision of Edenian villagers surrounding the ship with torches and pitchforks.

The Landing Zone was a large pasture outside one of the larger settlements. The field provided enough space to land and, if necessary, defend the ships. *Zilla* and *Yorick* descended quietly, landing pads deploying underneath, and settled onto the thick grass.

Alkema checked the scanners at his station. "No inhabitants nearby. No indication of hazardous elements in the atmosphere." He turned to Keeler. "Welcome to Eden."

"Game on," said Keeler, using an expression from his youth. He reached to uncouple his seat restraints and was amazed at the lightness of his arm. *Zilla's* on-board gravity had cut-out, and Eden (if this was Eden), had a far less substantial pull.

The Marines exited first, followed by the technicians. The bright amber daylight of Eden streamed into the ship, casting everything in a golden hue. It was morning in Eden, the sun had just rose above an eastern horizon still shrouded in yellow-gray haze. He looked out over a landscape of gentle hills covered with black grass edged by rows of thick-skinned trees with enormous black leaves. In the sky, the planet of which Eden was a moon hung in the path of the rising sun, perhaps three times as large as *Ulysses*, *Sapphire's* nearest moon. It looked like a large ghostly pale sun, its ring system scarcely discernible. As the sunlight filtered through Eden's atmosphere, it produced iridescent, multi-spectral shadows —like oil spilt on water — and lit the landscape as though through some kind of metallic lens filter. It gave a sheen to the skins of the landing team, making them look like and/oroids.

*I wonder what it looks like when it rains,* thought Keeler.

The Marines were scouting the perimeter. Keeler had not gotten used to the light, which gave everything the appearance of a sepia-print brought to life. Some of the others were wearing lenses to filter the light to a more customary spectrum.

The low-gravity was amazing. Keeler had foregone most of the *Odyssey Project Training* and so had little experience in low-grav environments. With his weight a third of what he was accustomed to, he felt like a child again, full of life, spirit, energy.

"Watch this Captain," said Specialist Alkema. With that, he launched himself into the air,

did a somersault over *Zilla's* command module and landed on his feet on the opposite side. Grinning, he ducked under the ship and crossed back to his Captain.

"I could do that, but I don't want to," Keeler said.

Toto appeared at the hatch and looked around. Apparently satisfied at the surroundings, he came over to where Keeler and Alkema were standing.

"Captain," called Lt. Commander Honeywell. "Incoming." He pointed off to the horizon, where a flock of large birds was becoming visible.

"Those are pretty big birds."

Alkema had extended his tracker in front of him, and magnified the incoming image. "They're not birds, Captain."

Keeler adjusted his vision and saw clearly. It was no flock of birds. They were humans with some kind of artificial wings on their backs. Of course, Keeler thought. Under these gravitational conditions, it would be relatively simple to construct contrivances enabling autonomous human flight. It was done for sport on Hyperion and Ulysses, and the other lunar outposts throughout the system.

"That's kinda neat," Toto muttered.

The flying people set down on the grass in front of them. There were four of them, armed with swords and a variety of throwing knives strapped in bandoliers across their chests. They wore thick, leathery helmets and goggles over their eyes. They landed on the far side of the pasture and stood, studying the landing party from a distance. The Marines took a position between the bird-men and the rest of the party.

"Easy guys," Keeler muttered. The Marines did not point their pulse cannons at the Edenians, but stood ready to defend if called upon.

"Am I seeing..." Alkema asked, "What I think I am seeing?"

"What is that, Specialist?"

Alkema projected an image from his tracker, a bioscan of the winged guards. The wings may have been contrivances, but they were made of muscle and sinew, they were connected by muscle, nerve and vein to the guards, and functioned as a part of their anatomy.

Keeler gave a low whistle, leaned over to the pilot and whispered, "Toto, I don't think we're in Oz any more."

## Chapter Four

### Eden – The Farside

*Kate* and *Neville* left the butterscotch glow of the Edenian sun behind them, plowing into the dark and murky skies of Eden's night-side. This side of Eden, consisted primarily of one huge and pitted continental landmass. Without sunlight, it became a cold, windswept, and stormy place. *Nine days of cold darkness followed by nine days of searing heat*, Redfire thought, looking out through the canopy. It was less surprising that only four per cent of Eden's population lived here, than that *anyone* would choose to.

The largest settlement on this side of the planet was nestled in a deep, broad valley surrounded by a collar of mountain ranges. The probes suggested as many as 10,000 - 15,000 inhabitants spread over 800 sq. kilometers. This, in itself, was curious. Normal patterns of human colonization would produce the largest settlements on the coastline, which would facilitate commerce with the more populous dayside as well as the arrival of immigrants. Those who lived here had seemingly chosen to isolate themselves behind natural barriers, and subject themselves to the more extreme deprivations of the continental climate.

While trying not to form any prejudicial notions, Redfire could not help but wonder what kind of hardy, fearsomely independent people would choose to live in such desolation when the planet's dayside seemed, from all reports, paradisaical. Exiles, obviously, but had they exiled themselves or had they been exiled?

*Kate's* pilot was a very tall, heavy, dark, and taciturn man named Paul Ironhorse. Redfire checked out his background, found he was from Sapphire, Boreala Continent — Brendan Frost Land, specifically, one of the few places on the planet he had never been. A large grassy island archipelago, with active volcanoes where herds of lycobeasts pounded the plains. Redfire sat behind Ironhorse on the command deck, with the Mission's Medical Technician, a Republicer with the unlikely and unbecoming moniker Adpansia Gilbert. He called her Addy.

Redfire turned away from the view, "It seems pretty quiet out there."

"They could all be sleeping," Addy said. "With a night cycle this long, and so very cold, they might go into a state of hibernation to wait it out. It would help them conserve energy more efficiently."

"Only if they've lived on the dark-side for a couple hundred generations," said Redfire. "They're basically human, after all."

"That's a point of contention," Addy said. "There's a certain body of evidence that human colonists were genetically altered to match the climates and biospheres of the planets they colonized."

Redfire shook his head a little irritably. "That's not really my area of expertise. I think the real question is, when are we going to find a planet with nightlife?"

*Kate* plunged through a cloudbank, assaulted by an army of ice pellet hail. The topography display showed the mountainous terrain below, invisible in the darkness.

Addy shrugged. "You never know. All of the outer colonies could be underdeveloped."

"Two thousand years should have sorted out the winners from the losers. There's probably about a billion variables that go into making or breaking a civilization."

Ironhorse spoke. "Human culture rises and falls in cycles, across many worlds."

"What does that mean?" Addy asked.



"We just might be going to worlds on the bottom of their cycles."

"This is the kind of thing the Captain gets off on," said Redfire. "Anthro-sociological speculation. I hope this world gives him something to chew on."

## Eden – The Dayside

About forty of the birdmen had arrived, more or less surrounding *Zilla* and *Yorick*, but they had kept their distance, staring at the landing party, keeping weapons close at hand but not attacking. Keeler did not particularly like the "birdmen" nomenclature, but for the moment, there was no avoiding it.

The birdmen shouted unintelligibly at one another and occasionally tried to address the landing team, but linguistic differences had yet to be worked out. The Edenian language reminded the captain less of any language he had heard on his own world, and more of the noise a herd of un-genetically-enhanced cats might make if they were being chased by a herd of pianos during a thunderstorm.

"How much longer?" Keeler asked.

"The LingoTron is still assembling a language matrix." Alkema was feeding LingoTron samples of the birdmen's chatter in an attempt to decipher the local dialect. "It's not ... too... easy."

Keeler looked over to Lt. Cmdr. Honeywell, the lead Marine; a Republicer close to his own age and perhaps older, built with the brute, purposeful muscularity of one of those statues of Warrior-Heroes of the Unification Wars that lined every street of Republic's City of Consensus. Keeler found the resemblance reassuring under the circumstances. "*Pegasus* is aware of our situation?" he inquired.

"Affirmative," Honeywell answered, not taking his eyes from the birdmen. "There's two Aves with reinforcements in orbit. They can be here in two minutes if we need an assist."

"Let's hope we don't." Keeler had already ordered most of the landing teams to stay inside, or close to, the ships, or at least close to the ships.

"Agreed," said Honeywell.

Keeler leaned over. "What's your analysis of the situation?"

"This is a scouting party," he answered. "Every few minutes a new one arrives and an old one returns to the base to tell them what we're up to. They're holding back until they can discern what our intentions are."

"Sounds good to me." The Captain chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. On his mind, how to demonstrate peaceful intentions in a non-verbal way. He had considered food, but what if their food was toxic to the Edenians, or tasted bad? What if the gesture was interpreted as a sign of weakness, of appeasement? "We've got to find some common ground," he muttered.

"How's that, sir?"

"Common ground... something unambiguous to convey our peaceful intentions, and hopefully promote the kind of dialogue the LingoTron can decipher.

He looked across the field toward the apparent leader of the birdmen, the one who had landed first and had the least amount of crud on his armor. He was about 200 meters away, and Keeler began walking toward him.

"Captain," I wouldn't advise that, said Honeywell.

Keeler ignored him. He continued walking toward the lead birdman. He began to sing.

*"I know of a girl  
Whose hair is black as night  
They say she never shares her favors  
But they say her sister might."*

The birdmen regarded him quizzically. Alkema stood up from the computer, saw what his Captain was doing, and hesitated only momentarily before joining in on the second verse.

*Through rose and thorn I traveled,  
Alas, her sister foiled my stealth  
If I can't play with your sister, dear  
I'll have to play with myself*

The song was quite old, a traditional drinking song in the taverns of the University District in New Cleveland, as well known to the university's alumni as the Armpit Avengers fight song, but less likely to be sung in the den on Bountiful Harvest Day.<sup>?</sup>

*"When her maidenhead was broken,  
I was called to account for her shame  
I told her father, Sure as I'm standing  
It was like that when I came."*

They had crossed the field, and stood only a few meters from the birdman leader, whose hand hovered near the knife on his belt and twitched slightly. Honeywell raised his pulse cannon.

Keeler and Alkema did not move a muscle. The leader slowly dropped his hand away from his knife belt, and approached them. Keeler and Alkema stood. The Marines tensed. Everyone seemed to know, this was *it*.

Alkema did not take his eyes off the approaching figure, but said quietly, "Clever idea, Captain. It's hard to look threatening when you're singing a drinking song."

"Especially when you sing it as badly as I did," Keeler whispered.

The birdman stood before them. Very tall, easily higher than two meters. His head mostly hidden by the goggles and helmet, but the wings were what drew the eyes. They were large, covered in what looked more like leather than feathers, with an elaborate colorful design across them. When the sun was directly behind, a faint network of veins appeared.

*"Ezhvergh roan chollo Altama cheskova,"* he said. *"Hroth."*

"Hroth," Keeler repeated.

Hroth slowly reached across his belt and removed a large, heavy-handled knife. He slowly extended the knife toward Captain Keeler and held it before him.

"This is the tricky part," Keeler said. "If I take the knife, am I accepting a peace offering, or am I accepting an offer to engage in combat to the death?"

"What are you going to do?" Alkema whispered.

"Normally, I'd offer my jacket, an unambiguously peaceful gesture, but I don't think it would fit over his... uh, ..." A clever way of referring to his wings did not come to him. "...wings," he finished.

*"Ezhvergh roan chollo Altama cheskova,"* the birdman repeated.

"So what do we do now? His arm is probably getting tired." Alkema asked.

"I could let him have you."

"I'd prefer you didn't."

Keeler removed his gloves from the large pocket at the front of his underjacket and handed them toward the birdman, holding his other hand below the knife. The birdman took the gloves gently and dropped the knife into Keeler's palm.

"Thank you," said Keeler with a slight bow of his head. He tested the tip of the blade against his thumb, and a bead of red blood appeared without his even being aware of any sense of penetration. He grasped it by the handle.

"So, you would be ... Hroth?" Keeler said, gesturing toward the man.

"Hroth," the man repeated.

Keeler touched his own chest. "Keeler."

"Keeler," the man repeated.

Keeler gestured toward Alkema with the knife. "Alkema," he said.

"Elk-ma," the birdman repeated.

"I think the LingoTron is onto something," Alkema said. "Keep talking."

Keeler gestured to himself. "Captain William Keeler, of the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*, leader of the Eden Expedition and all-around swell." He handed the microphone to Hroth.

"Arch gardisto Hroth de Altime prefecture dua ordono."

"We ... we come in peace?" Keeler ventured.

"Whack ream you buskin in Altama Prefecture?"

"We're getting something," Alkema reported.

"I certainly hope so."

"Kiun do you your dealt suldi?"

A sudden electronic chirp caused Keeler to look to the LingoTron. Words and colors were flashing across it in an excited manner. "It's got a hard-on for something."

Alkema agreed. "It's latched onto a likely language matrix and its resolving the variables. I think we might have it, Captain."

Parameters resolved

The LingoTron announced.

"We've got it," said Alkema.

When the lead birdman spoke again, his voice was channeled into a small ear-speaker embedded in their jacket collars. "High Guardsman Hroth of the Altama Prefecture, Second Command."

"Za!," Keeler announced. He faced Hroth. "Captain Keeler, of the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*." The LingoTron spat out the sentence in the native language. Hroth looked perplexed.

"No corresponding language for pathfinder ship," Alkema explained. "It's translating now... 'a ship that charts a course among the stars.'"

Hroth looked up to the sky, then over at the Aves.

"Your manner of conveyance is unknown to us," said Guardsman Hroth. "What is the purpose of your arrival here and to which Prefecture will you give fealty?"

"We come on a mission of exploration. We have sought out your world because it was known to us as a colony of the Galactic Commonwealth." Alkema transmitted the matrix from the LingoTron to the central processing unit on *Zilla*, from whence it was networked to the entire landing party.

"Will you ally yourself with the Altama Prefecture?"

"We know nothing of this Altama Prefecture of which you speak," Keeler told him. "But we seek friendship wherever we may find it."

"Altama Prefecture is where you have landed your ships," Hroth answered gravely. "The Scion Altama will wish an audience with you," Hroth told them. "You may accompany me back to the citadel, but you must leave your weapons behind. A force of Low Guardsmen will escort you."

*Or take us prisoner,* Keeler thought. "Escort us to the citadel... you must mean the town we passed, a few clicks from here."

Hroth favored them with a slight nodding bow.

"Do all of the people on this planet have wings?" Alkema asked.

"Only the High Guardsmen," Hroth answered.

"Are you born with wings, or are they attached later?"

Hroth gave him a look as though the question was asinine, and Alkema supposed it would have been an asinine question if he knew what the answer was.

The Captain heard Honeywell's voice in his earpiece. "Forty Edenians approaching, bearing 077."

"That must be the Low Guardsman now," Keeler muttered.

The Low Guardsmen entered the field, marching in-line in four columns. They were all huge, but this was not so remarkable. Their enormous shoulders and arms were encased in a kind of golden armor and chain-mail arrangement, topped by gold helmets, but this was also not so remarkable. Their weaponry consisted of things that were sharp, heavy, and intended for close quarters, although the short-spears might have made useful projectiles, but this was not so remarkable either.

What set the landing party agape was the guardsmen's thick rough gray skin they wore like living armor. Bony plates stuck out from their hands, positioned so as to serve in the capacity of both weapons and shields. Horns and ridges protected their faces and eyes, and from their upper and lower jaws, huge teeth, like tusks, protruded.

Alkema stared on wide-eyed, while Keeler imagined what the USNC groundball recruiter might have offered to secure some of the guardsmen as players.

"By your leave," said Hroth, bowing slightly. "I have to tell them not to kill you."

His wings unfolded, blocking out the sun. As he lifted off, he looked less like an angel, less like a bird than just a man, leaping into the air, and going very much higher than that leap should have taken him. As he reached the top of his jump, the wings took over him and beat down, lifting him still higher into the air.

Sitting in the hatch of the ship, Toto shook his head. "This is the damndest place... I never thought any place could be this strange."

"How do they do that, Captain?" Alkema whispered.

Keeler shook his head. "Directed evolution? Genetic engineering?"

"But how? this planet barely possesses the technology for electric lights." He lowered his voice. "Do you think they could be aliens?"

Keeler hushed him as the leader of the Low Guardsmen approached, his eyes dark and invisible behind his helmet and bone structure. Hroth walked beside him. "I have instructed him and his guards to escort you to the Citadel Altama. My guards will follow from the air. The Scion will receive you before his Second-Best Palace."

"Are we your guests or are we your prisoners?" Keeler asked.

Hroth seemed puzzled by the question. Alkema explained. "The Lingotron translated both words, roughly, as 'captives.'"

"They don't make a distinction."

"If they do, Lingotron hasn't figured it out yet."

Keeler thought for a moment, "Let me consult with my people."

Hroth stared at him. "I will permit that. Explain to them that they will be received by the Scion and probably not killed."

The Marines were still standing in a wide V, protecting the non-Marine portion of the Landing Party. Keeler approached Honeywell, "Did you get all of that?" he asked.

Honeywell nodded, and turned off the open channel to Keeler's comm-link.

"Your assessment?"

"Tactically, it's a tough call Captain. In close quarters, we might be able to take them out with pulse compression grenades, but that thick skin and bone," he shook his head.

"What about us?"

"Landing Gear would protect us, if we're fully-suited, helmets and all."

Keeler looked back to the Guardsmen. His intuition told him if they had come to slaughter the party, they would have done so by now, or at least tried. Instead, they were to be taken to the leader. Keeler thought they'd make it.

"Get everybody suited up. The Marines will come with us, in case we have to fight our way back to the ships. Pilots will leave their ships in hot stand-by for immediate take-off."

"Aye, sir"

"Everybody else wears pulse-cannons on both wrists." He fixed Honeywell with a dead-serious look in his eyes. "Nobody dies this time."

## **Eden – The Farside**

*Kate* and *Neville* had set down, in the middle of a chilly meadow, sinking slightly into the soft, moist soil, *Neville* to the immediate right of the back edge of *Kate's* wing.

"Air is clean and breathable. No signs of microbial pathogens. External pressure is at 220 millibars. External temperature, 2 degrees Earthscale, and falling," Adpansia Gilbert reported from her monitoring station at the front of *Kate's* Main Deck.

"Anybody around?" Redfire asked, leaning over a sensor station.

"There's a village less than a klick from here," Gilbert reported. "I think they saw us flying over-head. I'm reading elevated adrenaline and hormone levels. I think we may have caused some excitement. I'm reading individual vitals signs... and I think they're beginning to gather in a common structure."

Redfire looked out over the settlement. The floater probe hanged at treetop height, had there been any trees, and provided an overview of the settlement, processed into natural daylight colors. The dwellings were low, constructed of stone and hidden among thick brush and rocks. They were small, from what he could tell, much smaller even than the average quarters on board *Pegasus*. The village followed no regular layout of streets, but a network of narrow, almost invisible alleyways.

*It was kind of pretty*, Redfire thought. It recalled the reconstructed Landfall Settlement at the Colonial Museum in Corvallis.

"I'm picking up a lot of life signs moving into the hills," said another technician. "I think we scared them."

Redfire spared her a glance. Her name was Anne Hulley. She came from the port city of Matthias on the northern coast of Oz continent, Sapphire. From an upper-class family with a fortune in shipping. No family on *Pegasus*, but a brother on *Olympic*. Redfire had always found examining the personnel files of his landing team to be the most efficient way of getting to know them.

"Captain," said the Marine, Caleb Sikorsky, (City of Peace, Republic, pregnant wife on board *Pegasus*). "I think they've decided what to do about us."

"What's that?" Redfire returned to the scanner. About twenty of the returns had left the common gathering place and were approaching there position.

"ETA fourteen minutes," the Marine finished. "Should we go and meet them, or wait until they come to us?"

"We go to them," Redfire answered confidently. "Show them we're just regular guys. Just me and a couple of Marines."

"Should we take arms?"

"Pulse weapons, just in case they don't like regular guys."

He went to the hatch and touched the egress panel. A chilly breath of night wafted in, cold as ice and dry as old bones.

His comm-link chirped. "Cmdr. Redfire, we're getting a linguistic data-link from the Alpha Team. They have a tentative language matrix."

"That was fast," Addie remarked.

"Our captain has a talent for making... contacts" Redfire told her. "Transfer the data to my earpiece. Let's go outside."

He stepped out into the dark with a pair of Marines and Addy with him. They were joined by a mission specialist and a Marine from *Neville*. Redfire ordered pulse cannons to minimum setting. As they left the lights of the ship, it became deeply, intensely dark. Raggedy black clouds blew across the faces of three of Eden's fellow moons, like feathers from the broken wings of ravens. The wind made a sound as it blew, like a sigh of desperation.

The dark, the cold, and the winds played on their minds, with only the voice of Anne Hulley in their earpiece making any human sounds.

"Forty meters to contact."

"Thirty meters to contact."

"Twenty meters to contact."

"Stop!" called a voice from the darkness ahead, from behind a pair of enormous boulders that gated the path. "Advance no further, or you will be attacked."

Redfire called in return. "We did not come to harm you. Will you speak with us?"

A woman stepped out from behind the rock, and into a place where night-vision augmentation could pick her out clearly. She was statuesque by the standards of any world; her waist was as improbably narrow as her shoulders were broad, anatomical data not in the least obscured by the animal skins and chainmail she wore. She carried a sword that appeared long, heavy and - one could infer - sharp. Although the night was cold, she wore nothing to cover her head but a thick, lustrous mane of ash-blond hair. She was exactly the wrong kind of woman to meet the landing party, the kind of woman Redfire had a weakness for, the kind of woman who brought back memories of frozen fields, lights reflecting on icy streets, rooftops,

and ice sculpture.

The sound of her voice snapped him back to reality. "If you have come to take us back," she shouted. "Know this, we will fight and die here rather than go back."

Redfire stepped forward. "We mean you no harm. I am Tactical Commander Philip John Redfire of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, I bring you greetings from the worlds of Sapphire and Republic."

Her eyes narrowed. "I know of no prefecture called Sapphire or Republic, and I know nothing of any Commonwealth."

"Sapphire and Republic are worlds... planets in orbit around stars. They lie 117 light years...from here." He pointed to a break in the clouds where stars were visible.

"You move among the stars?" she intoned doubtfully, and he could sense the grip on her sword tightening.

"Every star in the sky is a sun, like yours. Many of them have worlds like yours with them. We are from two of those worlds."

"According to what we are taught, our people were deposited on this world by an ancient race of powerful beings called the Progenitors. Are you they?"

"In a way, our progenitors were humans, like ourselves. They deposited our ancestors on the worlds we inhabit. We're just regular guys," he added

"What do you want from us?" she repeated.

"Only knowledge of your world... and if you desire, more ships will follow us, and bring knowledge from our worlds to yours."

"Why have you come to this place? The far side of the planet has many more people. What do you want with us?"

"Some of our people have gone to the other side as well. We mean to learn about all the peoples of this world. Our instruments showed that this was the largest settlement on this side of the planet. That is why we came here."

The woman stared at him. Redfire had a feeling that even without night vision, she could see him clearly. She lay her sword on the ground. "I will believe you, Tactical Commander Philip John Redfire of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, for now and until you give me cause to doubt you. I am called Winter. Our village is called Green Witch. So long as you do no one harm, you are welcome here."

## **Eden – The Dayside**

They came to the citadel by means of a road, only five or six meters wide, paved with white stones. The citadel was something less than an hour away, but the Edenian sun moved hardly at all. This and the unaccustomed lightness of gravity were playing a subtle kind of havoc with their sense of time. There was no sense of time passing, yet the walk seemed uncommonly long. Their awareness of time was further dampened by the distraction of forty, scary-looking guardsmen surrounding the landing party.

When they finally came to the citadel, the thing that grabbed their attention most was the wall.

The wall surrounded the citadel, 10 meters high and black. Along the face of the wall where it met the road, there were four great gates, each one flanked by two gigantic gargoyles. As the party drew closer, they saw that the walls were covered with a black tableau of skulls and

bones.

Keeler tapped Alkema on the shoulder and walked with him off the path to examine the wall close up. A low guardsmen snorted, then followed them. The arrangement of skeletons was quite deliberate. Some reached out from the wall, as though trying to break free. Some looked as though they had been caught in the final moments of a death spasm. Others were racked, as though undergoing torture.

Keeler nudged Alkema. "What do you think, Specialist? Is it real, or is it sculpture?"

"Looks like a classroom wall mural painted by second graders from Hell Elementary," Alkema said, surprising Keeler with a verbal wit he had never previously seen in the boy. Alkema raised his Tracker. "Organic material encased in a mixture of iron, carbon, and corundum. It's bone, all right. But why embed it into a wall?"

"I think we can rule it out as a monument to a fertility goddess." Keeler reached tentatively toward one skull. It was larger than human, elongated, with a ridge of large and small horns, sharply angled eye-sockets, and long, sharp pointed teeth set a double array of jaws. He stopped short of touching it, overcome by a strange feeling that if he did, it would come to life and leap out at him. "A warning to outsiders, perhaps? Or, a warning to their own citizenry? Or, do they just like skulls and bones."

"Maybe this is how they bury their dead."

Keeler regarded to tableau again. "I find it hard to believe people would arrange the remains of their loved ones into scenes of horror and agony." He tapped one specimen. "Look at this."

The skull he indicated looked basically human, except for three large horns, saber-teeth, eye ridges, and a pointed beak-like structure encasing the nose – a low guardsman.

"How do we find out what it is?" Alkema asked.

"We ask. Guard!" Keeler called.

One of their escorts approached them. Stiff, solemn, void of expression, he seemed less alive than the bones in the wall. "We were admiring your... handiwork," Keeler told him. "We were wondering how the custom arose of placing ... dead bones into such deliberate arrangements."

"The enemies of Altama Prefecture are entombed in the outer wall," the guard said, his voice so low the ground seemed to rumble. "This, we do to warn all of the fate suffered by any who offend against the Prefecture or the Scion."

"I see. So, do these figures represent those who tried to invade from outside, or those of your own citizens who broke the law."

The guardsman's yellow eyes narrowed to slits. "Yes," he growled. "I think you should rejoin the group now."

Keeler and Alkema took the hint and made their way back toward the road. There was a crowd of people around the gate to the citadel, and the guards were roughly thrusting them aside to permit passage of the eight strangers.

"Captain," Alkema whispered. "One of those statues just moved."

Keeler looked. Not just one, but both of the eight-meter tall gargoyles on either side of the gate were reaching down with their great black arms toward the gate. They grasped either door with hands bigger than the entire body of a human and began pulling them open.

"They must be some kind of mechanism... encased in ..."

"Neg," Alkema said, reading his Tracker. "Their skin is the same material as the wall, but



there are definitely living things inside."

"As the ancients used to say," Keeler whispered. "Are we having fun yet?"

When the gates parted, a great roar arose from inside the citadel. Beyond the gate was a great milling throng of people in a panoply of vibrant colors, colors, reds, blues, whites, greens, yellows... some muted, some vibrant under the brilliant gold light of Eden's sun. To the landing party, it was as though they were wading into an ocean of people, parting before them as the low guardsmen brutally made a path.

There was an annual festival in the tropical port cities of Sapphire, the Festival of Masks, wherein the citizenry dressed in outrageous costumes and masks and everyone tried to be the most elaborate and outrageous. The population of Citadel Altama made those revelers look like gray and desultory monks of some restrictive religious order. There were guardsmen and more guardsmen, high and low. There were dancers on platforms with iridescent skin and feathers where hair normally grew, some with bonus sets of arms and breasts. Aside from the normal range of human skin pigmentation were bright yellows, blues, reds, greens, magentas, and turquoises.

Alkema could not help staring at a woman with a head like the pictures of terrible reptiles from Earth. She saw him staring, smiled rows of interlocking triangular teeth, opened her mouth and wagged a forked tongue at him.

"I think she's taken, sorry, Dave," Keeler whispered.

When Alkema looked back, the reptile woman was being embraced by another woman... this one with a bouquet of pink and purple tentacles. Never mind how Keeler could tell it was a woman.

The citadel's buildings were constructed of brick and stone, all between three and five stories in height, whose roofs were a profusion of steeples, pointed towers, curving minarets, and spikes. All the structures ran together, forming solid walls, street-long that turned the whole citadel into a giant labyrinth. They lost sight of the gate after the first turn.

The guardsmen cleared a path around them made their way toward the Second-Best Palace of the Scion Altama. The only one in the crowd to break the perimeter of guardsmen, was a huge being, who towered even above the rest of the crowd with a face like a lion, and a great mane of golden hair.

"A fine catch," he was saying. "Product of a successful raid into the Peridine Prefecture, by the looks of them. Could you have them brought to my apartments for inspection? My crops grow ripe in the fields and my bed grows cold."

"Lord Stonejuncture," growled the Head Low Guardsman. "These are for the Scion."

The lioness man growled. "Just like the Scion to keep the best for himself."

"What does that mean?" Alkema whispered, an edge of fear creeping into his voice.

Keeler answered. "It means Thank God we brought Marines with us."

The Scion's second-best palace was joined to the wall, much like any of the other structures. It was larger, and more impressive, but not a great deal more than the secondary houses in the Keeler Compound. *Which meant, Keeler thought, the Scion's Number One palace was either a doozy, or not that great either.*

They were hustled up a set of stairs, through a kind of foyer, and into a beautiful garden. The Scion was there, on a dais, surrounded by court of guardsman, Hroth among them. Among his courtiers was someone with a face on both sides of his/her head, a pair of women with silver and gold skin, another woman with leopard-print skin and glowing eyes, and a pair of huge, muscled four-armed men.

From nowhere came a voice, masculine and commanding. "All Hail Scion Altama of the Citadel Altama, Guardian and Protector of Altama Prefecture, Defender of the Fertile Fields of Altama Prefecture, Beloved Patron of the Citizens of Altama, and Chosen of the Progenitors as his Incarnate Perfection, the Scion Altama."

The man who stepped forward from the dais was disarmingly small and slight, with a neatly trimmed white beard that almost unnoticeably defined the margins of his face. He was clad in a robe of a complicated orange, black, and white design. Atop his head was a tall, pointed hat, which, Keeler knew, meant status. Every head bowed as he passed his courtiers and stepped down from the dais.

Keeler stepped forward. "Captain William Keeler, representing the..."

"During the last period of darkness, my court astrologers logged the appearance of a new planet in our heavens," The Scion announced, his voice nasal and piercing. He reached out and a high guardsman placed into his hand a large piece of creamy paper, with a complex drawing on it. The drawing was of a ship, shaped roughly like a large diamond linked to another much larger diamond: *Pegasus*.

"According to our legend/history, our ancestors traveled here from other stars. They found this planet a barren and desolate place, and they built it into a paradise. They were the Progenitors. They walked among stars. They were gods." He looked somewhat disdainfully at the landing party. "You, clearly, are not gods."

A kind of shocked murmuring rustled briefly through his court.

"We have come..."

"I must return to my meditation chamber, and contemplate the implications of your arrival. When I return, I shall have decided whether you will live or die, and determined the manner of your execution." With that, the Scion turned away from them, and walked past the dais into his chambers.

"That could have gone better," said Captain Keeler.

## Chapter Five

### Pegasus – Iestan Family Temple, Deck 16, Section 69:L20

Like all Iestan places of worship, it was small and simple in design, used only for public ceremonies: graduations, weddings, and Passages. It was in this temple that the Lears and one-hundred and seventy hand-picked, well-dressed guests gathered to celebrate the Passage of Goneril and Augustus Lear's eldest son.

In the center of the room was a large table, laden with traditional foods and Republic delicacies. The walls were hung with flags and bunting in the family colors, burgundy, black, and gray, which matched flowers procured at great expense from the ship's gardens. At an altar, guests inscribed words of praise and encouragement on slips of creamy paper.

The Executive Commander watched her son, awkwardly and self-consciously talking with her and her husband's guests. He was dressed in brand new endurance clothing, a black and grey jacket, trimmed in red, and loose mottled-gray pants, both with an excess of pockets. A small pack contained three 1-liter containers of water and a copy of *The Life, Reflections, and Teachings of Vesta*.

She made her way over to her son, stopping only briefly to exchange pleasantries with a couple she had not previously greeted. Finally, she had an audience of her son. "Are you enjoying your party?"

"I don't know any of the people in this room," he said, in a voice of anger putting up a front for fear to hide behind.

His mother put on a sympathetic expression and surveyed the room. "Ordinarily, these occasions are reserved for family, and only the closest of friends. We have to adapt to our circumstances. Are you afraid?"

"Nay."

"Enjoy the food. You won't believe how hungry you can get in three days."

"Why don't they hold a party after the Passage?"

"After the Passage, you're supposed to reflect on the life ahead of you, and on any revelations you received during your journey. Do you feel ready?"

"It doesn't matter whether I feel ready, I'll just have to get through it." He sighed. "I'll be very happy when this is over."

"Indeed, you will be," she said. She gave him a long, loving look. "This is the last time I will look at you as a child."

Trajan rolled his eyes.

"Mom!" came a sharp voice from behind. It was Marcus, her other son. Marcus was darker than Trajan, but more outgoing, more physical, although presently a little ungainly, unaccustomed height owing to a recent growth spurt made him a little off-balance. He carried a large plate heaped high with a good haul from one of the buffet tables.

"Do you want to wish your brother a good jorney, Marcus?"

Marcus looked offended. "Why? He's not even leaving the ship."

"Homunculus," Trajan hissed.

"If it were my Passage, I'd go to the planet and find an island where I'd be all by myself."

"When it comes time to do your Passage, you can do whatever you like," his mother assured him.

"Someplace with a toxic atmosphere..." Trajan suggested.

Marcus stared down his brother, hard. "Jeb Devries says doing your Passage on the ship is like taking it in the Shopping Zone."

"Jeb Devries is a parasite."

"Mom!"

Lear gently took his hand. "Marcus, the point of the Journey of Passage is where you go inside, not where you are outside. It doesn't matter where you take it."

"I know," Marcus said, shoving some cake into his mouth.

Lear ran her fingers through Marcus hair. She tried to send a message to Trajan, asking him to be patient with his brother, but she could not tell if it was getting through. "I have to prepare for the ceremony," she said out loud. "You two behave," she gave Marcus a shoulder squeeze, meaning *especially you*, and with that made her way to the prayer chamber.

When she had gone, Marcus leaned in close to his brother. "Hey," he whispered fiercely. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"I just danced with Mercedes Grumman."

"So."

Marcus put his mouth to his brother's ear. "My reproductive organs were engorged the whole time. I think she could feel it, too."

"That's disgusting!" The last thing Trajan wanted was to carry that image with him when he went up to recite the Entreaty of Dedication.

A short time later, the ceremony commenced. Lear led the ceremony, as was traditional in the family-centered Iestan faith. Iest was a faith without churches, priestesses, or hierarchies. Religion was practiced daily, in the home, led by the heads of the household, as Vesta taught.

She took her position before the altar, and spread her arms in a gesture of welcome. "In honor of Vesta, the daughter of God, mother of all the children of light, uniter of the star and the sword, the cross and the wheel, the spirit and the path, of science and religion, who gave humanity the key to the stars, we commence this ceremony of passage for my son, Trajan Johannes Lear."

There was applause and cheers, of a tasteful and muted variety appropriate to the occasion. Lear waited for it to subside. "I believe that it is through the Passage that we find meaning. We may not find such meaning during the Passage itself, but the Passage does mark the first step toward finding that meaning that gives purpose to our lives.

"At the time of my Passage, I always thought the most important aspect of Vesta's journey was the walk by the sea. For it was when she walked by the sea that her experiences coalesced into meaning. She realized she was the Daughter of God, and His Messenger, and that she must lead humanity from the darkness that had befallen us.

"As I look back now, the journey of Vesta in itself was not the most important point of the story. Whether or not she really met with angels, or messiahs, or prophets is not important either. What is important is that Vesta came out of that ordeal with a vision and a purpose that carried her through life. She turned her inward vision outward to the world, a fallen world, decayed in spirit, rotting in decline. She led humanity back from the brink, and opened up the stars to us.

"We begin by revisiting the life of Vesta, whose own passage was an accident of fate, but

which led her to unite the many faiths of Earth, and revive the human spirit when it was in the darkest hour of its darkest night.”

Taking his cue, Trajan stepped forward. His mother kissed him on the forehead, and he had to keep from shying away from her. He strode to the podium and set down his pack by the side. With a wave of his hand, he activated a hologram that accompanied his narrative.

There were many versions of this story available in holographic form, for display during the ceremony of Passage. Trajan had agreed to the same version as was used at his mother’s Passage, and the Passage of Lears for generations before him.

The custom was for the initiate to provide his own narrative, in his own words, of Vesta’s journey. Some wrote the experience into poems, which they recited on the altar. Some wrote songs, and some acted out the whole journey in mime or interpretive dance. Trajan Lear took the more common, literal approach.

“When Vesta was 12 years old, she undertook a journey, from a city the ancient text called Beautiful Horizon to another city called the Port of Joy. This was on Earth. She made her journey alone. Her parents had gone on before her. She traveled first by airship, which was the common mode of transport in those ancient days, but a few hours into her flight, a great storm came up from the sea. Her ship was torn from the sky and crashed.

“Everyone on board perished, except for Vesta, who escaped without even the slightest injury. She found herself alone, in darkness, far from anywhere. All around her was burning debris and dead bodies... rather than await rescue, she chose to make her way to the next city.

“She walked for three days. She walked until the sun rose on the first day, and when day came, she rested. She was tired after a long night of walking, and it was hot out. She lay down to rest in a place where trees made a natural shelter. She could not sleep, but rested and waited for the day to pass.

“As she waited, two beings, a man and a woman, appeared beside her, as though in a dream. She could not remember them approaching, and could not recall exactly when they appeared. It was as though, she said, they had been with her the whole time. They were tall and beautiful, and glowed with an Inner Light. The first thing she remembered them asking was ‘Are you afraid?’

“She answered nay. They continued to walk with her, and they spoke of many things. They were sorrowful over humanity’s dire condition, and asked her if she knew how humanity had fallen so low.”

“‘Because we pursue false gods,’ Vesta told them. ‘We value things that do not matter.’

“And they were very pleased.

“This answer just kind of came to her, she said later. She said it was like someone had opened her up, and pure truth was flowing through her. ‘Could this be the one to whom the truth has been given?’ said the man-being.

“‘It is so,’ said the woman being.

“And then they ‘went away.’ I don’t know what Vesta means when she says they ‘went away.’ I don’t know if they just disappeared or walked away.

“The sun went down. Vesta kept walking. She knew the sea lay to the east, so she began walking away from the direction the sun set, and tried to keep to a straight line.

“Another man began walking beside her.

“‘Would you help me?’” Vesta asked. “I’m lost and hungry, and I need to find a city.’

“The man who approached was serene, smooth, and fat. He wore a simple orange robe, and

for a while he walked beside her, saying nothing. He gave her some water, but refused to say anything, even when she asked him. When he finally spoke, the fat man asked her. 'Is there anything in this world that can be taken into the next?'

"She thought about this and said, 'Nothing outside of us can survive, not money, or clothes, or anything we can possess. Only what we carry inside... wisdom and truth.'

"And the Fat Man was pleased. He did not say another thing, and after a while, she noticed he was no longer walking with her.

"On the second day, a great storm came up. With thunder and lightning and pounding rain. A man stepped out of the rain. He was tall, very muscular, with long black hair down his back and intense, fiery-dark eyes and completely naked.

"Don't be frightened,'he told her. And she tried not to be afraid of him. She asked him who he was, and he gave her a name that seemed to be many names, but made made her think of wind, sun, moon, corn, water, and many different animals. 'I am told you seek a path,' he said.

"I am looking for a way into a city. I am lost,' she told him.

" He told her, 'The path that I have to show you is among the oldest of paths. Many have followed it. It may lead you home, however, it will be a long path.'

"Why should I follow your path?' she asked.

" 'It is, in some ways, an easier path, but it is very slow.' She agreed to follow his path.

"Then, another man came to her. 'Sister,' he asked, 'may I walk with you?' Vesta said he looked like the gentlest, and saddest man, she had ever seen. He told her, 'There was a time when I tried to follow a certain path, and I tried to lead others with me. Few followed me, and many of those who said they would follow me, only claimed to follow me, but did not really follow me.'

"If they had followed you, what would have happened?' Vesta asked him.

"I tried to teach everyone to love everyone else, to treat everyone else as they would have treated God himself. In the end, perhaps that is exactly what they did.

"Vesta was sad about this. 'People treat each other terribly. Everywhere one looks, it is clear that fortune favors evil. In the houses of the rich, every manner of depravity is practiced. Good people suffer for their unwillingness to lower themselves. Maybe people don't deserve anything better than the world we make for ourselves.

"And he told her, 'The world is a reprobate place. What you have to decide for yourself is, do I want to be judged by the standards of a degenerate world, or do I want to hold myself accountable to a higher standard?'

"Vesta thought about this, and then she asked him, 'If I were to set a higher standard for myself, what would that standard be?'

"Simply to act toward others as you would have them act toward you. Hold to the truth. Be generous in spirit. Be moral in your own life. Be above reproach. Show kindness, compassion, and strength.'

"Vesta agreed that he spoke in truth."

"And he was gone."

"The last man to approach Vesta was a man with a sword, and a cat. He regarded her critically. 'Your attire is immodest,' he said.

"I have been on my own for two days,' she answered him. 'I have no food, I am tired, but I know in another day I will be saved.'

"The man took his sword and swung it against a tree. The tree fell, revealing a roadway. They walked down the roadway together.

"And the man said, 'When darkness pervades the world, one is chosen to bear the burden of leading the world out of darkness. The message has already been given, but it has been forgotten. A prophet must be chosen to repeat the message, to remind people of the undeniable truth. If you follow on my path, you may become the prophet.'

"Vesta thought about this, and then asked, 'What would be required of me?'"

"The man asked her in response, 'Will you respect the equality of all persons?'"

"And Vesta said, 'I will.'

"Will you forswear intoxicants of all kinds?'"

"And Vesta said, 'I will'

"Will you support justice in all things, in all ways, to all people?'"

"And Vesta said, 'I will.'

"The man said, 'Then, if you so choose at the end of your journey, you may take up my sword.' He walked away from her. He was the only one she saw actually walk away.

Trajan paused. He realized, in his nervousness, he had skipped part of the story, an important part of the story. He wondered if he should go back, but decided to plunge on ahead and be finished with it.

"The sun was about to come up, and the air grew suddenly colder. This was the third day. Vesta found herself walking beside the two beautiful creatures again. They asked her if she had chosen a path for herself.

" 'I have a question,' Vesta said. 'All the one's who have visited me have been men. Why have no women come to me?'"

"The beings looked at each other, and they gave her an answer that ... that's very hard to put into words. They said that women, collectively, had been guiding humanity all along, and to find a single woman, capable of serving in the role of... savior... was very rare. They had chosen many in the past, but none had prevailed.

"And Vesta understood, and then she gave them her answer.. 'I can not choose only one path, for all of them are wise, and all of them speak truth. Truth can not deny truth, and therefore to choose only one, and to deny the others, is a denial of truth. I will follow all of them, all my days.'

"How can you follow so many different paths?'"

"She told them, 'A true God is a Creator of all things good. All true and good paths lead to the same place... the place of truth. So long as I pursue truth, and do so with a pure heart, I will find the truth.

"The next day, they ... the rescue party ... found her. She was 60 kilometers, or so, from the crash site. She was lying in a kind of shack, not far from the sea. After she returned, and told people of her vision, she was told that her revelation was simply a hallucination, and told to forget about it, but she would not.

"She went on to become a great leader, a great thinker. She wrote 100 prophecies, and 99 were proven true. She foretold of our journey to the stars... she told us how to reach the stars ... and what we would find ... and many other things."

He looked at his audience. They were bored, not too terribly. He could feel his mother beaming with pride off at the side of the altar.

"I offer a prayer that my own Passage will show me a path that I can follow, to serve in

Vesta's memory, to serve all my brothers and sisters."

"Amen," said the audience, as the hologram presentation disappeared, and was replaced with an active schematic of the deck-layout of *Pegasus*. "My journey," he said, his voice nearly cracking, "will begin here." He pointed to a spot at the front of the ship, "Sector 01, Deck Minus 63, The Undergrid of the primary sensor array. The most remote point on the ship accessible through the intraship transport system. My goal will be to return to here... Garden Deck Nine, within three Republic Days."

There was some polite applause, much to Trajan's discomfort. "The horizontal distance is only three-thousand seven hundred meters, so, I should have plenty of time for meditation. And I'll be seeing some parts of the ship very few people see. Thank you."

There was more polite applause, of the sort appropriate to the event. His mother, father, and brothers joined him, as the rest of the celebrants divided, allowing the family to pass through the center.

Feeling lightheaded, as though all the breath were being sucked out from him, Trajan Johannes Lear stepped forward to the transport pod.

### **Amenities Nexus – Deck 23, Section 72:00**

Eddie Roebuck had agreed to meet Eliza Change in the Recreation Complex. He was looking forward to it. He had actually been spending a lot of time on the Recreation Deck since quitting his job, but most of it was by himself. The times he had spent with her had been the closest he had ever been to being happy since he had joined the Odyssey Program.

He had a nice glass of chilled ale waiting for her, and an order of her favorite crustacean appetizers. He turned over in his mind the idea of asking Eliza to quit her post and join him. Maybe they could run away to the UnderDecks together.

He did not let this trouble him long. Eliza would never forsake her duty. This was, perhaps, her only flaw. When he saw her enter the complex, he smiled and waved her over. From the look on her face, she had just been through a tough duty shift. He hoped he could make her feel better.

"Lizzie, glad to see you. Sit down and start putting beverages into your mouth."

She did not sit down at first. "You put me in a really tough spot today, Eddie."

"Didn't I? What's the breakdown?"

"While I was on watch, the issue of disciplining you for dereliction of duty came up. It's in my hands now, Eddie."

Eddie stood and held her chair for her. "Come on, sit down. Don't make a big tension out of it. Vesta Krishna, I thought it was something serious."

"It is serious, Eddie. I have to discipline you."

"Not necessarily. As the commanding officer of this ship, you can sign off on a full pardon."

At that moment, something clicked in Change's head. She sat down and leaned toward him. "You knew, didn't you? You knew that Exec. Cmdr. Lear was out-of-duty, and that Redfire and Keeler would be off the ship when the issue of disciplining you came up... and I would be the one in command."

"Now, you're getting it, my timing just could not have been better." He raised his hand. "High-five me."

"You bastard!" she hissed at him, making heads turn around the complex. "You were going



to use me to get out of work. How dare you put me in this position!"

"Hoy, Eliza,..."

She stood again. "Don't you dare. Don't you dare say another word."

He reached for her hand, and she pulled it away. "What's gotten into you, babe? I thought we were on the same side here. It's not Matthew is it? I mean, is tight-ass a contagious syndrome?"

"Eddie, people tried to pull this kind of slag on me in the Mining Guild all the time. I didn't take it from any of them and I'm not taking it from you. Do you understand? Don't you ever, *ever* try to pull something like this with me again."

Finally, it dawned on Eddie that Eliza was not staging an outburst for someone else's benefit. He had expected her to go along. He had thought she had the same disrespect for the ship's authority figures as he did. Now, he realized he didn't see it that way.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"It's too late for that," she told him, her voice lowering. "I turned your case over to Ex-Cmdr. Lear. You're her disciplinary problem now."

Eddie felt a sudden chill. "You didn't."

"I did."

"But Cmdr. Lear is on Medical Exception."

"As Acting Commanding Officer, I can delegate non-command functions to her at my discretion. I told her I had to recuse myself from this action for personal reasons, and she agreed... after a lecture on the quality of people an officer should choose to spend time with."

Eddie was blown away. "You can't do this."

She fixed him straight in the eye with a glare that was almost radioactive. "Eddie, if you ever pull any kind of stunt like this with me again, I will take care of your discipline myself, and you will think of Ex-Cmdr. Lear as the Matron Saint of Mercy."

## Chapter Six

While they awaited the Scion's decision of what to do with them, the landing team waited in his rooftop garden-hall. The floor was alabaster, and matched the gold-trimmed pillars that surrounded the perimeter. Red silk curtains fluttered in the breeze around them. The top was open to the sky, and they could see the tip tops of a few other buildings.

Time continued to crawl. Keeler rested on a kind of stone chaise, carefully studying his surroundings and the four-armed guards that surrounded them. "What did the Scion mean about their ancestors being 'gods'?" Alkema wondered aloud.

"These people probably have formulated a kind of creation-myth to explain their presence on this world, basing it on racial memories of the world's colonization. It may form the basis of the local religion." Keeler traced his finger along a gold inlay on the arm of the chaise, recognizing a kind of ideogram language. "Our arrival may have shaken things up. If the Scion's power is derived from his position in the religious heirarchy, he may perceive us as a threat. They may be debating right now whether to kill us, imprison us, or just make us leave."

"Aw, shit," said Toto.

At the perimeter of the compound, a man (presumably a man) dressed in nothing but a long red cape, stopped and stared at the prisoners. He had enormous and well-developed muscles around his chest and shoulders, and his head was that of a lion, a magnificent animal known to be Earth-native. His eyes seemed to glow as he peered at the captives. He snorted and walked away as he had come.

Keeler and the others stared after him. "Nothing like that is an accident," he said.

"What do you mean?" Alkema asked.

"Evolution does not randomly produce a creature with a lion's head and a human body. Somebody made them. They were bred to form, fitness to purpose. These people have figured out how to produce four-armed people, dragon people, flying people with wings, and apparently lion-heads, but look at the rest of their technology? They can do genetic engineering, but the rest of their civilization is from the Dark Ages? That makes no sense."

"Advanced genetic engineering existed in the Old Commonwealth. Maybe these people held onto it," Alkema suggested

"But why do it?" Keeler demanded. "Why make humans with four arms, wings, funny heads ... whatever."

"Maybe it wasn't genetic engineering," Alkema suggested. "This Eden could have been a major inter-stellar port-of-call in the days of the Commonwealth. Maybe when the Commonwealth collapsed, a lot of alien species were trapped on Eden. Maybe their genotypes became cross-mixed with humans."

Keeler brightened. "Now *that* is a highly intriguing suggestion, albeit a genetic long-shot. Still, a thousand years in a common environment might have caused genetic impacts we could not anticipate"

Alkema heard a small chime from the communicator built into his landing gear. "Time to check in with the ship."

"Patch me through," Keeler said. He stood, not knowing why, it simply seemed appropriate. "Landing Group Alpha, Keeler here."

"Pegasus here. Lt. Navigator Change. Status Report, Captain."

Keeler looked round. "We are on the surface, all well. We've been taken to one of the urban areas and are being held in a large reception hall. The local leadership is debating whether or not we should be allowed to keep living."

There was a moment before *Pegasus's* response. "Do you require evacuation, Landing Group Alpha?"

"Not just yet. I think we have the means to defend ourselves if necessary. How fast can you have more ships down here?"

"Aves standing by in hot-ready condition. Thirty-seconds to launch, another six minutes to reach your position at maximum safe speed."

"Maintain status. How are the other landing parties doing?"

"Gamma Landing Party reports touchdown at designated coordinates. No contact with indigenous inhabitants. Scientific operations underway. Team Beta reports successful touchdown and contact."

"That's it."

"No further reports."

"I wonder if Commander Redfire is having fun, yet," Keeler said.

## **Eden – The Farside**

On the other side of the planet, Redfire, Ironhorse, and a few others from his party were being led by Winter through a gloom colder than death, in which the chill seemed to grow stronger each minute. Winter was explaining things to them. "The valley of Green Witch is protected by the mountains from outsiders. The mountains also shield us from the winds. It is possible to grow food here."

"Crops?" Redfire said incredulously. He checked the temperature. It was minus 15 degrees. "How can you grow crops when it drops below freezing every nine days?"

"Our plant life here is adapted to a short growth cycle. We use the hot springs in the caves to extend the cycle for some of the other crops."

*Human resourcefulness*, Redfire thought. *Boffo*.

"The presence of humans has driven most of the carnivorous beasts into the wilderness beyond the mountains. It is a relatively safe inhabitation."

Redfire had studied the topographical holomap in the cabin of *Titus II*. "The storms and the mountain passes would make it difficult to attack by land."

"No Prefecture has enough forces to mount a land assault, and they have too many differences to assemble a coalition, if it should ever come to pass however, we keep a year's worth of food for every person hidden in caves in the mountains. With enough warning, we could evacuate every soul."

She seemed intelligent and well-spoken. Redfire did not think it was solely because of the Lingotron. "Do you have contact with other settlements on this side of the planet?"

"We maintain a force of guards to protect us from raiding parties, but they are fairly rare. Green Witch is the largest Sanctuary, but there are others... and unlike the Prefectures, we are not at hostilities with one another."

"And all the people here are people who fled from the Prefectures on the Dayside?"

"That is correct."

"Why did they come here?"

"Most of them were slaves," she answered matter-of-factly.

Redfire was shocked. "Slaves? The people on the Dayside practice slavery?"

"Of course. Anyone who is not gifted is assigned to serve those who are."

"What does it mean not to be gifted?"

"To be like you... unable to change your form, without any special ability. Why is this all so surprising to you, Tactical Cmdr. Redfire?"

Redfire was still unclear on the concept of being gifted, but he sensed that would require a longer discussion later. Instead, he answered her question. "Slavery has never been known on our worlds."

"There are no slaves on your world?" She was as surprised as he was.

"I am willing to bet not one schoolchild in fifty even knows what the word means."

"Every man his own master. It is hard to imagine." She scowled. "So, who does the work on your world... the work no one wants to do?"

"We have machines to do most of it. For the rest... we have found that there is no job that someone will not perform for the appropriate compensation."

"Compensation?"

"Wages... payment that can be exchanged for something else you want." He sensed she was now thinking that economics would be as complicated to explain to her as the discussion of being "gifted" would be to him. He found himself looking forward to being able to discuss these things with her ... alone.

"What if someone chooses not to work at all?"

"Then, they receive a minimum level of sustenance, nothing more, nothing less."

"The same as our slaves are assured here."

"I can not imagine why anyone would choose to live in slavery."

"The slaves are assured, at least, of sufficient food, care for their persons, shelter. A hard-working slave is valuable property, and they are taken care of, at least until they are too old or sick to work. In the sanctuaries, there are no such assurances. All that you have, you provide for yourself."

"For myself," she concluded, "I believe that to die as a free being is better than to live as a slave."

"I agree."

"Not everyone does," she told him. "For every 100 that reach our sanctuaries from the dayside, 60 will return within a year. Twenty will die."

Redfire could not help but smile. "Fascinating how different our worlds are."

"What is your world... was it called Sapphire?... what was Sapphire like?"

"The first human to see it called it 'a beautiful blue jewel set in the black velvet of space.' The sky is blue, as are the oceans. There are great cities..."

"Cities... like the citadels?"

"Larger. Our largest cities are called Corvallis and New Cleveland. More than a million people live in each of them."

"What did you do on your world? Were you a warrior?"

"I was an artist."

"An artisan?"

"Neg, an artist, I created ... I created things purely to interest, entertain, and provoke the

people that watched them.”

“You will have to explain that to me some time. How many worlds have you visited,” Winter asked.

“Only one, besides yours. Our voyage has just begun.”

“What was it like?”

“It was called Meridian. Its skies were green, not gold like yours. And it smelled bad. The people all lived in giant cities. They were all slaves of ...” how to describe it to a woman who knew almost nothing of technology. “... a powerful force that had come to their world from another one, cast a spell over them and made them destroy their own culture.”

“What did you do?”

“We used our ship’s weapons to destroy the evil force, and set them free.”

“You liberated an entire planet from slavery?”

“Or doomed them to extinction. We couldn’t wait behind to see what happened.”

“So, you are a warrior after all.”

Eventually, they reached a large structure. It looked as though a natural circular rock-formation had been supplemented with large rocks to fill in the gaps between the boulders. The roof was constructed from tree trunks, into which a combination of branches and animal pelts had been tightly inter-woven. The party was led through a flap of animal fur that served as the door. Winter led them in, protectively. A thousand eyes stared back at them from the fierce and grubby faces of the village’s inhabitants.

The light inside the large round hall came from torches, tiny flames encased in some kind of crystalline substance that intensified the light. It was still quite dark.

Winter whispered to Redfire. “If they seem unduly angry, please remember, we usually sleep through the nights, it preserves our energy.”

There were some awkward seconds, before Winter explained. “Every newcomer is expected to explain himself.”

“What do I tell them?”

“Usually, you would state the name of your Prefecture, Scion, and Master, and also the tale of your escape.” She paused and thought. “Just tell them of your journey.”

Redfire stepped forward. The crowd was regarding him balefully. He saw a woman with two filthy children huddling beneath her wraps. “We are strangers here,” he began. “I am Commander Phil Redfire of the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*.” He could see that it did not register with them. “*Pegasus* is a great ship, larger than your village, it flies among the stars. It is high in the sky over your world now. It brought all of us here from two distant worlds...”

The crowd set to murmuring, and to Redfire, it sounded like highly dubious. A short man stepped forward. “They can not possibly come from other worlds.”

“Thistle!” Winter hissed.

“I tell you,” the man continued, his nasal voice oozing super-confidence. “They can not come from other *worlds* because there are *no other worlds*.”

“Who do you suppose they are, then?”

Thistle twitched. “Agents of the Prefectures. Come to take us back to slavery.”

“Then, why haven’t they?”

“Why should they need to, if we invite them into the warmth of our homes and give ourselves up without any fight whatsoever?”

"We know nothing of these Scions," Redfire interjected. "We have come because all of you belong to a great family of humanity, scattered across the stars. We are your brothers."

"And brothers of the Scion also," said Thistle.

"No," said Winter fiercely. "They are not of the Hauptarchy. I will stand for them, for as long as they remain."

The room grew silent. Redfire had a sudden sense that her offer to stand for them had made the difference between acceptance and rejection. He looked at Winter again. She held the respect of the whole village.

How much more was there to this woman? He was looking forward to finding out.

## **Eden – Dayside – Citadel Altama**

The Scion re-entered, trailed by a large Mardi Gras parade of courtesans and bodyguards in outrageous costumes and bodies, all of whom regarded their visitors with venomous stares. They took positions around the hall, forming a semi-circle around the landing party, focused on the Scion.

"I have chosen to over-rule my court of advisors, and not kill you outright," the Scion said, his voice flowing with equanimity.

Keeler faced the Scion. *Show no weakness. No gratitude.* "I would suppose then that you had determined that we are too valuable to be destroyed. Perhaps, you had in mind some service to the Prefecture might be accommodated by our presence."

"You speak ... strangely," said the Scion, waving off the remark. *Playing his cards close to his chest*, Keeler thought.

The Scion went on. "My advisors tell me that, if you have indeed crossed the space between stars in order to arrive at our world, that such a journey must be both dangerous and costly. So, the question is, why would you undertake such an expedition?"

Keeler answered, "We are searching for Earth, the ancestral home of all humanity."

"I have never heard of such a place." One of the Scion's council leaned over, whispered into his ear. The Scion nodded. "Perhaps, 'Earth' is another word for the Great Kingdom, whence the gods sprung. Do you know of the Great Kingdom?"

"That term is unknown to me."

The Scion appeared to lose interest. "Why did you choose to land your ship on our most humble prefecture?"

"We chose it on the basis of its population, its position along obvious trade routes, the city..."

"So, it would be a strategic position to occupy in the name of conquest," the Scion said, speaking with an easy tone. "We know why you have come to this world. You are not the first, although you are the first to come to this Prefecture."

"In ancient times, we believe your world was visited frequently."

"And in the present time as well."

Keeler was stunned. "You mean other humans, people like us, still visit your world?"

"They have been coming," the Scion answered. "This is the first time they have come to Altama Prefecture. Our spies tell us that in three of the Outward Prefectures, have been incidents with ... humans who claim to come from other worlds."

*We're not alone*, Keeler thought. *Incredible*, but not to the Scion Altama, who continued

talking as though he had said nothing of significance.

"You came here to learn the secrets of our world, is that the truth?"

"Essentially," Keeler said, hesitantly.

"You will not learn them here. You need to go north, to Chiban Prefecture."

"Chiban Prefecture?"

"Chiban Prefecture, 900 wheels dawnward of here, is the dominant prefecture of this world. They control the harbor at the mouth of the River Akura. As such, they control all trade on the dawnward side of the continent. In the Citadel of Chiban Prefecture, there is an ancient temple dating from the days when gods came and gave life to this world, the temple of the Z'batsu. The history of our world is written on the walls of the temple, and your questions may be answered there."

Alkema spoke up. "900 wheels, that would be ..."

"About three and a half days travel overland. You would not want to travel in your... skyships. And if your underling addresses me directly again, I will have his throat slit and his remains fed to the calves of my dragons."

*I wish I could deliver a threat like that,* Keeler thought, as Alkema walked backwards quickly. "Why can't we use our ships?"

"Scion Chiban is a very... suspicious man; as befits a ruler of his standing. He would interpret your arrival and your technology as a threat, and would be difficult to deal with. If you do not have land vehicles, we can provide them to you, as a boon, given in friendship, from Altama Prefecture."

*You are such a bad liar,* Keeler thought. He could not quite yet read the Scion's thoughts, but he knew the old man was lying, and that he furthermore intended them harm.

"You will travel here along the path of an ancient roadway. Centuries ago, or so legend has it, it was paved with bricks of hardened gold. The paving stones are long gone, but you can still travel along the roadbed. Do not leave the path."

"Do not leave the path," Keeler found himself repeating involuntarily.

"You will not communicate with your ship."

"Do not communicate with the ship. Why not?"

"You will not be allowed into the Prefecture if the Scion believes you are spies. You will also leave behind that man, that man, that man, and that woman as my guests, until you return."

By chance or deliberation, the Scion had chosen all four of the Aves pilots. Before Keeler had a chance to ask why, the Scion shot out a final instruction and left with a sweep of his robes. "You will be led from the Citadel in immediately upon completion of your departure feast. Eat well, food is rare on the highway."

Keeler's landing party was led from the garden under the watchful eyes of guardsmen, and led into a banquet hall that adjoined it. Food had already been laid out for them, comprising primarily meats and bowls of various mashed fruits and vegetables.

## **Eden – Citadel Altama – The Scion's Chambers**

The Scion did not eat with them, but instead retired to his chambers, which Keeler would have found disturbingly modest, accompanied only by the Lord Guardsman Hroth. He calmly issued instructions to his subordinate. "Any slaves who viewed the newcomers must be put to

death," the Scion decreed, without preamble.

"So shall it be," the Lord Guardsman agreed, betraying only a fraction of his enthusiasm for the project.

"The men they left with us are to be killed also," said the Scion, "but quietly, and without implication of responsibility."

The Guardsman nodded. "The Court Assassins shall see to it."

The Scion nodded sagely. "Kill the Travelers as well, but not here."

"Right," the Lord Guardsman understood. "Which Prefecture shall be blamed?"

The Scion looked at him in frustration. Perhaps, the reason this should have been obvious to him was why he was Scion. "Chiban, of course."



## Chapter Seven

### Pegasus – The UnderDecks

The transport pod shot down the length of *Pegasus*, dropped ninety decks and, when it could go no further, swooshed to halt beside a boarding ramp. Trajan rose from his seat and adjusted his pack. The hatch slid back and up. Trajan said a standard prayer, made a circle over his heart with his right hand, and stepped out.

The front of the chamber he entered was a wall that sloped gently upward. Trajan touched a panel and the wall vanished, revealing a viewport that spanned the width of the chamber. 14,000 kilometers below, Eden turned gently and he could see beer-colored oceans lapping on burgundy shores, forests of green so dark black paled by comparison. Across the planet's Farside, he saw flashes of lightning in boiling clouds. Further away was the bright yellow disc of the fat and ringed gas giant planet Eden orbited.

He kept his hand on the pad. "*Pegasus*, is Republic's primary visible from our current position in space?"

"Affirmative."

"Center, magnify, and enhance."

A light blue oval appeared on the viewport as the view changed from literal to computer-generated. The starfield shifted, a pale point of light took center stage, expanded and resolved into two bright stars of roughly the same size.

That was home. The computer told him it was 117.4 light years away, that 13 years had passed on Republic since he had left.

Thirteen years, he thought. Slightly longer than the time he had been alive. It meant all of his friends had grown up, and possibly had even begun families. The thought made him feel alone, and very, very sad.

While they had become adults, he had remained a child. He was out here, more than a light-century away from his home, a small bacterium in the belly of one ship, one ship of a fleet of nine that was trying to connect the human worlds that hung in space. The Ministry of Information had never tired of describing the Odyssey Project as the highest achievement of Republic culture, but Trajan had never wanted to be a part of this. No one had asked him. No one had given him the choice of opting for a more mediocre existence.

He remembered the last day he had spent on Republic. He had awakened early, and left the family's apartments in Jacet Tower before sunrise. (Not that he had ever seen the sun rise, in the perpetual gloom of the City of Alexander.) He had made his way down to the network of interconnecting tubes, called, for reasons lost to Antiquity, 'the Habitrail,' that connected the towers. He had taken a MagLev to the city's western edge, where buildings were newer, and housed a less influential class of people.

His thought had been to hide out here, for as long as it took, until... the thought in his ten-year-old mind had been a little unclear on this. He didn't really believe they would leave without him, but he had vaguely thought maybe, when they eventually found him, it would prove to them how much he didn't want to leave his home. Then, he might have been left to live with his Aunt Cordelia, the only one in the family who had seemed to care.

Part of his mind didn't think they would find him. He thought he could be on his own for days. One small boy in a city of tens of millions. He thought he could hide for days, and maybe they, as they fretted and worried over him, would come to understand how strongly he felt about not going on the Odyssey mission.

That was the day he learned about identity Slivers, which every citizen born on Republic had implanted at the back of the jaw. They found him, his mother and father, as he sat in the midst of a grove of living trees in a warehouse sector.

The MagLev ride back to Jacet Tower had been mostly silent. Programmed rain began to fall, drizzling across the windows. He had deliberately turned away from his parents, toward the rain.

*Trajan*, his mother had said to him. *Trajan, we know this isn't easy for you, but we love you. We can not bear the thought of leaving you behind.*

He felt his mother's mind reaching into his, and, for the first time ever, he pushed her out. *My thoughts to myself.*

His mother had smiled, in that infuriating way of hers, and said, "You blocked me. How wonderful! I was almost fourteen before I could block my parents."

In response, he had pounded against the viewport of the MagLev, as he punched against the viewport now, which made his hand hurt and caused no damage to the viewport. His hand continued to throb, but he was still one hundred light years from home, and his friends had all grown up without him.

He shifted the weight of the pack on his back and turned away from the viewport. This forward section was fairly large, and he had a choice of no fewer than four egresses. He had selected his in advance. It was the furthest right, and it led down. He walked to the hatch, opened it, and felt a chilly blast of air. These levels were kept colder than the top levels. No reason to generate excess heat beyond the needs to keep the machines operating. He closed the top of his jacket a bit more tightly.

He passed a row of squat, stainless steel columns containing junction boxes for *Pegasus* forward sensors, and several large holds containing spares for the sensors, the phalanx guns, and the other instruments of the ship's foremost section. He found he was already getting hungry.

## **Pegasus – The Executive Commander's Study**

The doors slid apart, and Eddie walked into Goneril Lear's office. She sat behind a large desk consisting of a slab of blond marble perched on a semi-circle of silvery metal. It looked antique but was probably just a replica of something that had been in her family for generations. She gestured toward one of the brutally minimalist chairs arrayed before the desk. "Have a seat, Technician Roebuck. This will not take long."

Eddie sat down. Her tone of voice was pleasant enough, and yet his heart was shivering, as though his blood had suddenly turned cold.

She handed him a datapad. "This is a report from Technical Chief Cisco. According to him, you have not reported for your previous eight duty-shifts. Is this correct?"

"Za, I quit."

"That is what he informs me." She set down the datapad and looked directly into his eyes.

"Normally, we require ten duty-shifts notice before leaving a section, and the approval of the section chief before the transfer is official."

"I didn't transfer. I quit."

She nodded. "So, you say. I usually would not involve myself with a personnel issue at your level, but these circumstances are somewhat exceptional. I have been put upon to determine an appropriate disciplinary exercise for you, but I will leave that up to your section chief. What I do need to know is what new function you are going to be trained to fill. You have not signed up for a retraining program."

"I'm not going to be retrained. I quit. I didn't just quit the flight deck, I quit the whole mission. I'm done. You can't make me go to work ... and you can not let me starve."

Lear looked at him expressionlessly for a moment, then nodded. "That is true, we can not force you to work, and we can not let you starve." Her left hand moved onto another pad of her computer. "The only alternative we are allowed is to send you back to Sapphire."

Eddie was stunned. This was not what he had expected at all. "You're kidding."

"We will not let you starve, but we can not have you consuming this ship's finite resources either. Everyone must contribute, Technician Roebuck. The only exceptions are minor children and the immediate families of key personnel."

Eddie paused. "Haven't eight years passed on Sapphire since we left?"

"Closer to thirteen... but that does not matter. You see, Sapphire is about 117 light years from Eden. Since, we would have to send you through normal space, the best we could do is perhaps half light speed. In which case, you would be back home in approximately two-hundred thirty four years."

"I'll be dead by then ... probably." He was in panic now. "You expect me to be alone in space for two hundred and thirty years?"

"Two hundred and thirty-four, but you would be traveling relativistically. It would seem more like ninety years to you."

"Ninety years?"

"I said it *would* seem like ninety years... but you won't notice the time at all."

"Why not?"

"You'll be in cryonic suspension."

Eddie's jaw dropped.

She continued. "Your body will be cryonically frozen and placed into an escape pod. The pod will be launched out of the ship at about one-half light speed and directed to Sapphire. When it approaches the Outer System, a beacon will activate. We will task an automech to maintain your suspension system until you reach your homeworld. There shouldn't be any kind of space debris between here and there, but just in case, your pod will be able to maneuver evasively should any object large enough to cause damage be encountered."

She leaned over her desk and smiled. "Your odds of survival should be about 99.97%, which, if you must know the truth, is much better odds than our AI model gave the rest of us of surviving this expedition."

Eddie found himself unable to speak, and gripped with a kind of terror he had not felt since he was ten years old, awaiting punishment after he and Barnes Asahi had given the dog several tankards of ale to see what dogs did when they got drunk. "I... You can't..."

Lear looked at him. "I can't what, Technician Roebuck? If you are about to say, I can not let discipline and morale on this ship be compromised by one unhappy technician, then you are

correct. If you were about to say I can't freeze you and send you home, you are wrong indeed. If you wish to avoid that circumstance, I suggest you begin retraining for a new function. Your file says you enjoy food and drink. Perhaps one of the food vendors will offer to apprentice you."

There were a few seconds of silence. "You may get up now." Lear said finally.

Stunned as he was, lifting himself out of the chair was like lifting a bag of potatoes ... lead potatoes. He left a thin trace of perspiration on the back. One thought, animal-like in its intensity, fastened itself to his consciousness. *I have to get to the door before she can do anything else.*

"By the way, technician," Lear went on. "Until you do present a retraining plan, you will be restricted to water and chow, and your recreation privileges are revoked."

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

Trajan had traveled downward fourteen decks and was about 900 meters from where his walk had begun. He was preparing to bed down inside a storage locker filled with various fabrics, raw materials for the artifactories that produced clothing. He rested with his back against a bulkhead, waiting for sleep to come, ignoring the first faint calls of hunger, and working things out in his mind. He reached into his backpack and withdrew his copy of *The Life and Teachings of Vesta*.

Trajan knew that one measure of a successful Passage was to find The One Answer, i.e., the Single Greatest Truth of Vesta's Teachings. Supposedly, there was Only One Answer, but The Answer Was Different For Everyone. The Passage was intended to resolve the paradox through the discovery of a unifying truth. This truth was supposed to be zealously kept from both non-Iestans and children who had not yet completed their Passage.

However, young adolescents were not known for their ability to keep secrets. Trajan had heard of several different truths that older boys had discovered in their passage. No one had ever been told he was wrong. Trajan had therefore concluded that whatever truth one chose from the life of Vesta became one's personal truth, one's One Answer.

Therefore, The Passage was merely a ceremony, a meaningless exercise that was primarily for the benefit of his parents. Nevertheless, feeling he might as well observe the ritual, he turned on the book and chose a random chapter.

### **The Three Ways of Explaining the Universe**

There have historically been three ways of explaining the universe.

1. God creates the Universe, from the Universe comes Life
2. The Universe creates God and from God comes Life
3. The Universe creates Life, and from Life, comes God

The first is the traditional view. God is the All-Powerful Supreme Being, who creates the Universe and all things in it. Life is made in His image, and answers to His judgment. All people are his children, and enjoy the dignity of having been brought into substance by a Perfect Being.

The second is the view of the New Age religions. The Universe existed before God, and God evolved within the universe, perhaps taking the form of highly advanced extraterrestrial beings who brought life to this planet, or simply as an intrinsic and intangible linkage between all living things. God is a being who is unknowable, beyond our capacity to contemplate.

The third is the path of Non-belief. The universe was an accident of physics. Life arose out of the random interaction of organic chemical, and then imagined God as a way of explaining its own existence. Life is an accident of Creation, not its purpose.

This was from the Prelude to Meditation 42, one of his least favorite meditations. He stared at the words, not really reading them. Every night for the almost thirteen years of his life, his mother or father had read from the book of Vesta to him, and he knew all of it, more or less. He did not feel like contemplating Vesta's discourse on the nature of God just now. It was his own nature that pre-occupied him.

He wondered what he was going to do with his life. He was sure his mother would ask him at the end of the journey. If he told her he didn't know, she would smile and say that he still had all his life ahead of him and he should take his time. By the way, have you thought about command training?

Command Core. There did seem to be a certain inevitability about that. He certainly had no interest in becoming a botanist. With his mother's guidance, he was assured of an easy track through the ranks. This would be a long journey and someday, years and years from now, he might be standing in PC-1, making big, important decisions as his mother did.

This, at least, would have been no different if they had never left Republic. He might not have joined the military, but he would have gone on to positions of progressively higher responsibility in any Ministry he chose. His family would have seen to it. Which Ministry would have been his choice. He could have picked any of them, and it would not matter.

Aye, the future was easy. It had always been easy, and so it would always be. He only wondered what the rest of his life would be like.

With those thoughts in his head, he fell asleep.

## **Pegasus – Launch Bay Four**

"*Pegasus* Flight Control hailing Terrain Survey Mission one-six, do you confirm launch ready?"

"Flight Control, this is Tango-Sierra One Six alpha, confirm launch ready," Flt. Lt. Matthew Driver answered.

"Flight Control, Tango-Sierra One-Six beta confirms also," said the other pilot.

"*Pegasus* Flight Control releases Tango Sierra One-Six Alpha and Beta for launch on command. Your window is forty-five seconds."

Matthew stared down the launch tunnel. The canopy of the Shriek in which he was strapped allowed him nearly 360 degrees of vision along almost any axis. The pilot of a shriek was seated on a kind of saddle, like a motorcycle, which in turn was mounted on a tri-axial something or other that allowed him to pivot into whatever position maximized maneuvering and battle-effectiveness.

The Shrieks were even more neurally-integrated than the Aves. Wrapped around Matthew's face, like a growth of plastic cancer from his ears to his chin and up over his eyes, was a neural control interface that gave him direct mind-control of the ship. He only had to think about what he wanted the ship to do, for example, "Launch!"

The Shriek fired down the launch tunnel and catapulted out of the front of the ship, A split second later, the other Shriek followed. The two ships, with their shining metal and blue-black

wings resembled nothing so much as space-going butterflies. They soared around the south pole of Eden's mother-planet, picking up speed through the use of an ancient maneuver known as a "gravitational slingshot." This would be a routine mission to map the second moon of the fourth planet in the system.

"Tango Sierra One Six Alpha reports escape velocity achieved," Driver reported.

"Pegasus Flight Control Acknowledges."

"Tango Sierra Matthew One-Six en route to ---- 10 223 Equuleus IV II at .21c"

"Pegasus Flight Control Acknowledges. Godspeed Lt Driver."

"Acknowledged."

"Godspeed Lt. Change"

"Acknowledged."

Eden, *Pegasus*, and the yellow-range globe both orbited disappeared rapidly behind them. Matthew mentally instructed the Shriek to switch its comsystem from linking to *Pegasus* to linking to Eliza Jane Change's ship. "Now, can I ask you why wanted to join me, Lt. Why-do-we-need-manned-probes-doesn't-this-ship-have-a-full-sensor-array?" He hoped his teasing sounded gentle.

"I had to get away from the ship for a while," her voice answered, without humor.

"Why?"

"Just pray to your God that no one ever puts you in command of that ship."

"Not much chance of that. Flight Core isn't exactly command track."

"You're better off staying away from that track."

"Why the sudden disillusion with command?"

There was a long, thoughtful pause before she answered. "Commanding the ship is not the difficult part. The second officers are very competent and run their sectors efficiently. There are three landing parties on the planet and at least two survey missions underway at any time, but none of them have encountered any major crises... yet."

"So, what's bothering you, then?"

"Every single minute, someone is demanding a decision. Fifty times every duty shift, Executive Commander Lear checks in to second-guess your decisions. And the worst part is, even when my watch is finished, I'm still in command. People try to take advantage. That's why I had to get off the ship. I needed some time to myself."

"How do they take advantage of you?"

A pause. "I don't want to think about it right now. I'll tell you after the flight."

Matthew scanned his instrument displays. "We'll reach Four-Beta in about two hours. If you change your mind between now and then, well, I'm here to listen for you."

A heavy sigh wafted over his sound system. "That won't be necessary. I'm de-activating internal gravity... Oh, yeah. That feels much better. Mmmmm."

Matthew wished she didn't have to sigh like that.

"Are you all right?" he asked finally.

"I feel great. I'm *weightless*," she answered. "Oh, yeah... oh, yeah it feels so good."

Again, Matthew wished she didn't have to sigh like that. "Run a diagnostic on your emergency over-ride. If you have to maneuver suddenly, and your gravity doesn't kick in first, you'll instantaneously become a stain on the back of your cabin."

She didn't reply. Matthew ran a remote systems check on her ship and assured himself that

the emergency gravity over-ride was engaged. He looked through his canopy, at the stars above, below, and on every side of him. It was like walking through the sky.

He put his own ship in shepherd-mode, so that it would guide hers. "Eliza... Lt.. Change, I mean. I'm going to go into sleep mode until .... I'm setting wake up for fifteen minutes before orbital insertion."

"Sounds nice," her voice lilted back. "I haven't had a zero-g nap in a long time."

He closed his eyes.

"Matthew," came her voice.

He opened his eyes. An hour and a half had passed. Ahead, he saw the blue-green sphere of 10 223 Equuleus. He began sighting the moon to make a course correction.

"I'm here," he answered.

"Do you think civilians are really different than us. Do you think they have a different set of rules than we do?"

"I don't know."

"You've spent your adult life in the Republic Military. I spent my whole life with the Mining Guild. We both believe, fundamentally, in chains of commands, mutual respect, and doing your duty."

"This is about Eddie, isn't it?" Matthew said, amazed he had not picked up on it sooner.

"Affirmative."

"It didn't bother you before that he was ignoring his duty before. Have you changed your mind?"

"Before, it didn't have anything to do with me. Now, he wants me to bail him out. He knew I'd be in command and that I'd decide whether and how to discipline him."

"What did you do?"

"I referred his discipline to Commander Lear."

Matthew was quiet for a moment. "Damb," he said finally.

"Did I do the right thing?"

"Absolutely. As an officer, your duty was clear."

"What about as a friend? I'm not accustomed to this friendship device."

Matthew thought hard. "A friend should never put you in that position."

"Which is exactly what I have been telling myself, but I know I caused trouble for Eddie, and I don't feel good about that. I'm furious at him, partly for making me have to do that to him, and mostly for putting me in this position at the beginning."

The words came with some difficulty. "If it is any consolation, I don't think in Eddie's mind, he was doing anything bad to you. I think, the way he saw it, he would break the rules for you if your position is reversed. I don't believe that it's right for him to think that way, but it is how he thinks."

They swung around 10 223 Equuleus V in a breaking maneuver and set a course for the planet's second moon. It was a fairly large body, only a little smaller than Hyperion. Its surface was a broken mass of ice and sheet rock. The ice seemed to flow, making the patterns of rivers and seas, dividing the places where it cracked through the rocks.

Change reported. "I'm picking up a magnetic anomaly. Coordinates: Latitude 12° 9' South, Longitude, 118° 14' West. There's a concentration of metallic elements not found elsewhere on the planet's surface. Let's check it out."

The two ships swung over a spiky range of ice-capped mountains. Matthew stared at the scanner. The magnetic anomaly had taken on a distinct appearance, like a huge shield. Its metallic content was dominated by gold, molybdenum, and corundum, exactly like the surface of Eden. "There's an artifact down there. Do you see it?"

"I'm picking it up."

They passed over the object. It was a large dark shield, faintly coated in frost. Snow danced across it, making whirlwinds from the moon's thin atmosphere. It was approximately 400 meters across, 100 meters high, and about ten meters thick.

"Scanning," Matthew reported as a beam of blue-white light was emitted from the bottom of his ship. "Very smooth. Detecting only minor surface imperfections. No indication of electronic circuitry, energy flow, mechanisms. Apparently solid metal all the way through." They held position over the object. "That's all I can tell. Any idea what it is?"

"It's refined metal, that's for sure."

"Jettisoned cargo from the colonial era?"

"That would be my guess, but a cargo of what. It isn't pure ore, it's not a mechanical device, it's not electronic."

"Log the position. We'll come back with an Aves and examine it."

With a kick of their gravity engines, they left the moon, and steered a course back for *Pegasus*.



## Chapter Eight

### Eden-The Dayside

Keeler and his Landing Party had been led out of the Scion's second best palace by the means of underground tunnels which led from the Citadel to the so-called "Goldstone Highway." There were no signs of gold paving stones in the wide dirt path, but the roadbed was still more or less intact, or, at least, easy enough for the trackers to delineate from the surrounding ground. The Guardsmen left the party by the side of the road, pointed in the direction they were to travel, and returned to the tunnel without wishing them well, or presenting them with lovely parting gifts.

Keeler took a good look at his party. There were ten of them. Four were Marines, which made him feel good. There were two medical technicians among them, and Keeler had a feeling it would be useless to pray they were not needed. He said a quiet prayer to that effect anyway before leading his people in a spoken one.

"To the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Giver of Life, we pray for protection on the long and unknown road that lies before us. We pray for the capacity to meet and understand the challenges that lie before us. We pray that everything we do along our journey serves Your Peace. We shall fear no evil."

"God is Near," answered the rest of the landing party. The unbowed their heads, except for Honeywell and the other Marines, whose job it was to remain vigilant and had never bowed to begin with.

Keeler tapped his walking stick on the ground and pointed up the trail "Let's exeunt this quiescently frozen juice-treat dispensary."

Although they were laden with food and gear, the packs were light on their backs. Their jackets kept them cool as the air grew sultry. The tunnels had deposited them well outside the Citadel, and the little camps that surrounded it. Before they had traveled even a few kilometers, the dwellings had become quite few and primitive, little more than shacks among the trees and fields. They saw no sign of intelligent life.

They soon found themselves amidst an expanse of fields. On one side stretched a large grain-field where some wheat-like crop was maturing, filling the air with a scent of dust and nuts. On the other was an equally long expanse of thorny shrubs laden with clumps of yellow and purple fruit, about the size of two hands held together.

David Alkema stood at the edge of the second field, which was somewhat below the level of the road, pointing his tracker at the shrubs. "Captain, those plants are unknown to us. I should get a sample of the fruit for Agro-Botany."

Keeler looked back at him. "Neg!" he was thinking. *Do not leave the path*, but Alkema was already carefully picking his way down the incline.

The shrubs were only a little taller than the young specialist. His tracker analyzed the fruit by sniffing the chemicals it gave off in the air. It told him the fruit was safe to eat, had a composition and a fructose constituent similar to grapes, nectarines, and tomatoes. He took a container from his pack and reached out to collect a sample.

Suddenly, there was a stabbing pain in his hand, as though it had just been stung by a large, voracious insect. He pulled it back from the shrub and was surprised to see the point of a black, metallic blade protruding from between his fingers.

He turned his hand over, aware at the back of his mind of searing pain throbbing outward

from it and beads of his own dark blood pooling and dripping from the ragged edges of the wound. The piece of metal that protruded from either side of his hand was shaped something like the wing of a bird, but with razor-sharp edges.

The next thing he was aware of was of the weight of something slamming against him and bringing him to the ground, which turned out to be Marine Specialist Dallas. They rolled over on the ground, coming to rest with Dallas underneath him.

"Shields in place! Protect the Captain!" Marine Lt. Honeywell was yelling. "We're under attack."

Keeler was staring at the crumpled forms of Dallas and Alkema. An enormous Marine hustled the Captain to the far side of the incline. Honeywell and the other Marine took positions on the top of the road.

"Scanning, one life form, humanoid, twenty-two meters away at 67 degrees." The young Marine pointed.

"Pursue!" ordered Honeywell.

The Marine was off like a flash. Eden's low gravity and the amplification of the landing gear making him run with the swiftness of a Panrovian stalking cat. Medical Technician Bihari picked her way to Alkema and Dallas, under the cover of the Marine who had taken Keeler to safety.

Alkema moved aside, blood dripping profusely from his damaged hand. Dallas looked bad, unconscious with the color drained from her face. A thick dark puddle of blood--- turned oily black in the light of the Edenian sun, spread beneath her. Bihari carefully rolled her over. There was another one of the things embedded into her stomach. She must have caught it in mid air, then driven it further into her guts when she rolled over with Alkema.

Alkema instinctively reached out the try to help her, and was answered by a sharp stabbing pain across the length of his right forearm. He withdrew.

"Get back to the road," Bihari hissed. "The Marines will cover you."

"Will she be all right?"

"She will be all right." Bihari withdrew a scanning plate from her medical pack, a transparent rectangle, about one centimeter thick. As she passed it over Dallas's abdomen, it displayed a full-color view of her internal organs. The weapon had cut into the muscles of her belly, and penetrated into the abdominal cavity, nicking her small intestine and stomach. The former was bleeding profusely.

"There's nothing you can do here," said Bihari without looking up. She placed a small bio-regulator on Dallas's chest to slow her respiration and heartbeat and to keep her unconscious. Her small brown hands dug into the medical pack again, removing bandages, sealant, and finally a grasping tool. "I have to seal the wounds internally before I can remove the weapon. Medical Technician Skinner will take care of you."

Alkema raised to a crouch, sheltered his wounded hand on his stomach and made his way back to the road.

"Are you all right?" Keeler asked him.

"I'm in better shape than Dallas."

"Let me look at that," said Medical Technician Skinner. He was a middle-aged man, a little older than the commander, but much more trim, with immaculate silver-white hair. His eyes were icy blue. He took Alkema's hand and turned it over, to see the blade protruding from both sides. "This reminds me of when I was a young medical technician, just out of the Medical College of Baden Baden Baden. My internship took me to a remote outpost in

northern Carpentaria, a fishing village, where I lived among the Johnsonites for two years. You'd be surprised how many objects I had to extract from the flesh of those hardy sea-farers." His tone was enthusiastically conversational, inappropriate to the setting and made more so by his eccentric and erudite inflections. He waved an examiner over Alkema's palm.

"Your bones are intact, but there is severe tearing in the muscles of your hand, and several blood vessels have been severed." His tones were clipped and precise, and suggested a life of privilege. He dug in his field kit for a strong-jawed instrument. He clamped it onto the larger protrusion of metal.

"This won't hurt a bit," he said quietly. "Until I pull it out." He pulled, one fast, fluid motion. There was a flash of intense pain, a momentary sensation of razor-sharp metal slicing away from flesh, and then he saw the blade held in front of his eyes, still speckled with drops of dark maroon blood.

"A souvenir for you, young specialist. Handle it carefully. You may want to mount this in your quarters, a reminder of staring down the grim spectre of mortality." He took out an anti-infection spray, and began dousing the wound with it.

"May I see that?" asked Honeywell. Skinner handed it to him and proceeded to bandage Alkema's dripping appendage. Honeywell examined it. It was a simple piece of metal, three-sided, with claw-like curved blades at each point. Personal shielding should be sufficient against it.

The Marine who had chased the assailant appeared at the edge of the field. He carried what looked like a long bundle of rags. "I have him."

Keeler and Honeywell crossed to him. Alkema began following his leader, but was held back by Skinner, until his hand was finished being bandaged.

The Marine laid his package on the ground, gently. "I tackled him and gave him a stun with my buzznucks." He said, referring to the electrical shock pads built into the palms of his Marine Landing Gear gloves.

The figure that was laid on the ground was thin, not the coveted liveness of youth, but the gauntness of prolonged deprivation, skin stretched tight over the bones of his face and revealing far too much of the definition of the boy's skull. None of them had ever seen anyone so emaciated. He was dressed in layers of rags, tattered and thickly encrusted with the moist, sticky brown dirt of the field. His body was clearly human, beneath its own coating of mud, but his arms and legs were as thin as sticks and the bones of his ribs strained against the skin of his chest like tent poles.

"It's just a kid," Keeler said.

"Did you find any weapons?" Honeywell asked.

"He dropped these," the Marine, a tall, crew-cut young Sapphirean named Everything, answered. He displayed a small leather bag and a device that seemed half-slingshot half crossbow. Honeywell took and examined them. The bag contained more projectiles like the ones Alkema and Dallas had taken. He fitted one into the launcher and fired it into the field, where it cleanly clipped a fairly thick branch from one of the shrubs.

"Impressive," said Honeywell, handing the weapon back to Keeler.

"In the Name of the Lady!" Skinner exclaimed, fresh from bandaging Alkema. "This child is malnourished! You there..." he pointed to Everything. "Bring me a nutrition kit and a sonic scrubber. Chop-chop!"

## Eden – The Farside

“... and this is our ship.”

Winter had come back to the Aves Kate. The temperature outside had, according to the ship’s instruments, leveled off at thirty-five degrees below zero. The entire ship was coated with frost, which had formed elegant wave-like patterns across the canopy of the command deck. The main hatch had opened with a crackle of falling ice chips and a blast of warm air and light from inside.

“I have never seen anything like this,” Winter told him, running her fingers appreciatively across the back of a passenger seat, gazing at the control panel in front of it. “Your artisans must be superb.”

*Artisans?* Redfire thought. That was an interesting way to describe them, although not the word the shipbuilding robots would have used. “They are indeed.”

“And this ship travels among the stars?”

“It could, but it would take a very long time,” Redfire responded. “We use it mostly to travel from our mother ship to the surface of planets.”

“Mother...ship?”

“The village in space I told you about.” He swung one of the flight couches around to her. “Have a seat. Would you like something warm to drink?”

“It is comfortable in here. I have no need of warm drink.”

“Speaking of the mother ship, I better check in.” Redfire touched the surface of the Communication Panel. “This is Team Gamma hailing *Pegasus*. Please respond *Pegasus*.”

A young blonde woman with warm blue eyes appeared. “Communications Specialist Kelleher responding. Good to hear from you, Commander. Please report.”

“We have made contact with the inhabitants of the planet’s dark side. They are human, and do not appear to be hostile. We will proceed to learn what we can. There is no need for additional support presently.”

*“Pegasus acknowledges.”*

“Please transmit the most recent status reports on Alpha and Beta teams.”

“Transmitting now.”

Redfire transferred the reports to the side-viewer. He distrusted neural link downloads, preferring to read and analyze information for himself. Winter studied his face. “What’s wrong?”

“We have two other teams on your world at present. One of them has ceased contact with the ship. Our leader is with them.”

“They are on the Nearside?”

“Za, a place called... Altama Prefecture. Do you know of it?”

“Only that it is one of the Inner Prefectures.” Redfire thought he detected a note of disdain in her expression.

“Is that bad?”

“We have a saying on our world. Those who live in the Outer Prefectures, they work. Those who live in the Middle Prefectures, they trade. Those who live in the Inner Prefectures, they take. They are not to be trusted. They are like serpents, always circling one another, looking for a weakness, waiting for the chance to strike. I’d sooner lay down in a nest of cave-vipers than in any noble house of the Inner Prefectures.”

*I will have to remember that expression if Commander Lear ever invites me for dinner,* Redfire thought. "Will they be in any danger?"

She hesitated. "Are they well-armed?"

"The same as us."

"They may be safe then."

"That isn't very reassuring."

She looked around. "You have weapons unlike any we have here. This ship can travel to any place on my world. Imagine a fleet of such ships and an army with weapons like yours. One Scion could rule the whole of my world. That is why the Scions will want to possess your... your ships, your weapons, your knowledge."

"Who are the Scions?"

"They rule the citadels of the Inner Prefectures. They are very greedy and devious. Your team should exercise great care around them."

The rest of the team was settling into seats, recording their observations over steaming mugs of hot chocolate, tea, coffee, cava, and breck. Redfire turned back to the communications panel. "*Pegasus*, what is the current status of Team Alpha?"

"Most of the team has left the settlement near their landing site and are proceeding northward toward a larger settlement. They are traveling by ground. At last reports, all life signs for all parties were showing normal."

"Is there a landing team standing by to assist Team Alpha?"

"Affirmative, lieutenant."

"On hot-ready?"

"Affirmative."

Redfire nodded. "Very well. Keep me informed." He turned to Ironhorse. "What is our status? How quickly could we be airborne if we had to be?"

Ironhorse leaned over a workstation. A holographic display of the ship came up. "Heavy icing on the wings and fuselage." He activated a control, and a blue pulse zipped along the length of the ship. On the outside, ice and frost broke free and avalanched to the ground. "Clear. We could reach the Alpha team in thirty-five minutes... if we had to."

Redfire nodded. "Good. Keep the ship on hot stand-by."

"You show much concern, much caring, for your comrades."

"We have to watch out for each other."

"That is what I have been trying to teach the people here." She sighed. "They do not care to learn. Most of the new arrivals have lost everything and everyone dear to them. Those that have been here for a long time are concerned only with their own survival."

She yawned and stretched, curling up into a ball on one of the couches. "Forgive me," she said. "Usually, we try to sleep through the coldest of the cold, as well as the worst of the heat."

"Would you like to rest? We have an area of the ship set aside for that purpose." Redfire yawned, and checked his chronometer. He was nearing his normal rest period as well.

"No," she said firmly. His dark eyes sought into him, burned down into him. "Not yet. I want to hear more of your world, your ship, your people. I wish to hear everything you can tell me."

Redfire looked back at her, and he could feel the eyes of the entire crew fixing onto him. He lay that feeling aside and focused on her. She had a magnetic quality that went beyond her

obvious intellect, curiosity, and... he could not avoid admitting it... her raw physical attractiveness, a quality he felt drawing him into her.

He gently extracted his hand from between hers. "Where shall I begin?"

## Eden – The Dayside

Technician Dallas was wrapped in a stabilization bandage from chest to waist, that would immobilize her while microscopic robot knitters repaired her injuries. She was strapped in turn to a carrying frame, which would be carried on the back of Technician Stonecipher. In Eden's scant gravity, she weighed little

Her assailant lay on a blanket in the middle of the trail. He had been washed with a sonic scrubber, revealing him to be a fairly ordinary human boy, whose hair, now less-tangled, hung around a face with a strong jawline, high cheekbones, and a buttonish, upturned nose. His rags had been replaced with nondescript blue-gray spare clothing from one of the landing packs. The contents of three emergency nutri-packs had been absorbed into his veins as he lay unconscious. The boy looked almost healthful, or, at least, less-starved.

"He is stable," reported Medical Technician Skinner.

"He's lucky I didn't break any of his bones when I tackled him," said Marine Specialist Everything.

"Luck!" Skinner huffed dismissively. "He may be thin, but his bones are strong as iron bars, and flexible, too. You also can not discount the fact that the effect of your greater mass was diminished by the Liliputian gravitational field of this worldlet."

Keeler looked at the boy lying at his feet, and then to the unconscious form of Nellen Dallas. Then, he looked back to the boy, then, back to Dallas. It was as though something was amiss, and he could not decide for himself what it was.

"Strange, strange planet," he muttered.

"Captain," Everything asked. "What should we do with the boy?"

Keeler looked down at the child and said quietly "Wake him."

Marine Specialist Everything gestured with his left hand, releasing the stun field that had dampened the boy's nervous system.

The boy's eyes snapped open. Like a startled cat, he leapt into a standing position and then retreated into a crouch as he surveyed the people surrounding him, his eyes darting from Keeler, to Skinner, to Everything, to Honeywell. Everything raised his hands defensively. Before Keeler could wave him down, the boy darted through the gap between him and Skinner and rushed toward the field.

"Don't pursue him!" Keeler yelled.

The clothing the landing team had provided hung off the boy's skinny body like sails off the mast of a schooner. As he charged down the rocky slope at the side of the roadway, he stumbled and fell, his legs lost in the huge pants. He scrambled to recover himself, finally pausing at the very edge of the field, where he fixed the party with a hateful stare.

"Now what?" Crowe asked.

Keeler reached into his pack, and took out the boy's launcher and projectiles.

For a tense moment, the boy's gaze met Keeler's eye-to-eye. Keeler sent a suggestion, unsure whether it would register. The boy looked down to Keeler's hands, and saw him holding out his weapons. A quizzical expression crossed his face, just for a moment. He then

hissed at the party one last time and disappeared into the field. He ran through the stalks and stands of the strange crop, silent as a whisper, and then was gone.

"Do you want me to pursue him," asked Everything.

Keeler shook his head. "I think not." He handed the weapons to Alkema. "Place these in one of the artifact packs. I should like to examine them later."

"Do you think there are any more like him out there?" Alkema asked.

"Kids with sharp rocks and slingshots?" Keeler answered. "Probably."

"Why did he attack us, do you think?"

Keeler gazed over the field. "I think he was just protecting the crop. So long as we stay out of the fields, they probably will not harm us."

Alkema looked toward the field where the boy had disappeared. He raised his arm "He's stopped, forty-four meters into the field."

"Protecting his crop," Keeler repeated. "It is probably his job. I imagine this was a terrifying encounter for him. A party of strangely dressed beings walking down the path, with weird, shiny, pointy weapons. He attacked us out of duty, which says a lot about him."

Skinner disagreed. "I believe he was simply too terrified to think clearly, that is, if he can think clearly."

"What do you mean, sir?" Alkema asked.

"Did you look into his eyes, young specialist?" Skinner asked. "I did. I'm not certain he functions on the same level of rationality as we do."

"You mean... he's not as intelligent?"

"What I saw in his eyes was not the spark of human intellect, but the primal, deranged fear of a captured animal."

Keeler mulled over the point. "Maybe it was just the terror of his capture, but if he has been trained to act as a human watchdog, he may function at that level full-time."

"That's terrible," said Everything.

"Indeed. If that's the case, and if there are others like him, we must be on our guard." Keeler sighed, and took a long drink from his canteen. "On the other hand, if there is reason inside him, he may consider the fact that while we had him, disarmed and at our mercy, we did him no harm, and, in fact, cleansed, clothed, and fed him."

Alkema did not understand. "So, what will he do with that?"

"Most likely, nothing at all. On the other hand, there is always a chance..."

Alkema waited for Keeler to finish, but he didn't. "A chance of what?"

"A chance that a guard dog you treat with kindness will turn around and bite you in the ass. If he's smart, and if there are others like him. They might make our journey a lot more interesting than we would like it to be."

## **Eden – The Dayside – Landing Team Gamma**

"I am Lieutenant Scientist Magnus Morgan from the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. We have come to study your world. We come from another star system which, like yours, was settled and populated by humans from the planet Earth, millennia ago."

Science Lieutenant Morgan was a blandly handsome man in his late twenties, with fine features, soft brown hair, and an unfortunate habit of letting his jaw hang open after he

finished speaking. His semi-wife, Kayliegh Driver, found this adorable. He and his crew were addressing an assembly of, perhaps, eighteen or so villagers who inhabited a small settlement on a great plain, cut through by a broad shallow river that emerged from breaks to the southwest. The villagers themselves were uniformly human in appearance, only a few freaks among them. All of them were dressed in rough brown tunics and leggings.

They had chosen a larger settlement for their touchdown, above a large and deep faultline that divided the planet longitudinally, stretching from pole-to-pole and under the sea like a great seam. It was chosen as a site of geological interest, the longest, straightest, smoothest fault-line their geologists had ever seen, like the cleft of a peach on a planetary scale. The nearby settlement consisted of a few broad streets dividing a few dozen largish buildings built of stone foundations topped with weathered brown and black wood, some of it planed, but logs for the most part. The landing party was surprised at how little heed anyone had paid to their arrival. In the background, people continued to shop, to haggle, to barter, and work. Village life seemed to be proceeding as normal.

"Is the translation matrix working," Morgan asked of his Marine specialist, Billy Keen, a blond-haired man with a puggish nose, short and thick-bodied like a wrestler.

"They appear to understand you, lieutenant. They just don't seem very interested."

As if in confirmation, a young woman and a girl shrugged and wandered away. For a moment, it appeared the whole crowd might lose interest and simply wander off toward some more interesting distraction. Then, an angry man, middle-aged and wiry, gray of beard and white of hair, came running down the street, shouting out.

"Uh-oh," said Billy Keen. He gestured for the other specialists to be alert.

The villager came at them, shouting gibberish for a second, then the Lingotron kicked in. "You're on my beans!" He was shouting. "You killed my bean crop."

"Excuse me," said Morgan.

"You done landed on my bean crop!" The villager shrieked at him.

Morgan and the rest of the party, except the Marines, looked down at the tangle of vines at their feet.

"I am so sorry, sir. I am sure we can compensate you for any ..."

"You're an ass!" the man shouted. The villagers seemed amused, now that something interesting had happened.

"We can replace your crop. The key thing is, we wanted your permission..."

"You're trampling all over them. Get out of there, you ass! All of you, you're asses!"

"Namgubed!" came a voice. They looked up the street to see another man approaching, with an entourage of two other men. He was dressed no differently from the others, and there was nothing in his face to differentiate him from the others, a very ordinary man just on the approach to middle age. There was a commanding aspect to his bearing, however, that stood him apart.

The accuser turned and faced him, and his mood seemed to mellow, slightly.

"Those aren't even your beans," the man said. Turning to Morgan, he continued. "Hail and well met, visitors. I am Doctor Cuthbertson. I am the headman of this village." He looked from Morgan to Billy. "Which of you is the headman?"

"I guess I am," Morgan told him.

With the arrival of this man, interest in the newcomers had increased. There were now nearly sixty people gathered nearby, or watching from a safe distance.



"What brings you to the village of Blackwood?"

"We have come from another star system. Our mission here is scientific. There is an interesting geological structure... a fault... running underneath this village. We also thought this would be a good place for collecting plant and animal samples."

"You might begin with some of those beans," the man observed. He was staring at their ships.

"With your consent, of course. If our presence is not welcome, we will leave."

The man looked stunned for a moment, then broke into a large smile and almost collapsed with laughter. Sensing the cue, the rest of the crowd laughed also.

The man noted the look of confusion in Morgan's eyes and determined he could not understand their amusement. "Obviously, you have the power to do your mission, regardless of our wishes, why not simply proceed."

"It isn't our way."

This was met with another raucous outbreak of hilarity. Morgan smiled awkwardly again. "If you ask us to leave, we will go."

"Would you," the man asked, a slight glint manifesting itself in the corner of his eye. "What if we were to ask some ... boon, of you, in return for our hospitality?"

"A boon?"

"We are a very simple people. These lands lie far away from the wealthy and civilized parts of the planet. We survive by selling them our crops and what goods as we can build. We enjoy a reputation as craftsmen and artisans. I can tell, by looking at your ship, that you have some very good tools that we might study."

"Our technology may be above your comprehension."

"Then, I will have struck a poor bargain. However, that is my choice. If you will allow us to examine your instrumentality in close detail, we will extend to you every hospitality."

Morgan thought it over. They could have asked for much more, for food, for blankets, for medical aid, but all they wanted was to examine technology they could not possibly understand. Still, who was he to argue, he would throw in the blankets and medicine as a bonus. "You have a deal, Doctor Cuthbertson."

## Chapter Nine

### Pegasus – Amenities Nexus Alpha

High above Eden, far away from the landing teams, cocooned warmly against the cold night of space and without a single person who wanted to kill them, Matthew Driver and Eliza Jane Change shared a table in one of *Pegasus's* Dining Courts. Behind dishes of soup and fresh-baked bread, they listened politely as Eddie recounted his meeting with Executive Commander Lear.

"I can't slagging believe you sicced Ex. Cmdr. Lear on me," he wailed at Change. "It's like throwing a baby into a pack of starving land-sharks."

"You brought it all on yourself, lack-wit," she hissed back at him, with surprising vigor. "Besides, Ex. Cmdr. Lear doesn't travel in packs."

They shared a collective shudder at the image of ravenous Ex. Cmdr. Lears charging through the ship's corridors, mauling everyone they came across, leaving behind neat piles of bones, picked clean and arranged alphabetically.

Eddie continued talking as he chewed his marshmallow bread, which threatened to burst the corners of his jaws with each word. "You just can't talk to Ex. Cmdr. Lear like she was a regular person you could rationalize and equalize an agreement with. I was all ready to give her my inner self, explain how it would be better off for the ship, in general, if an assol like me, who doesn't like his work and isn't that good at it just eases off. I also had a few observations to make about Cisco and how he would never admit it, but he has a great desire to work in effluent monitoring. Before I can even open my mouth she's all over me like a guild attack cyberdog."

Eliza raised an eyebrow. She had seen the Guild's robotic guard dogs, called Trauma Hounds, in action. They were generally two meters tall, armor-plated beasts with stainless titanium claws and teeth and laser-beam eyes. They were primarily used to seek and dig out victims from mining collapses, but they were entirely capable of ripping a person to shreds in less time than it took to say, "rip a person to shreds." While she knew of no occasion when they had actually been used in that capacity, their mere appearance was enough to reduce a victim to submission. She had never made a mental comparison to Ex. Cmdr. Lear before, but found it metaphorically apt.

Eddie continued. "First she tells me, if I don't get back to work, she's gonna let me starve to death. I mean, can you imagine? Or, she'll put me in slaggin' deep freeze and shoot me off the launch rails like a slagging Nemesis missile."

"Harsh," said Change, dipping a thick piece of spice-bread into a steaming tomato and pumpkin bisque.

"Harsh? I practically have my own reproductive organs spit-roasted and served to me on a slaggin' hors d'oeuvre tray ... and all you can say is harsh?"

"Ex. Cmdr. Lear has a reputation for being severe when she thinks it necessary." Matthew put in, almost casually.

Eddie looked at him like he had understaedd her by a factor of thousands. "Maybe you didn't hear me. I said she wanted to slagging *send me back to Sapphire in an icebox!*"

"She really said that?" Matthew seemed to be taking this well.

Eddie swore it was true. "May Krishna judge me for a hundred lifetimes."

"It's really not so bad." Eliza Jane broke in. "It's just like falling asleep. Some people in the Mining Guild go into stasis willingly, sometimes for a hundred years or more. Most of them come out okay."

"And are they happy to get out and find out their friends and everything they ever knew was gone?"

"Actually, that's what most of them want when they go into stasis in the first place. I worked with an ice-chipper once who froze himself for seventy-eight years because he couldn't stand his brother-in-law. So, he put himself in stasis with instructions not to let him out until the other man died. It worked out great. He was thawed out in time for the funeral, went back to work the next day. The only side effect was damage to the muscles in his eyes. He could only stare straight forward for the rest of his life. He had to move his head to track things. It was off-putting, but you got used to it after a while."

"Also you don't dream," Matthew added.

"Oh, you do dream," Eliza said.

"You can't dream, your neural synapses are completely inactive."

"Neg, neg, you do dream. I went into stasis once when a transport had a one-hundred per cent systems failure in the Sapphirean out-system. I distinctly remember dreaming that I was at Wolf Station watching them while they dispatched search and rescue parties. I even dreamt I saw the SAR ships in space. Then, I was with the SAR party when they found our ship. I remember seeing myself under glass. I remember the boarding party coming on the ship, in their big bulky spacesuits with the Wolf Station Insignia."

"Was that the *Edward Brisbane* transit ship?" Matthew asked.

"It was."

"My Squadron commander was at Wolf Station when that mission was carried out. You were extremely lucky. When they towed the transit ship back to the station, they discovered that the ship's navigational system had malfunctioned. You were very off-course. The SAR Team never should have found you."

"I had the sense in my dream that somehow I was leading them back to the ship."

"You must have overheard them talking when you came out of stasis, because from everything I've been taught, you can't dream in stasis."

Eddie slapped the table-top and pointed. "Hey! What about me? I'm the one who's going to starve or freeze. It's like the slugging Dark Ages on this hell-ship."

"I already told you, those aren't your only options. You could also return to the Flight Deck and do the duty for which you were trained," Driver proposed again.

Eddie Roebuck compared the idea of going back to work for Cisco and the idea of being flash-frozen and sent back to Sapphire. It was tough to decide which one had less appeal. "Neg, there must be some other way. What the slag are these?"

He held up a small basket of dark blue and black chips speckled with white and brown. "Charlotte chips," Matthew explained. "Fourteen grains and five kinds of seeds. I practically grew up on these things."

Eddie stared him down. "That explains so amazingly much about you."

"What about re-training?" Eliza Jane suggested. "Instead of going back to the flight deck, you could be retrained to serve in another part of the ship."

"It's all the same. The way this ship is structured, most of the people are like you guys, okay. You've got the super-high-end-glamour-boy jobs. At the scut end, all the real menial

work is done by mechs like my pal Pucky here..." His small pet robot bowed obediently. "And in between, they wanted some guys who weren't particularly good at anything just to hang around and do whatever the mechs wouldn't do. There's just no other job on the ship I can do that I'd wanna do."

"Why don't you join Flight Core, Matthew can teach you to become a pilot." Eliza suggested, in a sly tone of voice.

Matthew almost blew Charlotte chips all over them. Fortunately, Eddie was already shooting down the idea. "Okay, so imagine I go down to medical bay and have my sphincter tightened up by a factor of fourteen, and then I became a wing-jockey. Then, I'd have to leave the ship and risk my life flying off to some weird planet. Been there. Done that. Acquired the tau-shirt. Forget about it.

"Case in point, the planet below us right now. I mean, have you dukes checked out any of the surface reports? I mean they've got flying human wombats down there. They've got half-people half-cloven-hoofed wood-sprite people, they're got half women, half-horses down there. It's like slagging God's lost planet of misfit toys."

Matthew paused, a charlotte chip half-way to his mouth, and winced, "Ow!"

"What?"

"I think I actually caught one your sub-references." Matthew's face relaxed into a reflective expression. "Those flying men are kind of interesting. I guess the low-gravity makes it easier, but you would still need a kind of high-strength, low-weight skeletal structure. Also, how do they work those wings to get the right power-to-weight ratio? And how do they handle thermals?"

"Last duty shift, I reviewed a report from Gamma landing team," said Change. "They've done some geophysical soundings and discovered huge deposits of carborundum, molybdenum, titanium, platinum, gold, and silver throughout the crust. The soundings have also detected some kind of alloy running forty to one-hundred kilometers below the surface in what looks like a latticework. They don't think it's a random geophysical formation. Geological Survey is testing to see if the structure is planet-wide. If it is, it could mean the whole world was terra-formed, on a scale we can't even contemplate."

Matthew was impressed. "That would mean the ancient Commonwealth had even more advanced technology than we ever imagined."

Eddie began waving his arms. "Yo! Conversation, I'm over here. Come back to me. I'm the one who's gonna be frozen and shot off like a slagging Guilder funeral."

Eliza Jane's expression darkened, perhaps in remembrance of some funeral she had witnessed. Matthew might have caught it, but not Eddie. Eddie had given up looking for himself in Eliza Jane's eyes a long time before. Whatever the thought, she quickly put it aside and made a suggestion. "What about Recreational Services?"

Eddie brightened a little. "Recreational Services?"

"This ship has thirty personnel whose primary function is to oversee the development of recreational activities, including sports, games, relaxation, youth and personal development activities."

"You mean some assol thought the people on this ship were gonna need someone to tell them how to spend their spare time? That's gotta be a Republicker idea."

"That's right, Ministry of Recreation, Sport, and Games, Directive 100025-900A."

Eddie nodded. "Had to be. Nobody from Sapphire ever needed to be taught how to have a good time."

"So, what about it, Eddie?"

"You mean like teaching people to chill out and stuff. I think I could do that."

"Even if you can't, you are entitled to one hundred duty-shifts for re-training. During that time, you maintain the same privileges of any functional member of this crew."

Eddie seemed genuinely excited. "That ... sounds too incredibly amazing to be true. If there's spots like that on this ship, why haven't I heard about them."

"There aren't any current openings, but the ship's senior officer can approve a reassignment and training, if she feels it is appropriate."

Eddie turned, somewhat surprised. "You would do this for me?"

"Right."

"But you wouldn't do the other thing?"

"Right."

Eddie looked perplexed. "I don't get it."

"This is different."

"How is it different?"

She fixed him with a look, final and fatal. "It just is."

## **Pegasus – Main Bridge/Primary Command**

Lt. Cmdr. Windjammer was a high-spirited, athletic redhead from the southern extremities of Carpentaria, section chief of *Pegasus's* Operations Core. Windjammer was known for sometimes bringing his nine-year-old son, Jacob, along for his duty-shifts. Tonight, however, he appeared alone at the back of the bridge, and made a leisurely course toward the center of PC-1. He made a quick stop at each of the control stations — Environment, Operations, Engineering, Surface Operations, Geological Survey, Communications, Tactical, and Navigation — before finally reaching Lt. Colgate at the Commander station. "Lt. Colgate, it is now 2755 hours, and I stand ready to relieve you."

"2757 hours," Lt. Colgate corrected him. Lt. Felicity Colgate was a Section Chief in Environmental Operations. She was only a little younger than Goneril Lear, one of her many protégés. She handed him the small datapad that contained the latest reports.

Windjammer smiled, either because to deny her any satisfaction or because her anal retention genuinely amused him. He reviewed the status report. "Secondary fusion cell 19Alpha Off-line again. Ojala must be going nuts." He scrolled down. "Alpha Party hasn't reported in over six hours. Odd that."

"Unusual, but there is an explanation." Colgate took the pad from him and replayed the last transmission made by Captain Keeler's party from the surface. Keeler stood in front of most of the landing crew.

"*Pegasus*, this is ... you better know me by now. We are about to undertake a long journey overland to ... what we believe may be both a center of government and possibly the site of the original Colonial settlement, perhaps even historical records. We estimate the journey should take anywhere from fifty-six to eighty-four hours. At the request of the indigenous governments, we are suspending communication until we reach our destination. We will contact you at that time. Keeler party out."

Windjammer studied the transmission intently. He was one of those big people, who seemed to fill more space than their actual physical dimensions occupied. Part of it was

charisma, self-confidence, the aura of an officer who loved his job and played at the top of the heap. Part of it was less tangible. "It doesn't look right," he said.

"Caliph identified it as genuine. Both embedded identification codes were present."

Windjammer crossed to Landing Party Alpha's monitoring station. He put one of his large hands on the shoulder of the specialist on duty. "Status of Alpha Landing Party."

A holographic image of the planet was brought up, with the position of the landing party displayed. "They appear to be following some kind of trail," the woman specialist explained. "An ancient roadbed. It leads from the city where they landed to another, somewhat larger city to the north."

"No contact though."

"There has been no contact for the last six hours, nineteen minutes."

"We have continued to monitor them," Colgate put in.

Windjammer studied the timeline reports that accompanied the display. He reached out and touched one report. "Marine Specialist Dallas seems to be injured."

Colgate explained. "We detected those injuries, but no weapons fire. They are consistent with some kind of misadventure, possibly a fall or an interaction with native plant or animal life. We offered medical assistance, but there was no response from the party."

"Under their self-imposed comm black-out, there wouldn't be."

"I am sure they would make contact if the injury was anything they could not handle," Colgate said, in a flinty voice. "Medical Technician Skinner is one of the best in the crew, and fully capable of handling level two injuries."

"Level two," Windjammer put on a thoughtful expression. "Repeat the last transmission from Alpha again."

The transmission was put up side-by-side with the ground monitoring. "Four people are no longer with the main group."

"It's in the report. The flight crews from the two Aves remained behind in the population center nearest the landing site." Colgate looked irritated, her tone was defensive.

Windjammer could not put words to it, but something seemed wrong. It could have been nothing more than the tone of Captain Keeler's voice, or the look in his eye, or some aspect of his posture. What exactly it meant, he didn't know, but he had a landing party on the surface, and it was his duty to do everything he could to protect them.

"You're relieved, lieutenant, have a good night's rest." He left Colgate and, slapping the report pad in his hand, made a quick pacing circle of the command center, returning back to Landing Team Alpha's monitoring station.

He leaned over the station and asked the specialist on duty, "Listen, do we still have those little butterfly probes. Size of a girl's hand, wings like water, almost impossible to spot. Come apart in your hand if you grab them. You know the ones I'm talking about."

"Zeta-Class microprobes," she answered him.

He snapped his fingers. "Za, have some prepared for deployment, optical, sonic, ultrasonic and electromagnetic sensors. Launch a Class Five probe and disperse some of them near the Alpha Party and the rest near the flight crews. Put the class five probe and three more into orbits that will give us constant telemetry."

"Said and done, Lt. Commander."

"I want to see what's going down there, at the best resolution I can get." He touched the communications pad. "Lt. Commander Windjammer to Landing Bay Alpha."

"Landing Bay Alpha, here Commander."

"Confirm two Aves at hot-ready for possible Evac of Landing Team Alpha."

"Landing Bay confirms Aves *Hector* and *Victor* on hot stand-by."

"Let's hope they are not necessary. Command out." He turned to the specialist at the monitoring station. "Let me know when those probes are ready to go."

He made another quick check of the bridge before heading for the command chair. As he passed toward it, a largish tiger-gray and white cat scuttled across his path. He reached down and scooped it up in his arms. "Hey fella, what are you doing in here?"

"Reporting for duty," Queequeg answered, a little irritably. "I know I'm late. My feet don't quite reach the pedals on the transport pods."

"Excuse me?"

"Check the duty roster Tac. Cmdr. Redfire set-up. I monitor the gamma landing team, every other fourth watch. If you put me down, I can get to my station and start doing that."

Windjammer pondered this for a moment or two, then put the cat down. "All right then. Carry on."

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

Many decks below and many sections over, Trajan Lear felt someone gently slapping his face. "Wake up!"

The voice was unfamiliar, harsh, and authoritative. It seemed to come from some place far away, although the sting on his cheek said otherwise. Trajan was surprised how difficult it was to come to consciousness. He had always been a light sleeper, seldom dreaming, tending to hover just below the surface of consciousness. The slightest perturbation broke the spell and he would be fully aware. This, though, was like coming trying to come out from under anesthesia.

The slaps came harder. "Time to wake up kid. Hoy!"

"Stop it," Trajan was able to say, though his tongue felt thick and dry. He raised his arms to protect his face, and as he did so, felt something cold, hard, and metallic press against his temple. A jolt, like lightning, flashed across his brain. His eyes opened suddenly, painfully hard, and when they did, the sudden light stung them like saltwater.

The figure that had been leaning over him pulled away. "Hoy, you're awake now. Good."

Trajan squinted at him, but he could not resolve the man beyond a vague dark form, that blurred at the edges.

"You are experiencing the after-effects of neuro-synaptic dampening field. I needed to put you in a state of deep unconsciousness." The words seemed to be drifting by him, and he had to make an effort to catch them as they passed.

Trajan pulled himself further into awareness. He knew that he was no longer in the locker where he had laid himself down to sleep. He also felt a raw, sore type of pain radiating outward from the back of his jaw where it connected to the rest of his skull. He reached up with his hand and touched it tenderly. When he looked at his fingertips, he was surprised to see a tiny smear of blood.

"Looking for this," asked the man in the room with him, still a shadow-shape at the edge of his vision, refusing to come into focus. A hand approached from the dark, blurry form, and held out a small glass globe with a thin sliver of metal inside.

"Your identification implant, a tiny sliver of silicon alloy micro-coded with your identity, your medical history, your permanent educational record, and all the other minutiae of your life. Every Republicker has one. Supposedly, this Sliver protects you should you ever become lost or injured. It makes your life very convenient. You can walk into any shop on your homeworld, or on this ship, choose any merchandise or service you require, and have it instantaneously charged to your family account. It also allows any Ministry on Republic to track you, should they secure Judicial Permission, of course.

"I had to perform a little surgery to remove it. You will feel a dull throbbing pain for several days, but I am sure the skilled hands of Dr. Reagan will ensure that no permanent scars will mar your smooth and childish features."

Trajan squinted hard, trying to make out his surroundings. He seemed to be in a small chamber, unlike any he had ever seen on the ship. It looked to be barely two meters wide and three long. Its walls were dark, and might have been black, or likely dark gray, but without a trace of instrumentation.

"Do you have anything to say, my young friend? Say something, please, I would be comforted to know I haven't inflicted any permanent damage on you."

"Is this part of my Passage?" Trajan asked.

The man laughed, a spontaneous, dismissive snorting kind of laugh. "It's always about you isn't it? The Executive Commander's spoiled young whelp. A boyling whose future was sealed by accident of birth, never denied any privilege, never gone wanting for anything you desired, and never been really afraid in your entire life. If only all of us could be born nearly so lucky as you."

"Is this part of my Passage?" Trajan repeated testily.

The voice answered sharply. "This is not about you. It's time you grew up, little nosewipe. Not everything in the universe revolves around you. Not everything that happens on this ship, or any where else, happens just for the sake of Trajan Johannes Lear, named first for his uncle, who was Minister of Planetary Defense for eighteen years, second, for his grandfather, who served as a speaker in the Legislature and the Council, and finally for his mother, Executive Officer of the New Commonwealth Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*."

Trajan's vision became clearer. He could see the man standing before him, a tall lean figure, dressed in a black jumpsuit not unlike what Guilder crew wore on the inter-stellar long-ships. A black mask covered his face, only a space for his mouth and the bottom of his chin.

Trajan tried to lunge for the man, but as he did his left arm jerked him back so violently he almost felt like it was going to be ripped from its socket. He looked down to see that nearly half of his forearm was encased in a gray plastic sleeve of some kind.

"Proximity restraint," the man explained. "Standard issue for the ship's Watch, although rarely used in the peaceable kingdom that is the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. In this case, it is set to hold you within one meter of that post." He indicated a structural support that ran across the center of the bulkhead. "I bet that arm is really throbbing now."

That was the truth. Pain throbbed through Trajan's arm in time with each beat of his pulse. The idea that this was part of the Passage ritual was rapidly receding. Trajan had never heard of anything like this happening to anyone else in the course of their passages.

"There's water within reach, a blanket if you get cold. I would have left you some food, but you're on a fast if I recall the ritual properly."

Trajan pulled the arm away from the bulkhead, slowly this time. He could feel the force-field increasing gradually, holding him to the wall. He turned to his captor. "Let me out of here."

The man shook his head. "Not now. Let me assure you, I have much better ways to use my time than tying up spoiled brats, and much better company to spend it with as well. The sooner I am rid of you, the better, I have every intention of returning to you your freedom, but only in exchange for my own."

His captor had no noticeable pattern of speech, no distinctly Sapphirean or Republicker accent. Was he a member of the crew? Was he someone who knew the family, and knew about his intended route of Passage. "Let me go. I have to complete my Passage. People will be looking for me."

"That is true, but they won't find you. They haven't found me, and I've been down here quite a long time."

Could it be true? There had always been rumors of stowaways on board *Pegasus*. His mother had always dismissed the



rumors as the height of foolishness. The ship was equipped with extensive sensor webs to detect any unwanted presence. Besides, a stowaway would have no access to food or water.

"Who are you?" Trajan asked, his voice not quaking, but barely so.

"A non-egocentric question. We have made progress already. All you need to know is that I am someone who needs something that you have, that you take for granted, something you may not even want, but something essential to my existence."

Trajan's response was not a plea, but a surly concession. "Whatever it is, you can have it. Just let me go."

"If only it were so simple. I know you would give me what I want, if only to save your sorry young life. Unfortunately, you don't have the power to give me what I need."

"Then why have you...?" Trajan stumbled over the end. *Why did you bring me here? Why did you abduct me? What are you going to do with me?* It came out a senseless garble.

"Because when our two paths happened to cross ... preparation met opportunity. We're going to work a very simple exchange. I am going to send word to your mother, the most powerful woman on this ship, that if she wishes to see her son again, she will provide me with what I want."

Trajan looked at him in disbelief.

"I comprehend that expression," said the man. "Part of you is wondering who... what kind of man would make such a brazen proposal. The other of part of you is wondering how your mother will respond. Her duty will not allow her to give in to my demands, and she will probably turn the full strength of this ship's security forces against me, both the regulars and the secret forces that live down here, in the UnderDecks, among my people. She need not respond today, nor tomorrow, nor the day after. I know these UnderDecks well, and I have been here a long time. I could drag this game out a very long time."

"What do you want?" Trajan sounded to sound strong, but it came out almost as a whine, and he was surprised at that, startled to find out how afraid he really was.

"I want no more than I deserve, and nothing that isn't possessed by thousands of people on this ship. I want my freedom, nothing more, and nothing less."

*My people... secret forces ... my freedom ... to which I am entitled.* This man was absolutely serious, and dubiously sane, and the contrast of his tone to his rhetoric was making Trajan's bones twitch with apprehension.

"Let me go," Trajan said, pleading now.

"Don't be afraid. I have no reason to harm you, but there are many means at my disposal to make sure a very long time passes before anyone from the topside sees you again."

The light in the cell extinguished on some onseen signal from the man and Trajan found himself in sudden and complete darkness. "I have to go away for a while. While you wait for me to return, perhaps you can derive some spiritual benefit from this exercise. Think hard about the difference between you want your friends to remember you and the way they actually will. You may wish to reconsider how you have been living your life until now."

Trajan tried to move slowly away from the support beam, but the proximity cuff kept him from moving more than a meter in any direction.

"You won't be going anywhere, not with that restraint. Screaming for help would also be a waste of time. This chamber is thoroughly soundproofed, not to mention isolated. There's no one around to hear you, and they couldn't hear you if there were."

The man was suddenly outlined in the dim light of a passageway as a hatch opened behind him. "I shall be back soon. Pray nothing happens to me. I am the only one on this entire ship who even knows where you are."

## Chapter Ten

### Eden – The Farside

A crackle of sonic lighting shivered across the wings and fuselage of the Aves *Kate* and *Neville*, disintegrating another coating of ice and snow as the long night of Eden's darker side grew deeper and colder. From inside, Tactical Cmdr. Redfire checked a temperature reading and saw that the temperature outside was now 57 degrees below zero. Although the interior of the ship was warm, and the outside accustomed to the cold-as-cold-can-get temperatures of deep space, Redfire could not help but shiver.

"Any ponds nearby?" he asked Winter, who was curled up on one of the couches like an angora cat. "Maybe we can get in a little four-on-four hockey action before sun-up?"

"What is this 'hockey?' of which you speak?"

"It's a game we play on my world. It's played on frozen ice, with two teams, some long-handled sticks, and a small disk. We play it in the cold season on my planet."

"Oh, I thought it might be a form of sex."

Redfire paused. "Well, there are some who think all sport is a metaphor for..."

"I was making a joke, Tactical Commander Redfire." She smiled at him and he was suddenly reminded, to his embarrassment, of the one simple fact of biology that, although never scientifically proven, had enabled the human race to survive and flourish: Men get progressively dumber as their sexual arousal increases.

She graciously picked up the slack for him. "How cold does it get on your world?"

"Not as cold as this. One of our continents... our second-largest land-mass, lies in an arctic region of the planet. There are settlements along the coastline, and some plants and animals live there naturally, but most of the interior is permanently covered with ice and glaciers. It's called Boreala."

"Boreala?" she repeated slowly.

"An ancient Earth-word. We think it means 'the northern land.'"

"Is that where you come from... the northern land?"

"Neg, I grew up in one of the temperate zones, near a settlement called 'Grandfield.' It's a part of Graceland – a Territory in our planet's largest continent, called Alpha."

"Strange names. Alpha. Boreala. What do they mean?"

"Alpha is the first letter of our alphabet. When the planet was first mapped, they designated the four land masses by their size. Alpha was the largest, then Beta, Gamma, and Delta. Beta became Boreala, Gamma became Carpentaria, and Delta kept its name. Alpha was so big, it was divided further into the Territories of Arcadia, Graceland, Panrovia, Jutland, and Oz, but the whole continent is still called Alpha."

"Oz, I like the sound of that. What does it mean. What does it mean?"

Redfire shook his head. "No one knows for sure. It might have been named for some place on Earth, or it might have been someone's name. It might have been a mis-interpretation of a map coordinate ... like O-2."

"What is Graceland like?"

"Graceland produces most of our world's food crops. That's how most of the land surrounding Grandfield is used. In every direction, for hundreds of kilometers, there's nothing but field after field of grains and vegetables, and orchards filled with fruit trees."

"... but you had no slaves to assist in the harvest," she interrupted. "How did you harvest the food?"

"We mainly used auto-mechs, with humans over-seeing them."

"Auto-mechs?"

"Machines designed to replace human effort ... 'robots' is another word I have heard describing them."

Winter was not interested in the automechs. Redfire sat on the couch next to her and pulled up a large datapad. "Download imagery. Grandfield settlement, Graceland Province, Alpha continent, Sapphire. Late September."

An image appeared. There was Grandfield, in the center, a semi-circle of white, tan and gold buildings marking the city center. Houses and shops gave way to suburbs and finally to farms. The fields stretched off into the horizon, blazing gold and amber as their crops reach the peak of ripeness.

Winter was almost cooing. "It does look not like so bad a place to live."

"It was good in a lot of ways... but not very exciting."

She pointed to a circular design near the center of one of the fields, where the crop had been pressed in. "What does this design signify? A prayer to a Harvest Goddess?"

Redfire had to examine the pad and magnify the spot to see what she meant. When he did, a memory of something he had once known as commonplace, so common, he had never thought about it before, but had not thought about in years, came rushing back to his head.

"I remember those. Sometimes the ships... the shuttles and trainers, from the Defense Academy would fly overhead, and swoop too close to the ground. When they did, their gravity engines created strange designs in the middle of our fields. Usually circles and shapes. You could not see them well walking in them; they had to be seen from the sky to be appreciated. The agriculturists hated them, because it destroyed a part of the crop, but when I was a kid, I thought they were mysterious and beautiful."

"You did not belong there," she said suddenly, with a voice of revelation.

Redfire considered this. "I guess you could think of it that way. If I had stayed in Grandfield, I could not have become what I wanted to be ... an artist... an explorer."

"A liberator," she reminded him.

"That was not what I intended to become... not in a literal sense."

"Was it hard for you to leave this place?" she waved the pad near to his face.

"A little... I missed my family."

She shook her head. "Was it *hard* for you? Did they try to stop you? Did they try and keep you in your place?"

It took Redfire a moment to change gears, to figure out what she meant. For her, leaving had not been a matter of taking the next MagLev train to New Cleveland and moving into a residence hall with a freshling roommate who was a modern dance student who seldom showered but insisted on bathing her breasts in the light of the full moons. He did not have to sneak away from Grandfield in the dead of night with armed men and hounds on his tail.

"Did you have to make the Crossing, or were you born in Sanctuary?" he asked her.

"I made the Crossing. The Scion's chasers were with us from the moment we set out. We were a party of nineteen, and only eleven made it to the sea. We were beaten back twice by storms, and once our boat overturned. We lost three more by the time we reached the Far Shore, and by the time we reached the Interior, there were only five of us."

Her eyes had grown sad. Redfire found himself saying, "It must have taken a lot of courage to leave behind your home and come to this harsh place." His mouth must have been on auto-pilot, as he ought to have known better than to say something so vacuous.

She pounced toward him, and he jumped back reflectively. "If I held a knife to your throat and you pushed it away, would that also be courage?"

"I'm sorry," he said. A Marine, lounging in the back of the ship spared Redfire a glance to make sure he was in no real danger, then returned to the holo-active entertainment matrix he was playing.

"It was almost a long time ago, when I had half my years. I lived in one of the Middle Prefectures, and my lord was a grower of sickle-seed and ryazan."

She could tell by his expression he did not know what those things were. "They are plants that we make into an intoxicating beverage, we flavor it with apples, corn, or blood."

"Animal blood?"

"If the hunt was good. There was a great revolt among the slaves in the Prefecture, led by an outsider whom the Scion called 'Cain.' He convinced the slaves to rebel, armed them. They set fires to their lords' houses and burned their crops. Stupid, when you think about it. The slaves would have starved if there was no food. Still, they managed to destroy nearly half of the holdings in the Prefecture, and the lords and masters were frightened. They used every man and every weapon they could to put down the rebellion."

"They must have succeeded," Redfire said.

She shook her head. "They did not. Seizing opportunity amidst chaos, the three bordering prefectures invaded and conquered all of the lands the slaves had held... more than half of Prefecture Sato. They simply put everyone to death, lord, master, and slave alike. Cain was captured by the Scion Chosun. They hung him and his followers by their arms in the Courtyard of his Third Palace, cut holes in the sides of their bodies and drew out their organs one by one, intestines, kidneys, bladder, liver, stomach and fed them to dogs. It is said Cain himself had two hearts, and two livers.

"My lord's estate had survived the slave rebellion, but, now he found himself bordered on two sides by hostile forces, and part of a weakened Prefecture that could not protect him. He was a weak man, besides, unstable and alone. He could not bear the thought of capture, and he was too cowardly to put up a fight he knew he would lose. He drowned himself in one of the distilling tanks."

"And you were free?"

"Slaves may be slaves, but slaves are not all stupid. If our own Scion's forces came, they would assume we had drowned our lord in the course of the rebellion. We would suffer the same fate as Cain and his followers. If the invading forces came we would be captured, possibly put to death. No one wanted to wait and see which fate awaited us.

"It was raining the night we set out... and cold. The wind cut through us like the teeth of an animal, but it was also a blessing. The rain hid our scent from the chasers, and the cold kept everyone else inside. Later, there was fog, and by the time it had lifted, we were far from our holding, and moving through lands where the slaves had burned everything. The forces from the other prefectures were spread too thin to capture us."

Redfire reached to the panel next to her, and called up a map of the planet's surface. "Can you show me where you were?"

She indicated one of the larger continents of the northern hemisphere. "If I recall properly, Sato Prefecture lay along this river, bounded by the hills of Chosun."

"That is a very long trek." Redfire traced it across the planet to their current location. Three thousand kilometers and change, easily.

"The Crossing was hard. We followed the slave route, taking shelter where we found it, eating what the land provided."

"Is that the way most slaves make their way to the Farside?"

"The weather is less extreme in the Polar Regions, so that is where most slaves attempt to make their escapes." Her finger traced a line from the northernmost island-continent through a chain of islands to the coves and fjords of the Farside hemisphere. "Our guides meet them here at one of the outposts and lead them into the interior."

"And for their reward, they get to eke a life on the knife's edge of survival."

"For a few of us, it is preferable. Don't think our lives are without joy. We celebrate our liberation with every rising sun."

"Does anyone every try to take you back?"

"We are safe here, in the interior. These storms may make our lives very difficult, but they also protect us. If slaves are taken back to their prefectures, they must be put to death. It is not worth the expense. However, recaptured slaves can be sold to new masters, in other parts of the Dayside."

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Redfire felt a need to say something, to break the silence. Again, his mouth was ahead of him, working on its own. "I admire you."

Winter put her hand on top of his, and it was very very warm. He could feel her blood pulsing through it. So powerful. So strong. Charged, as though magnetic. "

He looked into her eyes and for a second, he thought he saw a flash at the back of them, the way cat's eyes glow in the dark.

A thought intruded into his mind, like a visitor who enters the house without knocking, lays on the couch and drinks all the beer. The thought was of his skin touching hers, her warmth spreading to him, and the two of them wrapped in furs, entwined on the floor. He shook it off.

Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse stood at the bottom of the command deck lift, expressionless, and wondering when Redfire would get around to mentioning his wife.

## **Eden – The Dayside**

Keeler's party was traversing a part of the roadway that ran along a line of soft, rounded cliff faces beside a gently flowing river. The fields had gradually become less and less upkept, finally giving way to fallow lands and forest before rising into the hills through which they now traveled.

As light as they were from the flimsy gravitational pull of Eden, most of the journey had felt like a glide, as though their feet barely touched the ground. Still, hours and hours of hiking had weighed on them eventually. The sun was going into eclipse. The effect was to fill the landscape with a cool, diffuse orange light. Shadows grew deeper. It was time to rest.

Keeler was at the head of the party, consulting with Marine Lieutenant Honeywell as they surveyed a clearing. "What do you think?"

Honeywell surveyed it studiously. "Defensible... the trees are far enough apart to shelter us without providing cover..."

"Little malnourished boys with razor-tipped sling-shots." Keeler muttered.

"What's that, Captain?"

"Nothing. You were saying."

"It's a good, defensive position... and we'll have access to the river."

"What about other... facilities?"

"Captain?"

"I think we should establish an area where the crew can tend to their bodily functions. I think it would be best if we all evacuated our bowels in the same locality, that way, people won't have to watch where they step so much."

"I have one of the technicians digging a large hole between the camp and the stream."

"A large hole," Keeler repeated slowly.

"It's not the Wall of God Hotel in Corvallis, Captain."

"Apparently not. Alkema!"

Alkema had been standing behind him through the entire exchange. "Right here, Captain."

"Set-up a hammock for me. Good lad." He crossed over to check with Medical Technician Skinner.

"How is Specialist Dallas?"

"Unconscious, but stable," answered the doctor. "The bleeding has been staunched, her blood pressure is low, but deep inside her breast, her heart is keeping a beat as steady as a Cantonian metronome." He rose. "I will need to construct a healing tent."

Keeler blinked at him. "Okeedokee," he said finally. "Take two technicians and call me after the eclipse."

He excused himself from the company of the doctor and the Marines and strolled through the small clearing. Two of his crew were gathering wood to build a fire. Others cleared brush and checked through the small store of supplies. He pulled a nutrition bar from his pack and munched it, watching his people work.

Nearly half the sun had disappeared into shadow. The land was dimmed, as though in a prolonged twilight. His eyes were poorly adjusted, but he could see the two Marine Specialists standing guard and saw the rest of the party arrayed nearby, lying on their packs for the most part, no one moving. Keeler had never been camping in the wilderness, although it was a popular recreational activity on his planet. He hoped he would be comfortable. He closed his eyes and thought, *as well and goodly tired as I am, I am certain I shall be able to sleep regardless of the quality of the accommodations.*

He felt a shadow falling over him and half opened one eye to see Alkema returning. "Your hammock is ready, Captain."

Keeler nodded. "Well done. Get some rest yourself."

He found his hammock, laid down in it, and closed his eyes. Soon, he fell into his usual meditation ritual of feeling his weight settle into the bedding. However, the feeble gravity of Eden lent him only the weight of a child, and this was not settling in the manner to which he was accustomed. He tried to focus instead upon the slight sway of his hammock in the breeze. After a few minutes of this, and finding himself no closer to unconsciousness than when he started, he gave up, sighed heavily, and rose to a seated position.

The rest of his team were still assembling camp. They went about their tasks in a way that looked leisurely, but Keeler suspected this was more out of thoroughness than laziness.

He lay back in his hammock and stared up once again into the branches of the trees between which it was slung. He found himself staring at small white spots in the branches and

leaves above him. He squinted at them and leaned up to get a better look. They appeared to be a fruit of some kind. Light colored, perhaps white, smaller than apples or apricots.

Keeler reached up to grasp one of them. It proved surprisingly tough to remove from the branch and he guessed they were a long way from ripe. Still, he had never seen anything quite like them before. It felt soft and warm in his hand. Finally, it broke loose from the tree and he held it up to examine it.

When he opened his hand, he was shocked to see a single eyeball staring back at him.

"Yow!" he called out.

In the space of a second, Marine Specialist Everything and young David Alkema were at his side. "Are you all right Captain?"

"Marine, give me your light." The Marine passed him an illuminator. Keeler shined it into the branches.

From the branches hung scores, perhaps hundreds, of eyeballs. They looked like they were glaring at him.

"What is it?"

"A tree with eyeballs, what do you think it is?" the Captain answered. He moved the light toward one of the eye-fruits. Its pupil contracted. He moved the light away and the pupil dilated. He moved the light toward one of the eye-fruits. Its pupil contracted. He moved the light away and the pupil dilated.

"This is fragging weird," said Alkema, completely out of character.

"Agreed." Keeler turned the eye-fruit over in his hand. "Someone get me a specimen bag."

"Are the rest of the trees like this?" Alkema asked.

Everything shined his light around the clearing. There were a few small other trees mixed among the woods with small white spots in the branches, not many, but a few.

Keeler put his hands on his hips and gave a weak smile. "Why didn't I ever think of this for all those Halloween parties at the compound? Too late now, I guess."

"Do you still want to lie in your hammock, Captain?"

"Purgatory, neg. Set up a tent for me... *away* from the trees."

"You got it, Captain," Alkema said, a little wearily.

Keeler clapped his young aide on the shoulder. "You are too good to me. I think I'll go and stretch out above the riverbank until the tent is ready."

Honeywell intervened. "Captain, I would recommend you not leave camp without an escort. Buttercup!"

*Buttercup?* Keeler thought.

One of the Marine Guards came up to them. Keeler and Alkema's jaws dropped. Marine Buttercup was a giant, over two and a half meters in height, and his left shoulder was separated from his right by a stretch of hard muscle long enough to hold a road race on.

"By the Unknowable," Keeler gasped.

"Buttercup was a starting linebacker for the Armpit Avengers before being selected for the Odyssey Project," Honeywell explained.

Keeler exclaimed. "He looks like he should have smaller Marines orbiting around him!"

Buttercup said nothing, but scratched his cheek with a hand the size of a dinner plate.

"Buttercup, escort the Captain..."

"Neg, I will be all right," Keeler insisted. "Stay close and guard the camp."

"Captain?" Everything and Alkema called out, but he was already walking away from them, head down.

What kind of world was this? Since we've landed, we've been captured by bird-men, lion-men, bull-men, dragon-men, four-armed musclemen. We have been marched down a golden road, attacked by a starving puppy of a boy with a slingshot and as I lay me down to sleep, the trees have eyes.

This was not natural. It could not possible have been. Someone had to have built this planet, designed its inhabitants and from this flawed design had sprung all its insanity. God did not make faulty worlds, or creatures. That took people.

He found a smooth warm spot overlooking the stream. The water was black, with foamy white rivulets where it ran against and around the large chunky rocks that lined its shores. It was almost a kilometer wide, and surely must have been the river they had seen from orbit. From here, in the failing light, it almost looked like one of the grayscale holo-fictions-noir that were periodically fashionable on his homeworld.

He was lost in such thoughts when he felt the knife-blade against the back of his neck. "I was wondering when you'd show up," he said.

## **Eden – Citadel Altama**

"On Your knees," ordered the Low Guardsman, pressing Blade Toto to the ground.

As soon as the Misuke (the primary planet around which Eden revolved) had obscured all of the sun, the four pilots had been busted from their cells and taken out of the palace under the cover of darkness. Low guardsmen had loaded them into a large carriage with black-curtained windows, drawn by a team of matched centaurs. Any thoughts of resistance were banished at the first sight of the cross-bows and spears leveled at their chests.

The four of them, bound at the wrists, sat in twos facing each other as the carriage bounced down the road of dirt and stone that led out of the citadel. They had been blindfolded, but had a sense that they were returning to the field where their ships had landed.

"What are they going to do to us?" the pilot of the *Yorick* asked, his voice shaking, although mostly from the horrible roads.

"This isn't good," answered the back-up pilot from *Yorick*.

"They never should have left us alone," said the back-up pilot from *Zilla*.

"What are they going to do to us?" the pilot of the *Yorick* repeated.

Blade Toto said nothing, figuring there was nothing to be said, and they would find out soon enough anyway.

The carriage made a sharp turn onto an even worse surface that exacerbated the bouncing and lurching until it nearly threw them to the floor. The carriage stopped abruptly, sending the back-up pilot from *Yorick* face-first into Blade Toto's lap, but they were too scared to be embarrassed by this.

They heard shouting outside, guessing there was a party of guardsmen, not very many. They heard the doors open and felt themselves jerked into the open by scaly, claw-tipped hands.

Their blindfolds were never removed. The four of them were shoved to the ground and forced to kneel in a cross formation, head-to-head, while low guardsmen positioned cross-bows at the backs of their heads.



*"Damb,"* Blade Toto thought as the cold metal blade pressed into the nape of his neck and he heard the sound of the bolt drawing back. *"I really didn't think I was gonna die this way."*

## Chapter Eleven

### *Pegasus - Quicksilver Angels Mission Briefing Room*

The mission briefing rooms for each of *Pegasus's* four flight groups looked out through large windows over the primary flight deck. Eliza Jane Change found it both amusing and annoying that these pilots had such attachments to their vehicles that they needed to look over them at every opportunity. Flt. Lt. Matthew Driver kept glancing at *Prudence* from the corner of his eye.

Flt. Captain Stephen Hicksville welcomed them, a blandly handsome Republicer with sandy brown hair and thick blond skin at odds with his trim build. He greeted them, took a seat, and touched the pad in front of his place at the polished wood table.

"We have been reviewing the telemetry from the scout mission the two of you completed on your last duty-cycle. We placed a probe in orbit upon your return and have since mapped the entire moon. Enlarge sector 047." The viewer focused in on the icy surface of the outer moon. A rough-edged metallic object was wedged into the ice, like a bullet shot into a frozen lake.

Hicksville went on. "The object is 2700 meters long, approximately 400 meters wide, and 1400 meters in height all at its longest points. Its mass is estimated at 11.2 million metric tons."

"It looks like wreckage," Matthew countered. "Is it a ship?"

"Neg, since the first probe, we've sent a total of three probe missions into the area. They have doing some neutrino profiling, quantum resonance scans, all that stuff. It's solid all the way through. No conduits, no propulsion systems, no habitable spaces."

Eliza Jane's assessment was more experienced. "The decks could have compressed on impact. I have seen it happen before. If the ship came in fast enough, it would fuse into a solid chunk of matter."

"We really don't know yet, but it looks like the composition is fairly consistent as deeply as our sensors can penetrate it. Review, if you will, the composition of the object ... molybdenum, carborundum, cobalt, gold..."

Eliza Jane did not wait for the punchline. She interpreted the data herself. "The same as the crust of the colony."

"Exactly. Geological survey believes the colony was extensively terra-formed. They think it might be a piece of the crust that somehow ended up impacted on an outer moon. It could be an artifact from the colonial era. If so, it might provide insight into the terra-forming technology used by the ancients." Hicksville did not seem enthused by the prospect, merely providing a detached mission briefing.

"A team of engineers and space recovery experts is being assembled to take off and study the artifact. If it's structurally sound, we plan to extract it, and have it towed back to the ship for analysis." Behind him was a live data-feed from the surface of the moon, where an Aves had set down with an exploratory team. Some engineers and scientists in heavy space ear were walking across the surface of the object.

Eliza Jane Change remained skeptical. "It's almost as big as this ship. You should leave it in place and study it there?"

"Both options were evaluated, and the study teams agreed, if it can be extracted, they can

study it more thoroughly by bringing it into space.” He gestured toward the data-feed. “Aves *Una* is on the surface right now, with a team to evaluate its stability for extraction and transport. Another team is evaluating the best means of extracting it. They favor slicing it out of the ice with lasers and then pulling it free with tractor beams.”

“That sounds pretty straightforward,” Matthew agreed.

“Once the object is in orbit, a single Aves should be able to tow it into a high orbit with the Eden moon. The orbital calculations have already been made.”

Eliza Jane gave both of them the eye of the skunk-beast. *Amateurs!* If they were lucky, it would only break apart into several thousand small fragments without destroying any ships in the process..

“Lt. Change, you were in the Mining Guild prior to your selection to the Odyssey Project,” Hicksville went on.

“Before I was *assigned* to the Odyssey Project,” she corrected him.

Hicksville shared a glance with Matthew, who returned a look that said, *Sore spot. Do not touch.* “You’re experienced in navigating in deep space, around asteroids and so forth?”

“It was my job for about twenty years.”

“We’ve been developing a plan for extracting and retrieving the object. I’d like you to lead the mission, with Matthew as shipmaster. There is some complexity involved. You should run through a few simulations before the mission... both of you.”

Matthew sent a specific portion of the flight profile for display on a holo-board behind Hicks. “Pulling the object out of the gravity well seems to be the major challenge. We will focus on that.”

Hicks drew his attention to a large spattering of rocks and ice orbiting far above the planet’s surface. “There is a debris field in the planet’s outer orbital margin. It isn’t very dense, but it could be problematic.”

Eliza Jane squinted at it. That was an unusual formation, like a debris field caused by the collision of two asteroids, or an asteroid and a comet. Could its presence so closed to the object be a coincidence? She wondered if anyone was studying it.

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

A hooded figure made his way along Deck Zero. The deck was a demarcation line, of sorts. Above it were the ship’s superstructure, the command tower, the living quarters, the botany bays, the vivaria, and the other “mission areas” of the ship. Designed for human occupation, those decks were warm, spacious, and comfortable. Below Deck Zero were the ship’s gravity engines, stores, fusion reactors, cargo holds, artifactories, waste processing facilities, and other “functional areas,” largely automated, intended for no more than occasional inspections by the ship’s active-duty-crew.

Deck zero itself contained little. It was primary a utility deck, a place where the conduits connecting the above and below of the ship passed through, readily available for inspection and maintenance. It was also made of the thickest and sturdiest alloy to be found anywhere on the ship, representing, as it did, the primary load-bearing structure.

The figure came to a transport pod station, and waited for a car to come. He stood still, hands clasped behind his back, occasionally surveying his surroundings purposefully. He knew the car would come, and precisely on the hour, it did.

The hatch of the gray-white transport pod, shaped rather like an egg with a flattened bottom, slid open, and a large figure extracted himself out of it. He wore a uniform of black and silver armor, with no distinguishing insignia of any kind on it. On his head was a large, dark, helmet. An only slightly less imposing figure, similarly attired, extracted himself from the opposite hatch.

The man who had been waiting paid the second figure no further attention. He waited until the first man had closed the hatch before stepping out of the shadows. "Centurion Bellisarius, will you do me the honor of sharing a word with me?"

Bellisarius turned, he was a heavy man, much-invested in the kind of identity-altering, age-defying medical procedures for which the Centurion Order was notorious. His heavy jaw dropped slowly, and a leaden word fell out, "You!"

"Friend Bellisarius, I have helped you on more than one occasion, and I have asked for nothing in return..."

"And you never fail to remind me of this whenever I can not avoid the crossing of our paths."

"The legendary Centurion wit," the hooded man deadpanned. Slowly, he withdrew the hood from his head. He still wore the face-mask he had worn in the presence of Trajan Lear. "I have brought you something." He tossed something at the Centurion, who reflexively deployed his personal shield. The object bounced off of it harmlessly and landed at his feet.

Slowly, keeping an eye on the stranger at all times, he lifted it up. It was a back-pack, the type schoolboys carried their datapads and sealed lunches in. He extended his two hands before him, making an L with both hands and thumbs, and scanned the pack. It was empty.

"What is this?"

"You don't recognize it?"

"Should I?"

"You mean Executive Commander Lear did not invite you to her own son's Valediction Ceremony? How offended you must be. You and she go back so far. Then again, she does try to keep her relationship with the Centurions most discreet."

"Spare me your riddles, Hunter. What is the meaning of this?"

Two cliches in as many sentences, Centurions, he reminded himself, were not known for their creativity. He reduced his statement to simple facts. "The backpack is the property of Ex. Cmdr. Lear's son, who is in my custody somewhere in the bowels of this ship. If you will do a very small favor for me, I will see that he is released unharmed."

Bellisarius raised an arm and moved toward John Hunter. "You better pray that this is a joke."

"This is as serious as I get."

"If you harm that boy in any way, I will personally see to it that you are beaten to a bloody pulp and discharged from an airlock."

"I know, deep down, you really mean that, too. The boy will not be harmed, unless of course, something prevents me from returning to the place where he is being held. But if his stay in our world were prolonged, I think our good Executive Commander would be subjected to needless stress, not to mention embarrassing questions about her son's absence."

"What do you want?"

"Good man. We're on the same frequency now. I want an identity Sliver."

"You're mad."

John Hunter paused thoughtfully. "You're not the first to make that observation. Tell me, good Centurion, how many people inhabit the UnderDecks?"

"Somewhere between one hundred fifty-three and one hundred and seventy-six," Bellisarius answered.

"And of any of us try to penetrate the ship's upper decks, the sensor grid will detect us and we will be captured, frozen, and put off at the next supply drop. You Centurions, however, are free to move back and forth, just as you move between your assumed identities among the ship's crew and your true function as Centurions, loyal to Republic."

"You desire that same privilege."

"It would ... improve my situation markedly. Get me the Sliver. It is to be an uninitialized, uncoded Centurion ID Sliver, as virgin as you think your daughter is."

"A Sliver by itself won't get you onto the UpperDecks," Bellisarius told him.

"Then there should be no harm in delivering one to me. I have no further demands. Deliver me one Sliver, and I will release the boy as soon as I verify its authenticity."

"I have a better idea," said Bellisarius. "Give me Executive Commander Lear's son, and I will permit you to continue breathing."

"Catch," said John Hunter. He lobbed a tiny object through the air, which Centurion Bellisarius caught neatly. "The Sliver I want will bear a striking resemblance to that one. I suggest you verify the identity and authenticity of the Sliver before we meet again. Signal me when you have the Sliver. You'll receive more instructions then."

Suddenly, the deck went black. All light drained from the scene. Bellisarius moved instinctively in the direction where his adversary had been standing and found, to no surprise at all, that no one was there when he reached it.

The darkness cleared in streaks and wipes before evaporating entirely. In the deck was the empty shell of a shadow grenade. Centurion-issue, as if to remind him that John Hunter was capable of pulling off anything he put his mind to.

The Minor Centurion addressed Bellisarius. "Was that him?"

"It was indeed," Bellisarius answered. "There are perhaps a score of Hardcore Isolationists hiding down here who would gladly destroy this ship and kill themselves in the process. That man is more dangerous than any of them."

### **Pegasus – Executive Commander Lear's Suite**

Bellisarius, now dressed in the more ordinary uniform of ship's security, delivered the message to Executive Commander Lear.

She had been in the midst of her vision strengthening exercises, alone in her chambers. Augustus was at the Vivaria and Marcus was playing soccer. He handed her the Sliver, and she had turned it over and over again in her palm. "He cut open my son's jaw and took this out."

The actual extraction probably required only a small slit of a few millimeters in length. Bellisarius did not let the thought of correcting her even enter his mind. "The Sliver corresponds precisely with your son's implant, and there is residual DNA on its surface. We were able to make a positive identification: 100% certainty."

Lear set the Sliver down next to her son's backpack. "And this John Hunter is ransoming my son for a Centurion identity Sliver." Sparks were practically chipping through her teeth.

"That is his one and only demand."

"An uninitialized, untraceable identity Sliver," she repeated. "So, he can blend in among the crew, freely use our resources, pass back and forth between here and the UnderDecks at will."

Bellisarius stood absolutely still.

"It doesn't make sense," Lear snarled. "Even with an ID Sliver, we would find him."

"He's a very resourceful man," Bellisarius offered.

"Apparently, more resourceful than the finest Centurions Republic would spare me."

"It is most likely that acquiring the Sliver is only the first part of his plan. He is clever enough to know that he would be detected if he leaves the UnderDecks?"

"I can not allow that." Duty, as always, burned brightest even in the midst of rage.

Despite knowing she would choose her duty, Bellisarius was relieved to hear her say it. If she had given in, his next duty with regard to her would have been exceedingly unpleasant.

"I await your command," he said.

"Can we track him using the sensors in the UnderDecks. Could we find my son using the sensors in the UnderDecks."

"The denizens of those areas have found away to evade detection. They are somehow able to make themselves undetectable to the instruments we have place below decks. We don't know whether it is through alteration to the equipment itself..."

"...or through changes to the electro-magnetic signatures of their bodies. I read the report concerning the girls we put into stasis last month." Her voice caught for a moment. If there was meta-surgical alteration involved, would those in the Underdecks alter her son as well? "How many people do we have in the Underdecks?"

"Fifty-One Centurions." There had been fifty-two at launch, so the number was not without portent.

"Not enough. I told them this ship was too dambled big." She pulled up some files and, strictly against orders, slipped into vision augmenters. "I can't alert the ship's regular security until Trajan is overdue for his return. That's still a day and a half from now."

"We could simulate a distress call from the lower decks, that would give us a pretext in which to send down security."

"Prepare a plan for doing that, but do not implement it until I have had time to review it and consider the repercussions. In the meantime, have your forces sweep the UnderDecks, use automechs, Trauma Hounds ... anything you need, but be discreet."

She did not have to tell him to be discreet.

"Confine and interrogate any of the undocumented people in the UnderDecks you encounter. I give you absolute discretion."

"We will do as you order, executive commander."

"You will find my son!"

Bellisarius went back a long way with Goneril Lear. He knew things about her not even her husband knew. In all that time, he had never seen her with such a fury burning inside. "And, if my son is harmed in any way, you have my sanction to eliminate John Hunter by any means you see fit."

## Chapter Twelve

### Winter – The Farside

After long hours of conversation, Winter had fallen asleep, gradually rolling herself into a tight ball on the landing couch, instinctively tucking her hands and feet toward her belly to conserve heat. When he sensed that she was soundly asleep, Redfire had covered her with a flight jacket. He wondered how long she would stay asleep, expecting that she would probably stay asleep for a very long time, given that people went into a kind of hibernation during the long nights of this world.

The ship had grown quiet. The rest of the landing party were in sleepers, enjoying long, rejuvenating sleep cycles. Redfire supposed he ought to have joined them, but although he felt fatigued, he did not feel like sleeping. Though his skin was tired and his eyes burned faintly, something was pulsing through his blood that would not let him sleep just now. He had felt this way countless times before.

Redfire began walking forward toward the comm station to check in with *Pegasus*, when he was distracted by flickering light outside the ship. He opened a viewport to look outside and was surprised to find that Ironhorse had built a fire forward of one of the wings.

He pulled a parka from a locker and slipped into it. Upon exiting the main hatch, the biting cold cut him like a knife. "The portable heaters are far more efficient," he called out to Ironhorse.

Ironhorse did not turn away from the flames. "But a fire is more appropriate, and it is good for the soul."

The air was strangely still. The cold and darkness of this, which some called 'the deep night' when the dayside was in eclipse, was so complete as to freeze and silence all activity, like a great cloak flung over the hemisphere. Redfire moved toward the fire, heard his boots crunching against the cold, cold ground.

Ironhorse stood solemnly, his face aglow with the light of the fire. There was something unspeakably primal and ancient about the scene, a human warming himself before a fire in the heart of a cold, dark night. Something in the atmosphere was lending a fluorescent green tint to the spattering edges of the flames.

"You couldn't sleep either?" Redfire asked.

"I have already slept and awakened. When I went to the sleeper, you were in deep conversation with the woman. When I awakened, you were still in conversation in her, but much quieter and much closer to her than when I had left."

"You make it sound ... inappropriate," Redfire said.

"You are already thinking of bringing her back to the ship."

Redfire suddenly realized that he had been thinking that very thought. "Why do you think that would be a bad idea?"

"I do not know if it is a bad idea," Ironhorse answered, "but I do not think it would be a good one."

"Why not?"

Ironhorse extended a steaming thermos of herbal tea, which Redfire accepted. "Remember that you asked."

Redfire stood beside him, and felt the warmth of the fire upon him. Ironhorse was right, this did feel good for his soul.

"For one thing, there is your wife."

Redfire said nothing for a moment, because the only words he could think of were "It isn't what you think." Not only was that a lame expression, it was also embarrassingly not true enough. "If she wants to leave her world, I can't refuse her that on the basis that my wife would be jealous." He immediately hated himself for saying it. It sounded like something Lear would say. Rationalizations were never uglier than when they came from one's own self.

Ironhorse drove his point home. "She comes from a savage, primitive world. You and I come from worlds that are enlightened and peaceful, yet there are differences between our own peoples as deep as a river gorge. Do you know what the rate of failure is for marriages even between Sapphireans and Republickers? Not to mention, in our normal gravity, it would be hard for her to even get out of bed."

"Ironhorse, no one is talking about marriage here, for truth, I am already married."

"She's warmed your blood, more than this fire, or even a portable fusion heater."

Redfire began to wish he had stayed inside. "That only proves that I'm male. Za, she is beautiful. Beautiful women have always been the downfall... and the saviors... of men."

Ironhorse chuckled and shook his head.

"What?"

"You just keep squirming away from the real question... squirming away from yourself. How do *you* feel about this woman?"

"You want me to admit I'm attracted to her... and I do ... and I am, but I am adult human being. I am the master of my emotions, and my actions." It was more than that, he knew. Something about her was getting to him in a way he could not quite understand.

"That's one side of you, but, you are also an artist, always looking for expression of your inner spirit. Now, your spirit, and her spirit are searching for some kind of connection."

"Oh? You think she's into me?"

Ironhorse gave him an *Oh, please* look. "I am concerned for you, and for what might happen if you let yourself develop an attachment to this woman."

"I appreciate your concern."

"Neg, you don't. You don't understand. Every living being is eventually consumed by its nature. If you possess the warrior's nature, you fall in battle. If there is no battle in which to fall, you will make a battle of your whole life. Poets are consumed by words, artists by creation. Whatever is most important to you, that is the thing you will build your life around, and in the end, it will consume you."

"And Winter?"

Ironhorse drank his tea. The steam from the tea and his breath rose in clouds around his head. "Her nature is that of the wild, and the wild will consume her... and any man who lets her claim him."

Redfire noticed that somehow, when he spoke, his voice seemed somehow more shrill and fragile than he intended, and his words seemed to fall all around him like broken shards of ice, seemed to dissipate into the night. Ironhorse's voice, on the other hand, stayed close to the fire, retaining weight and warmth. Several long quite moments passed before Redfire could think of anything to say.

"What about shamen?" he asked finally.



Ironhorse stared into the fire, as though he saw faces in the flames. "It is our fate to be consumed by our own spirits... and that is not such a bad fate."

Redfire stared into the flames for a few moments longer, so bright and white and full of light they hurt his eyes against the backdrop of the night. After a while, he said, "I have to contact *Pegasus*," and returned to the ship.

## Eden – The Dayside

"I didn't want to do that," Keeler said to the boy lying unconscious at his feet.

He did not go on to say, "but I knew that attempting to communicate with you would be futile. I know you just want your weapons back, but they are in a satchel back in my camp and there is no way I could to explain this to you before you would kill me. Therefore, I think you lying on the ground with, what I hope is, a mild concussion is better than the alternative outcome of me, lying on the ground with a severed spinal cord. That's why I whacked you with my walking stick. By the way, I bet you were surprised that someone as old and heavy as I am could move so swiftly."

He gathered the boy up into his arms. It was light as a bird, and Keeler hoped he had not seriously hurt him. The boy's head lolled against Keeler's neck and reminded him of a time he had found his young nephew, Justice, asleep on the grounds and had carried him into the Main House. He was making his way along the path back to the camp when a shout went up from Marine Specialist Everything.

"Captain, we're under attack!"

Keeler took two more steps, then broke into a run. The minimal gravity let him make Olympic-Grade long jumps covering the few dozen meters of ground in the space of seconds. Alkema was waiting for him at the edge of the camp. "Captain, Praise God, you're not hurt."

"Never mind, what's happening? I mean, report!"

"Some big men with swords just charged the camp."

Keeler passed the boy to Alkema. "Protect him!" he ordered, then raised his walking stick into the air and plunged into the fray.

"Captain!" Alkema called after him. "Captain, don't you'll be..." He then looked down at the bundle Keeler had deposited into his arms. *What the hell is this?*

An unknown number of low guardsmen, four-armed musclemen in horns with armor, wielding swords, had invaded the camp. The Marines were putting up a fierce resistance, unarmed, but not disadvantaged. Their landing suits provided them with almost impenetrable body armor, vision augmentation to turn night into day, and strength augmentation. The planet's gravity was low already, but their added strength gave them the ability to do such things as catch a heavy sword in mid-swing and rip it from the hands of the sword-wielder, as Honeywell had just done when Captain Keeler joined the battle.

If he had still had his pulse rifle or hand cannons, Honeywell probably would have just stunned his attacker, but the rules of engagement had been dictated by the Scion. He turned the sword against the guardsmen and plunged it through his armor plating straight into his heart.

Sensing an attacker behind him, he wheeled about, swinging the sword with him. By the time he caught up with his own action, the decapitated form of a guardsman was falling toward him. He had to leap high in the air to avoid it. He landed on the back of the beast and quickly turned around. His immediate area was clear, but fighting was going on all around

him. He was shocked to see closest at hand, Captain Keeler, fighting off one of the guardsmen with his walking stick.

Keeler wielded the stick – which had suddenly tripled in length – in a long arcing thrust, and swung it at the legs of one of the attacking guardsmen. It struck him in the waist and neatly disconnected his legs from his torso. This was not enough to disable the four-armed man. Although blood was gushing from his wound, he scuttled along the ground like a crab. The Captain swung his walking stick again and brought it straight down, plunging it into the wounded man's back and punching it out through to the front.

Honeywell decided Keeler did not need his help at the moment. He turned to the right and saw Dr. Skinner trying to protect Specialist Dallas from two sword-wielding attackers. He was fending off blows with only his medical kit. Honeywell made a running leap at one of the guardsmen and kicked him hard in the back. The force of the blow sent him headlong into the roots of a tree and crushed his face like a ripened melon. Honeywell threw his sword to Skinner. "Doctor!" he called out.

Skinner caught the sword and brandished hard at his opponent, meeting his blade and sending tiny sparks into the night. "This takes me back," he said as the guardsman made a slash at his eyes that he only barely managed to deflect.

Honeywell swung his sword and struck a glancing blow to the back of the guardsman's neck. The guardsman wielded. Slamming his sword at Skinner, the weaker, he freed one hand and drew a dagger from his belt and swung it into Honeywell's chest. The blade snapped off against Honeywell's breast-plate. Honeywell brought his own sword down against the guardsman's forearm. It penetrated the armor sheathing and bore into the flesh to a depth half as thick as the blade. The guardsman howled, a sound like a screaming bull. He swung out, broadsword gripped in two of his enormous arms, caught Honeywell with the flat side and knocked him over. The guardsman abandoned the doctor and charged on Honeywell. He brought his sword up and smashed it down, aiming to split the Marine's skull. Honeywell rolled and instead the sword slashed into the break between shoulder and upper arm. It did not break through the material, but the blow stung.

Honeywell saw another blow coming and raised his sword to fend it off. The guardsman knocked the sword from his hand. Honeywell scuttled backwards until his back was against a tree. The guardsman swung. Honeywell ducked. The sword connected with the tree and buried itself in the trunk. The guardsman tugged it almost free when Honeywell grabbed its blade and sent a massive charge through his buzz-knucks. It surged through the shaft and shocked the guardsman, who howled again. It was the largest charge Honeywell could deliver, but it stunned the guardsman only a little.

The Marine made the most of the small advantage. He kicked out hard, catching the guardsman in the stomach and sending him backward toward Skinner, who slammed his head with the backside of his sword. The guardsman collapsed to the ground, face first.

"Kill him!" Honeywell yelled.

"I am a healer, I can not kill."

Honeywell grabbed his sword, found a spot between the armor plates on the guardsman's shoulders and plunged deeply. He felt a slight click as the sword severed the guardsman's spinal column. He twisted the sword to make sure the wound was deep.

"There, he'll live."

Keeler and one of the Marines had a guardsman cornered against a large tree. The guardsman was bleeding from a trio of head wounds, one of its four arms was hanging loose

and useless. Every time Keeler thrust out, the beast attempted to grab the staff. The Marine, trying to get in close with his sword was having no better success. The hands of the low guardsmen were articulated like human hands, but covered in a thick bony plating and had become nicked and gouged fending off the blows.

"Captain!" Keeler heard Alkema calling. Keeler spared him a glance, enough to see Alkema holding a rock about twice as large as his head.

"Stand aside!" Alkema yelled.

Keeler and the other Marine dived to other side as Alkema tossed the rock in the air and Marine Buttercup spiked it like a volleyball. The rock smashed hard into the head of the guardsman, knocking him to the ground, mortally wounded.

Keeler and Alkema stared down at the fallen guardsmen. Marine Honeywell raised his sword defensively and looked for more opponents. The battlefield had grown preternaturally silent, the fury of a moment earlier gone away.

"Is that all of them?" Keeler whispered.

As if in answer, a shrieking came from the trees and a great, four-armed shape fell from the branches, directly toward the Captain, sword pointed straight down.

Keeler pivoted, swung his battlestaff, raised the coefficient of force on the far end as high as he dared. The staff connected with the back of the guardsman, reversed his course and sent him into a high, narrow parabola, on a trajectory whose height and rapid descent would reduced him to a mass of broken bones and armor plating upon impact.

The Captain watched the guardsman disappear over the cliff's edge. A wet smack was heard a moment later. "And they say golf was a waste of time."

Honeywell and the other two Marines were frantically scanning the surrounding woods and trail. "Anything?" Honeywell called out.

"Negative."

"I detect no movement, no heat signatures, no life signs."

Honeywell put down his hands. "How many?"

"Counting the one the Captain just took out, ten."

"A nice round number. That's probably all of them."

"All dead and/or disabled."

Honeywell nodded. "Assess our own casualties." He crossed to where Keeler was kneeling over one of the bodies. "Looks like our friend the Scion changed his mind about us."

Alkema lifted up a corner of a Guardsman's tunic. "These creatures aren't wearing the same colors as the ones in his court. Look at the sigil on his breastplate. It's different."

"A different unit, maybe."

"Possibly, or maybe the guardsman of another Scion. We can't know."

"If it is the Scion, we underestimated him."

"And he underestimated us," Keeler said grimly. "He is unlikely to do so again, at least not as badly. We know we'll have to be on our guard from here on in."

"Captain," Alkema asked quietly. He jerked his head toward the recumbent boy, lying on the ground under a pile of landing packs. "What about him? Where did he come from?"

"He tried to kill me a few minutes before all this Hell broke loose."

"Do you think they're together?" Honeywell asked.

Keeler shook his head. "Neg, I think he just came back for his weapons. Why send a

scrawny little kid to take me out when one of those four-armed storm-troopers could do it?"

One of the Marines returned. "Goodyear and Hastings are dead, sir."

"Goodyear and Hastings?"

"Two technicians from *Yorick*," Alkema explained to Keeler.

"They probably died just before the attack. Their throats were slit while they slept. It's a bloody mess over there."

Keeler was enraged. "Death?! On my landing mission! They weren't even armed!"

He looked from one Marine to another, to Alkema, to Skinner, off tending to the wounded in one corner of the camp, wanting to demand that one of them explain this barbarity to him. He came from a world on which violent death was something you heard about most in cautionary tales about humanity's violent past. What kind of monster would steal a life in such a way, would cut short the mortal path, would slice the throats of sleeping innocents and drench the ground in their blood.

He looked around the camp once again. The eyeball trees no longer seemed the most horrible things in it. He looked at where the guardsman had fallen and felt no remorse for them. His anger roared up inside him again like a fire receiving fresh fuel. How dare these monsters come into his camp and kill his people. He wished they had all died more horribly, and the Scion he hoped would burn in the flames of Hell.

It was Alkema who broke the silence, with a tentative voice, asking, "Orders, Captain?"

Keeler allowed himself a deep, steadying breath. "Help Skinner and Bihari tend to the wounded. We can't remain here long, we've got to find a better shelter. Strip these... things, of all the weapons you can find, anything useful."

He paused, bit his lip. "Prepare the bodies of Goodyear and Hastings. We'll bury them here, for now, to protect them from scavengers. We'll come back later and... we'll make sure they receive an honorable ... funeral. Salvage what you can from their supplies."

Alkema nodded, and slowly backed away to carry out his orders. Keeler turned away from the Marines, and crossed to where the boy he had been carrying at the last moment in time when the universe had seemed to make any sort of sense was lying on the ground. Aside from the purple bruise on his temple, he looked remarkably peaceful, a savage angel in repose. Keeler turned and shouted. "Skinner" he called out. "When you get a chance, take a look at our little friend, here."

### **Pegasus – Main Bridge/Primary Command**

"Alpha Landing Party is under attack," reported Specialist Shayne American from her station. The other two landing team monitors, a middle-aged man and a tiger cat, immediately brought the seen of the campsite on their displays.

The images came from the Zeta-class micro-probes hovering in the vicinity. The 3-D resolution was not good, attackers and defenders alike appeared as ghostly-white outlines, but the pitch of the battle was obvious. Alpha landing party were fighting for their lives.

Lt. Windjammer had the duty watch. "Flight Core, stand by to launch Aves for immediate Evac of Alpha landing party. Stand-by for coordinates."

"22 degrees 14 minutes fifty three seconds north latitude by 40 degree 50 minutes eleven seconds east longitude. Grid location 9 by 473," Shane read off.

"Received," Flight Core responded.

"They'll never make it in time," said Queequeg.

Windjammer examined the feed in time to see Keeler strike down a guardsman with some kind of ... the scanners picked up nothing. It was as though the Captain were fighting with an invisible iron bar. "Neg, they won't."

He turned to the full bridge. "Options?"

Queequeg had one. "If we can get within weapons range, we can set the ship's weapons to stun everyone in the area."

American had a better one. "Send down a squadron of Shrieks. On remote pilot, they can get there faster than the Aves can."

Windjammer topped them. "Stand-by to launch Shrieks. Helm, take the ship into firing position. Tactical, set the forward long range cannons for wide-area stun as soon as we get into range. Flight Core, launch Aves when ready."

He called up a monitor to follow the launch in Flight Core, and was surprised to see them standing down from Launch Ready. "Flight Core, status?"

"Command Center, the Launch Order has been countermanded."

"On whose orders?"

"Executive Commander Goneril Lear."

Surprise read on the faces of Windjammer, American, the entire command crew, and the cat. The command officer slammed the comm-link panel. "Lt. Windjammer to Exec. Commander Lear."

Lear appeared on the console next to the Second-in-Command's chair. "I've countermanded your launch order."

"Why?"

"Captain Keeler's last transmission specifically forbade interference from the ship."

"The Landing Party is under attack, commander."

"They are capable of self-defense against this level of assault."

"You have no authority. You were relieved."

"Only of ship functions, I am still have authority over the mission in the absence of Captain Keeler. Landing Party Alpha is on their own, unless the Captain explicitly calls for assistance. His comm-link is still functional, as are those of Marine Lieutenant Honeywell and the rest of the Landing Party. If they call for assistance then, and only then, are you authorized to respond. Am I absolutely clear?"

Windjammer stared at the screen for a moment.

"Am I absolutely clear?" Lear repeated.

"As glass," Windjammer responded, with a tight jaw.

"Lear out." She vanished.

Everyone on the bridge was staring at him. Everyone wanted to see what he would do next. He turned to the primary viewscreen on the bridge, where the battle was displayed almost life-size. The Landing Party, at least, seemed to be getting the better of their opponents. Two of the Marines had a four-armed guardsman pinned against a tree. One beat away at his arms with a sword he had acquired from one of the fallen. This enabled the second to bring his hands together in a rock-hard, slamming clap to the guardsmen's head. He fell limp to the ground.

He turned back to American. "Prepare the Shrieks for launch. Over-ride any lock-outs

from Flight Core. Authorization Windjammer, Shining-Path-eight-four-two."

"That won't over-ride a command lock-out from Lear," American told him, but she turned to her station any way. A moment later she reported, with distinct surprise. "Shriek launchers enabled."

Windjammer's relief was so great he actually felt able to breathe again. Executive Commander Lear had probably only ordered the Aves launch over-ridden and Flight Core, bless their hearts and good sense, had neither told her about the Shrieks nor extended her over-ride to them. He had time to launch one, maybe two flights.

"Launch," he ordered.

There was a woman at Flight Control Station. "Flight One launched."

"Ready a second."

American reported. "Second flight ready."

That was fast. "Launch."

"Flight two launched."

"Shriek launch over-rides engaged," American reported.

"What about second flight?"

"Too late... second flight is clear of the ship."

Lear re-appeared. "Lt. Windjammer. You are disobeying a direct order. Stand down those vehicles or you'll be relieved."

Windjammer held up his hands in a gesture of obsequiousness. "Executive Commander, those vehicles will not interfere with the Landing Party. They are only going to take high-altitude positions above them for observations and for immediate response ... only upon a request from the landing party."

Lear eyed him suspiciously. "I will be monitoring them."

"By all means," Windjammer re-assured her. She vanished.

"Status of Landing Team."

"I think they're going to make it," the Alpha Landing Team monitor said, with only a little hesitation. Queequeg directed one of the probes in closer to the camp, shut down all sensors except for one and maximized its gain. "I am only detecting three active heartbeats among the attackers, and those appear come from unconscious men."

"Two of the landing party are dead," the monitor added.

Every man and woman on the bridge shared in a single emotion: astonishment.

"Confirm that." Windjammer whispered.

"All sensors functioning normally. I detect minor injuries in four other members of the party, and of course, Specialist Dallas."

"Comm. Units?"

"Functioning normally."

*Why don't they call for help?* Windjammer asked himself. He looked around the bridge, his eyes falling on Queequeg. "Cat," he said. "With me." He walked toward the conference room where the Captain met with senior staff. Queequeg followed.

When the door had close behind them, he leaned across the table and fixed the cat at eye level. "You are not an authorized member of the bridge command, correct?"

"You got it, chief."

"Rumor has it you have a lot of talent with systems."

Queequeg flicked his tail. "Rumor greatly underestimates me."

Windjammer almost smiled at that, but the situation was too serious. "Can you make sure I have a back door to those Aves? If the situation gets desperate, I don't want Lear to lock me out again."

"Is that all?" Queequeg asked.

Windjammer stared, suppressed the urge to rub the feline's ears. "For now," he answered. "Carry on."

The cat jumped off the table and trotted through the doors.

Humans, Windjammer reflected, had used genetic engineering and nano-technology to give speech and thought to several animal species ... cats, dogs, apes, even pigs. Only cats had ever really taken to it, though. He wondered why that was.

The comm unit issued an alert. "Lt. Windjammer, come to the bridge. Alpha Landing Party is under attack ... again."

## Chapter Thirteen

### Pegasus – The UnderDecks

Centurion Bellisarius and his lieutenant, Tyro Centurion Constantine, exited the transport pod at the same station where they had had their previous encounter with the renegade, John Hunter. They drew their weapons and inspected the vicinity carefully, but the station was quite deserted.

The platform overlooks a large expanse of the UnderDecks, Bellisarius surveyed the environs. “Minimal sensors, command-only intruder counter-measures, a million square meters of hiding places... it’s as if they were begging for stowaways.”

“Why would anyone want to live down here?” Constantine muttered. He was in his late thirties, young for a centurion, lean, dark-skinned, with a high forehead and deep frown lines between his eyes and around his mouth.

His question had been intended as rhetorical, but a half-distracted Bellisarius answered it anyway. “Insane, desperate people who saw this is as their only chance to be part of ‘The Greatest Journey of All Time.’” He all but spat the Odyssey Project slogan. “Sapphireans, who thought the lottery process was unfair, and the crews should have been determined by merit. Citizens of Republic, who thought the selection process was unfair, and there should have been a lottery. Then, there’s the Isolationists, of course, who would sabotage this ship and the mission, given a chance, but they are few.”

Anger seethed in his tone. He took the presence of these undocumented and unwanted passengers personally. Each and every one of them represented a lapse in the security protocols – a shuttle that had not been properly inspected, a forged ID Sliver that had not been detected, a work detail that had not been sufficiently monitored. In the sixteen years that it had taken to construct Pegasus, fifteen hundred and fifty-three people had been caught trying to smuggle themselves on board. The Mining Guild, who cared for nothing but a quick credit, was known to offer passage to the Odyssey Shipyards. The Sapphireans were inclined, in their libertine manner, to look the other way. Only he and the Centurion Guard stood between Order and Anarchy, so had it been since the founding of the Great Republic.

“This should never have been a civilian mission,” Bellisarius went on. “We should have stuck to the original plan. 1,000 highly trained military personnel on a lean ship. That was the right way to do this... Odyssey Project.”

Constantine saw a shadow approaching them. “Bellisarius... look.” He swiftly activated his body shield and weapons pack.

“That won’t be necessary,” Bellisarius assured him, raising one hand, palm down, signalling his lieutenant to relax.

The figure continued moving forward from the darkness, moving more fluidly than a human would. When he got close, Constantine saw that he had no face, but a mirrored orb for a head. His hands and arms were constructed of the same material, and the rest of him was hidden beneath a Centurion’s cassock.

“An and/oroid,” Constantine said in astonishment.

“Salutations, Centurion 10010010,” Bellisarius.

The and/oroid made a rapid series of hand gestures in the air. Although Constantine was fluent in the secret sign language of the Centurion order and even conversant in the sign language used by and/oroids to interact with humans, he found nothing familiar in the



movements this individual was making.

"Forgive my associate, he is ignorant," Bellisarius said to the and/oroid.

The and/oroid made another gesture.

"Now, there's no excuse to name-calling. We have a job to do."

"I've never heard of an and/oroid Centurion before," Constantine offered by way of explanation, as they stepped together into the gloom.

"Oh, they've been around for a while. How long have you served the Order, Centurion 10010010?"

The centurion held up two fingers on one hand and made a pair of circles with the other one.

"Two hundred years?" Bellisarius commented. "I never would have guessed a day more than 150. You seem as shiny as a new power conduit." He leaned in to Constantine. "They don't normally like working with wet-bags. It would not hurt to flatter him."

### **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

When John Hunter returned to his chamber, Trajan was collapsed in a heap in one corner. Salty rings of red encircled his eyes. His hand, where it emerged from the restraining cuff was also red and raw. Veins were bulging against the smooth skin of that hand. "You shouldn't try to pull away from the pillar. You could injure yourself."

The boy came around slowly, and in a way that made Hunter suspect he had only pretended to be sleeping. "Let me go," Trajan begged. "I won't tell anyone."

"I believe you would tell," John Hunter said, a little softer and gentler than he had been before. "But that's not the reason I will keep you here. I'm not a monster, but I have to weigh your temporary discomfort against my ... freedom. You will have to take this on faith, but the less you know, the better it will be for you, as time goes by. They will want to block your memory of this, when you go back."

"I want to go, now."

"If our mother agrees to my small request, you will be on your way shortly, and this will all seem like a bad dream."

Trajan's lower lip quivered like he was about to argue the point, then gave it up in futility. With his free hand, he made an attempt at wiping the tearstains from his eyes. "Since my Passage is over, why don't you give me some food?"

Hunter shook his head. "Not yet. The purpose of the Passage is to enable you to find your soul. I respect your religion and I will not stand in the way of that. If at the end of three days, I have still not received your ransom, then I shall see if I can find some food for you. Food isn't as easy to come by down here as it is up there."

Hunter sighed, and sat down on a box just outside Trajan's reach. "Besides which, your Passage may not be over. You and I may share many meals together, in the days and months to come."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Trajan shrieked. His voice cracked at the end of it. Whether this was the onset of puberty, or whether he had been screaming and rendered himself hoarse and broken, John Hunter could not be sure.

"Motive and opportunity. I was the motive, you were the opportunity."

Trajan drew himself into a ball against the wall, buried his head in his arms. "Why can't you just answer one fetid direct question with one fetid direct answer?"

"I don't think your mother would approve of your language. All right, let me tell you. I don't want to have to live down here any longer. I need a way out, and you are it."

"It's because of my mom, isn't it?"

"Your mother is the greater part of my problem. Executive Commander Lear is obsessed with rules and order, and has very little common sense. Those of us who are down here might as well be put to work for the good of the ship. Some of us would make fine additions to the crew, most of us would at least give more than we would take. The worst you can say about most of us is that we are too unlucky, or too eccentric. Neither of which ought to be a crime. Neither of which should warrant being put into stasis and sent back to the home worlds for criminal prosecution. Captain Keeler, on the other hand, is a very sensible man. I am sure a few minutes with him would be enough to persuade him into accepting our participation on this mission."

Trajan was confused. "What do you mean by us? Who are these people you keep talking about?"

A smile parted Hunter's mouth, he seemed almost ready to laugh. "That's right. How could you possibly have known. How few of you on the Topside know about us, how very few? You go through your lives, completely unaware there are stowaways on this ship... a few, only, but more than you would think."

"What's a stowaway?"

"Someone who hides on board a ship in order to obtain free passage." He paused, thought about something for a moment, then went on. "There are people who wanted to be on this ship more than anything. A few of them are dangerous, the Isolationists. You owe Vesta a prayer of gratitude that it was me and not they who found you first. Their demands would have been impossible... and they never would have returned you. Most of us, though, are rather decent."

"You hid yourself on this ship... before we launched?" Trajan looked incredulous.

"Almost two years before. When I came on board... oh, the cargo decks were empty, most of the crew areas were unfinished. All the primary systems were in place, but the inhabitation decks were almost as stark as these Underdecks."

"How did you get on board?"

"A bribe here, a theft there, I learned a few tricks in the process." He paused, as though the conversation was beginning to take him places he did not want to go. "That story is not nearly as interesting as the story of my journey to the Republic out-system to meet this great ship, and eventually conceal myself on board her."

Trajan leaned resignedly against the wall at his back. He had the uncomfortable feeling he was going to hear the man's life story. Like any other boy on the cusp of thirteen, his interests did not extend to the autobiographies of didactically-inclined adults.

Hunter began with relish. "To get from the Extraction Zones of the outer Sapphire System to the Odyssey shipyards, I bribed the captain of a refinery ship to take me on board as a Cryo-Hibernation technician."

"So, you came from Sapphire."

"I did, but that does not mean I was born on Sapphire. A refinery ship carries eighty million tons of gas and ore. They have to use star-sails, because Gravity Engines would interfere with the refining process of the chemicals. The magnetic fields generated by ion-drive engines would make the chemicals unstable. As a result, refining ships move very slowly, and it takes them eight or nine months to travel between our two systems. They process the gas and ore en

route. The ships are entirely automated, so the crew goes into Hibernation after we clear the Oort cloud and are revived before we reach the other system to save on resources. However, Guild Regulations require at least three humans remain awake in transit, to run the machinery in the event of an emergency or a massive system failure. Another beast shit Guild job. They know if the ship failed bad enough that the and/oroids couldn't handle it, there sure as hell wouldn't be anything we could do about it, but it keeps the Guild employment rolls up, and so the dues keep pouring in.

"It's the third worst job in the Guild. You're practically alone. You have to patrol one end of the ship to the other three times every seven-hour-shift. You pass by the gas refineries, and they stink of ammonia and acid, the ore refineries bang away like an army of giant hammers, the air gets charged with static electromagnetism that makes your hair stand on end. The smell of oxidized metal and ozone permeates the ship.

"And it's lonely, and it's dark. Just imagine the creepiest, coldest, scariest place you've ever been. Someplace that would make you cry if you had to stay there for even a second longer. Then, imagine being stuck there for nine months. That was my life on the good ship *Madison Gilmore*."

"You said there were three of you."

"Oh, indeed, I had company, if you want to call it that. The other techs had been in the Guild for years. They were hardcore Guilders. They couldn't empty water from a boot if the instructions were on the heel, but they knew how to invoke every manner of grievance procedure to avoid having to do what little actual work was required on the ship.

"Furthermore, they knew each other from a long time back, and I was the outsider, not that I cared. The older one was named Ozzie Aziz. He had a metal jaw, and metal teeth on the lower part. Something about the Guild, a physical disfigurement is like a badge of honor. If they lose a limb, they don't grow new limbs or get realistic cyber-organic body components, they get prosthetics, the more mechanical and artificial they look the better.

"Haphaestus Hathaway had no visible disfigurement. He was taller than Aziz, but just as fat, and he wore a beard.

"Like yours."

"Many Guilders reactivate the dormant hair follicles of the face."

"It's repulsive."

"Indeed, but it helps keep the face protected in the event of explosive decompression."

"So why did you do it?"

John Hunter paused. "For reasons I would not expect you to understand."

"Sixty-seven Sapphirean standard days into the transit, the proximity sensors malfunctioned. Some glitch in the system caused them to sound a proximity warning at random intervals, once every few days for about twenty seconds, as though another ship had intruded on our space. We tried to shut them down, but the Guild Health and Safety Computer refused to let us over-ride. I got used to the alarms after a while, but they made Aziz and Hathaway nervous. Every time they went off, they spat on the deck and crossed themselves."

"They spat on the deck and what?"

Hunter demonstrated the gesture. "A prayer gesture from one of the ancient faiths, although these men were not so much religious as superstitious. I paid it little mind, myself. I did my duty-shift every twenty-one hours, then repaired to my quarters. I had my readers to keep me company. Aziz once asked me if I had any coitus simulation programs. When I told

him I did not, he expressed surprise and disappointment. Offered me access to any one of his. He had hundreds, and had used every one to the point of tedium."

He was surprised to see a faint blush come to Trajan's cheeks. Of course, to any good, clean-minded boy from one of the primary families of Republic, coitus simulators were not a decent topic of conversation. "I explained to him that I was more interested in lore," Hunter continued quickly. "The Mining Guilders are a superstitious lot, and over the centuries, have produced a surprisingly rich body of literature, one overlooked by most academics. I had read tales of shipwrecks, pirates, debaucheries, down-and-out men and women with nothing to lose desperately grasping at whatever wayward strand of hope passed their way. The Guild is made up primarily of misfit and misbegotten souls who never found their place in our worlds, and their literature reflects that condition, and a view of the universe as hostile to the most basic human aspirations ... comfort and hope. Guild society offends the sensibilities of most of the good people of Sapphire and Republic. What I read of it offended me, too, but each offense was like an exquisite sting to my sensibilities. I relished it."

Trajan was looking bored again, and Hunter realized he had gone off-narrative. "When I told him what I was reading, Aziz asked me, 'Do you like ghost stories, then?' I told him I did. When he relieved me on the next ship, he gave me a book. Not a reader, an actual hidebound and glued set of papers. It must have been centuries old. It was musty, and the print had faded in places, but it was a story I had not found in any of my other readings. I would later learn there was a prohibition among Guilders of even speaking the name of the ship it concerned.

"The *Loran Deene* was a colonial transport. She arrived in the Sapphire system, so the legend goes, in Pentember in the local year A.S. 4351. She cruised slowly by the system's outer markers without a word. The alarms were raised, and a detachment of patrol ships was dispatched to escort her in. The patrol ships scanned her. They saw her running lights were on, and that all her systems were functioning perfectly, but there were no life signs on board."

He paused and let the thought sink in.

"She made orbit over Hyperion, but the outpost couldn't raise contact with her. They scanned her, and saw that all her lifepods and shuttlecraft were intact and at their stations. They dispatched a boarding party. Two women and five men. They broke in through an air-lock, and reported that the ship was icy cold, and silent.

"The boarding crew made their way to the bridge, they passed a mess hall with food still sitting on the plates, half-eaten, but still fresh, as though it had been placed out just that morning, but the ship had been followed for nearly three weeks at that point."

Trajan interrupted. "Well, if the ship were cold, as they said, it would have kept the food fresh. In ancient times, they used to preserve food by keeping it cold?"

"They said the coffee and tea in the mugs were still lukewarm, despite the cold temperature of the ship," John Hunter stated testily. "Two of their party were sent to the cargo holds to check on the colonists. They were surprised to find that each of the stasis chambers was empty. Not a trace of any colonist was found, although their personal possessions were still on-board, and the manifest indicated each chamber had been occupied when the ship had departed from Turning Point colony. Again, I remind you, all the lifepods were in place, all the shuttlecraft were on-board.

"They continued on to the bridge. They didn't encounter a single person. The bridge was empty, too, and also looked like it had been abandoned only an hour before. Most curiously of all, the controls were all set to manual."

Trajan rolled his eyes.

"I didn't believe the story either," said John Hunter. "I could imagine a colony transport coming into the system on auto-pilot, with a dead crew and a load of dead colonists owing to a malfunction of the cryo-hibernation units. I could imagine the story being gilded over the course of a few centuries, merging with other stories, evolving into something more horrible. It would have been easy to slip in a small detail about the controls being set to manual. For the sake of a good story, I think we ought to accept that as given.

"As you can imagine, there was some debate on the Hyperion Outpost as to whether to bring the boarding crew back. There was a quarantine protocol. If some disease had wiped out the ship and its crew, or if there had been some sort of alien contamination, it had to be contained, but the boarding crew was terrified. They demanded immediate evacuation.

"Eventually, it was decided to evacuate the boarding crew and remove them to an isolated facility on Hyperion, away from the main outpost. They were told to wait onboard until it had been evacuated and sealed. As they waited for the clearance to evacuate, they diligently reviewed the ship's logs, looking for indications of a systems failure, an alien attack, or perhaps an evacuation to a planet or another ship.

"As they worked, one-by-one, members of the boarding party began to disappear. First it was one of the technicians, stepped off the bridge to use the lavatory and never returned. They sent another technician to look for him, and he never returned. Then, there was some kind of malfunction, and the lead engineer went to investigate, and he never returned. They split into two search parties of two people each, searched the ship with communication lines open, agreeing to meet back at the bridge. The communicators failed, and so they made their way back to the bridge. The second party arrived to find the ship's Chief Warrant Officer, a woman, alone on the bridge, and unable to explain what had happened to her search partner.

"So then, there were three left, the two women and one of the men, they noticed that four of the stasis units had been re-activated. Immediately, two of them went down to the cargo hold, leaving only one woman, the warrant officer, on the bridge. When they reached the cargo hold, they discovered the four missing men had been placed into stasis chambers. They tried to bring them out of stasis, but the controls had been locked out.

"By this time, the boarding party was near panic. The two who had gone below went to their shuttlecraft, and prepared to over-ride the controls. The woman on the bridge refused to go, ordered them to stay on board, but they would not listen to her. They over-rode the controls, and broke the shuttle free from the docking lock.

"However, the shuttle soon began flying erratically. There was no communication from those on-board. The shuttle would not respond to commands from the Hyperion outpost, and soon disappeared to the dark side of the moon where it crashed, leaving a crater and wreckage that can be seen to this day."

Trajan snorted. There were probably dozens of shuttle crash sites on the major moons of the Sapphire system. It proved nothing.

"The last of the boarding party was the Chief Warrant Officer. As the shuttle was on its final plunge to the surface, communication with the *Loran Deene* was lost. Some hours later, the ship's thrusters fired and it broke from orbit over Hyperion, on a course perpendicular to the orbital plane of the Sapphire system. Just as the ship passed out of communication range, the survivor sent her last transmission. It was cut by static and distortion, and she seemed nearly insane, gabbling semi-coherently about a radiation surge, failures in the stasis units, malfunctions in the ship's BrainCore, the ship reprogramming its and/oroid emergency crew to ensure the ship completed its mission. The last they saw her, in the last transmission from the ship, she was sitting in the captain's chair, as the *Loran Deene* pulled away from the station, her

eyes wide and crazed in terror."

He smiled darkly. "The *Loran Deene* is said to cruise the Sapphire system unto this very day, looking for spacers to help fill her cargo hold. Her mission was to deliver 293 colonists and 14 crew to Sapphire, and she can not rest until she has done so."

Although the boy was trying to maintain a skeptical countenance, his eyes had grown somewhat wider. "So, this story is really true?"

"I can't say, but my story is true... I was a technician on the *Madison Gilmore*, which suffered a malfunction of its proximity warning system in interstellar space that I duly logged, although the malfunctions ceased after we entered the Republic system, and a full systems check found no anomalies. I served on that ship with men named Ozzie Aziz and Haphaestus 'Griffy' Hathaway, and shortly after reaching Republic, they died."

"They died?" Trajan said incredulously.

"The two of them boarded a shuttle to meet the guild liner for the return trip to the Sapphire system. The shuttle disappeared without a trace."

"You're lying."

Hunter shrugged. "I have no reason to lie to you. You can verify the story later."

"If I access the Ministry of Entertainment database and Cross-Reference Mining Guild Lore with colonial history and *Loran Deene*, I'd find the story you just told me."

"I can only assume the story is true because it happened to me. Never tried to look it up myself."

"How can a ship like that be lurking around the Sapphire system for thousands of years and no one's ever spotted it?"

John Hunter's answering tone was incredulous. "A solar system is a huge place. Even a ship this large..." He spread his arms expansively to indicate *Pegasus's* enormous size. "... is like a speck of dust."

"... but it would have run out of fuel at some point, it would have..."

"Do you want to hear the rest of the story?"

Trajan blinked at him. "There's more?"

"I was skeptical like you, and I did not take the story seriously. I casually mentioned the story to Hathaway the next time I had to relieve him. He responded by pinning me against a bulkhead and threatening to snap my neck if he ever heard me use the name of that cursed ship again.

"When I saw Aziz again, I could read by the look on his face that he had set me up; the kind of asinine prank guildsmen carry out on each other to ease the boredom of a long journey. I told him I would let him have this one, but if there were another one, I would take him down and lay him flat.

"Hathaway came to my bunk later, in the middle of his watch, and woke me from an unpleasant dream whose details I could never again recall. He apologized for his reaction, and explained the Mining Guild's prohibition against speaking that name. According to legend, anyone who invokes the name 'Loran Deene' on a Guilder ship threatens to add its crew to her unholy cargo, or brings disaster on ship and crew alike. I apologized for my ignorance, and he told me of a complicated series of ritual gestures... spitting on the deck, sending a bottle of spirits through an airlock ... designed to ward off the ghost ship. I assured him I would, although it seemed ridiculous to me and I had no intention of following through.

"Sensing this, I think, he insisted I give him my word as bond, and in return, he would tell

me the story of his first transit. His first crossing between the system was also as a cryo-technician, on an ore carrier. His companions were a crewman named Reese — a dark and unhappy man, lately beset by the latest in a series of failed romantic relationships — and a woman, whom they called Oak, short for Oakley, although whether this was her first or last name, he did not know. The ore-carrier also carried passengers, of a sort. In addition to the twenty seven regulars of the ship's company were sixty guilders in stasis, assigned to the Medusa hydro-carbon extraction facility on Colossus IV.

"Shortly after the ship passed out of the Sapphire Out-system, there was a malfunction in the stasis chambers. The eighty-seven crewmen died. Their deaths were sudden, but not absolutely sudden. There had been just ... *just* ... enough time to experience a last spasm of life, to realize their predicament, ... a nano-second of panic before death claimed them.

"The course had been laid in by computer, and there could be no turning back. They sent out distress calls, but no one answered them. They were alone, for three-hundred days, with nothing but the corpses of eighty-eight men to keep them company.

"I don't think you can imagine what it was like for them, on that great coffin of a ship. You look around these UnderDecks, and you think how austere it is down here, but there aren't puddles of coolant and lubricating fluid on the decks. No reeking stench of sulfur and ammonia. The bulkheads and supports aren't stained, or warped. You don't hear the constant pounding and hissing of equipment. It gets into your mind. Your brain hums like a gong all the time. It makes you a little insane, and you don't realize how much it affected you until after you leave the ship and the ringing stops.

"It was hard on them, especially Oak. Every time she went to the bridge she would have to pass the stasis chambers of the dead officers; the captain, the first officer, the chief navigator, the chief engineer, the watch officers, laying in their transparent sarcophagi. Nearly all of them had awakened just before they died. All but the captain wore some wide-eyed expression of horror. Some of them were open-mouthed, as though trying to scream from empty lungs. A few had managed to raise up their hands as though to claw their way out. It was a gallery of horrors they all had to pass through every day. The men just tried not to look, but Oak never made it past without being caught by some expression or gesture. Sometimes, she swore that a face had changed somehow from the previous day.

"She told Hathaway that when she slept, which was often, she sometimes heard in her dreams a kind of scraping sound." Quick as a cat, Hunter drew a knife and began scraping it back and forth on the deck. It made a rasping sound that caused the back of Trajan's ears to itch. "She told him that, in that panic one experiences when awakening from a nightmare. She thought the dead crew were trying to claw their way out and come after her."

"Please stop doing that," Trajan asked.

Hunter grinned, gave the deck one last hard scrape, and replaced the knife in its sheath.

"Days went by. Then weeks. Reese, who had always been melancholy, fell into an even deeper melancholia, and stopped speaking to either of the other two. He stood his watch alone and left as soon as she came on duty, or even before. On the rare occasions Oak and Hathaway saw Reese, it was in the horror gallery, staring at one or the other of the grotesques. When caught in this attitude, he would retreat to his quarters without a word.

"Oak and Hathaway clung to each other for sanity; going through their routines, eating, sleeping, performing routine functions. It helped, for a time. They managed to forget for a few minutes, here and there, about the eighty-seven dead who rode with them. Reese remained sullen and uncommunicative. They made renewed attempts to draw him in, but he hardly said a word to either of them.

"Reese had been handsome man once, with short blond curls like yours and a nice build, but, since the disaster, he had eaten little and slept less. He became gaunt and sickly, and his eyes became reddened, sunken and dark. He looked, Hathaway told me, like the figure of Death. He had taken to slipping quietly onto the command deck and lurking in the shadows until the one on duty, usually Oak, finally noticed him. It was hard on Oak because Reese had become such an apparition that when she would first catch sight of him, she thought her nightmare had returned, that one of the crew had scratched their way free from the stasis chamber and come to claim her.

"Hathaway, too, was beginning to lose his sanity. At night, he too, began having the same dream as Oak. He heard the scraping sound, like nails against steel. Once, he awoke from that nightmare to the sound of a woman screaming.

"He ran from his bunk to the cargo hold and saw Oak pounding against the front of one of the stasis chambers. She was slamming it with her fists and screaming, 'Why can't you leave us alone? You're dead! Why can't you let us sleep? You're dead! Why can't you stay in your chamber? You're dead! You're dead! You're dead!'

"Hathaway tried to stop her, but she insisted on beating the front of the stasis chamber until she was exhausted and her hands had swollen until she could not use them any more. When she finally collapsed, he gathered her into his arms and took her to the ship's infirmary. The two of them decided to seal off the two cargo bays where the stasis chambers had failed. It would mean a longer trip from one end of the ship to the other, but it was an inconvenience they were willing to tolerate.

"They carried out their plan without consulting Reese. Whether he minded or not, they never found out. Oak came found him on her next duty shift impaled on the primary control column. He had removed the instrument cluster and, in the course of his watches on the bridge, filed it to a sharp point, scraping it over and over again in the night with a file, until it was hard as a needle. Then, he threw himself on it.

"Reese's file specified that he wanted to be interred into space. So, after the maintenance automechs removed his body from the control column, bundled it into an ejection pod, and fired it out through an aft airlock. Just as they did so, a proximity sensor activated, indicating the presence of another ship within communication range.

"They ran to the command center and put out a frantic distress call. The other ship was too far away for visual contact, but it was on a direct intercept course with Reese's coffin. They frantically searched for an Identification channel. The only active channel was a very old reserve channel, one not used since colonial times. On that, they heard only a howling burst of static, that might have been a whisper or a scream. Then, it fell silent.

"They made the rest of the way to Medusa Station in relative peace. At first, the nightmares came back to them, except that in them it was Reese trying to claw his way free from the chamber. Those dreams went away eventually.

"Oakley left the Guild after they made orbit. She never even went back to the Sapphire system. She journeyed to Colossus IV, and took a job in the agro-botany dome.

"The next quarter, the Guild and the Republic Ministries of Space Transport, Safety and Health in Space, and about eleven others, held a board of inquiry into the incident. It wasn't until her testimony that Griffy found out Oakley was, in fact, her family name. He found this out when the Sub-commissioner on trans-stellar occupational safety called to the stand ... Lauren Deane Oakley."



## **Pegasus – Executive Commander Lear’s Suite**

Executive Commander Lear rose quickly from the bed she shared with her husband and silently slipped out of their chambers.

She carried inside a churning sense of grief and anxiety. She, of course, could not tell her lifemate the full scope of what bothered her, but they had been married too long for him not to empathically sense her concern over Trajan. Over dinner, he had spoken words of reassurance that had failed to reassure her, although she had acted like they had.

She sat down at her ocular exercise terminal, and projected a series of characters against the wall. She stared at them, forcing them to resolve themselves for her reading.

First came the character for family.

Then came the character for journey.

Then came the character for home.

She hesitated. This was a standard ocular recovery character set. She should have attached no meaning to the series of characters, but it was hard not to ignore their significance. With a deep breath of resolve, she projected the fourth character.

It was the character for water. It had no significance to her current crisis, except that water was the one consumable a child takes on his Passage. That was a stretch, she decided.

Her eyes hurt, but she forced herself to continue. If she had been doing this weeks ago, she would still have had her command. She could have held a security drill, swept the UnderDecks. She could have ordered a massive systems check and sent squads of technicians and automechs through the UnderDecks.

She focused hard, and the soft features of her face became a study in concentration. The fifth character went up. It was the character for “alone.”

“How apt,” she said out loud.

## Chapter Fourteen

As darkness fell, Magnus Morgan took out his recorder and made a journal entry.

**We have used the Shrieks to survey the subterranean fault line along almost its entire length. Although the feature is fault-like in appearance, it does not appear to be seismologically active, nor does it mark the boundary of any tectonic plate. The seam itself is almost perfectly straight, unlike anything found in nature.**

*The planet as a whole does not seem to be geologically active. The crust is exceptional thick and stable, and almost uniformly composed of dense metals, with the aforementioned high concentrations of molybdenum, titanium, cobalt, coborundum and other less common elements.*

*Our supposition remains that the planet was subject to terra-forming at an earlier stage of its history. Our knowledge of colonial terra-forming was obviously incomplete. We thought they could only transform the surface of a planet. This seam shows they could build a planet from the core outward and suggests that not only could they build a planet, but they also would have been able to do so in perhaps less than one century.*

*Mission observations: The morale of the landing team remains high. All team members are working with admirable efficiency. The villagers of Blackwood have moved past the bean-crushing incident and become active and helpful in assisting us in achieving our mission. They have expressed tremendous curiosity about our technology --- ships, landing gear, instruments, and most especially, our power packs.*

A shadow fell across him, blockading what diminished light was still radiating from the sun. He looked up to see Doctor Cuthbertson standing over him.

"How fares your mission?" Cuthbertson asked.

"It fares well," Morgan answered. "Your people have been very ... helpful to us."

Cuthbertson gestured in the direction of his village. "The people of Blackwood have prepared a meal for you and your ... 'landing team?' ... I believe that is the expression. Many of your friends are already there. I would ask you to join them."

Morgan closed his recorder and stood. "All right. That's very hospitable of you."

"Come this way." Morgan and the man walked down the hillock toward the village. Although it was growing dark outside, warm light spilled from the windows of each building. As they drew nearer, Morgan saw that the streets were bustling, now as in the light of day.

"You keep busy," Morgan observed.

"We do work harder in the Unfinished Lands than elsewhere. The Unfinished Lands have no tolerance for idleness."

Morgan remembered looking at the ground below as the Aves had made its approach. The land had indeed had an unfinished look to it; irregular hills, broad sloppy waterways too shallow for navigation, sparse vegetation except around the widely scattered settlements; subjected to nearly constant wind from the harsh weather at the planet's margins. "I can see why they are called the Unfinished Lands."

"According to our legends, this world was constructed by the Progenitors as a place of perfect contentment. They completed building the Inner Prefectures, and were working on the Middle Prefectures. They were planning on finishing the Outer Prefectures later. Then, they

went away, before these lands were finished." Morgan could not help but notice Cuthbertson was looking up toward the stars when he told this.

"Interesting Legend," Morgan said.

"If you go to the Inner Prefectures, you may see some magnificent buildings, some beautiful gardens, but all these were put there by the Builders. Our surroundings may be more humble, but we have built everything ourselves. Ah, but now we are here," Cuthbertson stopped in front of a large building. It was constructed of timber, thatch, and brick and looked little different from any other building in the village. Morgan somehow sensed it was newer. In fact, he could not shake a vague feeling that it had not stood this morning.

"We've prepared a lodging that we hope you would find comfortable," the Headman said. He opened the door and gestured for Morgan to enter ahead of him.

When Morgan had entered, his jaw dropped to his chest.

The main hall was well over seven meters tall, and described a cavernous space with couches and what seemed to be a sumptuous banquet spread out on long tables. Aside from that, it was an extremely accurate reproduction of the interior of the Aves that had brought him. The couches were the same black and blue pattern with gray accents, and incorporated the head-rests and crash arms. The tables were inset with large thick sheets of black glass inlaid with colored glass in patterns that mimicked the system interfaces of the main cabin.

"How ...?" Morgan stammered.

"Magnus!" Kayliegh Driver called to him, crossing the floor holding a glass of some purplish liquid. "Isn't it amazing?"

"Amazing, right."

Cuthbertson spoke. "Our intention was to provide you with a comfortable environment based on your usual surroundings."

"How did you do it so quickly?" Morgan almost gushed.

The Headman pursed his lips and drew his hands together prayerfully. "In the Unfinished Territories, we survive on our wits. We have learned to make things quickly, and adapt. Let me show you."

He led Morgan and Kayliegh to a window. Peering through it, they realized they could see the outside, brighter than day. These windows were how the room was being lit.

"Brightglass," the Headman explained. "It stores daylight when the sun or the planet is bright in the sky, and then releases it at night to illuminate the interiors of houses."

"We have something like this on our world," Morgan said.

"The Inner Prefectures possess a few pieces, left over from when the world was made. Very precious. Very costly. A few years ago, we discovered a way to make Brightglass. Soon, we were able to make it better than the source material. We export it to the Inner Prefectures through Third Parties. If the Scion's knew we had this skill, they would send Guardsmen to take it from us."

Cuthbertson hesitated, as though he had said too much. "We are artisans. It is how we survive. Some in the Prefectures call themselves artisans. They make furniture, perform carpentry, plumbing, and so forth, but they are rude mechanicals. All true Artisans are here, in my Village of Blackwood."

He pointed to a thin and nervous man hovering near the buffet. "That man, over there, his name is Landsman Ihnatko. He is a weapons builder. He is working on devices that will ensure our protection from the Inner Prefectures, by which one ordinary man could defeat a dozen

Low Guardsmen. That woman over there, Mistress Thell, has developed techniques in metal polishing that reduce friction to almost nothing. We believe we may soon use these to develop modes of transport swifter than any possessed by the Scions. Those two there, who look alike, the Woundspeck twins, they have developed a means of casting fire from devices you could hold in your hand. It may all seem rather primitive to you who walk among the stars."

"On the contrary, it amazes me," Morgan said. "It took a thousand years for my people to recover when the Commonwealth collapsed. At the rate you're going, you could catch up within a century or two. I don't think any community on our world ever contained so much genius at one time."

"It is said that a true Artisan carries within him, or her, a spark from the Builders themselves. I have spent my life seeking out such people, gathering them here in this one place..." Cuthbertson hesitated. Morgan sensed he was trying to convey something great to them, but something secret at the same time.

"Let us drink," he said, and offered Morgan a goblet of the liquid. He saw that the goblet was also made of brightglass, and lent to the liquid inside a dappling inner light. Morgan sensed that this use of the material was a rare extravagance. They, and Kayliegh also, raised their glasses and drank together. The liquid inside was like wine, and although Morgan had never much cared for wine, he found the drink curiously good.

After he drank, Cuthbertson continued. "Your people have managed to transfer the greater part of your labor to machines, and in so doing have freed yourself of want."

"Not entirely, but it has given us the opportunity to focus on pursuits of the intellect, of the soul," Morgan told him.

Cuthbertson had no interest in soul-talk. "It also seems to me that if enough machines could be made, turning out useful things like brightglass and other useful goods, a man would become more powerful than an army of guardsmen."

Morgan was beginning to wonder why the Headman was telling him all this. The Headman explained. "The Artisans in my village have another boon to ask of you."

"Your people have been extremely helpful. I am sure any request will be treated favorably."

"When your people build things, do they keep records of how they are made?"

"We do."

"We should like access to such records. Leave us copies of the books that explain how your clothing, your tools, and your space vehicles are made. Not your weapons. You may have proscriptions against sharing weapons, and we respect that, but we are curious about the other things."

Morgan found himself suddenly in mind of an old Republicker aphorism. *When a politician pours you wine, an awkward situation will follow.* "I will speak with my command, but I don't see any reason your request can not be accommodated." Honestly, he did not see how much good it would do. Producing the materials for those things was a level of technology unto itself.

Cuthbertson smiled. "Good. Good. Excellent good. Now, let me introduce you to our buffet. Hopefully, you will find our food satisfactory."

## **Eden – The Dayside – Altama Prefecture**

The Scion Altama stood at the top of the tallest tower of his palace, the highest point in the citadel. From here, he could see great stretches of his realm, the whole of the citadel, the nearby villages, the fields and wooded lands surrounding them, almost down to the banks of the river

Ai. He required instrumentality to see beyond, and that was also here.

He stood at the controls of a rather amazing apparatus, a set of brass and gold-plated tubes and horns, like some enormous and incredibly complex musical instrument. This was suspended above a huge, white, marble bowl. It had been built and hauled to the top of this tower at an expense that had taxed his subjects almost to starvation

The Scion twisted a small handle one way, and the device projected a view of one corner of his city onto the hollow of the bowl. His small, elegant hands adjusted a set of large screws, and the machine showed him an empty field to the west of his citadel.

He squinted at the scene and pursed his lips, as though trying to remember exactly how to work the accursed contraption. He reached toward another control, twisted it, and the image in the bowl showed a distant hillside. He twisted the first control another way and pulled three levers. Now, the machine showed the view of a distant tower.

The Scion frowned. There should have been a lantern on the tower. This was disappointing. He twisted a few more knobs and brought the tower into more focus. No one was on it or near it. He turned a wheel, flipped another lever and projected a long stretch of the Goldstone Highway onto the bowl, distorted into a fan shape at the edges.

A high guardsman stood nearby. When the Scion finished manipulating the machine, he spoke. "Most Exalted One, may I presume that the low guardsmen have failed."

The Scion only needed to look at him and squint his eyes. The high guardsman took his meaning properly. "It seems our visitors may have more mettle than we gave them credit for. Pray, who was the Lord of that detachment?"

The Scion glared at him, knowing the question was meant solely to remind him who to blame for the failure. "Lord Havebone," he answered in a dry, flinty voice.

The guardsman took a careful step forward, his wings twitching crisply in the cool breeze of the ecliptic twilight, like ancient, dry pieces of paper. "Shall a detachment be sent to ascertain what happened?"

"Yes," said the Scion, "and another detachment to finish the job properly."

The High Guardsman's expression betrayed nothing. "Then, it shall be done. Does your eminence have any suggestion to assure our success in this endeavor?"

The Scion sighed. "If I send twice as many high guardsman as low, will that be sufficient to ensure that my orders have been carried out?"

"Half as many of the high guard will succeed where the low guard has failed. As I have maintained all along, your prominence, air power is the key to military success."

"Your conceits and petty inter-service rivalries notwithstanding, I will send twenty high guardsman. You are to strike at the time when the sun emerges from our planet's shadow. When you have sufficient light, you will kill our visitors, and recover as much of their equipment as you can."

"Shall we alter our dress, to make it appear as if Chiban...?"

"Why, do you lack confidence that you can carry out the assignment?"

"By no means, Excellency."

"When you have killed them, you will remove their bodies and place them among those of the low guard who failed."

"The High Guard will not fail."

"Do not say it, finish it. I have no interest in assurance, only in victory."

The Guardsman bowed. He climbed up onto the parapet. His wings spread out, unfolding

like reverse origami. He let himself fall forward, then the wings lifted him up into the air. He swooped downward, then upwards on a course for the barracks of the high guard, a large structure exceeded only in size by the granaries at the western wall of the citadel.

The Scion looked up into the sky, toward the eclipsed sun. The large moon they called the Riverstone was visible, glowing pale blue between the sun and the horizon.

"As it is written," the Scion sighed, "so shall it be."

## **Eden – The Dayside – The Goldstone Highway**

Beyond the reach of the Scion's telescopes, the Alpha Landing party was licking its wounds, making its way northward. The trail had become steeper and rocky. Two Marines walked ahead of the group and two trailed behind, each carrying a large sword and wishing they had better armament.

It was a silent party. Their sleep broken by the attack, they were fatigued, but what weighed more heavily on them were memories of the all too brief obsequies held in the Memory of Frodo Cleveland and Tiberian Goodyear. They had constructed cairns from the rocks around the campsite to protect the bodies. It had been a somber task made worse by the fear of attack that made them jump every time anything rustled in the trees.

The boy wasn't badly injured but he had not regained consciousness. He weighed so very little, it was a small matter to bundle him into a carrying travois. They did not know what else to do with him. Captain Keeler did the honors, concerned, despite Skinner's assurances, that he had struck the boy too hard.

"Nothing to say?" Keeler asked Alkema, walking in his customary position at the Commander's right hand.

Alkema spoke quietly, his voice heavy with weariness, "I never even spoke to Hastings or Goodyear. They were on *Yorick*. When we prayed over them, it just struck me that I was saying prayers over people I barely knew. It made me sad."

"They were a part of our crew," Keeler said gravely, betraying perhaps a thousandth of the weight he was carrying over their deaths.

Alkema sighed, and his next words seemed to come with even greater effort. "And then I think, there I was. I killed someone by crushing his head with a rock."

"Under entirely different circumstances," Keeler interrupted. "I owe you my life."

He lifted his bandaged hand. "That little kid you're carrying on your back, he tried to kill me, too. Why? Why did they try to kill us? We aren't a threat to anyone."

"The boy was trying to defend his crop against poachers, I think, that was his job. It was the only thing he knew to do, like an animal defending its burrow. The others wanted to kill us because someone ordered them to. That was their job."

Alkema kicked against the dirt. "No one should kill because they ordered to."

Keeler took this in silently. He found himself thinking of the Flight Crews left behind at the Citadel Altama. They were most likely dead as well. He wondered if Alkema had thought of this, but decided there was no reason to bring it up. That would make six people who had lost their lives on this mission. Six people with families, and friends, and colleagues on *Pegasus* and back on the home worlds, who would mourn for them, and perhaps curse the name of the man who had led them on this fatal journey.

He thought of Flight Lieutenant Toto. Damb, but he had really liked that kid. He suddenly

felt worse, which a moment earlier he would not have judged possible.

Alkema went on. "This whole planet... it's like one of those horror houses they put up to celebrate The Night of The Living Dead."

"Hallowe'en, you mean. We still use the ancient name in Oz for it." Keeler looked up toward the stars. It caught him by surprise, seeing the constellations all jumbled up and out of position. "We, the people of Sapphire, and to a lesser extent Republic, are beneficiaries of millennia of human spiritual evolution. Humans have always possessed a unique duality of nature. We can go either way, and sometimes both simultaneously. From the dawn of creation, we have struggled with the questions of good and evil, order and chaos, right and wrong, creation and destruction. The ancients pondered this. For a time, they thought the mind was the source of evil, and they tried to fight it with psychology. Then, they thought the body was the source of evil, and they fought it with genetics and eugenics. They even tried economic and political coercion to try and modify human behavior, which led to some of the most horrific tragedies of the Ancient World. It wasn't until they recognized that good and evil resided in the spirit that they were able to make real progress toward perfection."

"The Great Awakening," Alkema put in.

"Actually, I was thinking of the Crusades."

Alkema looked at him in shock. "The Crusades?"

"The Awakening would have meant nothing without the Crusades. True, the Crusades were a time of horrendous violence. True, the human species was nearly extinguished more than once. However, they did succeed in driving out most of the evil from the human race. Each Crusade was fought world by world, driving the darkness and chaos further and further out into the Galaxy, until light and order reigned over every human world. It ushered in a Golden Era, during which our world was founded."

Alkema argued, the first time Keeler ever remembered him disagreeing. "But even if ... it's obvious not every human world was cleansed. Look at this world, commander. Evil was surely not driven from this world."

"Or the darkness returned," Keeler replied. "It only takes one surviving virus to infect a living host."

"Do you think this is what the rest of the galaxy is like? The people on Meridian transformed into aliens, and this world..."

"This is why we sent out large, heavily armed ships on this mission, against the advice of a lot of people. That the first two worlds we encountered were miserable armpits could just be sampling error. We won't know until we see some more worlds. We are, after all, the explorers, the bold adventurers, blazing a trail across the trackless expanse of the galaxy, facing unknown perils at every ..."

"Excuse me, Captain," Alkema pushed away, holding a hand on his mouth and another on his stomach, he began heading toward the side of the path.

"*Do not leave the path,*" Keeler was thinking as Alkema ran into the brush. The young man had taken in too much of this world, and now it was coming out of him. He made it off the path and into a ditch before he began heaving. Keeler wished for a moment that he could join him, but that would not have been commanding.

"Save a rock for me when you're done," Keeler called out. The rest of the group had come to a wary halt. He took advantage of the pause to let Skinner check out his passenger.

"He's awake," Skinner told him.

"For how long?"

"His eyes opened up about half a klick back."

"Almost ten minutes and he hasn't tried to kill me. I believe we're making progress."

"He is still wearing a sedative patch. He would have to have the strength of a Borealan wrestler to cause you any harm."

"Take him off my back. Let me see him." Skinner helped remove the pack and the two of them regarded the boy.

His eyes were opened and wide, but there was no longer a crazed look to them. He was not quite calm, but seemed instead to be taking in that which surrounded him. Slowly his jaw began to move and grunts began to work their way out of his throat.

"I believe he's trying to speak" Skinner declared.

"Lingotron," said Keeler, pulling the device from his pack. *Was the boy capable of language, or was this just an impression of the gibbering around him? Did he speak the same language as the villagers? Would the lingotron recognize a pattern if he did not?*

The boy grunted again, and this time there seemed to be some form to it. Keeler put his fingertips against the boy's temple and fixed him in the eyes, tried to reach whatever form of mind lay behind them. The boy gazed back at him. Keeler felt no sense of connection, but the boy continued to struggle to speak.

The lingotron hummed and finally chirped out "Where going?"

"I think he wants to know our destination," Keeler was speaking slowly. "We are going ... to the Temple of the Z'batsu... in Chiban Prefecture."

The boy betrayed no comprehension. He gabbled again, and the lingotron hummed.

"Going to Farside?"

"Farside?" Keeler repeated.

"Farside. Going to Farside."

"What is he saying?" Bihari was now also standing over them.

"He wants to know if we are going to a place called 'Farside.'" A pause. "I don't know what he means."

Alkema finished retching, wiped himself off and stood, leaning against a tall pile of rocks to steady himself. He almost jumped from his skin when he saw that what he was retching on was not a random assortment of rocks, but a humanoid form, smooth and metallic. "Captain!" he yelled, wiping his mouth. "Captain, come quickly."

Keeler and Honeywell were at his side in a flash. "What is ..." Keeler began, stopping in mid-sentence to ponder the object. "... it," he finished.

Alkema was scanning the object. It was like an abstract sculpture of the human form. It was cast in metal, dented in many places. "What is it?" Keeler asked. "A statue?"

"I think it's a mechanoid," Alkema said. He turned toward the path. "Scout, get over here. Take a look at this."

Technician First Class Scout approached with a mixture of curiosity and caution. Honeywell cocked his head slightly to let her know it was all right to proceed. She set her technical kit on the ground and withdrew a high-intensity scanning instrument. She brushed her dark bangs out of her face, clipped the eyepiece to her temple, and began scanning.

"It's a mechanoid, all right," she reported. "More sophisticated than our automechs, not at the level of our and/oroid. Its AI systems appear to be mnemonic."



"Mnemonic," Keeler mumbled.

The technician flipped open a plate on what appeared to be the mechanoid's chest. A faint orange light was flashing, weakly. "Its power source is still functioning."

"Commander..." said Alkema, steadily but frightened. They looked up to see the mechanoid's eyes had begun to glow faintly. Keeler and Honeywell leaped backwards. Honeywell brandished his sword.

Scout had not budged. "I think I have activated an auto-diagnostic function." She waited a few moments, analyzed her readings. "Power flow is positive. All of its internal systems seem to be functional."

"So, why isn't it moving. Is it a statue, or a kiosk of some kind?" Keeler asked.

"Neg, it definitely has auto-mobility. Its arms and legs are articulated, and I detect a pseudo-muscular system for moving the extremities."

Alkema stood off to the side a bit, studying the mechanoid, its position, and the environment around it, in particular, the burned out tree-trunk behind it.

"It's not a system problem," he announced. "Its materials have dehydrated and its mechanism has fused. It needs to be lubricated."

"Don't we all?" Keeler muttered.

Scout shined an intense scanning beam into the mechanoid's armpit. "He's right. It's completely corroded. There's lubricant in my kit, would you get it for me? I'll also need an energy-wave stimulator, a sonic brush, and some alcohol to clean the connections."

"Lubricant, stimulator, alcohol... sounds like a bodacious first date." Keeler added.

Alkema scowled. Humor may have been the commander's defense mechanism, but right now he found it inappropriate. The technician took the lubricant and another device when he handed it to her.

"Based on the scoring, I'm guessing this guy was hit by lightning," Scout suggested. "It over-loaded his system, so he went into a repair mode. By the time the internal repairs were completed, the rain had caused his joints to corrode and fuse."

"How long has he been standing here?"

"I have no way of guessing, but I would bet it's been a very long time. See his feet?"

"Neg."

"That's because they're buried under eight inches of deposited soil."

Keeler looked at the mechanoid, and then back to the boy, and instinctively tightened his grip on his walking stick. Honeywell, Buttercup, and Everything raised their swords. Things were getting interesting, and they had enough experience to be worried.

A shaft of light stabbed out at them. They turned toward the sky, taking care not to look directly at the sun, which was emerging from behind the planet like the stone in a diamond ring. The change in the landscape was almost miraculous. The olive color of the ecliptic twilight transformed to a gold that lent contrast and edge to what had been a murky landscape of shadows seconds before.

"Daybreak," Honeywell said.

"Are we safer now?" Keeler asked him.

Honeywell stared up into the sky. "Nay, we're not."

Following Honeywell's gaze, Keeler looked up into the goldening sky. He saw nothing. "What is it?"

"I've heard them circling us for the last half hour. I think they've been waiting for light."

"Who?"

In answer, a pair of short, thick arrows shot from the sky and stuck themselves into the roadway and a small boulder at Keeler's feet.

"Run!" Keeler yelled, he ran toward the boy, whom Bihari had already scooped up, and made for the opposite side of the road. More arrows rained down, striking the ground in the dust behind his feet. The attackers were still too high to be seen, but their weapons were very close to finding their marks.

Keeler, Skinner, Bihari, and the boy took shelter in a rocky ditch with Marine Lt. Honeywell. Alkema and Scout sheltered behind the mechanoid. The rest of the party crouched low in the opposite ditch. The boy was frightened, but silent. His brown eyes searched the heavens.

An arrow punctured the rocks at the edge of the ditch. Three finger widths of its shaft penetrated the stone. "Crossbows," Honeywell explained. He took out a pocket scanner and ran it over the arrow.

"Can those penetrate your armor?" Keeler asked.

"They can't, and they don't have to," Honeywell said. "The points are tipped with a contact poison... absorbed through the skin." Just for emphasis, Honeywell's defensive shielding flared and an arrow bounced off that otherwise would have struck his left eye.

"Next time, I am definitely wearing the landing suit," Keeler decided out loud.

A winged shadow flashed across the ground. Bird-shapes descended from the sky and flashed above the highway, like savage fallen angels killing time on their way to Hell. They passed above, a hundred meters, perhaps less, and another rain of arrows thunked into the dirt around Keeler, Honeywell, Skinner, Bihari and the boy.

"I count twenty," Honeywell said.

"Damb, that's a lot of bird-guys," Keeler said. "We can't defend ourselves on the ground." The High Guardsmen were wheeling, far up in the sky, like hawks.

As he watched them, another arrow shot down from the sky, flew over his head and embedded itself in the rocks behind him. The Guardsmen turned and were bearing down on the party on the opposite side of the path, who were less protected.

"I am going to try something," Honeywell lifted one foot up to the roadbed and braced another against a rock. He withdrew a dagger from his belt and held it out in his right hand, an expression of intense concentration on his face as he calculated his move.

When a flight of four guardsmen in a diamond formation reached the lowest arc of their dive, he leapt with all his strength, amplified by his landing gear, impossibly high. He connected with the last of the flying guardsmen, bringing him down to the ground in a tumbling ball of wings and arms and armor. They hit the ground hard, with Honeywell on top, his arm raised high and they saw the flash of a dagger just before he plunged it into the breast of the Guardsmen. He squawked as he died, like a screaming raptor.

Honeywell jumped from the body and ran for the ditch, a shower of arrows trailing him. He regained shelter in one long jump, just ahead of a screaming guardsman, diving low to avenge the death of his wingman.

"One down," Honeywell reported.

"Do you think they're stupid to get low enough to let us try that again," Keeler asked grimly. His question was punctuated by another arrow, burying itself in the brush behind him.

"Perhaps we can wait them out until they run out of ammunition."

"I counted twenty arrows on the man I took down," Honeywell said. "This could also just be the first wave."

"What do you suggest we do?"

"Maybe if we..." Honeywell began. Suddenly, there came a noise from high above, a high-pitched aerodynamic screech, like air moving fast over metal.

"Look!" Alkema yelled from behind the mechanoid.

Two trios of tiny dots high in the sky were arcing downward. The Shrieks grew larger and larger, swift and silent. Stainless steel butterflies of death, their long wings pitched into an attack angle as they swooped down on the hawk-men.

The Shrieks closed and fired their ion maneuvering thrusters. They came from high and behind the guardsmen, firing white-blue energy bolts. Each time they connected, which was almost certain, the targeted guardsman vanished in a wisp of vapor, only little charred bits of wing and bone were left to fall to the ground.

"Somebody up there likes us," Honeywell muttered, unable to keep from smiling. Keeler, somehow, looked even more grim. The Shrieks were brutally efficient. They bore down on the Guardsmen with deadly speed and precision. The Guardsmen were caught by surprise and had no defense. The Shrieks finished them off in seconds.

Bihari and Skinner hugged each other. Honeywell and Buttercup exchanged a victory salute. Keeler could hear clapping and cheers from the opposite ditch.

One of the Shrieks turned from the others and swooped down on the landing party. It came to a hovering stop above the Goldstone Highway path.

Keeler stepped out into the road and crossed until he stood face-to-face with the Shriek. For a moment, it was as though the two were staring each other down. Keeler looked small in front of the machine, like a bug about to be consumed by a bird.

He raised one hand, a finger pointing upwards.

"Go," he barked.

Like a well-trained terrier, the Shriek wheeled and shot upward into the sky to rejoin its comrades. In less time than it takes to tell, they had all disappeared.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Pegasus – Deck 14 – Section 84:R30

Eddie Roebuck sat in a comfortable, egg-shaped chamber deep in the interior of *Pegasus*, several decks below the Command Tower, forward of Flight Operations, deep in the heart of the Habitation Decks. Its curvaceous walls were colored a light, undulating blue. The furnishings were soft and rounded, no hard edges. He sat across a thick, blue and black striped table across from two people who, in his opinion, seemed entirely too happy to be alive.

"Thank you *so much* for coming down and talking with us this afterdawn." Her name was Donatella Alenia. She was a heavy woman, with a large mouth and flat-black hair that framed her squarish face in a gentle crest. "We were *so happy* to hear of your interest in working with Recreational Services. We are always *so eager* to welcome new faces to our little department."

Sitting next to her was an only slightly more sober male, with grey-touched hair, and a fatherly aspect. His name was Rod CraneVaulter. "I imagine it's quite a change from Flight Services. What made you decide to change professions?"

"It was either this, or starve, or Executive Commander Lear was going to freeze me and send me back to Sapphire," he answered.

Their faces were frozen for a moment, then broke in subdued, polite chuckles. "What an excellent sense of humor! Doesn't he have a *great* sense of humor? That's going to be very useful. I can tell, it's going to be a lot of fun having you around," Alenia's voice was roaring and triumphant, as though she had just won an arm wrestling tournament. "Have you been briefed on the kind of work we do here in Recreational Services?"

"I just thought you ... you know, helped people chill out and what not. I mean, me, I can't imagine needing any help with that, but I figure, there are probably a lot of people on this ship with airtight-orifices who need to get loosened up."

"Okay. okay, that's part of it," Alenia said, slightly drained of her joviality. "More broadly, we think personal *time* can be an opportunity for personal *development*. Part of our mission is to provide guidance for members of the crew who want to take advantage of such opportunities. We sponsor clubs for art and cultural activities, music, dance, literature and hobbies. We assist in setting up sports leagues and facilities as needed."

"Do you do parties?" Eddie Roebuck asked.

"We can arrange music, catering, and entertainment to any member of the crew who requests it for any special occasion. Not long ago, the Executive Commander asked *our* assistance in arranging for a traditional Iestan Ceremony of Passage for her son... which was quite well-received."

Roebuck nodded. If anyone needed help throwing a bash, it would have been Executive Commander Lear.

"What we do around here may seem trivial," Cranevaulter put in. "But I like to think of it as one of the most important functions of the whole ship. The crew gets so focused on exploring what is *out there* ... " he spread his arms expansively, pointing vaguely outward "... that they neglect to explore what's *in here*." He drew his hands inward toward his heart. "That's where we come in. That's why what we do is so important."

"So excellently put, Mr. Cranevaulter," Alenia gushed. "Now, did you have a specific task in mind?"

Eddie reclined in his chair. "I think I could lead by example. Look at me, positively no

tension at all." He held up one arm and flopped it over loosely, conveying his complete sense of relaxation.

Alenia kept up her enthusiasm, but a little strain had crept into her voice. "Relaxation counseling... that's very interesting. You will require additional training before we can allow you to ... counsel the crew on self-relaxation. Now, what else do we have."

Cranevaulter came in with a suggestion. "Are there any sports you like?"

"Sports?" Eddie said. "Well, zah, football, Calvinball, I mean back in Halifax, I used to go to all the Halcyon games, and most of the Turbinado games."

"That's good, but did you actually participate in any sports."

Eddie was blank for a minute, then he answered. "Ever hear of fizzball?"

They shook their heads.

"O.K., what you do is, you get a case of cheap, evil-smelling ale, like Rockhard, okay, or maybe Drillnut, if you can find it. Ideally, you want it to be in cans, not bottles. Okay, so then you find a park or an open lot. Then one assol sets himself up as the pitcher, and everybody else takes turn batting. The pitcher throws a can of ale and the batter tries to slam with the bat... or racquet if you prefer."

They waited for him to continue. When he did not, Cranevaulter asked "Is that it?"

"Zah, pretty much."

"So, what is the point of the game?"

"What's the point of the game? Come on?" Eddie looked into their happy, polite, uncomprehending faces. "It's fun for all involved. Everybody gets to see cans of ale smashed up. Everybody gets sprayed with cheap, evil-smelling ale. Everyone gets to dive for cover when the pitches go wild. It's great fun."

"Perhaps sports are not your forte," said Alenia. "And your academic record ends after two years at New Halifax City College." Eddie thought she was being terribly polite to describe it that way. She could have said, "being thrown out of New Halifax City College." She could have mentioned the restraining order. She could have mentioned how an entire wing of the Actinium Residence Hall had to be condemned. She could have mentioned the Dean of Student Life taking a two-year Sabbatical at a Monastery to steady her nerves, but she was being terribly polite. "I guess that leaves us with early childhood development."

Eddie warmed to the topic. "Oh, my dad died in a Mining accident when I was two years old. My mom went into a decline and died three years later. I was mostly raised by my Aunt Be, who was a little bit mental..."

"That's not what I meant, I was going to ask if you would be interested in working with young children?"

A look came across Eddie's face that said, "only in a hand's-off, advisory capacity," but Alenia must have misread it. "Do you like children Eddie?"

"It's been a long time since I've known any personally."

"If you ask me, molding young minds is one of the most noble things you can do in this life," she went on, like a milk-beast grazing a meadow. "Coming from such a tragic childhood yourself, you must have developed a deep understanding of how to face up to all the traumas life presents to us."

"I guess," said Eddie. He was thinking to himself that the best advice he could give to a child was not to be left an orphan and raised by a crazy maiden aunt. Cranevaulter's face lit up, like he had just had a wonderful idea. "Why don't we visit one of the Play Centers."

"Excellent idea," Alenia enthused.

They stood and led him through a wide, short corridor. "How much do you know about the Odyssey Project Principles for Extra-Parental Child Care?" Alenia asked.

"Now that you mention it... pretty much nothing."

This time, there was no strained, polite laughter. "In accordance with Ministry of Families Policies and Sapphirean Custom, we are required to limit our personal influence on child guidance. The parents are expected to be the primary source of values and moral instruction. We can only supervise their recreation, maintain a safe environment, and provide them with stimulating educational materials."

Eddie nodded. Her words brought back a memory of Kindergarten in New Halifax, his very first day. Another child, a big, fat and spoiled child, with the unflattering and completely suitable name of Deuteronomy Jeruffah Khan, had become enraged when he threw a malfunctioning toy hard against the floor and it had bounced up and struck him in the eye. In his rage, he had swatted the girl who had given him the toy hard enough to knock her off balance. They both had begun wailing and a curious sympathetic response had gone through the class, and before long, they all had been upset and crying, except for Eddie, who had sat calmly in a corner with his crayola-wand, coloring his genitalia turquoise.

Cranevaulter added. "The parent-child relationship is paramount. Parents on *Pegasus* are only obligated to a four-hour duty-shift, to minimize separation from their children."

"Really?" Eddie said. "Maybe I should have a couple myself."

There were about a score of children in the playroom, with four adults watching over them. It was a largish, open space lit brightly with simulated sunlight. On one wall was a hologram, showing Eden from orbit. On the other wall was a hologram depicting autumn in Sapphire's Kandoran Nature Preserve. The children themselves were clean-scrubbed, healthy, and strong; not a snotty nose or a dirty hand would be found among them. They played with building blocks, stuffed beasts, and read colorful books to one another.

"Children," called Alenia. "We have a new friend to meet today. Come over here." In their irregular, distracted way, the group of children coalesced around Eddie and Alenia. "This is our new friend Eddie."

"Hoy, Eddie," came a chorus of tiny voices. A few tiny hands waved in the air.

"Hey, little monkeys, how ya' doin'?" Many of the children giggled appreciatively.

Alenia whispered to him, "Eddie, why don't you share something with the children, to stimulate their young minds?"

Eddie looked over the children. Their faces were bright and clean like newly minted commemorative coins. They were innocent, and eager, and the worst thing that would probably ever happen to them ... was *him*.

He looked to Alenia and CraneVaulter, and realized that these were the people he would have to work with if he moved to recreational services, and they would be the people who would determine his success in that endeavor. Every day would be a fresh obligation for happy talk and smiley face and happy regurgitation of how meaningful and important was to help people who were too terminally lame to come up with a good time on their own.

Being flash-frozen and shot out of a missile launcher compared favorably.

"Eddie?" Alenia, prompted.

Eddie displayed his broad, winning, and dangerous smile. "I was just looking at all you shiny, happy children, and thinking about ... this great big beautiful ship we all live in." The

children seemed to concur, a little restively. They had been told how big and beautiful the ship was a thousand times over. He counted on that. "I was wondering if any of you remember the first day your mom and dad brought you here."

Eddie paused. He had been working in the landing bays then. He had seen an awful lot of children come through the receiving area. They had not been smiling, or happy, when they first came on board. He saw some faces grow a little darker, some showed a little blush of embarrassment. Even among those who could not remember clearly, a chord had been struck. The atmosphere was soured with the memory of the apprehension the children had felt when first brought on board.

"Pretty scary the first time you landed here, wasn't it?" Eddie continued. "I mean, who would've thought that this big scary ship would be the place you were going to live in forever and ever. Also, really, none of you wanted to be on this ship. Your moms and dads made you come here. Now, you're going to spend your whole lives on this ship."

A little boy, a veritable dark-haired Cherub, tugged up at his sleeve. "But... but... but... we're going to live on Earf. We're gonna all live on a Earf, in accawdance wif prophecy."

His name was Brady, according to the name tag on his jumpsuit, and he held tucked under his arm a stuffed Sapphirean land monster in a ridiculous shade of pink. Its artificiality offended Eddie deeply. Actual Sapphirean land monsters were purple.

Eddie gently removed the boy's hand from his pants leg. "Well, we've got to find Earth first, and nobody really knows where it is. It'll probably take 300 years to find it, and ... well... you know... none of us is going to live that long."

Eddie paused. He had them in his grip, and what he was saying was, admittedly cruel, but... "Do your mommy and daddy ever worry about bad things happening. I mean, all kinds of bad things can happen in three hundred years. I mean, this ship is built to keep us all alive. It's really really hard to keep people alive in space. Just the tiniest, tiniest hole in the hull and all of our air could leak out." He then pantomimed suffocating to death in a very graphic way that left him gasping on the floor of the play center.

Uncomfortably, Alenia nudged Roebuck with her toe, all the while continuing to smile. Eddie came up to his knees. "That'll probably never happen, but you never know. That's why they have escape pod drills. Also, the galaxy is filled with exploding stars and hostile aliens ..."

"Technician Roebuck!" Alenia admonished. "They're children!"

"Oh, right... I meant big giant space monsters."

Amidst the pandemonium that ensued, Eddie could not help notice one small boy in the corner. He was not crying. He was calmly playing with a crayola-wand coloring his toes chartreuse. When Eddie saw the boy, he broke out in a huge grin. The boy looked up at him, smiled shyly in return, then returned to his task.

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

Bellisarius and Constantine were inspecting a deck of cargo bays. There was a line of them stretching from almost *Pegasus's* mid-point to the stern of the vessel. These were large, hangar-size areas with ceilings that curved to the deck, colored the dull mottled grey and green of the alloys of which they were constructed. They were poorly illuminated. No one was supposed to access these cargo bays except for automechs, occasional inspectors and technicians, and of course, the clandestine visits of Centurions.

This particular chamber was piled high with white, blue, and buff cargo crates, cubic,

hexagonal, and oval in shape, containing a variety of cloth and fabrics for the construction of uniforms and other items of clothing. "No life signs," Constantine reported.

"Keep scanning. They have ways of hiding from our instruments."

"Scanning for residual biological signatures. I wonder how they do that."

"If we knew, we could round up the lot of them in twenty minutes."

Constantine carefully scanned the chamber. "I'm not detecting any spaces between the cargo containers large enough to accommodate a human," Constantine reported. He wondered if their scanners could be fooled. He turned to 10010010, and the and/oroid, as though reading his mind, was already removing a small probe, like a tiny electronic rat, from a panel of his tunic. He set the small object on the floor. It scurried off into the recesses of the chamber.

A voice came into Constantine's ear-piece. "Can you hear me, Constantine?"

"Did you say something, Bellisarius?"

"I said nothing."

"It wasn't Bellisarius," the voice repeated, as Constantine began to look toward the and/oroid. "And it isn't the metal man, either. Do you recognize my voice?"

"What is it, Centurion?" Bellisarius asked.

"Someone is communicating with me over my secure headset. I think it's Hunter."

"Bright Boy," said the voice. "Perfect ten for recognition."

"How did he access our secure encrypted channels?" Bellisarius demanded.

"Never mind the rants of Bullshitarius. If you want to find me, proceed along Connector 82 Alpha to section 29:L15 on Deck minus 27. You will receive more instructions there. This message will not repeat, so put those six years of eidetic memory training to good use."

"Connector 82 Alpha to Section 29:L15 on Deck minus 27." Constantine said out loud.

"Let's proceed," said Bellisarius.

The and/oroid called back his mouse probe, and the three headed out into the corridor. Deck Minus 27 was fifteen decks up from their position. They found a lift-pod and took it upward and then proceeded to Connector 82 Alpha. When they reached Section 29:L15, Hunter came back on. "What took you so long?"

"I hear him again."

Section 29:L15 was a large storage and maintenance locker. "Dress up, boys, it's cold outside. 10010010, you're fine the way you are."

If a blank face could wear an expression, 10010010 would have shown puzzlement.

Constantine received more instructions as he and Bellisarius slipped into insulation gear and rebreather packs. "You would be advised to leave any pulse weapons in the locker on this deck."

Constantine relayed the instructions, and watched Bellisarius flush red when he was asked to surrender his pulse weapon. "Tell him to penetrate himself."

"Come on, Bellisarius. We can do this now, or we can do this later. If you want to tell Lear you blew off a chance to capture me, that's up to you."

"What's he saying now?" Bellisarius asked.

Constantine looked into the fierce steely eyes of his master. "He says we have to put down our weapons or he won't meet us. He will not give a second chance."

"That's not what I said."

"He's playing games with us," Bellisarius grumbled loudly, but he sighed and lay his two



pulse cannons on the floor.

"Get on the utility lift. Take it to the top. There's a lockout code, but I am sure Nellisarius can over-ride it."

The three of them stepped on the lift, it was a narrow fit. Bellisarius put a code into the pad at the side. A security cage closed around them as they lifted upward. They passed to the decks where the charges for *Pegasus's* phalanx close-in defensive guns were stockpiled. The storage pods were dark, cold, and the charges were arranged in long torpedo-shaped cases. Stray glints of light reflected off their shiny black surfaces. Access code or not, this sensitive area of the ship was filled with the most sensitive sensing technology. If they had so much as tried to bring a single pulse cannon to these desks, the Command Tower would have lit up with alarms like a Rehabilitation Colony Escape Attempt.

Upward, the lift brought them through several closed and inaccessible decks, solid alloy surrounding them. It remained very cold. The lift finally stopped before a large, heavy hatch, marked with cautionary yellow. A sign warned, "Null gravity area. Zero atmosphere. Extreme electromagnetic charge danger." They paused, less from fear than from the knowledge that accessing that hatch would trigger a warning sign to the Command Tower.

"Come on, what are you? Chicken-fowl?"

Bellisarius opened a palm-pad identification panel. "Discreet Access. Code Bellisarius-Five-One-Five-Zero."

There was a brief pause while the atmospheric pressure was equalized on the other side of the hatchway. A series of magnetic locks released and the hatch, heavy as a bank vault, opened upward. Beyond it lay a chamber, not much less cold and dark than space itself.

The three Centurions cautiously stepped out, onto a kind of catwalk that reached halfway over a deep, dark chamber. Twenty meters below was a long empty shaft, fifty meters wide and almost as long as the ship itself. This was the electromagnetic launch rail for the Aves and Shrieks.

John Hunter stood on a catwalk on the opposite side. He waved. "Hoy, fellas."

It was a perfect set-up. They could not reach him, they could not shoot at him, and if they tried and fell into the chasm, they would die, they would trip any number of sensors, and there would be a lot of inconvenient explaining and/or covering up to do.

"Do you know what will happen if they launch a ship while we are standing here?" Bellisarius demanded.

"The electro-magnetic charge would lift you half a meter into the air. Every hair on your body will stand on end and most of your major joints will dislocate. Then, you will crash to the deck, unconscious, and wake up in a stink of ozone and drying blood from your nose and mouth, and spend the next fifty-six hours with a degree of headache and nausea so severe you'll spend every second longing for the sweet release of death." He smiled knowingly. "But, enough of that maudlin talk. Have you brought word from the Executive Commander?"

"There will be no negotiation, Hunter." Bellisarius called out firmly. "We will find the boy, and put you in a stasis chamber. We'll add kidnapping to your charges when you are tried on Republic."

"Don't play games with me, Nellisarius. The life of a young boy is at stake here."

"Harm the boy and your own life is forfeit."

"Give me the Sliver, Bellisarius."

"That will never happen. If Executive Commander Lear had even suggested giving in to

your demand, I would have sanctioned her. There is no way you are getting that Sliver."

Hunter looked down to the deck and pinched his eyes. "You are making a terrible mistake."

"On the contrary, Hunter. You have made the mistake. You have exhausted our tolerance and we will take you down."

Hunter sounded unconcerned. "You will never find him. The Executive Commander faces long, long days and nights wondering what has become of her son. Every minute he spends here, he becomes more mine and less hers, more ours and less yours. We will keep him down here so long she will not recognize him, and he will be practically a stranger to her. Long before that happens, though, people will wonder what happened to him."

Bellisarius matched his unconcerned tone. "When the Executive Commander's son is reported as lost below decks, and every resource on this ship is directed against you, we will find you, and the boy."

Hunter turned away from them, so they could not see his face. "You have no idea what you are unleashing. This will grow into something you will not be able to control."

"Then, why don't you save us all a lot of unnecessary difficulty and turn your self over to us now?"

Hunter shouted turned and raised his arms over his head in a great theatrical gesture. "Never!" It would have been more impressive had they not been divided by an airless chamber. In this long, wide tunnel, it would have made a very dramatic echo effect.

Bellisarius was not impressed. "You can not win, John Hunter."

"Can't I?" Hunter answered. He turned away from them, and tried to walk. "I think I already have. You just haven't figured it out yet."

Bellisarius roared after him. "We will find you, John Hunter. Leave now, turn your back on us, and you can forget about any mercy we would otherwise extend to you."

Hunter made it through the airlock, commenced the recompression cycle, and leaned against the bulkhead, holding his stomach hard, tears streaming from his face. He could not believe they had fallen for it.

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

When he felt a woman's hand touching his arm, Trajan awoke. She stood before him, a diaphanous figure, pale and white. In the first instant of consciousness, he wondered if he were dreaming and had summoned the ghost of Lauren Deane in his sub-conscious.

Then, he tried to awaken himself, but found himself already at the surface of wakefulness. She held his forearm and was picking at the retention cuff with a small pair of metal calipers.

"..." Trajan began to say.

She brought a finger to her lips in a seemingly languorous movement, like she were moving underwater. "Sssh."

*What was she doing to him?* He tried to pull his arm away from her, but she it firm. She turned to him. Her hair was long, straight, white-blond in color. Her face was kindly but determined, her eyes seemed too large, and too deep. "Don't be afraid," she said, speaking with a slight accent he could not place.

Trajan whispered. "Who are you?"

"Be silent," she answered him, turning back to her task. "No one must hear, and I need to

concentrate.”

Ignoring her, Trajan asked, “What are you doing?”

Frowning, she whispered back at him. “What part of ‘Be silent’ do you not understand?”

He pulled his arm again. “What are you doing to me?” he insisted.

She sighed, would not release her grip. “I am trying to release this restraint without cutting off your circulation or giving you a paralytic shock.”

“Why?”

“Because either would result in serious injury to you, and might impair your escape.”

“I meant, why are you helping me escape?” Trajan persisted.

“I am a friend of his,” she answered, in a very soft voice.

It was baffling to Trajan that a friend would do this. Trajan tried to probe her mind, but of course he could not. When he tried though, she immediately dropped her picks and took his face in her hands. She drew herself into his face and held him with a hard stare.

“Trajan Lear, I am setting you free. My motives are not your concern, but a proximity restraint is a very dangerous, delicate, and temperamental device. If I don’t disable it properly, you may find yourself in need of a cloned prosthetic arm, do you understand?”

They stared into each other for a moment. Reluctantly, he gave her his arm. Slowly, she picked up her instruments and returned to work.”

“Why are you doing this?” Trajan persisted.

“Because what John is planning is too dangerous. He fancies himself a liberator, a freedom-fighter, but he would only bring our destruction and our exile.”

She peeled back a panel on the cuff and began slowly pulling out a very thin wire. “I only ask one thing of you, Trajan Lear.”

“What?”

She looked hard into him. “Do not tell anyone what you’ve seen here. Do not tell them about John Hunter, or me, or anything.”

Trajan held his peace for a moment. The woman was indeed pale, and in her white gown, seemed almost too glow from the inside. He reconsidered that this might be a dream. Then, the restraint cuff fell from his arm.

She rubbed his forearm briefly. “You are free. Now go. Now. Please.”

Trajan stood and very slowly, very warily stepped away from the pillar, expecting to be jerked back, to wake up again and find himself alone and trapped. Instead, he stepped free. Step by step, he made his way to the opposite side of the chamber.

The woman stood. “Now, go. Tell no one anything.”

Trajan stumbled toward the hatch. Then turned back. She stood in the center of the chamber looking so forlorn, almost infinitely sad. He ran back and embrace her, wrapping his arms around her thin, bony but surprisingly sturdy frame. “Thank you,” he whispered.

She was too surprised to respond at first, then she gripped him back. He felt her lips kiss the back of his neck. Then, she whispered. “Promise me you will tell no one.”

“I promise.”

He felt a warm drop of water on his neck and pulled himself away from her. Her face betrayed no indication that she might have been crying. “We will reveal ourselves one day, when the time is right. Now, you must go. Just go.”

Trajan backed slowly toward the chamber’s hatchway. Still facing the woman, he tripped

the hatch control, and the hatch slid open. He looked out into the passageway beyond, then back to her.

“Go!” she hissed urgently.

“Goodbye,” Trajan whispered back, and then ducked into the passageway.

He looked down the long tube. He could not recognize what it was, what function it might have served. It was narrow, and just tall enough for a man to stand with a light hunch, and he wondered how his captor had managed to carry him. It seemed to stretch forever in either direction. He tentatively stumbled down it.

“Turn around,” she called. “Go the other way.”

He turned around and began walking, then he thought better of it, and started to run.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Eden – Dayside – The Goldstone Highway

Scout turned back. "I am ready to re-activate the automech, Captain."

Alkema stepped away from the thing, frowning. "It'll probably try to kill us... like everything else on this planet."

"Don't be so pessimistic, young Alchemist," Keeler corrected. "I prefer to think a lot of things on this planet have tried to kill us, and failed."

Alkema gave his captain a rather cross look. He had begun to figure out what had been bothering him about the captain's behavior. On *Pegasus*, he had recognized two distinct strains to the commander's character. There was 'Professor Just-Call-Me-Bill Keeler,' who went through the motions of command with almost comic detachment. There was also 'Captain Keeler,' who, during the Meridian Crisis, had snapped to the fore, taken control of the situation with unwavering authority. Present circumstances would have called for 'Captain Keeler,' but now, he seemed to have slipped back in into 'Professor-Just-Call-Me-Bill' mode. He sensed Keeler had begun to detach himself from the situation.

Honeywell was also less optimistic than the captain. "Can you take him down if he does try to kill us like everything else on this planet?"

"I think so." Scout removed a tool from her kit and squeezed the activator, producing a bright-blue, crackling bolt of energy. She inserted it into the aperture she had opened in the automech's back. "If he goes berserker, I'll sever the gray thing that's probably the connection to his primary power coupling."

"Probably..." Alkema said?

Keeler was uncharacteristically terse. "Just turn it on..."

Honeywell gestured for the rest of the party to take shelter in the ditches. They ducked low and watched as Scout jammed a long pointed tool deep into the robot's innards, then gave him a fresh volt of electromagnetic power. There was a flash of orange and green sparks and a crackle of electric discharge. A weak scent of ozone wafted into the muggy air. The automech slowly bent upwards, straightening his posture. Two red gleams came into his eyes, but there were no other outward signs of animation.

Everything and Buttercup took up defensive postures, pointing heavy swords at the automech, doubting whether they could do anything to stop it should it move against them. Slowly, it rose to its full height, which was something in excess of three meters. It shook its arms from the shoulders, as though working out kinks. There was a kind of crunching shriek as the long frozen metal moved again.

The robot's head swiveled a full three-hundred-sixty degrees, slowly, as though taking in the surrounding area. It stopped on the spot where Keeler, Scout, Alkema, and the two Marines were standing. It paused a moment, and then it spoke.

"George Borrows Things," said the Lingotron.

"What did it say?" Alkema asked.

"George Borrows Things," repeated the automech.

Keeler raised his eyebrows. "Apparently, it's ratting out George."

"George Borrows Things," it repeated again.

"Za, we got that part. Is there a problem with the Lingotron?"

Alkema was already on it. "Neg, the Lingotron in fact is telling us that he is communicating in a language very close to the ancient Mandarin baseline."

"Perhaps our understanding of the ..."

"George Borrows Things," the automech said one last time.

"I think I got it, Captain," Alkema said. "He's been altering his tonality slightly each times he repeats the phrase."

Keeler understood and nodded. "Trying to find his voice."

"Identify..." Suddenly, a bright blue beam shot out from its forehead and washed out over the small group. Keeler and Alkema ducked instinctively. The Marines brandished their weapons. Sport lunged for the gray thing.

"Identity confirmed." The beam disappeared. "Welcome to EdenWorld. This unit is identified as George Borrows Things. This unit will provide for your needs for the duration of your presence here. Please address this unit with any commands at any time."

They stood in stunned silence. Not only had something on this world not tried to kill them, it seemed to be offering to help.

Captain Keeler was the first to break the silence. "Do you know what this means?"

"I can take my hand off the gray thing?" Scout suggested.

"He addressed us as visitors to the planet. He knows about space travel. This automech may have been active during the colonial era," Keeler said so breathlessly he might have been on the verge of passing out. He moved in a slow semi-circle around the machine.

Scout pulled her tool out of the automech slowly. "It sure as hell wasn't built around here. Not recently in any case."

Keeler addressed the automech. "Do you know when you were built?"

"My internal chronometer indicates initialization occurred 25,613,193-point-8535 hours ago."

"Three thousand two hundred and sixty seven years ago," said Alkema

"I can do the math," Keeler snapped. "Were you built here, on this world? Or were you built elsewhere, and transported here?"

"There is no such data recorded in my memory core," the automech answered. "I only retain data gathered since my most recent activation. Anything recorded during a prior operational period is erased."

Alkema understood. "In other words, you die when someone shuts you off, and when you're turned back on again, you start over on a completely clean slate."

"Except for autonomous functional routines that are hard-wired into my circuitry, that is correct."

"How interesting," Keeler said with huge disappointment.

"When was your last de-activation?" Alkema asked.

"This unit last was last activated 6,640,480-point-0032 hours ago."

"It looks like you've been out here for a long time."

"According to my internal chronometer, I have been immobile for the last 685,216.0114 hours. I was struck by a lightning discharge, which fused several locomotion actuators. I put myself in stand-by mode at that time to minimize power consumption."

They paused to take this in, and in the space of silence, the robot asked, "Do you require additional information about this unit, or would you like to input a request. If so, please state

your primary objective."

It was Alkema who answered the request. "We are trying to reach the Temple of the Z'batsu at Chiban Prefecture."

"This thoroughfare leads directly to Chiban Prefecture. I will accompany you there."

Keeler, Alkema, and Scout looked at each other at the same time. "I think it intends to come with us," Scout said. "It said 'will' not 'can'."

"Indeed, sir. It is the responsibility of this unit to serve the requirements of travelers. You are travelers. If your requirement is to reach the Z'batsu of Chiban Prefecture, then I am responsible to lead you there. I can also provide protection and forewarning."

"Protection and Forewarning?"

"There are numerous hazards to human life along the Goldstone Highway. Dragons, vampires, werewolves, and ogres represent a few of the more common hazards."

Keeler looked at Alkema. "I was wrong, this guy has been around." Keeler was studying the machine intently, contemplating the irony of it all. Here was a machine that had functioning since the colonial era, and probably could have kept records of everything that had transpired in its lifespan. That it had been preserved at all was an accident of the culture in which it had been left. That same culture, placing no value on its historical significance, had allowed its most valuable component, its memory, to be erased over and over again.

As they stood contemplating this, the automech's head raised upward, telescoping. "George Borrows Things wishes to make a suggestion."

"Go ahead," Keeler said.

"George Borrows Things suggests that you shelter yourself in the ditches beside the roadway, and take defensive positions."

Honeywell tensed, "Why?"

"There are individuals approaching who might do you physical harm. George Borrows Things can protect you."

"There are ... people approaching." Everything confirmed with his tactical tracker.

Keeler nodded. "Let's go." Everything, Alkema, and Sport joined him in a hasty retreat to the underbrush, Honeywell covering their tails. The automech's head slowly came down until it rested again on his shoulders. It then made itself absolutely still, still as a statue.

Two figures came up the Goldstone Freeway. At first, Keeler thought they might be humans, being human-shaped and having only one pair of arms each. They were dressed not much better than the boy had been when they found him. Their heads were topped with mound of thick, shaggy hair, and their noses seemed somewhat pointed. When one turned in their direction, Keeler saw his eyes were glowing red like coals in a campfire.

The other raised his head in the air and sniffed. Picking up a scent, he turned toward the party's hiding place. Everything gripped her heavy sword. Across from them, Keeler saw Bihari clamp her hand, tightly but lovingly, over the young boy's mouth. On Everything's Tactical Tracker, the two figures were undergoing a transformation. They had dropped to all fours and their bodies were starting to spasm. Keeler touched the Tracker where the figure's faces were and zoomed in. Their faces getting longer, and their teeth longer and more pointed. Shoulders and hips were transforming into haunches.

Just when they seemed ready to move toward the ditch, the automech wheezed and discharged a stinking puddle of industrial lubricant. Its acrid stench stank up the air so bad even the landing party in the ditches where holding their noses.

On the lycanthropes, the effect was intensified twenty-fold, they howled out and reflexively ran as far away from the auto-mech as they could.

"Interesting technique," Keeler said, brushing dirt from his uniform.

"Sometimes the greatest strength of an enemy is the greatest weakness," the automech explained. "My waste products have a particularly pungent aroma, which overwhelms the advance olfactory systems of the slave-guardians."

"Werewolves?" Keeler asked the automech.

"Many of the estate Lords employ them as guardians over their slaves. Some of them also work independently as slave-chasers. Is there a slave in your party?"

Keeler called to Bihari. "Bring the boy!"

Bihari brought the child from the side of the road. He was walking now, mildly sedated. He seemed frightened of the machine but with Dr. Bihari keeping a protective, motherly brown arm across his chest, he did not run away.

"What do you know of this child?"

"I am unacquainted with this individual."

"Do you recognize where he might come from? What societal class?"

"May I see the back of his neck," the robot asked. Gently, Bihari turned the boy around and raised the thick sheaf of black hair at the back of his head. There was a design tattooed into his skin, blue and red lines linked by black squiggles.

"I do not recognize the markings," said the robot. "It is similar to a design used to mark the slave caste of Idoh Prefecture."

"Slave caste?"

"Affirmative, you can see he has no paranormal abilities. The society on this planet is structured rigidly according to people's paranormal abilities."

"So, we had surmised."

"His caste is usually used for menial chores, guarding crops, cleaning streets, clearing land for planting, harvesting. They are maintained on the edge of starvation from a young age, it weakens their will." The robot paused momentarily. "Unconscionable treatment."

Keeler had a sense that the machine was scanning him, and had toned its response to match his reaction. If Keeler had been unmoved, or even contented by the description of the boy's treatment, the mechanoid would have said something agreeable. A heartless attitude, Keeler thought, but probably critical to the survival of a machine on a primitive world. Also, probably part of the machine's original, hard-wired programming. *Note that for later*, Keeler thought to himself.

Bihari spoke up. "We think the abuse has resulted in retardation."

"The slaves are taught only what they need to know in order to serve the Lords and Masters. He is still a child, though. The damage is reparable. Is that why you are taking him to the Z'batsu?"

"Why?" Keeler asked.

"I have memories of another slave caste boy, who was actually the son of a Lord captured in a military confrontation and reduced to slavery. When his father recovered him, he spent all his remaining fortune undertaking a journey to Chiban in hopes that the Z'batsu could restore him. The Z'batsu have healing centers capable of dealing with any medical emergency a visitor may suffer."

George Borrow's Things paused. "It is critical for this unit to return to Chiban Prefecture. I



would recommend an expedited departure.”

Before he could ask why, Sport showed Keeler some readings on her tracker. “When we activated him, he began to draw on his internal energy reserves. His power sources are incompatible with our own. Unless we can get him new power cells, or recharge his current ones, he’ll run out of power in less than sixty-nine hours.”

“I think we have plenty of incentive to keep moving with or without Georgie here,” Keeler said. He turned to Honeywell. “Let’s move on.”

## **Eden – The Farside**

The biggest health threat to Beta Team proved to be boredom. As the long cold night drew on and on about them, there was little to do. When the agro-botanist had been offered the opportunity to tour the greenhouse crops grown deep in caves to protect them from the cold, fully half the crew had opted to join, even those whose closest connection to vegetation was an occasional side-salad.

Redfire, however, found himself exploring a landscape far more challenging than the mountains of the Farside, and had discovered a survival instinct even stronger than the cave-dwelling plants.

“... and so they asked me, what was my judgment,” Winter said, about to conclude an anecdote regarding a property dispute in Green Witch, which she had been called to mediate. “So, I told them, prepare a meal of beans and rock-worm paste and feed it to Akio. We will keep him for three days, during which time, Shia may examine his output. If the gemstone he claims Akio has swallowed does not appear, Shia will pay him six strips of red silk.”

Redfire broke out in a howling laugh such as no one had ever heard from him before. The mission zoologist poked her head up from her station, just to see that he was all right.

“You are a woman of ceaseless amazements,” he said.

She favored him with a honeyed sigh. “It is not easy living here. Not everyone recognizes that being free is not the same not being a slave. It’s all they’ve known.”

“But surely, most of them have been born in Green Witch, and some have had ancestral ties here for generations before.”

“Truth, but for most of them, there is no other way but the Lords and the Scions. I could go overland from here to the village of the Journey’s End, but they would receive me as a stranger. They dislike Green Witch as much as any of the Prefectures, and they re-instituted slavery. Slaves as masters over slaves. There is no Scion yet, but there is council of Overlords, all of whom own slaves.”

She had a way of making conversation sound like poetry, Redfire thought. He had a momentary vision of honey-dew falling from her lips and into his. With a small sense of alarm, he realized these improper thoughts were bothering him less and less.

Redfire stared into his folded hands for a moment, then spoke. “I wish I could show you how we live on my ship. I wish you could see the homes we live in, the ship’s gardens. I wish you could know that there is a better way of life to aspire to.”

“Always so eager to get me up to that ship of yours.”

“The ship would be a wonder to you. I could show you things you can not imagine.”

“Perhaps, I do not wish to see anything I can not imagine.” She put a hand lightly on his cheek. “When you see the sun return to my side of the planet, you will look upon a wonder

beyond your imagination as well."

Redfire felt someone standing over them and turned up to see Flight Lt. Ironhorse. *How long he had been standing there?* In Ironhorse's small, dark eyes was a burning intensity, as though he were very angry about something. Only in his eyes did he betray it.

"A man from the village has come to the ship. He is requesting... *her*."

Winter rose slowly from the couch, letting her hand linger at Redfire's shoulder. "I will see him."

Redfire stood as well. "I'll go with you."

As they passed Ironhorse, he did not turn, would not look at them. Redfire, also, kept his eyes directed at the deck plating.

"Have you seen the latest Mission Report from Alpha Team," Ironhorse asked.

"Neg."

"They have been attacked twice by hostile natives. Two of their party were killed."

Redfire paused for a second but did not turn back. "Captain Keeler?"

"He is fine."

"Then, I am sure he knows what he is doing," Redfire said, half absently, following Winter out the hatch. The cold dry air froze the inside of Redfire's nostrils. Standing near the fire was a man of diminutive stature. He was covered in animal skins and rags. A long brown scarf, caked with frost and mud, was wrapped around his face, showing only his eyes.

"Tanawa," said Winter.

"Lady, a rider has come to the village. He bears a message of utmost urgency." He extended a hand, raw and dry, cracked from the cold, so small it might have been a boy's hand. Winter took the dirty scroll of paper of paper from him and stepped closer to the light of the fire to read it.

"A leader never truly rests," Redfire muttered.

The messenger seemed to take great offense at this. "She is not our leader, we have no leader. She is our Guardian-Protector."

Redfire scowled at him. "Guardian-Protector?"

"You've said enough, Tanawa, now go!"

"... but."

"Go home and rest, Tanawa. You have done well."

The messenger looked at her for a moment as though he were going to say something, then turned and walked back toward the village with his shoulders drooping. There was no way to tell how old this Tanawa was, but Redfire sensed he was older than his years.

"This is not good," said Winter grimly.

"What?"

"An escape party is supposed to reach the outpost at Land and Sea, by dawn today, but their guides were caught in a storm. A patrol of Chasers from Aswan Prefecture is operating in that area. Only last week they found a party of runaways. They killed the women and girls, sent the men and boys back into Aswan."

"I thought you said they seldom sent chasers to the Far Side?"

"The Aswanees lost many slaves in a rebellion two years ago. They've been aggressive about using escaped slaves to rebuild their stocks."

Redfire's eyes searched upward, as though a plan was taking shape in the air above

Winter's head. "How many slaves in the escape party?"

"Sixteen," she said. She studied her map. "The nearest sanctuary is at Kami, but they could not send a party before dawn. I doubt the slaves could hold out that long."

"Our ship could be there in minutes," Redfire answered. "Come on."

He took her by the arm and began to lead her back in to the *Aves Kate*. She came with him, made no question or objection.

Redfire called out as soon as he entered the ship. "Ironhorse, contact *Pegasus*, clear us for take-off. Alert the rest of the landing team to rendezvous at *Neville*, until we return."

He saw an eyebrow raise on Ironhorse's face.

"Ironhorse, have you ever heard the joke, 'how do you know when someone in Flight Core is about to die?'"

"How?"

"It's when he says, 'I'm gonna try something.' Well, Ironhorse, I'm gonna try something. There's a party of escaped slaves on the coast a few hundred kilometers inland. They're going to either die or be re-captured if we don't rescue them."

"There is very heavy weather along the coastal plane," Ironhorse observed, not as a warning, but just reminding himself of a factor to take into account in his flight plan.

"Call in the Marines and anybody else who wants to join us," Redfire ordered. "How soon can we be off the ground?"

"We can be off the ground in two minutes," Ironhorse answered.

"Make it twenty. We'll form a rescue party. Hoo-ah!"

Ironhorse bristled. "Don't say that around the Marines."

"What? Hooah!"

"Za, you have not earned the right to say it." He turned and made for the command deck.

Winter took his hand. "Will your people risk their lives for a few slaves?"

*What risk?* thought Redfire, opening a weapons locker and selecting a pulse weapon.

Redfire's gut reaction was, *It's easy to brave when you've got better weapons than your enemy*, but something kept him from saying it. "Freedom is the most important value of my people. They value their own, and they will fight for the freedom of others."

"If the Aswanees capture you, you will be killed, or enslaved."

Redfire doubted that would happen. *Pegasus* would not let that happen, although, for a moment, he entertained the romantic fantasy of allowing himself to be captured only so that he could lead a slave rebellion, overthrow the tyranny of this planet.

Winter reached around his neck and brushed her fingertips through the close-cropped hair at the back of his scalp and he realized, for her, he would have taken on the slave-chasers even if he had nothing but a spork to defend himself.

## **Eden – The Dayside – Citadel Altama**

Lord Havebone had failed, but Scion Altama would devise a suitably entertaining execution for him later.

The Scion walked through the halls of his First-Best Palace, the golden light of the re-emergent sun throwing shadows on the polished stone floors that seemed to bear no resemblance to the man who cast them. No visitors were ever permitted here, only his most

loyal subjects. Although its walls were of the smoothest stone and its floors of the finest marble, the accoutrements here were far less opulent than the second best, palace. There was no need to show off, here.

His Reception Room was a great circular hall in the center of the palace. The skylight above alternated clear and colored glass, producing pleasing patterns on the white floor that, viewed from the balcony rail, made out the crest of Altama. His throne was in the center of the room, a huge cushioned chair which put his dangling feet at eye-level to anyone he received here. One of his loyal firstservants was waiting to help him up, as always, and to carry out his every command, among them were a pair of flash-servants. "Summon the telemancer Jasmi," he ordered, as he arranged himself on the throne. The flash-servant snapped to work and ran from the room, literally in a blur of speed.

Flash-servants were fast.

A few moments later, a telemancer was brought before him, a slim young girl in a shimmering purple gown that clung to her body as tightly as her own skin. Her eyes were surrounded by an intricate design of black and indigo thorns that were painted over the top half of her face like a veil. When she bowed to him, the fabric of her gown strained against its own seams, threatening to burst out and reveal the intricate black, purple, and green tattoos that covered her body and were said to move in the moonlight.

The Scion distrusted telemancers, regarding them as, at best, a pernicious necessity. The telemancers were an odd and exotic lot, invariably female. It was said that the touch of a man degraded their abilities, and if she could not communicate telepathically with every other telemancer in the world, she was no good to him. After adolescence, their abilities faded, and they were bred to make more telemancers in a very secret hall of one of the temples in the citadel's Ritual District.

If there were any other way to communicate over long distance, he would have had the lot of them tortured and killed in this very chamber. "I desire to contact the Scion Chiban." He told her.

Wordlessly, she moved to her station, a small octagonal platform with a pair of golden handgrips set into it. She grasped these tightly and her eyes rolled back in her skull. She concentrated this way for several long seconds, not moving so much as a twitch.

The Scion Altama arranged his black robe around him, sat up straight and imperiously, one arm firmly on either arm of his throne. He did not know if the telemancers saw, or merely heard their Scions as they spoke, but he took no chances, would show no weakness before Chiban.

Finally, her head lowered, and she stared right at him in a manner that would have gotten any other of his subjects beheaded. She spoke in a tone that would have gotten any other subject cast into the pit of Needle Vipers.

**The Scion Chiban wishes to know why you are contacting him. He is aware of no issue between our Prefectures, and knows you too well to expect a gratuitous interchange.**

"There is always some issue between us," the Scion said, then caught himself. "Do not send that, ask Scion Chiban this question: 'Have you looked at the sky, lately,'"

There was always a delay in communicating through the telemancers. The Scion Chiban would relay his words to his on telemancer, who then would have to project her thoughts, containing those words, into the mind of his own telemancer, who would relay them to him. The wait for a response was even longer than usual in this case. Scion Chiban, arrogant bastard,

was probably seeking to make him wait, deliberately, a vulgar display of his higher position among the Inner Prefectures.

**We have noted the presence of a ship.**

"Exactly! Once again, it appears, the stars have sent envoys among us. It is time again to re-consider an alignment for our mutual benefit." He waited for his response.

**Our astrologers tell us this ship is not like the other ones. Have you met with these envoys?**

"We have captured four of their party, and two of their sky-ships, but several more have escaped, killing some of my guards, although not my best ones. The prisoners, under torture, admitted that they are the Vanguard of a large force which intends to conquer our world."

**They confessed this to you?**

"Red hot iron and a sharp boning knife are the most reliable truth detectors I have ever known. They have come against us because we are the strongest of the Prefectures and if we can be defeated, the whole of the planet shall follow. We must show ourselves capable of self-defense."

He waited for the Scion Chiban to respond, and when he had waited long enough, he continued. "We have attempted to dispatch them on the Goldstone Highway as they made their way toward Chiban, but they were too much for our forces.

**How many casualties did you suffer?**

"That matters less than the fact that they were defeated swiftly and with near total fatality." No way would he betray the true strength and numbers of his forces to the Scion Chiban.

**How many envoys?**

"By our count, there are perhaps twelve on the road. Heavily armed. We suggest dealing with them as we dealt with those who came before. By my mark, if they are not already in Chiban Prefecture, they will be so shortly. I suggest a large detachment of high and low guardsmen. Do not let them escape, Scion Chiban. They are headed for you, as surely as a mid-day storm. You must strike them down with totality."

**That would be our duty in accordance with the Treaty of Idoh**

"You will do it then?"

A long silence followed. Eventually the telemancer collapsed to the floor. Chiban had broken off contact. The Scion pondered her unconscious form for a moment before ordering it cleared from his chamber.

Chiban would honor the Treaty of Idoh, he was certain. Chiban would send an overwhelming force of armed guardsmen to finish the job quickly. That was the nature of Chiban, forceful and prudent, although not particularly subtle or creative.

He stared at the iridescent purple and red water splashing in the fountains on either side of his throne (which were meant to keep the air cool and fresh in his chamber), and contemplated himself, a luxury in which he had indulged more frequently as he aged. He was Scion of a High Prefecture, descendant of a line bred by the Progenitors themselves to keep order among the masses. Yet, Altama was only one of the High Prefectures, and foremost among them was Chiban, which controlled all of the trade along the river and its tributaries. A more ambitious Scion could have expanded Chiban, conquered Altama, Betrobi, Kansia, and the others and controlled the entire Central Landmass.

If only he had been bred in Chiban, he was sure he would have made more of his destiny, more than his all-too-cautious counterpart. Disagreeable as ever, Fate had put him here, in this

position, and he supposed it was better than his seven brood-mates. Eight are bred, but only one may be Scion, and the other seven were all put down, except for the one who escaped.

He had ruled over for Altama for two-thirds of his life, a life that seemed most times to consist of little more than being the focal point of any number of petty conspiracies. He was like a game-master, who could watch as those lesser than he maneuvered for position. Occasionally, he might intervene on behalf of someone he favored, or to destroy someone he dislike, or change the rules just to see how the players would adapt. He smiled wanly at that. Lord Havebone's family had occupied a particularly desirable suite in the Eastern Tower. The competition to be his successor was bound to be entertaining.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Pegasus – The UnderDecks

Trajan came to his senses stumbling through some kind of connector corridor deep in the UnderDecks. He must have been running for a long time. As he stopped to catch his breath, he nearly collapsed, struggling to bring enough breath into his body to keep from passing out. He looked back and could see no sign of the place where he had been held, no sign of the man who had taken him, and nothing in the least way familiar at all.

Fighting the hunger and dizziness that swam into his head and threatened to bring him to the deck, he continued stepping along the passageway, almost involuntarily, as though some instinct were compelling him to keep moving as far away from that place as he could manage. His chest was heaving, his arms and legs shook, but he could not stop. He felt his way along with his back against the wall, his head moving back and forth in quick movements as his wide eyes scanned the passageway. His jaw still throbbed where the ID Sliver had been removed. He touched it lightly with a shaking hand and found it tender and stinging.

His surroundings had changed, although he had no memory of when one section had ended and another began. He vaguely remembered jumping down through a tube-way. He guessed he was at least 400 meters, and maybe a deck or two below where he had been held, but he did not know whether he had been running toward the bow or the stern of *Pegasus*. The new corridor stretched ahead of him, a utility deck lined with blue-gray panels separated by dark gray connectors. It did not look like any part of the ship he had seen before.

Although he could not make himself stand still, he undertook a great effort to pull his thoughts together. He had enough discipline inside him to know that what he needed to do. It was like a voice inside of him, one true voice rising clearly above the tumult, telling him that whatever fear, whatever hunger, whatever panic he felt must be restrained by the part of him that could still reason. Because he was strong, he was able to focus on that one voice of clarity. He would have to thank his mother later for that.

Another eight meters or so brought him to a junction of two passageways. On the corner, at eye level, was an ident panel. "Deck -44/Section 78:08. EVS" It listed the locations of several adjacent Environmental Systems Substations. This meant he was only 44 decks below the centerline, and almost directly underneath the command tower than he had been when he lay down to sleep in the storage bay. He touched the display, hoping to use it to gain access to a map of the nearby area, and his location within the total ship. From there, he could request the shortest route to the nearest occupied section of the ship.

When he got back, he decided, his first order of business was going to be to tell his mother everything that had happened. She would send a hundred Marines and Watchmen down here, and they would check every section until they found the man who had captured him, and then that man would be flash-frozen and sent back to Republic. Trajan would personally throw the switch on the cryo-stasis chamber, and he would tell the man he hoped his chamber failed on the way back to Republic.

Instead of going into motion, however, the panel remained inert, like a static sign. He tapped it several times and finally lay his palm flat on it, trying to bring it to life. Trajan reflected on this bitterly, the first ident panel he comes to was malfunctioning. How up was that? He guessed the UnderDecks were not high on anyone's maintenance list.

Below the ident panel was an emergency communication relay. He slapped it hard.

"Emergency. This is Trajan Lear. I'm on Deck minus forty-four, section seventy-eight-oh-eight. Please Respond."

Nothing happened. The com-link remained inert.

"This is Trajan Lear, my mother is Executive Commander Goneril Lear. My ident code is Strong Tiger – seven-seven-six-four-seven. I've just escaped from a man who was holding me. I was kidnapped. I'm on Deck minus forty-four, section eighty-oh-eight. "

The emergency comlink had not responded, and showed no sign of having been activated. He hit it again. "Can anyone hear me. Respond, please." He hit it again, and then again. "This is Trajan Lear. Someone, help me, please."

No response.

"*Pegasus*, acknowledge activation of emergency comm-relay 78:08 minus 44."

Nothing.

"Access personal communication. Text, audio-visual. Trajan Johannes Lear," by this time, he realized the link was inoperative, and he sort of collapsed against the passageway. "Please..." he repeated weakly. "Please." He turned upward and screamed at the ceiling. "Help me, somebody, please... help me!"

Silence answered him, and he realized with terror that he might have just betrayed his position to the man who had captured him. He turned to the corridor, about to run, then started quaking. Which was the direction he had come from? Which way was forward? The shakes came harder. He didn't know which way would take him out, and which would take him back to the trap. The passages seemed to stretch on endlessly.

He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. Somewhere along this corridor, there had to be a data kiosk, an operations workstation, a security terminal, something. He walked along slowly, touching the side of the passageway with one hand. He came to one at the mid-point of the junction. He tugged at the indentation in the wall and the station folded out.

He pressed his palm down on the input pad. Nothing happened. He tried again, a little more pressure, a little more contact. Nothing.

For a moment, he lay his arm on the computer and buried his face in the crook of his elbow. He felt tears leaking out of his eyes, soaking into the fabric of his shirt. He choked back sobs, lest some sound betray him.

*Why was every device on this deck indifferent to him? Why was he locked out?* He thought perhaps *Pegasus* would not recognize him without his Sliver, but then he remembered half the crew were Sapphireans, who did not carry identification implants. The ship still ought to have recognized him bio-metrically. *What was going on?*

Suddenly he felt utterly alone. There was no one to help him or save him. He thought of his mother, and Marcus, and his father. He remembered a book he had been reading, an old story about two young men and two women, one young and beautiful, the other old and hideous. The young woman was called Desire, and the old woman was called Despair. They went everywhere together. Desire would seduce a young man and then leave him, and Despair moved in and claimed his life. *"He looked at her now without revulsion, for he realized it was with her that he truly belonged."*

He was not alone, he realized. Despair was here with him, a great, fat sow of a woman with white hair, bony fingers, and a dank scent to her skin. He felt a cold, dark fear fall across him, felt his blood chill as despair wrapped her arms around him and reached into his soul. He felt her calling to him, like a voice from the bottom of a frozen lake, trying to lure him to her, trying to call him to her icy bosom.



*"You could spend the rest of your life walking down here. They will never find you.*

*They will never find you before he does.*

*They aren't even looking for you.*

*He is looking for you, and he is closer than they are.*

*He will find you, and take you back, and you will be his boy forever."*

Despair tugged at him. He felt her sordid, frigid breath on the back of his neck.

*"You are mine."*

He remembered the book again. ***"... and then Despair drew him close to her, and smothered his mouth with her frozen kisses. With all that he had left, he screamed, or tried to, but his breath was gone."***

Through his glistening eyes, he could almost make out her form. She was in the corridor with him. Her arms were spread wide open, and her white robes danced in the wind and sparkled like ice crystals, and although he could not see her face, he knew she was smiling.

*"He was inside her. It was like falling through a place so dark, it had never known light, nor even of light. Eternal shadow. Depthless and cold."*

He took a deep breath, as deep as he could, to try to cleanse out the hopelessness that clung to his insides. He made himself breathe slowly. He forced the tears to stop flowing. He reached inside himself for the strength he would need to control his mind and body.

"You..." he stammered, his voice weak and failing, falling into a crack. Trajan steeled himself and tried again. "You... you will not have me. I... I am not... I will not give into you."

Despair looked back at him, doubtfully.

*"You don't mean that."*

"Go!" he ordered.

A cold breeze, from where he could not know, blew past him just then.

He lifted his head from his arm. He was alone with himself, yet somehow less than alone than before.

He was not going to let Despair claim him.

He was not going to let his captor take him back either. If he tried to take Trajan again, it would not be without a fight. The boy's next order of business would be finding a weapon, something sharp or something heavy, ideally both.

Then, he was going to get out of this place. He would pull himself out of here, climb up until he reached the Habitat levels, and keep climbing up until he made it back home. He would have to do this himself, and although some might have said Vesta was with him, he did not expect her to show up and lead him up to the Habitat levels.

Bracing himself with both hands, he leaned on the inanimate terminal, and stared at it until his vision cleared and he was breathing in a normal way. He stared at the clear screen of the terminal until he could see through his own mind almost as clearly.

Without reference points, it would be difficult to determine whether he was heading toward the bow or the stern of the great ship, but up was easy enough, and everything he needed to get to was forty-four decks above him. If he was correct, directly above him should be the vivaria, and the botany bays. There would be food there, and comm-links that would recognize him, and most blessedly, there would be other people.

He let go of the terminal and let his hands ball into fists. He felt the strength in his own hands, and felt the strong steady beating of his heart pulsing blood throughout his body. He

felt his breathing, regular now, and his mind was clear, his thoughts were focused, and this would carry him past any weakness of the body.

When he felt steady again, he raised himself up and studied his surroundings.

The passageway seemed to branch off regularly, every ten meters or so. He did not think it went all the way back to the ship's stern, but even if it did, he ought to be able to walk the whole length in less than an hour. Somewhere along, there would be a shaft, and either a lift or a ladder which would take him up.

Keeping his expression fixed, staring down the long passageway, he wiped the last spot of moisture from his cheek, and began walking.

### **Pegasus – The Quarters of Eliza Jane Change**

It seemed to Eliza Change that for every hour she spent on the bridge, she had an hour and a half of follow-up, reviewing status reports from different sectors. Keeler usually avoided such work, giving it only the most perfunctory of acknowledgments, trusting everything was all right. Lear thrived on every detail, frequently sending back reports with corrections and requests for clarification. Change doggedly slogged through departmental reports on power consumption, efficiency, personnel, environmental systems, the landing team reports, and the orbital survey reports. This way was the worst way, she decided. She had already taken to skimming through the reports from the Landing Teams, caring little about planets or what came to pass on them.

She was more engrossed in a long report from the duty navigator on Second Watch. It was very long, and filled with abstruse terminology about adjustments to trim and refocusing the ship's Gravitational Envelope because of anomalies in the gravitational and electromagnetic fields of Eden, its mother planet, and some of the other moons. The need for frequent course corrections was correlated to an excess of a rare element called "Turbonium." Turbonium was abundant in the planet's mantle, and had the effect of giving the planet its very own special gravitational field that was somewhat at odds with the gravitational constant of the universe. Turbonium incidentally, helped augment the small world's gravity enough to keep the atmosphere from drifting off into space.

"Someone is at the portal," came the voice of her auto-announcer. Some in the ship's company preferred chimes, or tones. Some liked neural reminders that alerted them to the presence of a visitor by placing the thought directly into their heads. She preferred the direct voice; inobtrusive and functional. She put the report aside, marking her spot.

Eddie appeared in her doorway. "Hoy, Eliza, mind if I invade your realm?"

She had been expecting him to drop by. She did not want to see him, but could not think of away of avoiding it. "You can come on in, Eddie, but I am not feeding you."

He stepped into the room with a casual lope. "I can't believe I've never been to your quarters in all this time." He looked around. "These are ... big."

Senior officers quarters were quite spacious, especially compared to a Technician Third Class. Change's seemed even moreso because of the sparseness of her personal effects.

"What do you want, Eddie?"

"You sound like you're still mad."

"I got an exception for you to get into Rec Services, and you couldn't even behave yourself long enough to get through the interview."

Eddie shrugged. "I did them a favor, Eliza. We both know it never would have worked for

me, it's better off I just shot myself down."

She snapped at him. "Eddie, I have to face Executive Commander Lear in PC-1 every day for the rest of our voyage. Now, she has this lapse of judgment to lord over me. After I trusted you, and gave you a shot at the easiest job on this entire ship and you throw it away. Everybody breaks their coccyx for you, and you don't even try."

"It wasn't right, Eliza... and it's better they saw who I was right away."

"The point is Eddie, I tried to help you. I extended myself for you and you humiliated me. I don't see any reason Ex. Commander Lear shouldn't freezer pack you and send you home. You are not happy on this ship. You don't want to be on this ship. It might be best for all of us, you included, if you just went home."

"My home doesn't exist any more," he answered. He combed his stubby fingers through his thick shocks of hair. "Everybody I know dead. I'd be the same freak on Sapphire two hundred years from now as I am on this ship now; the freak who washed out and was sent home in an ice bucket."

He looked her with his big brown eyes. "But here, I have you, anyway. Without you, I would have quit a long time ago. I never would have come this far without you."

She squinted at him.

"Without me, you would have quit a long time ago, too," he reminded her.

Eliza sighed, but answered him with a tone just as strong as before. "O.K., so we're both responsible for the other one being here. Neither one of us wanted to be here, but I've adjusted Eddie. Life on this ship means something to me now."

He looked at her in surprise. "You mean you've drunk their Ankh wine?"

She shook her head. "More like I have accepted the fact that I was meant to live out my life on this ship. It's not the life I had planned for myself, but it isn't a bad life. I have a duty, and I find meaning in it, guiding this ship from one star to the next. It is enough."

From Eddie's face, she could not tell if any of this was registering. He availed himself of a small cushioned chair. "What's your theory on rules?"

"Excuse me?"

"What do you think rules mean? When you gored my life the first time, you said it was because I broke the ship's rules. What do you think the reason of rules is?"

"I don't understand."

"It's like this: Sapphireans don't have a lot of rules. We have a general sense of right and wrong, a lot of moral and ethical theory gets shoved in our heads from when we're babies on up, but we don't make a lot of rules. The rules we do make, you obey the rule, but you have to follow the sense around the rule, too. Law says I can't hit a man, so I kick him. The way Sapphireans see it, either way, the man's hurt and I assaulted him. So, I'm in trouble.

"Republickers, on the other hand, they think you gotta have rules for everything, but if you can find a way around a rule, you're platinum. Law says I can't hit a man, doesn't say anything about kicking him. So, I can kick him until he's cripple and nobody has slag on me.

"So, how are you, Eliza Jane? How are you on the reason of rules? If I kick a man, do I get away with it, or is it okay because I followed the rules?"

She answered him. "In my experience, good people don't need rules, and bad people won't follow them."

"Neg, neg, neg. Do you think, if the rules of this ship are followed to the letter of the law, even though ... even though it lets me kick a man and get away with it, is that okay with you?"

Does that satisfy your sense of duty, your sense of obligation."

"You're going to ask me to do something, aren't you?" It was Eliza's way to get the point with a minimum of distracting preliminaries.

"Only if you let me. I read the principles and imperatives, Eliza Jane. I got the idea from the children."

"The children?"

"Za, I looked at 'em, and all I could think of was, nobody makes them do scut work just to earn their keep."

"That's because they're children, Eddie."

"Better 'n' that, they are 'ancillary personnel.' That's the word the ship's personnel code uses for them, 'ancillary personnel.' They are family relations to people in the crew. They don't have to do anything. It's not just the little house apes either, it works for adult relatives. If I had my mom on board, and she was ... I don't know... assistant pastry chef, anything, I could live free. Same if I had a sister... or a wife."

He stared at her deep and meaningfully for a second, then grinned.

"What do you think?"

"I am not going to marry you, Eddie."

"Neg, wait, neg. I knew you were gonna think that way, but look, it's only a rule. We'd be living within the rules, and nothing would be any different than it is now. I'd be happy, your life wouldn't be any different, and to top it off, you'd be getting one by Lear, and that's gotta do somethin' for ya."

He thought he saw a momentary gleam in her eye. Then, she asked him. "What would I get out of this arrangement?"

"What? You mean apart from the status attached to being the wife of the most beautiful man on the ship?"

"Affirmative, apart from that."

"I was thinking you'd ask. First of all, as a married officer, you get bigger quarters."

"Which I would have to share with you."

"You say it like it would be bad."

"Eddie, the floor of your suite looks like cargo hold of a garbage scow."

"There's also promotion. Married officers get promoted."

"There are only three people on this ship who outrank me, and I don't want any of their jobs."

"Sapphirean citizenship."

"Sapphire is more than a hundred light years behind us."

Eddie shrugged. "All right. I get more out of this than you do. That bud's for you. On the other hand, you don't lose anything from being married to me either.

"Gee, Eddie, I feel like I have been waiting my whole life to hear a man say that to me."

He knelt down in front of her couch, folded his arms together in an attitude of abject supplication. "Eliza, I'm at the end of my trick-bag here. If you say, Eddie, go twist yourself, I don't have any more alternatives. Working on the flight deck is like a livin' death. Going back to Sapphire, even if I wasn't scared outta my balls at the thought of being frozen and shot through space... I might as well be dead anyway."

She took his hand in hers and stroked it gently. "Eddie, is this really what you want? Is this

what you've boxed yourself into? The only way you can be happy is to just do nothing, just be useless."

Eddie slumped at her feet. "You sound like Driver. I'm not lazy, Eliza. If I could do something useful like you and him, I would do it. But I can't do anything useful. I can't fly a shuttle. I can't navigate. I'm just no damn good at anything. And what I am good at, just isn't worth doing."

With some effort, Eddie forced himself to look up into her eyes. To his surprise, he did not see either the resolve or rejection he had expected to see.

## **Pegasus – Main Bridge/Primary Command**

Executive Commander Lear came to PC-1 during Windjammer's watch. Although taken by surprise, the good lieutenant greeted her warmly. "Good Morning to you, commander. What brings you here. Are you returning to duty?"

She brushed him off brusquely. "I won't be returning to duty for at least another three days. I have come to make a personal request. My son is missing in the UnderDecks."

"Missing in the UnderDecks?"

"He was undergoing his Rite of Passage. He should have returned to the Meeting Point nearly eight hours ago."

"Perhaps, he is simply running late. Has he attempted to contact you?"

"He has not been in contact with us."

"Is that part of the ritual? The ship's inter-communication network is completely functional. He should have been able to get to you from almost anywhere on the ship."

"He has not, and you are correct. The Rite of Passage requires three days of isolation. That's why I did not come here sooner. I didn't want to look like a panicky, over-protective mother." She tried to chuckle amiably, but it came off as forced and uncomfortable. "I am concerned he may be lost, or possibly injured. I would like you to dispatch all available personnel to search parties along his route in the UnderDecks. Half the team would begin at his starting point, half at the ending point, and proceed to search in a maximum intensity search through the ship. We could also bring in volunteers from off-duty and ancillary personnel to assist."

"Sounds like a major operation."

"Not really, I have prepared detailed search patterns." She handed him a datapad.

He looked it over. "This is very well planned."

"I simply adapted an existing search protocol."

"Are you sure this requires a full mobilization? We could start out with the regular on-duty security team."

She paused, and let a thin wan smile play across her lips. "It is a mother's prerogative to be over-protective, sometimes. I know I may be over-reacting."

Specialist Farah Telecom, was at Operations. "Let me scan for his identity sliver." Before Lear or Windjammer could respond, she had already input the request. "Trajan Lear was last recorded in section 22, deck minus twenty-six," reported the Specialist.

"That was about one day into his passage," Lear explained.

"He has not been tracked since?" Windjammer asked.

"Correct, that was sixty-three hours ago."

"Is it possible his identity Sliver lost its ambient power source when he passed under a

quantum wave relay?" Lear asked all-too-calmly. "It has been known to happen."

Windjammer had made his decision. "I'll authorize the search." He walked to the security station and gently put his hand on the shoulder of Specialist Telecom. "Order a full security mobilization. Sweep the UnderDecks according to Exec. Commander Lear's recommendation. Call up reserve personnel and any volunteers you can get."

"Thank you, lietenant. You might also consider its value as a training exercise. In an intruder alert situation, our people may have to search the UnderDecks. They constitute a vast area of the ship, and few of us are familiar with them."

"You've made the sale, commander, you can stop selling. I don't think any one on this ship would refuse a request to search for a missing child."

"Are there any personnel with extensive experience in the UnderDecks?" Lear asked.

"Some maintenance technicians. Nobody goes down there much." Telecom answered.

"See if any are available to lead or assist the search," Windjammer ordered.

Lear put her hand on his, a rare gesture. She was seldom known to touch other crewmen. "Thank you, once again, lieutenant."

"You don't have to convince me, Commander. I have three boys of my own. Would you like to stay here and monitor the search?"

"A generous offer, but I can do so equally effectively from my suite."

Queequeg put a paw on his command interlink pad. "Lt. Windjammer, I have received a transmission from landing team beta. They are requesting permission to support some indigenous people in a rescue operation."

"Busy night," Windjammer mumbled.

Lear scowled and hissed. "What is that animal doing in Primary Command?"

"He was designated by Tactical Redfire as his team-to-ship interface for this watch."

Lear was about to object, but knew she had no grounds. Only Redfire would have designated a cat to cover his duty shift. Obviously, this was another one of his juvenile attempts to annoy her and subvert her authority.

Windjammer answered Queequeg without approaching the station. "What is the nature of the rescue operation?"

"Team Beta is requesting to assist in the escape of slaves from the Dayside hemisphere to sanctuary zones on the Dark Hemisphere."

Lear had been keeping up with the regularly Landing Team reports. The command interlink in her suite had read them aloud to her, to prevent eyestrain. She knew something about the slave system on Eden. "Will this operation involve armed conflict with local indigenous persons?"

Queequeg relayed the question and the response. "Team Beta reports there is a possibility of conflict."

Lear spoke into Windjammer's ear. "We have a mandate to avoid conflicts with other colonies unless the ship is threatened."

Windjammer nodded. "Relay to Team Beta that they may participate in the rescue, but they are not to engage any indigenous forces in combat if avoidable. Use non-lethal defense unless absolutely necessary."

Queequeg switched to ground link. "Team Beta, she says okeedokee."

Windjammer paused for a moment to stare at the golden brown planet turning beneath his ship. "I never imagined anything like this," he said to Lear.

Queequeg raised a paw. "Executive Commander. But I doubt anyone on this ship knows the UnderDecks better than I do. It's warm down there, and dark. Lots of hiding places, it's a cat paradise."

Lear sighed, "I am not in a position to refuse any offer of assistance."

"What will I get if I find him?" Queequeg asked.

"What do you mean what will you get?"

"I am not a regular officer of this ship. I can't be ordered to do this. I am doing this out of the kindness of my heart. So, what will you give me?"

Lear had no time for foolishness. "If you want to help, then help, otherwise your assistance is neither necessary, nor appropriate."

Instinct took over. Queequeg's fur bristled, his ears flattened and he nearly hissed at her. He recovered himself before it was too late though.

He was, however, acutely embarrassed.

## Chapter Eighteen

After the sun emerged from the eclipse, the air rapidly grew sultry. As Keeler's landing team exerted themselves against the thick, balmy air, making their way up to the steeper parts of the trail, perspiration began to streak their faces, and they drank more and more from their supplies of water.

Modesty demanded that a person acknowledging the call of biology off the trail and find a large discreet rock or grouping of trees. Security demanded that no one leave the trail without armed escort, lest anyone be taken in a moment of most extreme vulnerability. Captain Keeler, for his part, had restrained himself, when Alkema had taken his turn, from sneaking round, jumping into the bushes after him screaming "Oooga-Booga!"

The young slave-boy, for his part, had been gradually released from his sedation, and now followed Keeler complacently, holding his hand most of the way, and occasionally trying to communicate. "How many time Far Side?" he would say, tugging at Keeler's hand.

"You bet." Keeler would answer.

Sometimes he would point at the sky and make shooting noises, imitating the brief battle between the Shrieks and the high guardsmen. His behavior became more like a small child than an attack dog. When he didn't walk near Keeler, he hung near Medical Technical Bihari, who would sometimes carry him. He would have weighed little on a planet with normal gravity. He weighed next to nothing here.

They had marched for some hours before the need to rest overtook them once more. As the party rested underneath a rare grouping of shade trees (no eyeballs), Keeler spoke to Honeywell. "I am concerned that we will not reach Chiban or the Z'batsu before the sunset. I think spending another night in the open would be dangerous."

"Agreed. The night would be very long, out in the open like this, we'd be sitting duck-birds. I'd hate to see what comes out at night around here."

"Nine days worth of night... although I imagine when the sun reflects off the planet, it will be more like a prolonged twilight."

"Half-light can be more dangerous than full darkness. At twilight, all the senses are somewhat dulled. We will need some kind of defensible encampment."

Keeler nodded slowly in agreement. "Scout the road ahead, and see if you can find some form of shelter. Maybe a village, or a homestead of some kind."

"I'll see what I can find."

"We may have to barter with the inhabitants, but I'm sure we'll have something worth trading. Would you like to take the automech with you?"

Honeywell distrustfully looked over to the automech, "I'll be fine on my own."

"Said and done," Keeler clapped his man on the shoulder and sent him on his way.

### Eden – The Farside

On the other side of the planet, where night had all but forgotten the light of day, *Kate* left the ground, shedding an avalanche of needle-sharp shards of ice from her undercarriage. Lifting straight up into the still dark sky, she shot away and disappeared beyond the horizon in less time than 'horizon' takes to read.



There were eight people on board. Ironhorse and another pilot were on the command deck, Ironhorse piloting the ship and the other charting a course, monitoring weather and terrain, and preparing the Aves's weapons should they need to be used.

On the deck below them were two Marines, a technician/part-time Watchmen, and a medical technician. who were being briefed around a large table by Redfire and Winter. The table displayed a dynamic hologram of the coast at Landsea.

"*Pegasus* sensors have tracked a group of sixteen life-forms moving inland," Redfire explained. Sixteen roughly human shaped red dots appeared huddled in a hollow of the rocks, still terribly exposed to the raging storm that lashed the shore with tiny holographic waves. "They have also tracked a larger party numbering twenty-two moving in from a structure located forty-point-one-two kilometers south along the coast." A swarm of green dots surrounded by green circles moved in threateningly.

"These are the chasers from Aswane Prefecture," Winter explained. "Some cycles ago, they established a base on Shima Bay, which was the safest harbor on the Landsea. The slaves have been forced to make land at unprotected stretches of the coast." She pointed to the narrow beach near the cluster of red dots. "Someone betrayed this escape group. The chasers would not have ventured out into a storm unless they knew slaves were there for the recapturing. Sometimes, the drebunals, the ones who lead a slave party to the Far Side will take a pay-off from the chasers, and so receive twice the allotment."

Redfire projected a tiny gold Aves onto the scene, its course tracked by a blue line above the landscape. "We will come in from the east-southeast. As you can see, the Aswanees will be within 100 meters of the slaves' position. We can expect them to resist, or at least interfere, with our rescue operation."

"We could take out the Aswanees with long-range weapons," he went on. "But Executive Commander Lear is averse to killing native inhabitants. Even if we stun them, they'll die of exposure in this weather. So, we'll separate the Shrieks while still 20 km out beyond visual range. They will attack Aswanees, firing light charges, harmless, but keeping them occupied while we rescue the slaves."

Redfire adjusted the table's magnification to focus on the stretch of beach adjacent to the rocks. "Winter agrees with me that flying the ship directly over the slaves is only going to panic them. Therefore, we have to set down a few meters away." His finger ran along the beach until it found a wide, fairly flat spot almost equidistant between the slaves and the Aswanees. "From here, we can lead them out to the ship."

One of the Marines bent over the table, tracing a line-of-sight with his fingers from the landing zone to the position held by the Aswanees. "Wouldn't it be better to put the ship between us and them?"

Redfire oriented the ship in that direction. Warnings about cross-winds appeared. "We can do it, but it will only offer a little protection, and it will make the take-off rough. Winter, do the Aswanees have any projectile weapons?"

"Throwing blades," she answered. "Javelins, cross-bows probably."

"Nothing the gear can't handle," said Redfire.

"Surface conditions," the Marine requested. A small display appeared. "Sleet and fog on the ground. No daylight to speak of. The ground is irregular, covered with rocky debris, currently coated with sea ice. That should be fun to drag a bunch of panicky refugees across."

"Welcome to flavor country," another Marine put in.

"No one said it would be easy," Redfire told them.

"Wouldn't be fun if it were easy," muttered one of the others.

"When we have secured the people in the ship, we'll head out over the sea, re-acquire the Shrieks, and lay in a course back to Green Witch. In and out easy."

He knew, even if as he said it, that it was not true. "All right, we will be on the ground in twenty-three minutes. Say your prayers."

As the others returned to their stations, Redfire went up to the command deck, to address Ironhorse. "Surface winds are gusting up to 60 klicks. You'll need max stabilizers."

Ironhorse continued to stare through the canopy, as clouds and ground flew past. He paused just long enough to make Redfire wonder if he had heard him, before saying, "Xhiao, go down and check the stabilizers on the bottom deck."

Xhiao looked up from his station, about to say he could run a diagnostic from here. He saw the back of Ironhorse's head and, intuitively, said nothing and exited the Flight Deck. Redfire moved up into the second seat. He did not take it, but leaned over it from behind, wrapping his arms around the headrest. "Nothing a good Aves pilot can't handle."

"Why are you doing this?" Ironhorse asked.

Redfire was taken aback. "Isn't it obvious?"

Ironhorse said nothing.

"What?" Redfire demanded. "Slavery is wrong. Letting people die when we can save them is wrong. It has nothing to do with her."

"When I told you Captain Keeler's party had been attacked, you barely raised an eyebrow. When she told you about her people, you did not hesitate to offer our assistance." There was no anger in his voice, just a flat certainty that was all the more powerful for it.

There was fury in Redfire's response, though he kept his voice to a harsh whisper. "You don't even know me. How dare you suggest that I abandoned the Captain."

"You were two seconds from asking her to *Pegasus* when I told you about the messenger. In your mind, you were already contemplating how she would adjust to life on board. Have you given any thought to how Captain Jordan would feel about that?"

"That's two different things, Ironhorse."

Ironhorse fixed him with an '*Oh, please*' look. "You've spent every moment of the past six days with her."

"In case you haven't noticed, this is not exactly the Garden Park of Ultimate Euphoria on Bacchanal Island. It's too cold and too dark to do any mission work. Talking to her is the only entertainment available."

"You two have kept yourself apart from the crew. It's bad enough that Captain Jordan is going to have to hear the whispers about it when we get back."

"This isn't the time or the place for you to discuss my personal life... and it never will be."

Xhiao re-appeared. "The stabilizers are all operating at peak efficiency."

Ironhorse finally turned, and looked Redfire hard in the eyes. "We begin descending to the lower atmosphere immediately. Secure yourself, the descent may be rough."

Redfire took the flight deck's third seat and secured himself. "I'm on tactical systems," he said, attaching a bio-input visor to his temple. "Flight command to all hands, commencing descent from 9,200 meters."

Winter appeared in the lift. "Is there a place for me here?" she asked.

Although the fourth seat next to him was vacant, Redfire ordered. "Get below. Marine

Ryan will secure you into a landing couch."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"Just go," he repeated. "I will join you when we're on the ground again."

She hesitated at the entrance to the chamber, then went below, her expression slightly darkened.

"Descending through 7,000 meters. Slowing to one-thousand kph."

"One hundred ten kilometers from landing area," Xhaio reported. "One-hundred."

Redfire reviewed the topographical maps of the landing area. "I will launch the Shrieks at 2,000 meters altitude, twenty kilometers from the landing zone."

"Running final systems check on Shrieks," Xhaio reported. "All systems optimal for separation."

"Loading flight plan into Shriek braincores," Redfire reported.

"Flight Plan confirmed."

"Loading Tactical parameters into Shriek braincores."

"Tactical parameters confirmed."

A spray of sleet and hail smattered against the canopy as they passed through 2,200 meters. The ship wiped it off and went to virtual display mode, projecting the surrounding environment in the inside of the canopy.

"I am launching the Shrieks in three, two, one... now," Redfire announced

From either wingtip of the Aves, each Shriek released its clamps and fired a small ion engine. They sheared away from and ahead of the mother-ship.

Redfire's course was to bring the Shrieks low over the Aswanees at Mach 2, producing a sonic boom he hoped would startle and confuse them. He would then bring the ships in directly overhead, with full illumination activated. The sudden light would blind and confuse the Aswanees, while providing the rescue party with illumination to pull out the refugees. If the Aswanees still persisted, he would activate the sonic compressors, and hit them with shockwaves of sound to further disorient them. He thought he might rather enjoy the challenge of working in the medium of soft weaponry.

## Eden – The Dayside

Sitting on a large stump with the boy cradled in his lap, Keeler was talking to the automech. "Can you extend your eye sockets telescopically?"

"Affirmative."

"Can you extend your lingual articulator beyond the labial margin?"

"Affirmative."

"Can you rotate your cranial unit 360 degrees?"

"Affirmative."

"Rapidly?"

"I am capable of rotating my cranial unit up to 2800 rpm."

"Can you do all three at the same time?"

"Affirmative."

Keeler tapped the ground once with his walking stick. "Proceed."

The automech extended his eyes and tongue and spun his head like a belt-sander. The boy

laughed heartily at this, nearly collapsing to the ground in giggles. Keeler regarded the robot with an oddly satisfied expression for several seconds, then commanded him to stop. "Now, metal-man, let's see if you can dance." He began clapping rhythmically.

Alkema stood off to the side, observing the captain's behavior with concern and uneasiness. If it had been he who had died, would the captain be playing with a child as if nothing had happened? He was pursuing these thoughts not out of self-pity, but to try to understand the captain's behavior. He was beginning to wonder if Keeler had cracked under the strain, or if his current behavior was intended to keep him from cracking under the strain.

The automech was doing a kind of jig. "Dance, my puppet, dance!" Keeler called out. He whispered to the boy. "I bet this would be even better if he spun his arms like propellers."

*Maybe you resent the fact that he's playing with the child that put a throwing blade through your hand,* said Alkema's brain.

"Shut up, Brain," Alkema almost said out loud.

"Man approaching," Marine Everything called. This was the signal for everyone to get very nervous and either grab weapons or get behind someone who was already armed.

"It's Lieutenant Commander Honeywell," Everything called back.

"Is he all right?" Keeler asked. No one had been surprised, at this point, if Honeywell reappeared with a spear protruding from his back.

"You can ask him yourself in a few minutes, but he looks fine to me."

"Is he being followed?"

"Negative, Sir."

Keeler considered this information, then said, "Take cover anyway. Everything, Buttercup, if he starts to turn into a dog or shoot fire from his armpits, take him out."

Honeywell came up the path a few minutes later. A few questions about the winners of the 6063 and 6064 All-Republic Unity Ball Championship (and an adamant assertion that City of Achievement had been robbed by a bad call) served to convince them that he was himself. When this was settled, he reported to Keeler. "There's a structure about fourteen clicks up the trail. It's in bad shape, but it should be defensible."

Keeler nodded. "How many hours until nightfall?"

Alkema answered him. "Twenty-two hours, forty-two minutes, but it will start getting dark in about fourteen hours."

"If we move quickly, we should be pretty well dug in by then."

"You might want to take a good look at the place first," Honeywell suggested.

"You said it was defensible."

"Za,, it's on the top of a hill, only one road to it. The main building and the towers have fallen in, mostly, but the walls are mostly intact."

"So, what's the problem?"

Honeywell's facial features hardened with thought, either because he did not know how to put into words what he felt, or because the words that properly conveyed how he felt were at odds with his training and fundamental common sense. Finally, he just had to say it. "It's creepy."

Keeler adjusted his pack. "Creepy? That's your tactical assessment? That it's creepy."

Honeywell stood firm. "I'll show you the place, captain, and if you disagree with me, you may make your own evaluation."

Keeler nodded. "Let's get moving."

The landing party assembled, policed their rest area, once again set out on the trail. It probably would not have mattered, Keeler thought, if they had not made the effort to clean up after themselves. This was a planet where frightening, misshapen beasts killed and ate people. Littering was probably not a major environmental concern.

Their first view of the castle Honeywell had scouted out was of a great hulking shadow that blotted out the portion of the sky near the horizon. It had once consisted of five towers arranged symmetrically in a pentangle shape around a central keep. All but one tower had collapsed, but what remained showed they had all been tall and narrow, with crenulated tops like the heads of chessboard bishops. Now, they rose above slopes of collapsed building-stones. The castle had been built of coal-black stones, now lying in broken heaps. It was a near-ruin, yet, somehow it still managed to look dangerous, sinister, and ... creepy.

"I concede your point," said Keeler to Honeywell as they made their way up the final hundred meters toward the structure.

"I knew you would," Honeywell answered. "Apart from that, it may be the most defensible position within walking distance. The walls create a natural perimeter, in the event of more attacks, we'll have time to put up defenses, or hide."

*And it is still on the path* Keeler thought. For some reason, that was important. "No life-forms inside?"

"I thoroughly reconnoitered the interior. It was abandoned by human life-forms a long time ago. Spiders, rats, insects, that's about it."

"Snakes?"

"Za, snakes too."

Keeler rolled his eyes. "Well, I guess there would have to have snakes. Wouldn't be very creepy without snakes, now, would it? Are they poisonous?"

"Nay, perfectly safe to eat."

The interior of the courtyard was filled with old dead leaves and tree branches. Small piles of rubble filled the corners and were scattered randomly across the courtyard. Keeler ordered some of the technicians to begin digging a fire pit. He doubted this side of the planet ever got very cold, but a fire would be reassuring.

The walls were very high and put most of the space inside into shadow. More than the desolation and abandonment of the place, an aura of despair hung over it like a great dark cloud. The air itself seemed somehow dead, as though every living thing that entered would leave its soul behind.

"Do you recognize this place?" Keeler asked George Borrow's Things.

"It had been long abandoned by the time of my previous activation."

"Maybe it would put us in a better frame of mind if we imagined it was once something innocuous like a bordello, or the rustic country retreat of a whimsically eccentric university chancellor," Keeler suggested, mostly for his own benefit.

Alkema and Honeywell were organizing the party. "Gather up all the firewood you can. Let's try and find a fresh water source," Alkema ordered.

"Set up a perimeter. Put a guard up on the high tower," Honeywell barked.

"Clear spaces for us to set up the temporary habitats."

"Let's see if we can reinforce these walls."

"We will need find a clean, safe spot for Dallas," said Medical Technician Bihari.

Honeywell jerked his head toward the keep. "That's as safe and clean as it gets."

Keeler sat down on a large block at the side of the compound. "This place could be fixed up; a coat of paint, some tasteful curtains, wicker chairs, a few objets d'art." A pause. "A ten iso-ton nucleon detonation." He paused again. "Damn, I miss Redfire."

Honeywell heard a warning sound chirp in his ear-piece. "Sir, I am reading a life-form within the perimeter.

Suddenly, there came a scream. Medical Technician Bihari came running from the keep in all-out terror. Too close behind her was a fast-moving blur that made a horrible screeching noise like dried bones and dirty glass tossed into a drink blender. The horror chased her into the courtyard, and she was trying to make it across when she stumbled and fell, having just enough time to roll on her back before the creature was upon her.

It seemed less a creature, than a whirlwind of dust with angry red demon eyes and snapping jaws of needle-sharp teeth at its center. It had Dr. Bihari pinned down and was raising its head for the death blow.

There came a roar, like a wild animal. From the high tower, a figure leapt. It had the body of a man and the head of a lion. Its enormous jaws were now opened wide showing huge yellow fangs. He landed on the creature and the whirlwind stopped. One great paw was on the neck of a small brown creature that seemed part-human, part rat with leathery wings twitching against the dust. The lion-head reared back, snapped once at the creature's throat, and ended its struggle.

Then, the lion turned to them, his ears flattened and its eyes flaring red.

The party regarded the beast cautiously. Honeywell and Buttercup stepped out, defensively postured, swords ready. Keeler stepped into the courtyard as well. The Lionhead wore a tattered blue coat, shirt, and cape over his body, secured with gold buckles and leather bands. Although now faded, patched, and caked with mud, his costume still looked as though it might have been finery, a long time ago. He stared at Keeler, and seeing him unarmed, addressed him as the leader. "It won't harm you now," said the lionhead. "But you need to separate the head from the body, bury each in a separate place, with metal or wooden spikes through the heart and brain. That way, it can not come back to life."

The creature lay still on the ground, its throat ripped out. It had a head like a weasel, albeit with a much larger jaw and much larger, pointed ears. It seemed to have three pairs of wings, and as many arms and legs. The wings looked tough and leathery, not unlike those of the high guardsmen. Each appendage was tipped with four long-clawed digits.

"What was that?" Keeler asked. The boy had wrapped himself around Keeler's legs and was hiding his head in Keeler's back.

"Ghoulfieud Dervish," answered the Lion in a voice so deep and resonant it threatened to shake the stones loose from the walls. "Vampires like to keep them as pets. Sometimes they run away, or are abandoned. They like old rotting places and fresh blood."

"I thought you said there were no life signs in the structure?" Alkema asked Honeywell.

"There weren't when I scanned it."

"It wasn't alive until it smelled blood," the lion explained. "There must be someone in your party with a bleeding injury."

"Are there any more of them?" Keeler asked.

"Not in daylight. I think your woman requires remedial attention." He turned away from Keeler and approached the Marines, fearlessly, almost imperiously. "And what do I have here?"

You have the embodiments of slaves, but your costume is unfamiliar to me." He reached toward Honeywell. "Is that armor?"

Honeywell brandished his sword. "Stay back."

The lion-man seemed unimpressed. "I could kill with a swat of my hand, but a demonstration on one of your subordinates might be more effective."

"That won't be necessary," Keeler said, interposing himself. "We know you can kill, and we thank you for doing that. I am Captain William Keeler, of the ... of the ... oh, yeah, the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. I am the leader of these people."

"A ship? Then, you come from a maritime prefecture."

"Neg, actually, we come from another planet."

The lion-man did not look impressed.

"Realize, there are several thousand more of us in orbit of this planet. We are just... an advance scouting party."

"Then your army is vast."

"It is large enough and very well-armed. We have already withstood several attacks."

The Lion head nodded. "Of course, you have."

"Is this your castle then?" Keeler asked him.

"It is not. It is merely the only habitation available to a caitiff who betrayed his lands." The Lion bowed slightly. "I present to you, the former Lord Paperlung."

"The former?"

"Before my prefecture was invaded and my lands taken, I was Lord of Lands not far from here. I ought to be dead, but I was young when the invaders came. My parents hid me away, and I saw them murdered before my eyes."

"How awful," said Alkema.

"It is disgraceful. I ought to have had the bravery to fight and die for my lands, but I ran. I have been living as a wretch, ever since."

Keeler stepped forward. The boy, demonstrating that his mental faculties were not utterly degraded, let go of his leg and cleaved to Marine Honeywell instead.

"In all this confusion, I have neglected to thank you for saving my medical technician. Thank you." Keeler offered his hand. The lionhead regarded it curiously, then took it in his own, which was part human, part lion's paw, covered with thick tawny fur.

"When I saw your party approaching, I assumed you were a party of slaves, en route to the Far Side. I was..." he trailed off.

"You were what?" Keeler prompted.

The lionhead let his gaze fall to the dirt and debris at the commander's feet, and spoke as though expressing an even graver humiliation than his desertion. "I was debating whether to eat you, or ask if I could join you."

Keeler heard the Marines positioning their grips on their weapons. "I hope this means you've decided on the latter."

"That depends on whether I believe you have the strength to make it to the Far Side."

"What is the 'Far Side?'"

Paperlung snorted. "One hears rumors of a place, on the Farside of our world. It is said life is hard there, darknesses are longer and colder, food is hard to come by. It is difficult to reach, but once there, a man controls his own destiny again. It is said that the villages there will

engage a nobleman as a lord protector. I might build a house, engage in commerce.” He raised his head and met Keeler’s eyes. “A modest objective, admittedly.”

“Not at all,” Keeler assured him, finally giving back his paw. “Actually, it sounds pretty appealing right just now.”

Skinner was bending over Bihari, who had a nasty gash in her neck and was bleeding profusely. “Look what the color of this planet’s light does to human blood. Have you ever seen a more incredible shade of vermilion?”

Alkema handed him a wound sealer. “Will she be all right?”

“Shock. Blood loss. A simple herculon collar would have prevented this injury. The medical technician landing gear might benefit from a redesign.” He pressed the sealer into the wound and released a swarm of nanobot epidermal knitters.

He took a transfusion cuff from his bag and attached it over Bihari’s arm. “Mr. Alkema, may I borrow 120 milliliters of your blood.”

“Za, of course,” he offered his arm and Skinner slipped the cuff over it, up to the back of his forearm.

Keeler turned his attention back to Lord Paperlung. “You will have to forgive us for our armed response. Most of the creatures on this planet have tried to kill us.”

“I have lived in this wilderness for eighteen cycles. You do not need to tell me.”

“We are trying to reach the Temple of the Z’batsu in Chiban Prefecture.”

“Chiban,” the lionhead growled. “You do not want to go there. They will kill you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Did the Scion Altama send you?”

“Za, he did.”

Lord Paperlung grunted. “Altama is up to his games again. He knows that the Chiban will have you killed, and he believes your vast and powerful army will then destroy Chiban Prefecture, leaving him as the most powerful of the High Scions.”

Keeler snapped his fingers. “I knew there was something I didn’t like about that guy.”

“Altama is ruthless and shrewd, although not especially inventive.”

“We are primarily interested in the Temple of Z’batsu. We think it might be an artifact from the original colonists of these planet.”

Lord Paperlung shook his head.

“What? Was that a lie as well?”

“No, there is a Temple of the Z’batsu in Chiban, but it has been sealed forever, from beyond time. No one may enter it.”

“Captain, we have incoming...” a Marine guard yelled from the WatchTower.

Keeler hastened to the watchtower. Everything and Alkema, accustomed to Eden’s weak gravity, simply made the wall in a single leap.

Far off to the horizon, a swarm of black dots was approaching. They telescoped their vision, and saw a veritable Army of High Guardsmen approaching from the north.

“You didn’t do anything stupid like, ha-ha, sending the Shrieks back to *Pegasus*?” Alkema asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Keeler answered. “Even if our little friends are still tracking us, there’s going to be a massacre..” He sounded casual and detached, as though he were appraising a situation someone else was in.



"Not for us," Alkema muttered.

"I count three hundred and twenty," said the Marine Guard.

Alkema scanned the skies, looking for Shrieks. Four shrieks, each having to take out eighty high guardsmen. It could be done.

"I have never seen such a large deployment of guardsmen," said Paperlung. "There are tunnels beneath the keep. We may be able to hide in them, escape into the hills."

Keeler stood still for a moment, then shook his head slightly. "Neg, I think not. We have injured people, and we don't know that we can survive a long night in this planet's wilderness. Lord Paperlung, you may hide if you wish. We will make our stand here."

Lord Paperlung's lower lip quivered as the approaching guardsmen brought to mind a day, long since passed, when guardsmen had swarmed the battlements of Paperlung Castle. The estate guard had tried to hold them off and fell one by one. He should have stood and fought then, perhaps now was his chance.

Before he could finish the thought, he fainted dead away at Keeler's feet. The captain looked down at him for a moment, then whispered to Honeywell, "Quite a day."

"I'm hoping tomorrow will be better," Honeywell answered. "And either way, I am hoping I'll be around to see it."

The high guardsmen circled the ruins. The circle grew thicker and wider as more forces joined it. They became so many that the sky actually darkened. Then, one of the Guardsmen broke formation, and set himself down a short distance away on the rampart.

The lead high guardsmen was a handsome man with skin as black as creosote. Sunlight gleamed off him like the surface of polished obsidian. His voice rang. "Do I have the honor of addressing the illustrious Captain William Randolph Keeler, shipmaster of the vessel that passes between the stars, brave leader of the Alpha landing team, hero of Meridian, wise and robust sage of the galaxy?"

Keeler hesitated, then his answer came. "You left out Quoits Champion of 7282."

Undeterred, the Lead High Guardsmen continued. "I am sent to offer you the full measure of the hospitality of His Magnificence, the noble High Scion of Chiban Prefecture. We bid you come with us, His resplendency awaits you in his second-best palace."

## Chapter Nineteen

### Pegasus – The UnderDecks

In the bowels of the great ship, Trajan Lear pushed onward and upward. His stomach now called out constantly. He always felt on the verge of passing out. Sometimes, he would find himself at the end of a passageway, look behind to see unfamiliar space stretching behind him, and wonder if he had somehow lost consciousness but managed to keep walking.

That terrified him. All he needed now was to pass out and let the man who had held him recapture him again, or worse, never to be found by anyone.

The gray-tiled passageway he had been following eventually opened into a kidney-shaped chamber with a concave ceiling. The chamber was dominated by a line of cylinders and cones connected to U-shaped piping and conduits leading above and below into other areas of the ship. ID plates identified them as redistribution nodes for water, power, heat, and atmosphere. He wandered amongst them briefly, like a child lost among branchless plastic tree-trunks, glowing with crepuscular blue light like a haunted forest.

*“Pegasus,”* he said weakly, trying once again. *“This is Trajan Johannes Lear. Why won’t you acknowledge, Pegasus?”*

It was an automatic gesture, and he had not really expected a response. None of the previous communication stations had responded either. However, at the moment he finished speaking, he spied a tiny light strobing across the chamber. He broke into a stumbling run. The light marked the location of a vertical transport shaft. He somehow knew the transport pod would not come for him regardless of how hard he pounded on the call-plate, but the interior of these shafts had maintenance ladders built into the sides.

He poked his head inside and saw the rungs reaching upward and into darkness. He found not much courage was required to enter the shaft and mount the rungs. The voice inside him that warned about high-velocity transporters and his current invisibility to detection systems, the fact that the shaft could possibly stretch hundreds of meters beneath him, was small and annoying, not really worth listening to. A way up, after all, was a way *out*.

As he gripped the first set of rungs and began climbing upward, willing his mind to clarity, like the sky of a cloudless winter night. His brain did nothing more than process the necessary muscle commands for gripping the next rung and pulling himself upward. The shaft was cold, and at some level of his consciousness this thought registered, but was disregarded as irrelevant. His stomach nagged at him in its emptiness, but he forced its complaints to a place beneath him, focusing only on himself, the shaft, and the climb.

### Pegasus - The UnderDecks

The man who called himself John Hunter sat cross-legged in the pale light of the empty cell. The expression on his face was one of reflection and meditation.

He had returned to find the boy gone. This had disappointed him greatly, and the walls of the cell had suffered for it when he flung every loose object in the room against them, including the restraining cuff he had procured at immense personal risk.

When his anger had subsided, he had sat down, gathered his thoughts. He knew the Centurions had not found the boy. They would have been here waiting for him. He had a fear

that the Isolationists had seized the boy, but he would have known by now if that were the case. The boy had either freed himself, or been helped by a non-partisan interloper.

His mind kept circling back to one primary lesson: He should have had somebody guard the kid. However, there was not a single person in all the UnderDecks he would have trusted with the task. This one fact symbolized the dilemma of his life in the UnderDecks more than any other thing.

While his mind was still on the subject of mistrust, he heard the woman coming in behind him. Her hands fell around his shoulders, as though she thought he was asleep, and he grabbed them, hard with one strike, and held them fast. "You let him go, didn't you?"

She didn't try to pull away from him, speaking soothingly had always been enough when she had upset him before. "Keeping him here was an invitation to chaos."

"That is exactly why I brought him here."

She sighed. "Some of us gave everything to be here. We know that there is a very, very thin margin of survival down here. We don't want to be sent back. We aren't going to risk our lives for you."

He shook his head, as if to say, *Idiots, it was for you that I was doing all of this*. Instead, he asked, "I don't suppose when you set him loose, you thought far enough ahead to... actually show him how to get back to the Habitation Areas of the ship."

Her silence told him that she had not thought that far ahead, which meant she had also probably not thought ahead to how Executive Commander Lear might respond to her son's injury, or whatever worse damages he might suffer alone in the UnderDecks, or in the Utility Decks through which he would have to pass to reach the Habitation Areas.

"He'll be all right," she tried to sound reassuring. "As soon as he gets to a Comm Station, he can..."

"I gave him the 'bath,'" Liz."

"You did what?"

"How do you think I could have carried him past every detector between here and Deck minus twenty-eight? He's turned off."

He felt her wrists tense inside his grip. He let her go.

He stood. "Did you see which direction he ran in?"

She shook her head. She hadn't meant to put the boy in danger. He picked up the restraint, and gathered a few more objects from around the room into the pockets and pouches of his overalls. He was disappointed to see that his hand-held tracker had cracked from the force of being hurled against the doorframe. *They should design those things better.*

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Without turning, he answered her. "I am either going to find the kid and bring him back here, or I am going to make sure he doesn't kill himself. One outcome is only slightly more likely than the other."

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

Trajan was unaware how much time had passed while he was in the shaft and climbing. He had so excluded other thoughts from his mind that there might have been no prior existence other than being in the shaft. He was nothing more than aching hands grasping rungs, feet that sang with fatigue at the ankles from supporting his whole weight on those two anatomical

hinges for such a long time, and an ache of emptiness and low-blood sugar that consumed his entire body. His head felt light and sore at the same time, the muscles in his neck were as tense as cello strings. He could not tell how much progress he had made. The only clues to his gradual ascent were the regular double spaces that marked the transition from one deck to another, and these he had not bothered to count.

Occasionally, thoughts of food would cross his mind. He had decided, when this ordeal was over, he was going to stuff himself until he burst. His mother had been planning a traditional feast --- *Was that still in the offing? Did she know about his abduction?* --- A traditional feast would have featured the finest delicacies of his world, in ample quantities, but that was not he wanted. He was thinking about the big thick fried meat sandwiches Sapphireans liked. With ground beef, cheese, onions, tomatoes, lettuce, and juices from the meat soaking into the bread. With a big pile of deep-fried potatoes and a thick chocolate milkshake. His mom would have had a conniption. He remembered eating such a meal, with a boy named Ian BrewMaker, only a few days before his Passage; a large boy with curly dark hair and eyes that were brown-almost-black. Ian was a good companion, with a sly sense of humor, and a great collection of Graphic Action comics, but might have benefited from an occasional meal of pod casserole and biotic salad.

The shaft ended abruptly at Deck -21. With neither resentment nor disappointment, he wedged open an access hatch. It took a lot of effort and left him, for a time, balanced above hundreds of meters of empty shaft on the toe-grip of a single shoe. He swung himself onto Deck -21, which did not look promising for encountering others of the crew. It was an ugly, utilitarian gray-green, with huge power conduits running floor to ceiling as far as he could see. He walked among them for more than a hundred meters before finding a lateral passageway ... little more than a catwalk. He had to duck to enter it, but it soon led him to another upward shaft. It was just a maintenance shaft, narrower than the transport shaft, but with thick-padded rungs that made climbing easier. It stank of ozone, but it took him all the way up to Deck -8. Trajan allowed himself a taste of elation at this. He was only eight decks from the Topside. He permitted himself a rest on the deck-floor. His wrists and ankles were aching, and he was blistering on his fingers and toes.

Deck Minus 8 was better lit than the decks beneath it, and the light seemed to dapple slightly. The air was also fresher and cooler. It felt almost as clean as the air on the Upper Decks, and this filled him with hope. The deck was fairly open, filled mainly with conduits and structural supports, but not divided into corridors or chambers. A muffled rushing sound came from somewhere nearby. He moved back and forth, listening carefully, until he could discern the direction the noise was coming from.

The sound led him to a huge conduit, half of it was above the deck and half beneath. An ident marker on its mottled blue and green surface showed it to be *Pegasus's* primary water exchange conduit. Trajan thought back to his orientation. The conduit ran along the centerline of the ship and served as an exchange point, as well as a center of mass for orienting the Gravity Engines. Water from the purification plants in the UnderDecks was sent upward to the drinking water, irrigation, personal use, and atmospheric regulators of the Upper Decks. Wastewater from the Upper Decks was pumped downward to be purified.

He walked along the conduit, one hand idly stroking its curving surface until he came to a ladder. It was a quick climb to the top. There was an access hatch there. Its tactile interface did not respond to him, but there was a manual over-ride switch. He pulled it up, and the hatch slid out of the way, revealing a river of fast, cold water.

Trajan fell onto his stomach and greedily took great handfuls of water, quenching his thirst

and somewhat relieving the emptiness in his stomach. He hoped the water was coming from the purification plants below, and not the sewers above, but this concern seemed almost academic. It was cold, and its taste was pure.

When he had taken in as much as he could, he stopped to ponder his situation, lying on his stomach with his hands in the stream, cooling and soothing. Was it wishful thinking to consider that the hatch he had just opened must be connected to a monitor somewhere in Environmental Systems, which would show an unauthorized access, and bring some Environmental Technician – an and/oroid or autobot at least – to investigate?

He had been in the UnderDecks too long to believe his salvation could come so easily. On the other hand, he was tired and sore. His position seemed pretty safe. There was no reason not to wait by the open hatch and rest for a little while. Someone might come, and even if no one did, this was a good time to rest. He lay down on the top of the conduit and closed his eyes, just for a moment.

### **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

“I can’t believe she called off the search and brought in the regulars,” Constantine was saying. The three Centurions had been searching through a honeycomb of storage areas when the call came in to desist from the search and report above for standard-issue uniforms.

Bellisarius was gruff, but unmoved. “When it comes to intelligence, Commander Lear is not exactly a star of the brightest magnitude.”

“Then, how did she get to be the Executive Commander?”

“The question should be, why is she not the Captain? Lear plays the game extremely well. She pretty much lived inside the Ministry of Space for the last ten years, did everything but sleep in the office of the Minister of Space. She showed up at every meeting, got her name on every report, and gave deep soul kisses to every ministerial posterior she could get close to. Lear is a player, all right, but not quite so good at real life.”

“She was supposed to command one of the later missions, but it got cut.”

“Like everybody knew it would.” He sighed, and shot a scanning beam down an adjacent passageway. “You know who I have developed a respect for?”

“Who?”

“Keeler.”

Constantine affected an appropriate look of surprise. “You’re mad.”

Bellisarius explained. “I would have expected by now that Keeler would be spending all of his time hunkered in his quarters, wondering what hit him. I thought as soon as we cleared Space Dock, she would have taken him down and given him an honorable way out — Ship’s Historian. All of our profiles said that’s what he really wanted, anyway.”

They entered a lift. Bellisarius continued talking. “I honestly thought during the Meridian Crisis, we would see Keeler go down. I didn’t think he could handle that many crises at the same time. I under-estimated him.”

“It may yet come to that,” Constantine reminded him. “Commander Lear might still be laying traps for him.”

“The longer she waits, the less likely it is she could pull it off. The crew likes Keeler, and even more, they’ve started to respect him. I do not even know that she is inclined to move against him, any more.”

"If she asked you to sanction Keeler, would you?"

Bellisarius looked at him, slightly stunned.

"Truth," Constantine persisted. 100100101 cocked his mirror-faced head, as though he, too were curious about Bellisarius loyalty.

"She's not going to ask to have Keeler sanctioned," Bellisarius stated again.

"But if she did..."

"If is a game for children and the weak-of-mind."

The and/oroid began making and gestures, putting together a question as to what conditions might compel Lear to order a sanction. Before Constantine could pursue this line of questioning, they three received an alert.

"Someone accessed a hatch in the primary water conduit about two minutes ago," Constantine said aloud. "The Isolationists can't be trying to get at the water supply again. Not after last time?"

"There are very few Isolationists going to the City of Knowledge on Brightling Scholarships," Bellisarius answered. "It's better if we got there and assessed the situation before Environmental Control. We're closer than anyone else."

They quickly made their way to a transport platform, hailed a transport pod, and shot away. They exited the transport at Deck Minus Eight.

## **Pegasus – Hangar Bay Annex**

"Eddie asked you to what?"

"Don't have an uncontrolled fusion reaction," Eliza Jane Change told Matthew Driver moderately. She had chosen a bad time to bring it up. Right after the final mission briefing, but before they had to embark on the ship for the recovery mission of the object embedded in the moon of the outer planet. "Eddie's desperate, and he thinks marrying me is the last life pod in the Escape System."

Matthew was not placated. "I can't believe he would ask you to do that? He's out of his mind."

"No more so than anyone trying to out-weasel Exec. Commander Lear. He's just desperate. He thinks there is no other way out of his situation."

"He could go back and do his job. That would be one way out of his 'situation,'" Matthew said.

"Easy for you to say that. You like your job."

Matthew cut in front of her, and put his arm against the wall to keep her from progressing, an unusually assertive gesture for him. "Eliza, I like Eddie. Off-duty, he's a fun guy to spend time with, and underneath his juvenile skin I think there's a good and decent person... but if he didn't want to go, he should have stayed behind."

"If he stayed behind, I might not be here."

This was old familiar territory. Matthew did not need to hear again how Eddie had kept Eliza from quitting during the training program. He swerved back onto subject. "So, was he angry when you refused?"

"I didn't refuse, but I didn't tell him I would either."

Matthew was shocked. "You are really thinking about it aren't you?"

"I owe him that much... to think about it. It would only be temporary... just until he

worked out a better solution.”

“How can you even?” Matthew said, and Eliza realized that this wasn’t just jealousy, but a genuine sense of righteous indignation at what Eddie had suggested.

“Be calm,” she said to him. “It wouldn’t be a real marriage.”

“That only makes it worse,” he answered her. “Marriage is supposed to mean something. It is supposed to be an eternal union between two souls whom God intended to be together. If you marry Eddie, you demean marriage, and you insult God.”

In a way, she was impressed. Matthew had never argued with her before, and she liked that he had a confrontational side. “You feel very strongly about this.”

He hesitated, looking as though he were about to tell her some secret he seldom shared with anyone.

“What?” she asked.

“When we had to move to Midlothian,” he answered slowly, “it was a very, very hard time for the family. My father had been away for a long time, and when he rejoined us, we had to leave our home and travel to the most remote, desolate city on the whole planet. I lost all the friends I had. Our new home was half the size of our old one, and everything around it was old machinery. Father told us we could stay in the City of Research, and he would go alone, live in a dormitory, support us from afar. My mother wouldn’t let him. She held our family together. No matter how terrible everything was, at the very, very least we knew my mom and my dad were with us.”

“You were lucky to have such a blessed childhood,” she told him. “My dad disappeared before I was even born. My mother became second wife to a shipmaster named ChainBreaker. They did it to keep her on his ship, and later, it kept me out of the Guild Orphanage. It wasn’t a real marriage, but it was a compassionate thing for him to do. Things come around, Matthew. They always come around.”

It was out of his mouth before he could stop it. “So, what? Sham marriages are like a family tradition with you?”

She slapped him. His cheek and her hand both stung, and at that moment, they were both sorry, but not prepared to admit it.

Matthew stroked his cheek, and flushed red, hot with anger and embarrassment. He turned away from her and charged down the passageway toward *Prudence*, reflecting bitterly that an Aves was a more faithful companion than any woman.

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

Bellisarius and Constantine walked along the primary water conduit. 100100101 walked along the other side, hanging close to the shadows. “The open hatch is fifty meters ahead,” Constantine reported.

“Life signatures?”

“Nothing on the alpha registers. Switching to ... we have a heartbeat.”

They drew their weapons. “Sapphirean or Republicker?” Bellisarius asked.

“Indeterminate.”

“Indeterminate?”

“Tracker can’t determine... but it’s male, and he’s sitting on top of the conduit next to the open hatchway.”

"Stealth mode." The two men became shadows. The and/oroid became practically a ghost, moving over the deck with no discernible movement in his legs. They advanced along the pipeline, feeling their way along. A side-effect of the stealth technology, the two Centurions could only see as well as they could be seen. The chamber, the pipeline, the deck itself all became forms made out of mist and fog.

"Forty meters ahead," Constantine reported. Bellisairus squinted, although he knew it was useless. Not only had the top of the conduit disappeared in the mist of fog, but the view was obstructed by pillars, posts, and adjacent ductwork.

"Thirty-five meters," Constantine whispered.

"Any word on a maintenance dispatch?"

Constantine checked his intra-ship communication channel. "Technical Core is sending down one Automech. Tango class. ETA fourteen minutes."

"We will go out of stealth mode at twenty five meters, secure the area and be gone before the automech reaches this deck."

"Confirmed. Thirty meters," Constantine reported. "I'm getting some bio-stats on our intruder. Mass: 44.42 kilograms. Height, approximately 1.57 meters. "

*Awfully small for an Isolationist Saboteur*, Bellisarius was thinking. Then something clicked in his head. *Mass: 44.42 kilograms. Height, approximately 1.57 meters*. He had seen bio-stats damb close to those before. "Lear's kid," he said out loud.

Constantine double-checked his readings. "Close match. How did he get here?"

"If it is him, that doesn't matter. Stealth mode deactivate."

They revealed themselves, twenty-five meters from where Trajan was straddling the conduit. He was sitting up, and apparently unaware of them.

"Trajan Lear!" Bellisarius called.

Trajan heard his name and stood up. He had been in a near doze, but now he snapped to attention. Coming quickly toward him were two figures calling his name. They wore strange black outfits — not like any uniforms he had seen among the crew, not unlike those of the man who had taken him captive. They called to him again. "Trajan Johannes Lear, come down. You're safe now."

If there truly was a population secretly living in the UnderDecks, then these men could be their enforcers. *The Isolationists would never release you*, Hunter's voice came back. After coming so far, at such risk, Trajan Lear was not about to be captured again.

Frantically, he looked right and left for a means of escape. He looked down the conduit behind him. If he could run across it without falling, could he outrun them. The surface looked slippery, and it curved slightly. If he fell off...

A clanking noise brought his attention around. A metallic and/oroid had ascended the conduit and was coming toward him at a frightening rate of speed.

"Stay where you are," the men were yelling. "We're here to rescue you."

Trajan frantically looked all around for an escape route, but could find only one. He looked down at the rushing stream beneath the open hatch of the conduit. The water was dark, rushing to Vesta only knew where. There was only about half a meter of air at the top and he didn't know if he could open another hatch from the inside.

How long could he hold his breath? Ten minutes? Twelve? Fifteen?

He looked back. The men in black were calling to him. He could not make out what they



were saying.

He leaped into the churning water.

## Chapter Twenty

### Eden – The Farside

*Kate* set down on a windswept stretch of beach not much wider than her own wingspan, a stretch of frozen, compacted sand squeezed between crashing ocean waves and sharpened ridges of hard, igneous rock.

The hatch opened and a ramp pushed out meeting by a gust of stinging cold air speckled with ice and salt. The Marines charged out of the ship first, with counter-weights in their suits activated to help them keep their balance in the low gravity and icy terrain.

Winter left the ship next to last, but charged to the fore of the landing party. She had refused the offer of landing gear, her arms were naked to the cold, cutting wind. Redfire followed near behind, using his hand-held tracker to lead and guide them to the runaway slaves. The runaways were only two hundred meters from the ship, but it was a rock-strewn expanse on a slight grade for the first hundred and a steep climb for the second. Winter led them up the shore, walking along an outcropping rock that curved along the shoreline like a misplaced scimitar. Once behind it, they were in a kind of channel, which sheltered them from the wind, but cut them off from the ship. Quarters were too cramped for a good fight.

They picked their way quickly up the side of a hill, moving away from the beach toward a fold in the rocks where the runaways were sheltered. The going got tougher. The rocks were steep and slippery-smooth. Tiny metal spike-grips deployed from the toes and heels of their landing boots.

A Republicer Marine named Chevron was the first to realize the obvious, that it was easier leaping over the rocks than trying to climb up them. She jumped first, and one-by-one the others followed, grasping hands at the top of the cliff to steady themselves. In a minute or less, the entire company was almost to the top, except for Redfire and Winter.

"I can't," she told him, not the helpless plea of a frightened woman, but an angry acknowledgement that she was from a low-gravity world and had a low-gravity physiology.

"Get on my back, woman," Redfire ordered. She climbed onto his back, he commanded the suit to compensate for the extra mass, then bounded upwards, making the long, not quite flat slope of the upper rocks. He nearly slipped but caught himself.

Winter slid from his back. He reoriented himself with his Tracker. "The runaways are in that hollow," he pointed down the rock face. It had been agreed that Winter would approach the runaways. The landing team, in their strange gear, could have been taken for chasers. This would have sent the runaways into certain panic.

Winter walked across the rocks and Redfire found himself staring at her backside, the sway of her hips unlike anything he had ever seen before. He had watched a lot of women walk on his time, but there was something about the back of her legs that seemed to be hypnotizing him, commanding him to come up behind her and wrap himself around those amazing thighs, feeling the muscles straining in and out.

She disappeared into the hollow. Over the wind, he could hear nothing. Redfire looked around the Marines and crew arrayed on the open rocks, occasionally lit by flashes of lightning from beyond the horizon, where a horrendous storm was raging. The lightning was from too far away for thunder to follow, but was bright enough to wash out all color from the landscape, turning the scene into a flashlit charcoal drawing each time it flashed. It made for a strange

effect of desolation, strobe lit, streaked with smears of precipitation.

A few minutes passed, and then the first two runaways appeared, a man and woman. Redfire was shocked. They were thin as starving dogs, and the rags wrapped around them wouldn't have kept a starving dog warm on a spring day in Kandor. "Get them back to the ship," Redfire ordered. He shouted an order to the Medical Technician over his comm-link. "We have sixteen incoming casualties, malnutrition, exposure, hypothermia. Prepare heating blankets and nutrition packs."

They emerged from their hiding space in ones and twos. When he had been a boy, an air transport had crashed in the Arcadian Rainforest. The survivors had fought their way through the jungle for 130 days, nearly starved, set on by parasites, clothing in tatters. They looked like butterballs compared to the Edenian runaway slaves. Winter was the last to emerge, carrying a child in her arms. She ran to Redfire and shouted at him. "I told them you would take them to Green Witch. I told them you were my emissaries."

"They're in no shape to make it down the way we came," Redfire tried to take the child, but she clung to Winter with a grip of iron. "The slope is a little easier down that way."

"Have the chasers seen us?" she asked.

Redfire looked up and raised his Tracker in the direction it said the Aswanees were huddling. The Shrieks had lights trained on the spot and were pumping out sonic wave blasts. The ships bounced and weaved in the night like hyperactive incandescent banshees. The course Redfire indicated met the rock channel almost precisely below them.

"They're so close," Winter whispered.

"They haven't seen us," he reassured her. He took her hand in his. Even through the glove, he could feel a warm vitality pulsing through it, radiating outward and coalescing with his. This impression he let fade to background noise as he and she picked their way down the trail, the last in the line of runaways and Marines. Two other Marines hung back, guarding the rear entrance to the channel.

The first of the runaways and their Marine guardians had entered the channel when the night was lit by a prolonged flash of lightning. Redfire and Winter saw the head of an Aswanee peer over the rock ledge and point. The Aswanee called to his comrades and they were all torn away from the Shrieks, looking down at the landing party and the runaways. They all howled in unison... and began to transform.

Redfire saw clearly three of the Aswanee chasers, huge, four-armed men of the type Alpha Party had seen in the Scion's Court, transform into monsters. Huge, cobra-like cowls grew around their heads, edged with bony spikes. Though mist and distance muted the light from the Shrieks, he could see that these hoods were brightly colored with red, blue, black, and yellow spots. Their jaws lengthened, and their hands became claws. For a moment, Redfire was transfixed. There had been a thriving community of physical alteration artists in New Cleveland. Most of them used body paints and epidermal pigment modification, the more extreme had altered their bodies genetically, sprouting ram horns or lengthening their extremities to absurdity. They probably would have sacrificed half their reproductive organs to pull off anything like this.

"That is a really cool trick," Redfire said to himself as the monsters vaulted over the cliff and came running down the rocks, now shaped like large hooded, reptiles, who ran like dogs on six powerful, many-clawed legs.

"Orbs," Redfire shouted. "They're coming. Get those people to the ship."

Two of the Marines jumped up from the channel and took up positions. They sighted and

fired pulse cannons at the Aswanees. They were intended as warning shots. The wind and sea salt air were throwing their targeting instruments awry. Most of the energy pulses were bouncing off the rocks.

The snake-dogs continued coming, very close. Ignoring Redfire and the Marines, they were headed for the channel. The runaways would be pinned down. "Situation One!" Redfire yelled, authorizing deadly force against the Aswanees. The next two Marine pulses connected. And when they did, the horrible creatures were briefly enveloped in yellowish light that crackled and snapped, then they fell to the ground in mid-lope.

"Get into the channel! I'll cover you!" Redfire shouted. One Marine dropped in. The other shook his head. *Neg, sir. You get into the trench. I'll cover you.*

All of a sudden, behind Redfire's head came a sort of roaring hiss. He whipped around and was face to fanged, hissing, venom-dripping face of an Aswanee chaser. He raised his pulse cannon, but the monster slapped it away with one swipe of his clawed hand. The beast jumped on Redfire and brought him down, teeth snapping at the commander's throat.

Redfire tried to push it away, but although the thing weighed little, it held him in a death grip. Redfire saw himself reflected in the creature's glowing red eyes. Its jaws snapped closer. It struck at him like a pit viper. A yellowish liquid suddenly shot from its mouth. Redfire dodged his head just in time to hear the venom splatter and crackle against the rock.

One instant, the beast was snapping at him, then something smacked its head, hard. Redfire glanced up to see Winter smashing its head with the stock of a pulse rifle. The beast snapped back at her and she grabbed its jaws in her own two hands and slammed them together. The beast howled. Broken bits of teeth fell around Redfire's head.

With the beast distracted, Redfire recovered himself, his training had disciplined him in a technique that used mental concentration to alter his perception of time. The beast's thrashing slowed. Sound diminished to a dull hum. Light flashed again, leisurely spilling over the scene like a dawn. He saw the Marine, trying to take aim without risking him or Winter. He saw Winter, her face full of ferocity, hands in a fighting stance, ducking a blow from the beast's forearm. He saw that she was going to take a glancing blow from the beast's razor sharp claws.

Redfire raised his right leg and kicked hard into the beast's abdomen, focusing his energy into the blow. The beast lifted up and back, its claws just missing Winter. Redfire flipped himself up to his feet. He and Winter pounced together onto the beast.

They landed in a heap, struggling for position, and ended with Redfire pinning down both legs with his own and one foreleg with his arm. His other hand was clutched at the beast's throat, and overlay Winter's hand. He felt the pulse of the beast's neck below his hand, and the pulse of Winter's hand above that. Her right leg pinned down the beast's other forearm. Her right hand was free. It was with this hand that she withdrew a long stiletto from a sheath on her belt. The creature had just enough time to confront its mortality before she slipped the blade into its neck.

They held it down until it twitched and breathed no more, an oily pool of blood spreading beneath it on the ground. Redfire had half-expected it to turn into a man again, but it didn't. Its cells were dead.

He and Winter picked themselves up from the ground. Blood pounded in his veins, his temples throbbed, he sweated, he bled, and the blood of the hell-beast was smeared on his hands. When he looked at Winter, sliding the knife back into her belt, he could feel only one prerogative and he would have acted upon right there on the rocks had he not been distracted.

"Commander, we need to get back to the ship," the Marine called.

Winter moved close to him, so close he would inhale what she exhaled. Her eyes met his, and it was as though he could see the future in them, a terrible, wonderful future. She touched her forehead to his and he knew she could feel it, too.

"We ... have to get back to the ship," Redfire said, almost apologetically.

She nodded, turned away then swung back to press a powerful, mind-blowing kiss on his mouth before turning and running back toward the Aves.

Redfire followed her as eagerly as a puppy and as willing to obey as a trained shepherd.

## **Eden – The Dayside**

After brief and decidedly one-sided negotiations with the lead high Guardsman, Keeler, the rest of the landing party, the boy, and the still unconscious Lord Paperlung were loaded into long-handled baskets for the journey to Chiban. Each basket was carried aloft by two guardsmen. George was carried aloft in a great net carried by five exceptionally well-coordinated guardsmen.

The flight was anything but smooth. There was a constant insidious lurching in time to the beats of the guardsmen's wings during level flight. When flight was not level, when they encountered a downdraft or an upward thermal, it was all Keeler could do to keep from being pitched out of the basket and sent falling to his death. He held the sides of the basket in a death-grip that would lead to an ache in his hand that would not go away until something worse happened to it.

After nearly an hour of terror-inducing flight, they came upon a large lake. It was shaped like a footprint and half encircled by a range of beautifully symmetrical mountain peaks. In its heel was an island, looking like a golden, three-pointed leaf resting on the waters. V-shaped wakes from a flotilla of small boats pointed toward the glistening isle. The light of day was only just beginning to fade, but already, the island glittered with lights and fires. A few more fires were visible at the shoreline, but obviously, the island was where the desirable real estate was.

As the flock of guardsmen descended and closed on the island, Keeler saw the buildings resolve themselves from a cancerous architectural growth on the landscape to individual monuments of wonder. The island was cut through with canals, and on their banks were built palaces two, three, and eight times larger and grander than those in the Citadel Altama, spires and towers reaching heavenward. Like Altama, the walls of one building ran into the next, creating a labyrinth of deep, narrow streets between the canals. Keeler would have bet a month that there was not a single blade of grass on the whole island.

They were set on the ground somewhat inelegantly, in front of a huge, eggshell colored, sea-shell shaped building. Rows of obelisks were arranged in straight lines on each of the four sides around the building. One obelisk was broken off about three-quarters of the way to the top, like a broken tooth. There was no sign of the missing portion.

The others in his party were stumbling and unsteady, regaining their land legs as they left the baskets and stepped forward on the vast plaza under the watchful eyes of what seemed like hundreds of guardsmen. Lord Paperlung took a step onto the concrete, then promptly turned and vomited into his basket.

Keeler approached the lead high guardsmen. "This is not the Second-Best palace," he hissed.

"The palace is for the reception later," the guardsman explained. "First, the Temple of the Z'Batsu."

"So, this is the Temple of the Z'Batsu," Keeler said, casting a wary but admiring eye toward the many-domed edifice. "Big One. Tell me, good guardsman, who were the Z'Batsu?"

"Is this a test, Lord Keeler?"

"If it will get me an answer, then, za, it is a test."

"The Z'Batsu made this world."

"Good, and what is the purpose of the temple?"

"When the Z'Batsu walked these lands, the Temple was the location for ceremonies of bone and flesh. Here, the Z'Batsu cast the Lords, the Priestesses, the low and high guardsmen, and all the Gifted Castes, who given dominion over the slave castes and common people. It was sealed when the Z'Batsu departed, and remains sealed to this day."

"What's in it?"

"All the power the Z'Batsu brought to this world is inside. Guarding the Temple of Z'Batsu is the sacred mission of the Scion Chiban."

"Bring him on," Keeler ordered.

"Lord?"

"Bring on the Scion."

"He is coming," the Lead High Guardsman looked uncomfortable. Such impertinence in the court of the Scion was unknown, yet, he could not rebuke Keeler for it. Keeler was eager to find out why not.

## **Eden – The Nightside**

The flight back was a blur to Tactical CCommander Redfire. A ship crowded with refugees, with medics and Marines busily distributing blankets, head and nutrition packs among the eerily quiet and complacent former slaves. He couldn't remember a word said or a facial expression from any of them, Marine, medic, or refugee. He had not gone near the command deck.

When *Kate* set down once more, Redfire and Winter scarcely waited for the hatch to open before they jumped out into the snow. She took him by the hand and led him toward the village at a pace that was almost a sprint. The first hints that the long night might be ending were asserting themselves in a pale glow at the eastern horizon. Faint golden light was edging the jagged mountain tops that ringed the Valley of Green Witch. A wind was blowing, cold, but promising the warmth of the day to come.

Redfire and Winter passed through the cluster of small stone hovels, like ghosts fleeing the night, casting three shadows each in the pale moonlight. Children awakened as they passed, and bawled. Birds fluttered frantically within their nesting sites. Dogs growled, and stared at doorways.

She led him to a place on the other side of the village, away from the hovels of the villagers. He did not realize where they were until she stopped. They were both out of breath, their sides heaving. Beside them was a pair of great fallen trees sheltered beneath the thick branches of two mature trees. When he could almost breathe normally again, she pulled him into the space between the fallen trunks, below the sheltering boughs. It was a snug space, with walls formed on either side by the large dead fallen trees. These were interwoven among the low branches of still-living trees, covered with filagree like long soft pine needles.

There were thick branches above his head, soft blankets and skins on the ground at his feet.

"Is this where you live?" Redfire asked.

She held her hand against his mouth, and Redfire could not help but breathe the scent that came from her fingers, like flowers and blood. It filled him, warmed him, set-off fireworks in his brain. He felt himself growing hot, felt the last fragments of his reason slipping beneath some internal horizon.

He faintly realized he was no longer looking at her, or even hearing the soft guttural noises she was making deep in her throat. Strangely, he became hyper-aware of the smells of her body, her breath, as though he could sense the very iron in her blood and catch a hot chemical whiff of the hormones burning off her skin. The piney scent of the wood, the musty odor of the furs, the aroma of smoke and the morning breeze surrounded them both.

His hands came up around her waist, a reflex as natural as breathing. He pulled her small, hard body close to him. Their eyes locked, and he felt himself falling into hers. He felt as though every part of him was on fire, locked into a single need he was powerless to defy.

They did not so much kiss as devour each other. She guided his hand between her legs, and he found her space covered with soft, dense fur. She pressed him against it, and he felt the skin beneath, hard and swollen like ripe fruit.

With a brief and tiny voice, the final shard of reason in his mind begged him to pull away, but he could no more resist what was happening than he could will the sun to retreat back into night. As soon as she guided his finger to catch a drop of the moisture that had begun to flow from her body, she owned him, became his master and he her obedient servant.

At its touch, he cried out softly, and then took her. No longer a man, Redfire became an animal, awash in a great storm-at-sea of pheromones and ancient, primal urges. He took her without tenderness, or desire, but only a great need to plant his seed within her. He took her and plowed her deep. She fought against him, but he knew this was only to insure that only the strongest and best of him made it inside her.

At some point, between their congress and the deep profound sleep that overtook him later, there was a powerful dream. He was copulating with her and she bit his neck so hard it drew blood. He threw his head back and issued an unearthly howl that rose above the treetops and echoed across the chill air, startling small animals into cowering in their dens.

He planted his seed in the full bud of ripeness, a sure and powerful shot that dragged on impossibly long. She cried out, a rapture like none that had ever been known before. He felt her changing beneath him, and he with her. They shed the human forms that had hidden their animal spirits, like clothing, like masks, like the disguises of thieves, and they emerged as red-eyed predatory beasts.

They ran into the night, four-legged, impossibly fast. There was a sensation of branches slapping at him, thorns and twigs grasping at his flesh. The night came alive to him in a thousand scents. The strongest of which, the smell of blood, of forest, of smoke, of cooking fires --- were like bright gaudy neon colors that lit their world.

They ran further and further into the night, farther from the village, through the scrubby pine-like trees that dominated this landscape. They left the smells of the village far behind them, and ran into the great wide open night, swift as harriers, till there was no scent but hers and the bare cold land.

A moon was overhead, white with large purple bruises across its face. They paused and prayed to it, raising a song of communion, entreaty, and benediction.

They came in time to a herd of animals, quadropeds, plump on the grass of the fields and shivering in the cold. The creatures could sense them, and the smell of their fear bled into

the air, tendrils of scent like dinner cooking in his mother's house. They hunkered low to the ground and circled, spreading their own scent through the air, so the beasts would not know from what quadrant to expect the attack.

They sprang on a young female calf that was isolated from the herd. It bleated a call to its brethren, its fear filled the air with starbursts of scent and panic. They tore into it, rending flesh from flesh with their teeth until it lay still beneath them, still but still warm. They gorged themselves on the meat of its legs and belly.

When their stomachs were full to bursting they trotted back toward the village. A band of gray/yellow rose to a third of the eastern sky, and mists rose from the fields around them. They returned to the pine thicket and fell asleep lying wrapped around each other.

## Eden – The Dayside

A hundred more Low-Guardsmen marched into the square in front of the Temple of the Z'Batsu, arranged in ten neat rows of ten. The high guardsmen snapped to attention, and arranged themselves in straight parade lines. The low guardsmen parted, revealing a large sedan chair in their midst carried by four each of their party. A Guardsman, acting as a footman, opened the carriage hatch.

A smallish man, nearly identical to the Scion Altama, save for his robes, stepped forth. He made his ways between the Low Guardsmen, who continually shifted position to protect him behind a wall of guards.

Keeler and the landing party stood before the line of low guardsmen, irregular spots on a tableau of perfect discipline and order.

The Scion stood before them, staring at each in turn, before deciding upon Keeler as the leader. "Captain Keeler of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*?"

"Za, I am that guy."

"We have a question," the Scion stated. "Why did you go to Altama instead of Chiban?"

Keeler answered him easily. "We got lost. From the stars, it is difficult to determine one Citadel from the next."

The Scion regarded him dubiously, considering whether the excuse was plausible.

A low heavy beating of wings broke the spell. The five guardsmen carrying the automech, George Borrows Things, arrived low over the square. The great weight of the robot had made them slow, and they had had to rest repeatedly en route to the city, most recently on the shore of the lake.

"What do we have here?" said the Scion, suddenly distracted by the appearance of George Borrows Things from beneath his nets. His face soon lighted up as he answered his own question. "The homonolithicus," he sang out. "This was the property of my eleventh predecessor. You have recovered and restored it. What a marvelous gift and tribute."

"And this," he said turning to Lord Paperlung. "What have we, a displaced Lord of Kami Prefecture? I do not understand."

"He's with us," Keeler explained.

"We understand," the Hautarch's enthusiasm at recovering his robot seemed undiminished. "We, at this time, would also wish to present you with a gift."

He nodded his chin slightly toward the Leader of the Low Guardsmen. The Guardsman



raised a trumpet to his lips and sounded a two-note signal. Another detachment of guardsmen entered the square. In between the front and rear guardsmen were Flight Lieutenant Toto and the other three pilots from *Yorick* and *Zilla*.

Keeler's façade of control and detachment fell apart like a cheap plaything the day after Solstice. "Toto," he called out and ran across the square to his pilot. He hugged the young man and kissed his forehead. "We thought you were dead."

"Well," Toto drawled. "They did try to kill us."

"How did you escape?"

Toto considered the question, then shrugged. "There's really not much story to it."

"Later then," Keeler said. He returned to Scion. "You have my gratitude, Scion Chiban."

The Scion seemed pleased. "Under the terms of the treaty made at the time of your last visitation, you are under the protection of Chiban Prefecture. We trust your side also intends to maintain its part of the alliance?"

Keeler paused, and what he said next astonished every one.

"Absolutely."

"To business, then. We had not anticipated your arrival for another forty-eight years. What brings you to our world at this time?"

"We were curious about your progress."

"You will be pleased to know that your plans are being executed. We already have agents of infiltration in all of the Inner Prefectures, and most of the Middle Prefectures. Within a generation, we will be in the Courts and Guards of every house." His voice was somewhat subdued. "When you left, you said you would return if you solved the riddle of the Temple. When we heard you had returned, we thought you might have succeeded."

"The Riddle of the Temple?" Keeler repeated, not in an inquisitive tone of voice. Alkema was not alone in wondering what game he thought he was playing.

"The Riddle of the Z'Batsu," the Scion repeated. "It prevents any man from going inside. Who solves the riddle gains all the power of the Z'Batsu."

"Repeat the riddle for me," Keeler ordered.

The Hauptarch shouted his orders without turning to the guard, without taking his eyes from Keeler. "Riga, choose one of your men to repeat the riddle."

The Lead Low Guardsmen passed along the front row of his men, then pointed to one man within his company. The man stepped forward. Keeler could not see his eyes, but sensed fear radiating from him. He ritualistically removed two pairs of leather gloves, and passed them to the next man in line along with his sword.

He walked toward the wall of the temple. There was a plate there, with the outline of a human hand. The guardsmen put one of his four hands on the plate, within the outline.

There was a brief, sharp, spitting crackling sound. Where a man had stood a moment before, a blackened and charred corpse was falling to the ground. By the time he hit the pavement, he was no more than ash and bone.

Keeler had not expected the riddle to be "What do you get when you cross a milkbeast with an Arcadian monk?" but this was something else entirely.

"Do you have a solution?" the Scion asked impatiently.

Keeler held up a finger. "One moment." He drew in his own people and huddled with Honeywell and Alkema. "Analysis?"

"Instantaneous incineration as soon as he touched the plate. Flash irradiated. We have

weapons that can do that, although you'd see a flash or something before it hit."

"I asked George about the riddle while you were talking to the Scion," Alkema reported. "He told me when the Temple was sealed, only one entrance was left. Only the Z'Batsu would be able to enter the temple."

"There's equipment on the ship that could probably find the triggering mechanism and disable it. Then we could figure out how to get around the lock."

"Sounds like a few days worth of work," Keeler told Honeywell.

Honeywell shrugged. "If we're lucky."

The Scion called to them. "Do you have a solution?" he repeated.

Keeler broke from the huddle and faced the Scion. "I do," he said. Without another word he walked up to the wall of the temple and put his hand on the plate.

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## Chapter Twenty-One

### Pegasus – Launch Bay Alpha - 02

“*Aves Basil* final check. All systems optimal. Final launch clearance requested.”

Flight Captain Jordan preferred retro touches in her command deck. Her controls looked more mechanical than most other pilots liked, and she wore an old-style flight helmet where most preferred to have the necessary instrumentality knitted directly onto the cheek. She watched the launch deck rise up past her canopy as her ship lowered onto the rails.

On her main deck were two Marines and eight mission specialists to supplement and/or relieve personnel from Landing Team Beta. There was another flight on an adjacent launcher to perform the same services for Landing Team Gamma, and bring technological schematics for exchanges with the natives at their location. Alpha’s relief team was on stand-by, as was another *Aves* intended to fly down to their landing site and, if necessary, blast some sense into the local inhabitants.

In addition to that, two more landing teams were to be deployed to other areas of the planet. Three *Aves*, led by *Prudence*, were scheduled to launch later on a mission to extract a large metallic artifact from the moon of an outer planet. Six long-range survey missions to the system’s other planets were scheduled to launch within one ninety-second period in the late afternoon, part of a Combat Readiness Drill. Two more flights were scheduled to bring down 85 personnel for shore leave and bring back 32 of the 140 who were already on the surface, enjoying an extended party on a stretch of beach on an uninhabited island. As night fell, there were plans for a bonfire, barbecue and marshmallow roast.

Fifteen flights and two stand-bys did not make for a heavy day in Flight Core, but then, Eden was a small planet.

“*Basil*, this is Flight Control. You are cleared for launch when ready.”

“Acknowledged, Flight Control.”

A light appeared at the far end of the launch rail. Captain Jordan reached for the launch actuator.

### Pegasus – The UnderDecks

Cold wet darkness rushed by Trajan Lear. The current was faster than he ever imagined, and it was shooting him along like a bug in a sewer pipe. He swam as hard as he could, though he was no match for the force of the water. He scraped along the sides of the conduit, looking for a hatch, or a ladder, something, anything to grab onto. The tube was pitch dark and with the water pushing him forward and knocking him around he had no way of knowing if he were even at the top or the bottom.

Terrified, he struggled for self-control, fighting against the forces of panic as much as against the current. To give in to panic meant a drowning death. He fought to keep air inside his lungs as minutes dragged on. As soon as he released, he knew, he would be unable to resist the reflex to refill his lungs, and there would be no air, only cold black water.

He didn’t want to die this way. This was how vermin died. Images from a school field trip to the City of Alexander Waterworks flashed in his mind. The sopping brown bodies of rats caught in the grating and strainers of the purification facility.

Suddenly, he banged against something in the darkness. He scrabbled and clutched at it with his hands, thinking it might be an escape ladder. It was some kind of divider within the channel. The conduit was bifurcating, splitting into two smaller conduits. He swam into the uppermost conduit, instinctively moving up, which had always been his salvation.

He shot down the tube, which soon dropped again. Trajan felt himself becoming disoriented as his lungfuls of air began to give out. Great purple spots began to mass behind his eyes. Just as he thought his lungs would burst and he could take no more, the force of the current dropped. The water calmed and light appeared from beneath him. He swam for it.

Down was up, and the light came from an open chamber. When he broke through he was able to suck in a great breath of air. He treaded water, bobbing in the midst of an open round pool, a few meters wide. There was a ladder to one side and he swam for it. He heaved himself heavily up onto the deck and lay there, coughing and shivering, as the cold penetrated his body to the core.

He stared at the ceiling, through eyes that stung from the light. How close had he come to death this time? Trembling lips formed the words "Vesta, I hate you."

He lay on the deck for several minutes, taking stock. He was wet and freezing cold, but alive and still in the game. When he regained enough strength, he tried to stand, but his left leg collapsed under him, his knee singing in pain. He must have banged it in the tunnel. He waited a few more minutes before trying again. Gingerly, he stood, and this time everything seemed to work so long as he put very little weight on the knee.

There was an Ident Plate on the wall of the Tank. "Emergency Overflow Tank 19-Alpha. Deck Minus Eight. Section 92:04. Someone had been looking out for him after all.

He began searching for a way out. His only choice was a small hatch in the floor of the deck that opened into a tall, narrow hexagonal corridor lined with black plates in various sizes. A plate identified at as "ALS Maintenance Access Tubeway -9A." He entered and began slogging through it, limping to favor the leg with the good knee. It was very dark. The walls contained little markings or texture. There were hatches at regular intervals, but they all led down. Sooner or later, though, there had to be a way out.

After he had moved twenty or thirty meters into the shaft, red lights and alarms suddenly began sounding. Trajan instinctively looked around. He had a momentary impression of a flash of light moving toward him. A millisecond later, something lifted him almost to the top of the tube, banging his chin against the ceiling. His hair stood on end and he felt as though his bones were being torn from their sockets.

It was over before he had a chance to scream. He found himself lying on his back on the floor of the tube, twitching and unable to remember if he had blacked out or not.

He realized ALS stood for Accelerator Launch System. This passage ran directly over the launch rails. A Shriek or an Aves had just launched beneath him. A high-energy discharge had spiked through the floor and knocked him like a bolt of lightning. He did not seem to be much worse injured, but he did not think he could survive too many more such jolts.

*Why should it start getting easy now?* He thought darkly.

If there was one bright star in his situation, it was that the end of the tunnel must be the Launch Bays. These were almost always bustling with activity. They could not be more than four hundred meters from where he stood. Even with his knee, he might make it in half an hour or so.

## Pegasus – Launch Bay Gamma 9

Matthew sat in the command seat of *Prudence*, the only place in the universe, he thought, where he was in control of events, or at least, where events were predictable, or where things occurred in reliable sequence and responses were predicable. As he worked his way through his qualifications to the original statement, he realized that at best they were true ninety per cent of the time. Still, much better accuracy rate than in the world of human-driven events, like things he did not want to be thinking about at that moment.

"Initiate Primary Systems Check: Propulsion," he ordered. His command synthesis formed a metallic ridge running beneath his left eye, across his cheekbone to the corner of his mouth. The engine core appeared on the display in front of him. Everything was gold, and gold was good. "Initiate Primary Systems Check: Energy System."

He knew when she entered the command deck, even though she had come up on the ladder instead of the lift, which was so like her. He did not turn around as Lieutenant Navigator Change took the second seat and fitted a navigation module into the control board. "Hello, Matthew," she said.

"You're early," he answered, which, a half an hour earlier, was one of the three non-confrontational statements he had selected as ways of addressing her when she entered his ship. He told himself he really wanted her to stay below, and do the Nav checks from her launch couch, but he would have been very disappointed had she done so.

"I want to speak with you before the rest of the crew came on board." Four engineering specialists were to join them in the mission to extract the object, as well as a mission Medical Technician whom everyone hoped would not be needed.

"Initiate Secondary Systems Check. Laser Cutting System Operational Check." For this mission, *Prudence* had been outfitted with a pair of mining lasers, which hung in a dome at the front of the command module.

"Matthew, I am sorry for hitting you." Her voice was sincere, although her apology did not have the ring of empathy, of pleading, Matthew had imagined in his mind.

"It was wrong of me to say what I said. I can forgive you, if you can forgive me," his voice was matter-of-fact, he requested another systems check with the same tones.

"I've decided not to marry Eddie," she blurted.

Matthew swiveled his head to look at her, stifling a gasp of surprise in his throat and finally saying, "Good."

She watched the navigational profile self-diagnose itself within *Prudence's* Navigational Brain Core. "Do you want to know why?"

Of course he did, but he was trying to be cool. "Why?" he asked, managing to sound almost indifferent.

"Partly it was because you made me think of how many things I had in my life that had no value. I didn't want to add marriage to that list. Also, I guess I don't think its okay to kick a man even if the law says I can't hit him."

"You lost me."

"No importance. Finally, I guess I just thought about being Eliza Jane Change Roebuck and it just didn't sound like a name I wanted to carry around with me."

Matthew looked at her hard. *Was this a joke? Should I laugh?*

She hit him lightly on the arm. "It's a joke, stupid."

He didn't laugh, but he did return a dimpled smile.

"Have you told him?" Matthew asked.

"Just before embarkation."

"How did he take it?"

"He said it was no big deal. He said he had a fallback plan."

Matthew sighed. "He always does. Initiate Primary Systems Check: Weapons."

### **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

A faint stinging remained in his elbows and his good knee, and his ears were still ringing from the EM discharge, but Trajan Lear was forging on. The end of the shaft was only half as far away now.

### **Pegasus – Launch Bay Gamma 9**

The Lead Mission Specialist, entered the Command Deck as Matthew completed final systems checks. "Flt. Lieutenant, Driver?" he asked, addressing Eliza.

"Other seat," she told him, pointing at Matthew.

"Oh, sorry. Engineering Specialist Hiram Olivetti, I'll be directing the extraction part of the mission."

Matthew and Eliza looked him over. Tallish, overweight and wiry-haired, but what stood out most was that his flight jacket was tucked under the waist of his pants on one side and hanging free on the left. They both simultaneously wondered how someone so inept at bathroom recovery could be put in charge of a tricky extraction mission... or any mission.

"Welcome aboard," Matthew said. "We are scheduled for departure in twelve minutes. You should get into your launch couch."

"I just thought we should review the flight plan, just quickly, before launch."

"We reviewed it this afterdawn, at the Pre-Launch briefing."

"I wasn't invited to that meeting."

Eliza doubted it. All the other Mission Specialists had been there. Nonetheless, she brought up a screen. It displayed the flight plan graphically as she narrated. "We will depart *Pegasus*, accelerate to point-two-five-c, and proceed to La Grange Eight. We will rendezvous with the Aves *Quentin* and *Susan* and proceed to 10 223 Equuleus IV, reaching the fifth moon fifty-four minutes, relativistic time, from our departure."

"Do you have orbital patterns laid in?" he asked. "We need an optimal orbit for the lasers to be able to cut around the artifact. The orbital patterns should be laid in."

"I have already calculated those orbits. You can access them through your station."

"Shouldn't we go over them now? Together?"

Eliza Jane Change raised an eyebrow. "We could go over them now, but we have only twelve minutes to launch. It would take half an hour to go over the detailed orbital projections ... with a knowledgeable individual. With someone whose expertise in orbital mechanics is deficient, it would take much longer."

"I see, but couldn't we..."

"Besides which, Matthew is eager to find out if its possible to complete a launch cycle with

a completely naked woman on his lap, and I promised to help out. We would really appreciate some privacy."

The engineer's jaw dropped, and he stammered. "Oh, ... I see... uh..." He all but fell down the lift in his rush to escape. Eliza smiled, and saw that Matthew's face was as red on the giant red spot on Gigantor (eighth planet of the Sapphirean system). "Sorry to have embarrassed you. That twitch was annoying me."

"Uh, no problem," Matthew said, smiling between his reddened cheeks, marveling at the capacity of this woman to disorder, restore, then disorder his universe again. "No problem at all."

### **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

Trajan continued forward; another hundred meters and then another hundred. His clothes were wet and chafing against his skin. His hunger had become too great a force to ignore. He was bruised all over, and then there was the matter of his knee.

If he were to meet Vesta someday, he thought, if there even really were a Vesta (which he sometimes, to his private shame, doubted), he would have much to say about this journey. Perhaps it was time to consider a conversion, although, in retrospect, a conversion would have been more useful *before* he had commenced his Passage.

*Maybe, he thought, maybe a long time from now I will think back to this Passage, and then I will know what it meant, because it sure seems stupid and useless now.*

### **Pegasus – Launch bay Gamma 9**

Matthew and Eliza completed their final launch checks. "Mission specialists report all on-board. Safety latches secured. Disconnecting from external support." Support apparatuses detached from above and beneath the ship and disappeared into the deck.

"Umbilical supports cleared. Internal power optimal."

"Do you always repeat things to yourself?" Eliza asked.

Matthew did not answer her. It was a pilot thing. She wouldn't understand. "Initiating pre-ignition sequence. GE is nominal. *Prudence* to launch control. Report all systems optimal. Launch-enabled at your clearance. "

A calm feminine voice answered him. "*Prudence*, your launch vector is Nine-Alpha. Stand-by for ASL positioning."

The deck vanished below the ship and it was lowered into the Launch Bay.

"*Prudence* lowering into launch position," Matthew reported. "Stand by for depressurization."

### **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

There was a light ahead, and muffled machinery noise. The Landing Bays. Trajan began hobbling faster. Less than a hundred meters now. Almost there.

He passed through a pressure hatch about forty meters before the end of the maintenance shaft. As he shuffled away from it, red lights began to flash, and a message appeared on the walls.

*WARNING: Maintenance Access Decompression in 30 Seconds.*

Trajan stopped. If the passage was decompressing, it meant that a vehicle was about to launch. The whole compartment was about to lose air pressure. He turned back to the hatch in indecision. Should he dive behind it, stay in the pressurized part of the tube and endure another shockwave. It probably wouldn't kill him. Depressurization probably would.

Then the hatch dropped, making his choice for him. He turned and broke into a hard sprint away from it, ignoring the bone-hard pain that shot through his legs. There was light ahead of him. He broke for the light with all he had.

The warning projected on the wall tracked him as he ran. *17 Seconds. 16 Seconds. 15 Seconds. 14 Seconds.* Too much tube remained, and not nearly enough seconds so it seemed. He pushed himself a little more.

*Eleven Seconds.*

He saw the end before him, a large aperture in the floor of the deck providing access to the Launch Bay below it, much farther below than he would have expected. He did not hesitate, though. With nine seconds on the clock, he cleared the edge of the aperture and leaped into the hole.

As he fell through space, time left him. He was aware of flashing red and yellow lights all around him, of klaxons bleating and machinery humming. He saw the Aves below him, like a raptor about to take flight, and observed quite detachedly that he was probably going to land on the front of the command module. Two scenarios occurred in his mind. 1. Immediately before launch, the entire chamber would be depressurized to a near vacuum, and he would die quickly when his lungs exploded, possibly blow out into space in the process. 2. He would land on the Aves and be crushed to a red stain when the ship accelerated to launch velocity.

Either way, his journey would soon be over.

## **Pegasus – Launch Bay Gamma 9**

"Commencing depressurization, sequence."

"*Prudence* acknowledges. Clear for immediate launch on depressurization." Matthew turned to Eliza. "You made a good choice," he told her. He reached for the launch control.

Suddenly, something slammed into *Prudence's* canopy. Driver heard a bump and looked up to see the boy lying on top of his command module. For a brief second, their eyes met, then the boy's rolled up into his head.

"Emergency. Abort launch. Abort launch," Matthew screamed, the volume and pitch of his voice rising. "Emergency. Cancel Decompression. Cancel Decompression."

Automatic systems activated to carry out his orders before he had even stated them aloud. *Prudence* began rising back to the flight deck. Klaxons changed pitch, becoming instantly louder and more urgent to warn of an emergency abort.

"*Pegasus* Launch Control aborting launch cycle. *Prudence*, convey nature of emergency."

Driver looked again at the unconscious boy sprawling on top of his canopy. Blood had begun to trickle from the boy's mouth. Eliza answered for him. "*Pegasus*, *Prudence* has a medical emergency. Dispatch medical personnel to Launch Bay Gamma Nine."

"Emergency Canopy Release," Driver said. The locks disengaged. He pushed out the panel behind his command seat and pulled himself to the top of the ship. *Prudence* was still rising, coming up level with the floor of the landing deck. He reached over to the boy and gently



rolled him over. Immediately, he began sputtering and choking, blood squirting from his mouth with each convulsion.

"I need a Med-Tech up here," he called out. He straddled the boy across the waist, put one hand behind his head and gently pulled the jaw open with the other. He cleaned out a clot of blood and broken teeth and made sure the air passage was clear again.

"Good God, it's Commander Lear's son," he heard a voice say. He looked up to see his mission Med. Tech, Jersey Partridge, walking across the top of his ship with a medical tracker extended before him. He knelt beside Driver. "Fractured jaw, multiple dental fractures, fractured ribs, bruised spleen ..."

"Will he be all right?" Matthew asked.

"Muscular distortion around the knee, multiple bruises... he's going to hurt, but I don't think he's going to die."

They both looked up to the place from which Trajan had fallen. It was at least two decks above them.

"How did he get up there?" Matthew asked.

"Commander Lear has the Watch searching the whole ship for him," Eliza reported. She was remaining in the cockpit, keeping order.

"Somebody should inform her that he's here," Matthew said.

Trajan's eyes opened. Matthew brushed the boy's hair from his forehead. "You're all right," he told him in a calm assuring voice.

"That's good. Keep him calm." Partridge placed a small adhesive device to Trajan's temple. "This should help with the pain. Don't try to talk."

Trajan continued to stare at Matthew, and the flight uniform that meant he was a member of this crew, a member of the society to which Trajan belonged. He was home again. He raised his hand weakly and grabbed for Matthew's.

Matthew took it and held it tightly. "You're going to be all right," he said, staring back, trying to convey feelings of serenity and healing the way he was taught at the academy.

He felt the boy relax beneath him.

"He's soaking wet," said Jersey Partridge. "His life signature's been scrambled somehow. His brainwaves look like he's been electrocuted. His blood chemistry is all messed up." He looked at Driver. "This kid's been to Hell and back."

Matthew did not take his eyes away. "You're all right now. You are safe." The boy stared back at him, and he could see a light of trust inside them.

"He could use some blood," Partridge said.

Matthew saw, as though for the first time, the blood that was spotting the canopy of his ship. His flight suit was already stained by it. He offered his free arm. "Here."

Partridge slipped the transfusion cuff onto Matthew's arm. "I just need to calibrate for type differences... oh, you're compatible. Never mind."

Matthew watched as a deep crimson stream began to flow into the boy. He squeezed the hand a little tighter. "You're going to be fine," he reassured him once again.

Trajan Lear began slowly receding away from the pain and the light. It was safe to rest now. He felt safe and secure, a sense of well-being radiating from those around him, especially the man holding his hand. The face of the handsome pilot who had come to his rescue, whose

blood was even know trickling into his veins, faded and blurred. Trajan heard him say, "He's losing consciousness."

The medicrat was saying, "It's all right... he's stabilizing... he's ... just ... falling... to ... sleep."

And Trajan Lear slept.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Eden – The Dayside – Chiban Prefecture

As Keeler matched his hand to the outline on the pad, and pressed, he felt energy surging through him strong as an ocean wave. It made a buzzing in his head, followed by a sort of weak 'pop.' His hair stung, and his arm felt like it was on fire.

A parabolic section in the wall of the Temple of the Z'batsu vanished. None of the interior was revealed, but the aperture was there.

The other members of the landing party were still standing in a dumb stupor.

"I don't know how long it's going to stay open," Keeler called out, fighting the energy that was trying to clamp his teeth shut.

Bless his crew, they did not need to be told twice. They rushed the opening. Keeler did not know whether holding his hand on the panel was necessary the aperture open, but he decided it probably couldn't hurt.

As each crew member entered, they seemed to vanish, as if they were not entering a building but jumping through a gateway into another universe. The last to enter were Blade Toto and a Technician named D who carried Medical Technician Bihari over the threshold.

Keeler called out, "You too, George... Paperlung."

Lord Paperlung briefly contemplated whether he preferred being outside with the Scion's men or inside with Keeler's, and then ran toward the hole. The automech moved surprisingly fast. Keeler released the pad as soon as they were through the portal, and dove in after them, lest it close up as suddenly as it opened.

The Scion's men had also begun charging the opening. However, from the inside, it looked less like a live image than a projection on a screen. Regardless, Keeler looked around quickly, found another panel with another hand-print on it. He pressed against it and the aperture closed. "I don't want those goombahs in here," he explained.

"How did you do that?" Alkema asked.

"The door was designed to keep them out, not us," Keeler answered.

"How did you know you wouldn't be killed when you touched the panel."

"Lucky guess."

Alkema threw down his pack in frustration and faced down his captain. "I want a real answer, sir. I have to know. I am tired of your ... totally inappropriate attitude. You're not mentoring me very well."

Keeler met his gaze for the first time in what was probably days. Alkema saw his eyes soften, just slightly.

"Logic," he answered finally. "... and poetics."

"Poetics?" Alkema did not seem to understand. "You mean like, 'Blood-flowers are red/Shadow-blossoms are black/If I said I love you/Would you love me back?'"

"Something like that. When we first arrived, I was trying to figure out how this world worked, just as the rest of you were. Our approach was flawed. We were trying to solve the problem in terms of our own safe, terror-free worlds, trying to come to a rational conclusion. But this world doesn't play by our rules, it never did, and I don't think it was never meant to.

"After the first attack, when Goodyear and Hastings were killed, I realized the folly of trying to rationalize the irrational. I saw how this world was affecting you, how it was affecting all of us. I knew we would be at each other's throats before long. I could not allow that to happen. I ceased trying to rationalize everything I saw, and, instead, I just decided to observe and accept, accept and observe... let this planet reveal itself to me.

"Soon after that, the planet obliged. We met George, and George addressed us as 'visitors.' He also scanned us thoroughly. After the scan, he proceeded to assist us, and to obey our commands... no matter how ridiculous. There was something about us he recognized, something that set us apart from the other goombahs on this planet."

Alkema seemed perplexed. "The Scion alluded to other visitors from other worlds, who could not access the Temple."

"How do we know they even tried?" Keeler asked.

Honeywell was even more skeptical. "Captain, that seems like an awfully thin rationale..."

"We're inside aren't we?" Keeler snapped. Then, he sighed. "I'm sorry. Za, there was more to it than that, but a lot more of it was instinct. I let myself accept the fundamental unreality of this world. After that, things began to make sense." "I just watched the way this world functioned, I thought about everything that had happened to us and it just made sense to touch that panel."

"So you have this world figured out." Alkema said.

Keeler answered. "Not quite... but I've got a handle on it. It's artificial, incredibly artificial; the topography, the cities, the people, even the plant-life, it's like... like a museum exhibit... Neg, not a museum exhibit, more like a shopping zone. Neg, it isn't that either..." He shook off that line of thought. "I am quite close to figuring it out. This is the right place. The answer is in here, we only have to find it."

Keeler looked up. "Sacred Excrement," he whispered.

The interior of the structure was vast and exquisite, without being aesthetically pleasing. Across the ceiling was a blizzard of giant crystal snowflakes radiating blue-white light. It hurt their eyes at first, although they realized it was, for them, a natural spectrum, as opposed to the gold-filtered light of the planet outside. The walls were curved like the exterior. It was like being inside a giant crystal egg.

"Specialist... you," Keeler said, pointing his walking stick at Scout. "Take a party around, see if you can find a way to recharge George."

Scout gave a quick nod, grabbed a technician. "Lead on, George. You probably remember where those things are kept."

"Affirmative."

Skinner grabbed Keeler's arm. "Good Lord, Captain. Your hand."

He lifted the hand that had gotten caught under the door. It was burned, and blood was dripping from the base of his fingernails, the skin around each knuckle was necrotic. Even the clothing had been bleached and shredded somehow. Keeler raised one side of his mouth in what might have passed for a cocky half-smile. "All right, maybe that didn't work perfectly."

"There is not much I can do," Skinner removed an anesthetic healing bandage from his kit and began wrapping the hand. "This is like the arm of a mummy of a burn victim."

"Will I ever play the ninety-key-harptilocus again?" Keeler asked.

Instead of waiting for the punchline, Alkema shined his lamp on the walls, which were covered with small tiles, about one centimeter high and twice as long. On each one was

engraved a small image. "What are those?"

Keeler studied the figures. "Stylized tactile ideogrammatic calligraphy," was his assessment. "Quite common on monuments built by ancient human civilizations. Let me demonstrate." He moved away from the medical technician and took Alkema's hand with his bandaged one, his walking stick, as ever, clutched in his good hand. "I'll need your hand. Mine's in no shape for this."

Gently, he rubbed Alkema's fingertips across the tiles. As he did so, images flooded Alkema's mind with each tile. It was a fragmentary effect, like flashes of memory, like what an insect with a compound eye might see. A woman laughing... or screaming. Great metal spheres falling to earth. Children recoiling from make-believe monsters.

"It doesn't make sense," Alkema said.

Keeler thought it over. "Wait, you're reading it up and down." He pulled Alkema's arm gently sideways across the wall. He saw Alkema's eyes widen. "What is it?"

Alkema began walking away from him, his fingertips still drifting across the surface of the wall. "This way to the monsters," he said.

## **Eden – The Farside**

Winter had not oversold the daybreak.

The night had grown lighter and lighter over several hours, the air warmed. Spring breezes blew across the landscape. Then, the air grew still, saturated with possibilities. The sky remained gray, an expanse of cloud-cover so flat and complete it might have been a sheet of frosted glass. Then, the sun rose above the horizon, invisible at first, but brightening the cloud cover, making to burn through like a flame through paper. Then, a single shaft of sunlight stabbed through the clouds like a spotlight. Then another and another, and the clouds began to boil away explosively. The last clouds burned away from the orb of the sun like the shock-wave of a nuclear blast. The temperature jumped 20 degrees in a matter of moments. The snow and the frost on the rocks melted away like time-lapse photography. Such was daybreak on the Far Side of Eden.

Ironhorse had watched the event sitting cross-legged atop the canopy of his ship. His crew, who stood watching with the villagers, cheered as though at a music concert. The sunrises, said some of the villagers, were the only thing the Far Side had over the Dayside.

That and freedom.

The Aves *Basil* came gently through the new day's sky on the Far Side, settling down not far from the first two. Ironhorse had been expecting her. When the hatch opened, he was standing by, ready to receive her. "Captain Jordan."

She removed her flight helmet, and a thick crop of golden blond hair fell perfectly around her face. "I trust the landing team is well."

"No injuries among us. Most of them are off exploring."

"I have put you in for a commendation for the rescue mission."

Ironhorse, out of modesty or simple indifference, said nothing.

"Where is Commander Redfire?"

There was the briefest of pauses, then Ironhorse answered. "No one has seen him since we returned from the Rescue Mission."

"Where was he last seen?"

Ironhorse paused again before answering. "He was last seen leaving the ship with a woman from the village."

Jordan raised a perfect eyebrow. "A woman?"

"Tactical Commander Redfire was spending a lot of time... with one of the village leaders," Ironhorse explained. Jordan got a harsh expression on her face.

"Molto," she yelled to one of her team. "Bring your tracker, we have a man to find."

Ironhorse watched as she began striding toward the woods outside the village. To his eyes, her simple, graceful walk was more pleasing than the finest ballet, more sensual than silk sheets and hot spiced oils.

"I love you," he whispered.

### **Eden – Dayside – The Temple of the Z'batsu**

Scout found what she was looking for in a side chamber. A Glowing blue piece of crystal contained within a clear tube held in place by two wedge-shaped pieces of metal. The entire apparatus was no larger than a man's fist. A row of them was arranged along a wall.

She opened the front panel of George's breastplate. "Ready for this, big guy?"

"Affirmative, Mistress."

She reached in and pulled out a nearly identical device. Almost all its blue radiance was gone, and it was a nearly inert gray. She inserted the new power cell.

"I bet that feels a lot better."

"This unit has no feelings as such. However, my power levels have been restored to optimal levels."

"I bet if I put this in the chamber, it'll get recharged." She put it in the empty cavity. Its blue glow was restored within a second.

"Very interesting," said Scout. She took another one of the cells for later study. "Let's catch up with the others."

Alkema led the party to a chamber, a very large chamber around the periphery of which were arranged very large tables, each looked about the size of a very large bed with rails around the sides. Alkema found a place and began reading the walls again.

Lord Paperlung drew a paw across the tiles. "They do not speak to me," he growled.

"Neg, only us." Keeler said.

"The made avian men here," Alkema was speaking almost as though he were in a trance. "Avian females there. Bull men here, leonine males and females, raptor men, dolphin men, vampires, lycanthropes. I'm seeing more... dragon-men, hermaphrodites with dual sets of sex organs, spider-men with eight legs climbing on the walls, insect-men scampering over the floors, tiger-men, panther-men, tiny people only a decimeter high, moth-men, manta-men, women with eight sets of breasts, men with clear skulls so you could see their minds, lizard-men, snake-men. Men with bowel systems that turned water into beer. Women who could bend metal with the power of their minds. Human trees."

He pulled his hand away, as though he could not take another second of the imagery flooding his head. "There were hundreds of variations... captain, hundreds... they could do anything. This is where they did it. They took people here... and they changed them."

"How did they do it?" Keeler demanded. Alkema looked at Keeler, as if begging him not to

continue. The captain met him with a firm hard gaze. Alkema's brow furrowed. He shook his head, took a breath and looked around the walls of the chamber. He could not read them visually, but he had developed a sense of their meaning, and of what meant what. He followed the wall to a section of pale blue tiles. He ran his hands across the tiles there.

After a few minutes of running his hand over the tiles, he reported. "I'm seeing DNA strands being re-sequenced. This must have been some kind of genetic engineering facility."

"Maybe this planet was some kind of research facility for genetic experiments." Honeywell suggested.

The news seemed to infuriate Lord Paperlung. "Are you saying that we... the Noblesse, were all created from... slave-humans?"

"Ironical, isn't it?" Keeler said. "Keep going, Young Alchemist."

Alkema walked along the walls, grazing the tiles with his fingertips, his trance returned. "They put them on the table, and then... they ... they injected them with nano-probes, tiny machines that reconfigured their DNA gene-by-gene. They hooked tubes to their arms and fed them. The transformations took weeks, months sometimes."

*The same way we used to do it on Sapphire,* Keeler reflected to himself. *They just took it to an extreme we never dared.*

"The machines ... the nano-machines... became a part of the anatomy. They enabled the rapid transformation... in some cases. They could transform from human to monster... grow crows... fangs, hair... it was..."

Some of the party were staring at the tables. Skinner reached underneath one of the pads and pulled out a restraint.

"Were the subjects willing, young Alchemist?" Keeler asked.

"It doesn't say, but... " He cocked his head. "There's a sub-text, almost a refrain in the background of information. It's like..." he squinted and concentrated hard.

Skinner saw an opportunity. "Lift the wounded onto these beds," he instructed the technicians. "These beds have been de-activated for centuries, but they'll make serviceable healing beds," he rubbed the shimmering silver fabric of the mattress pads. "Tacky... but very very comfortable."

"Try to leave them with the original number of heads," Keeler advised.

"I've got it," Alkema called. "... all monsters must... all monsters must... treat... all visitors... with respect. All monsters... must ... must comply... must comply with the ..." He shook his head. "I can't make out the next part. All monsters must comply with the... something... code of conduct. All monsters must ensure the ... must insure the maximum entertainment experience of the visitors."

"So, it wasn't a preserve," said Honeywell. "It was more like... a zoo."

"Closer... closer," Keeler muttered, almost to himself. Scout and George Borrowed Things rejoined the party. "We're close, but we haven't gone all the way. We know how they made monsters. No surprise. Big deal. Genetic engineering, just a stupid trick, we could do it, but we don't want to. I want to know why they wanted to. You don't just make zoo animals."

"There has to be some kind of command center in this complex," Keeler went on, his hand beginning to sting and itch beneath the bandage. "That's what we have to find."

"The walls don't give any indication," his young protégé responded. "We could try tracking the power systems within the complex."

"It won't work," said a technician, holding up a tracker. "I've been scanning the walls and

floors. Either there's no energy flow anywhere in this structure, or there is one constant energy flow all around us."

"I'll bet a pair of Ex. Cmdr. Lear's knickers that the second answer is right." Keeler thought for a minute. "If I were the ancients, and this was my design aesthetic, the command center would be just there, in the center of the structure."

Leaving Skinner behind to care for Bihari, Dallas, and the other wounded, Keeler led the rest of his party toward the center of the structure. Alkema, Buttercup, and Honeywell were with him, of course, Blade Toto, Flt. Lt. Southernbell (another pilot), Lord Paperlung, and Scout went with him.

The open appearance of the chambers was deceptive. The interior was constructed of an arrangement of large interconnected cells. They were turned around more than once before reaching, what the trackers said, was the middle part of the structure. It was surrounded by a kind of spiral labyrinth. Its walls pulsed with blue, purple, and black light.

"It looks... forbidding," said Lord Paperlung.

"You killed a Ghoulfrend Dervish back at the castle," Alkema reminded him, "But you're afraid of the dark."

"I know how to kill a Ghoulfrend," Paperlung growled back at him. This was something else entirely, he did not have to add.

"In," Keeler ordered. Honeywell walked first, Keeler behind him, then Alkema, Toto, Paperlung, Scout, Southernbell, and Buttercup bringing up the rear.

They walked down a little way following the wall. It curved away on either side of them, and was split with openings here and there. "Which one to take," Keeler mused. "I bet they all end up in the same place." He led the party into one. As they went through, all light disappeared, as though they had entered the deepest cave in the world.

Alkema rubbed the wall. "No tiles here," he said.

"Of course not," Keeler answered him.

"Are you sure this is the way to the command center?"

"Would you have put a maze like this around a public restroom?"

"Not on our world, but I thought we were on their logic."

Honeywell activated an illuminator built-into his uniform. It shined for a second or two, then faded, as though giving up against the darkness.

But another light appeared, a tiny twinkling fairy light appeared on Honeywell's shoulder. He brushed at it and it wafted away through the air. Others began to appear, one at a time, dancing and swirling in the air, like a snowstorm of tiny lights.

Lord Paperlung grabbed at one, tried to sniff it. "They have no substance," he declared. "No heat, no spark. Nothing at all."

"And yet, they are making me nauseated," Keeler observed. Indeed, the spinning lights were getting to all of them. They spun around the party like a blizzard without wind.

"Don't let them disorient you," Keeler ordered. "Keep feeling along the inner wall until you come to another opening."

"Got it," Honeywell called out. Why he was shouting, he didn't know. The lights weren't making any noise. He pulled himself through the opening.

One by one they emerged on the other side, onto a beach where the goldenrod sun of Eden was setting over the sea. The sky was glowing like embers in a fire. There were some people further down the beach, dancing and playing wally-ball around a bonfire. The sound of their



laughter carried on the warm breezes.

"Captain?" Honeywell asked.

"Let's check this out. Southernbell, Buttercup. Stay here so we can find the aperture again." *Either this is some kind of illusion, or we've been teleported. Teleportation, that would be an interesting technology. We never figured out teleportation.*

As they crossed the sand toward the revelers, the voices and laughter became clearer, and more familiar.

"That's Lt. Engineer Braveheart," Alkema said. "And Flight Specialist Alliant... and Jarrod Churchgoer... Hey, guys!" He called out to them. "Guys!"

He kept running, although his crew-mates seemed indifferent to his presence. He finally ran up to a woman from Climatology that he knew, and ran right through her. "What the ... holo-projections?"

"Looks like it," Keeler said. He looked around at his crew, enjoying themselves beneath the setting sun, enjoying the warm evening air. "They seem to be having a good time, though. Let's get back."

There were, so it seemed, nearly a hundred meters of sand and palm trees between the beach party and the portal. Keeler wondered how far one could walk in any direction within the holo-projection.

When they got closer, they saw only Flight Lieutenant Southernbell standing at the portal. "Where is Buttercup?" Honeywell barked angrily. "I told both of you to wait here."

BellSouth answered. "I just turned away for a nano-second and he wasn't there any more."

Honeywell called out. "Buttercup!"

Blade Toto asked, pilot-to-pilot. "You didn't see him run off? He might have run off to join the party?"

"He wouldn't have done that," Honeywell growled.

"I turned around and he was gone."

Keeler digested this for a moment, then made his call. "Back in the portal."

"Captain," Honeywell asked. "Shouldn't we look for him?"

"He couldn't have left the temple. That's where we go. Back in," Keeler ordered. The opening was marched by some leafy branches, which he pulled aside and exited the beach to find himself on the streets of a seaside town, where night had all but fallen. Fires burned on torches set into buildings and on poles that lined the streets.

"Where are we now?" Scout asked.

"According to my gear's geo-locator, we have not left the Temple," said Honeywell.

Paperlung sniffed the air. "This has all the trappings of a North Coast maritime citadel. Tashawa, maybe. I have heard of such places."

"Where's Scout?" Alkema asked.

They looked around. Their party had diminished again. "I know she came through the portal with us," Alkema said.

"We're being picked off one by one," Honeywell walked back toward the point where they had emerged. "We've got to ..."

"We've got to keep going," Keeler told him. "We can't go back, We don't even know how. We tried that and we ended up here. We have to find the next portal."

One of the doorways to one of the taverns lining the street stood out more brightly than the

rest. "There," Keeler pointed. "Stick close. I don't want to make you hold hands but I am also to that point."

Beyond the doorway, they could see nothing. They emerged on the other side to cold, and wind, and jagged peaks stretching as far as the eye could see. They were on the edge of a precipice, looking down below into an expanse of, to Keeler's experienced eye, very good ski slopes. He could picture a village set among them, lights glowing warmly in the windows.

"How do we get out of this one? I don't see any taverns or anything." Honeywell shouted above the wind.

Keeler looked up and down the ledge, nothing but bare rock stretching down the mountainside. "Look for a cave, or a big rock or..." He looked down at the rocks at his feet. He picked one up and threw it over the side. It fell a few meters then vanished in mid-air.

Alkema and Southernbell fixed Keeler with identical looks of disbelief. "You can't ..."

Keeler took the initiative to lead by example. He jumped over the side, pulling his knees up to his chest and making a cannonball just before he, too, vanished in mid-air.

Honeywell jumped a moment later, followed by Toto. BellSouth jumped next, and just as Alkema wondered how Lord Paperlung was going to be talked into it, he realized the lionhead was gone. He jumped.

The new locale was dark, and reminded them of the abandoned castle on the road to Chiban, but much larger and more intact. They were a great hall. On a kind of altar in the middle of the hall, a great sarcophagus was resting.

Honeywell stood and helped Captain Keeler off the floor. "I think you're on the right track, captain. You'd expect the defenses to get more sophisticated as you got close to the nerve center."

"These seem more like a world tour than a ... defensive system," Alkema suggested.

"How long do we stay in this loop?"

"Looking around, I'm guessing no more than four more jumps," Keeler guessed.

There was a great grinding creak as the lid to the sarcophagus began to open. A creature began rising, a horrible thing with white skin, red glowing eyes, and yellow fangs that glinted in the dark.

"Orbs," Alkema cursed.

"He can't hurt us," Keeler muttered, sounding more annoyed than anything else. He pointed to an archway at the far end of the room. "Let's try that."

Keeler, Honeywell, Alkema, Toto, and Southernbell broke for the door. Keeler, Honeywell, Alkema and Toto emerged on the other side. Now finding themselves in a slightly more familiar place.

"We're back in Altama," Alkema gasped.

Toto shivered. "I got bad memories of this place."

Honeywell looked around. Altama at twilight was only a little less raucous than the city they had seen that morning. He could smell a hundred different things cooking in the air as the citizens worked on their evening meals. He had not realized how hungry he was. "Have we considered just staying in place?"

"Good thought," Keeler replied, "Unless some sort of teleport mechanism kicks in and sends us wherever we choose to stop. It could explain what happened to the others. I, for one, do not want to end up back in Altama."

He looked up and realized Honeywell was gone. "Neg," he whispered to the dusk. The

remaining three walked down the street a bit further, coming to a corner, they turned it, and walked out in the midst of a village of small, very thick trees. Their trunks were as big around as a small house. Indeed, doors, latticework windows with little flower boxes in front were set into the trees; like a village of dwarves from a child's story-book. One tree-house was set apart from the rest, and where the others were faded and weather-worn, it was bright and new. They had to bend over to make it through the door.

They passed through to exit on a vast empty plain. They saw peaks in the distance, and all the stars were coming out as the daylight faded away.

"This is more pleasant," Keeler said. "Does anyone know any campfire songs?"

"I don't want to alarm you captain," Alkema said. "But, there's no one behind me right now."

"And there's no one in front of me," Keeler answered. He turned around to find that Alkema was gone as well.

"Hallowe'en Planet strikes again," he muttered.

Echoes answered him. "Hallowe'en Planet strikes again... Planet strikes again... strikes again ... again ... again... again..." It built and build into a huge echoing reverberation that made him hold his hands to his ears. The landscape around him faded to blackness.

He was standing in the midst of darkness, but had a sense he was back in the labyrinth. He caught a flash of movement in the corner of one eye. He raised his walking stick, and as he did saw some kind of metal weapon flash. He swung and faced himself, staring back at him, holding a walking stick.

A mirror image of himself, he reached to touch it and it did the same. The mirror effect was clear, but there was still nothing but darkness around him; no light source. Yet, he saw himself reflected on the black pane as plainly lit as daylight. He and his double turned, and he saw a hall of mirrors open up all around, above, and below him.

Sensing there was nothing better to do at that moment, he began walking, passing himself, and running into himself every few steps. Some of the mirrors were distorted, giving him a bulbous head, or arms that stretched into infinity. He looked into one and saw a tiny bald homunculus staring back at him. He passed other mirrors showing him in blue, green, pink, and yellow. His skin grew tiger stripes and polka dots, turquoise scales and tiny feathers covered him like an Arcadian parrot. A few steps later, he was confronted by a walking skeleton. At another mirror, a naked woman with a face like his met his startled gaze.

He passed a small mirror, set at eye level, picture portrait size, in which he saw not his own image, but a naked, crying baby. A pace away from that, a slightly large mirror showed a child. Keeler stared at it. No mistaking the face. He walked to the next, which was a little larger, and saw himself again, about two years older.

He continued stepping forward, every mirror showed him a little older, but always dressed in his Odyssey Project command uniform. He quickened his pace, passing through childhood in a few rapid steps, he sprinted through his awkward adolescence, slowed back to a walk through college, young adulthood. He reached an almost full-sized mirror which showed him almost as he was now. The next one, full-size, he bet, would show him his present age. He jumped in front of it.

Instead of his familiar handsome features, what gazed back were the empty eye-sockets of a rotted skull, ringed by wisps of white hair, wearing a tattered command uniform. Keeler was startled enough to cry out, but before he even heard his own whimper, a louder sound tolled through the chamber.

The sound that followed was like what was heard when you put ear inside a piano and play the lowest chord, extended and amplified. As it faded throughout the room, a light came up, a primitive incandescent kind of light.

The eight of them were standing in a circle, equidistant from one another, having simultaneously walked through eight equally spaced doorways.

A loud cackling laugh filled the chamber, and colored streams weaved through the air and coalesced in the center, taking the form of a bright dragon monster. They had seen a man transform into such a creature back in Altama, except that this image was so much brighter, so much more vibrant than the actual creature had been. It raised itself to its full height, roared and gushed flames.

Then, the shape shifted again, and it became a man. He was somewhat oversized, although perfectly proportioned. He had high cheek-bones, shining black hair and almond eyes. He was wearing a black and white outfit, with long tails and a bow-shaped tie at his neck. When he opened his mouth, he was clear of voice and his teeth were as white as moonlight.

"Thank you for coming to our planet," he said, with enthusiasm at once hearty and breathless. If smarm could power starships, you could have dropped him into *Pegasus's* Engine Core and blasted halfway across the galaxy. "However, we are temporarily closed. Please return when we have finished our augmentation and upgraded the entertainment experience. Thank you!" He bowed deeply, then split into five buxom naked women and three hard-bodied men, who jumped out from the ring, gave each of them a warm hug, then vanished in feiry flash, leaving only the cackling laughter hanging in the air.

Marine Honeywell spoke for all of them. "What the hell was that?"

"Did you..." Alkema asked.

"With the mirrors and the ..." Scout answered.

"And they got bigger and you got older..." BellSouth added.

"Za, that was it..."

Keeler had a feeling that this was as much as they were going to get. He was pretty sure he understood this place, all the clues were pointing to the same answer. It made perfect sense, and yet he lacked certainty, and he was sure he wasn't going to get it here.

He then noticed the tiny communication node built into his cuff, where it might have been mistaken for a button. "Captain Keeler to *Pegasus*. Respond."

"*Pegasus*, Spec. Shayne American here, captain, good to hear your voice."

"*Pegasus*, we need two... three... four... neg, we need a complete medical evacuation. We also need some Paleo-Engineering teams down here. Send heavy security, Marines. Can you lock onto my signal?"

"Affirmative, Captain. Two Aves standing by at Launch Ready. Security Teams on board."

Another voice came in, Lieutenant Windjammer. "Captain, is that really you?"

"Za, confirmation code, Mighty-Lovegod-Seven-Something-Something-Something."

"I think the whole ship just breathed a sigh of relief."

"Advise when Aves are within two minutes of touchdown." He turned to the landing crew. "We reached the temple. We made it inside. Our mission is complete. Let's go home."

## Eden – The Farside

"I'm not reading his life signature anywhere," Eric Molto reported. A blond slab of

Republicker maleness, he was leading the search for Lieutenant Redfire, a bit of steam issued from his mouth. Although the day was quickly warming, it was not yet temperate.

"This is the direction he was last seen heading?" Jordan asked Ironhorse. They had entered an expanse of thick pine-like trees at the eastern edge of the village.

"Za," Ironhorse answered.

"He never was much for nature hikes," Jordan commented darkly.

"There is a very weak signal coming from those trees," Molto pointed toward a copse of low trees with a natural hollow beneath. "It's not a human life signature."

Before the hollow were a faint impression of footprints, too small and with the wrong arrangement of toes for humans, they were profuse on the ground in front of the hollow.

"Weapons," Jordan ordered. She and Phillips drew their hand cannons. As if knowing what she would find there, Captain Jordan lifted one of the heavy pine boughs.

Tactical Commander Redfire lay unconscious on a bed of leaves, naked and alone. His skin was covered with scratches, and dried blood was smeared around his mouth. "Med-Tech!" Phillips screamed.

Jordan and Ironhorse knelt over him. She reached out and touched his neck. "He's got a pulse. He's breathing." She gently turned his head to the other side. "Are those bite marks?"

Ironhorse held back. "They ... look like, bite marks."

"Did something attack him?" Molto asked.

"He damn well better hope so. Philip John Redfire!" Jordan lightly slapped his cheek.

Redfire's eyes opened. He blinked against the morning light, glanced from one to another of them as though without recognition. He raised himself up long enough to disgorge a sodden lump of blood and saliva from his mouth onto the ground.

"Phil, Phil... Do you know where you are?"

"I'm on the Far Side of Eden," he answered.

"You sure are," Captain Jordan muttered. She picked up his landing jacket off the ground and draped it over his shoulders. He looked from one to another of them, eyes squinting against the morning light.

"Help me up?" Jordan and Ironhorse lifted him from either shoulder. Molto found his pants lying a few meters away in the brush and offered them to him.

From the edge of a wood, a she-wolf watched, panting, its tongue reaching out tasting the morning breeze.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

By My Estimation, The Date is

02 October 7318

*I am watching from an aft viewport as EdenWorld and its gold mother planet diminish behind us. Pegasus accelerates, and the spheres become disks, become spots, become points of light, and then are swallowed by the infinite darkness of space, leaving only the sun, which in a few hours will be indistinguishable from any other star. I may be the only one watching. Nobody else wants to look back at it.*

*Captain Keeler's Alpha Landing Party was evacuated fifty-four minutes after calling to the ship for rescue. Two flanks of Marines protected them as they left the temple and walked, or were carried, back to the very same ships that had carried them to the planet. (The details of Flt. Lt. Toto and Southernbell's escape are covered in my earlier entry. I don't care what anyone else says. I think it's one hell of a story, even if it doesn't seem possible. They are alive, aren't they?)*

### Pegasus – Hospital Four

Ex. Cmdr. Lear was already in Hospital Four, watching over her son as he lay on his own Mending Bed. Keeler did not realize how bad he must have looked until he saw the horrified expression on her face. "By the Bastard Sons of Enoch, Captain, you look terrible."

"Za, Madam, but in a few days, I'll be healed and you'll still be... oh, forget about it."

"Your hand..."

"You know, it didn't even hurt until you mentioned it. Med-Tech!!!" he shouted.

The nearest Med-Tech was young, attractive, and female, just as Keeler would have had it. She removed Skinner's bandage had applied and immersed the captain's entire hand into a bowl of teal-colored fluid that acted as both anaesthetic and anti-septic wash. "I'll need six-hundred nano-bots programmed for epidermal reconstruction," she ordered.

"Much better," Keeler sighed. Alkema took the bed adjacent to him. Lear saw that his corresponding hand also was bandaged, and was tempted to ask if Keeler's mentoring relationship was not going to extremes.

"I am counting at least seven severe injuries and two deaths among your landing party," she told them. "That's over fifty per cent casualties, Captain. Why did you not contact the ship for evacuation?"

Keeler looked to Alkema, saw his own puzzlement reflected back at him. He shrugged. "It never occurred to us. We had to reach the temple."

"We had to reach the Temple," Keeler repeated, and realized he was getting a headache. He looked up at the pretty Med-Tech. "I want to be sedated," he told her.

She obliged him, and he slept for the next seventeen hours. When he revived, he was informed that the Scion Chiban had been demanding an explanation of what he had seen in the Temple, and why the Scion had not been permitted inside. The Scion's guardsmen had

begun to harass the landing parties. Nothing we could not handle, but it made for a tense situation on the ground.

In the end, there was only one way to placate the Scion Chiban. Reluctantly, the captain made one last trip to the surface.

### *Eden – The Temple of Z'Batsu*

They went back to the Temple one last time, Captain Keeler, a pair of Marines, the Scion and two of his guardsmen. They walked through the empty halls for hours before his eminence was satisfied. "An empty shell," said the Scion, shaking his head. "For centuries, we pledged our honor to guard an empty shell."

"And it has brought you wealth, power, and honor," Keeler reminded him. What he said next would cost the Scion's two guardsmen their lives. "And so long as you alone know that the Temple is empty, you can preserve your position over the lesser Prefectures."

The Scion seemed pleased at this, but still wanting. So, Keeler gave him a little more to chew on. "The Temple is not so much empty, as unfinished. We believe the Z'Batsu intend to return, and finish it. Whoever preserves the integrity of the temple will be ... well rewarded I should think."

"And what of this machine," said the Scion, gesturing at George Borrow's Things.

"He has been instructed to guard the Temple," Keeler explained. "He will remain inside, and allow none to pass except those whom we have chosen."

"How will he know?"

"We are going to give him a riddle. Only those who answer it correctly, shall pass."

"Ahhhhh," you could almost hear the Scion's satisfied sigh.

"You will retain your greatness," Keeler explained. "And one day, your greatness will be magnified beyond your wildest imagining."

*Or not, you contemptible bastard.* Keeler thought.

The Scion Altama also had to be dealt with. The Captain had no desire to meet with him again, so he sent a detachment of Marines, led by Marine Buttercup (Aside: according to his data-file, Buttercup was raised on a beast station in outer Jutland. When he was eleven years old, he began lifting a new-born beast over his head. He did this every day until, at the age of fifteen, he could lift a full grown beast over his head.) The Marines fought their way into the palace inflicting heavy casualties on the guardsmen. They found the Scion hiding in some kind of armor-reinforced chamber. So, they cut him out with a molecular disruptor and dragged him out into the main square. Buttercup played a holographic message from the captain, informing him that because of his betrayal, dishonor, and deficient hospitality, he was going to be ritually humiliated in the traditional manner of Keeler's people. At which point, Marine Buttercup pulled the Scion's underwear over his head and kicked him in the butt.

Because of his ritual defeat, the Scion Altama lost all of his status. He was forced to flee the citadel in shame and was succeeded, so I understand, by a nine-year-old child who immediately ordered him hunted down and put to death. As of our departure, this sentence has yet to be carried out.

The Lionhead, Lord Paperlung, was transported to the Farside, where he became Lord Protector of a Settlement called Looking Glass. He lives in a modest home overlooking a lake and hunts in the woods for game.

Ex-Commander Lear's son continues to recover in Hospital Four. His injuries were actually more serious than any of those in the landing party, except the ones who died of course. He received them undergoing some kind of religious ritual. Humans put an awful lot of effort and thought into their religious beliefs, yet one somebody dies, it perturbs them greatly. I don't get it. Cats are far more practical. Be a good cat, and when you die, go to someplace better. Be a bad cat, and when you die, you go to someplace worse.

### *Pegasus – HospitalFour*

Trajan Lear lay on a healing bed in the Medical Core's recovery suite, nursing a pair of broken ribs, a bruised spleen, internal bleeding, a fractured wrist, a concussion, and bruises from the base of his spine to his neck. He had slept the better part of a day and a half after being removed from the Flight Deck.

His mother was seldom away from his bedside, usually working on a report on her data-pad.

**Our assessment is that the other humans who visited this world will return in the next twenty-to-forty years. It is imperative that a Phase II ship be in orbit to assess them for possible contact, or for tactical and strategic evaluation.**

Dr. Reagan came in, making her rounds. "The boy still asleep?"

"Still," Lear reported.

Dr. Reagan passed her hand over his body, a vital signs sensor attached to her palm. "This Odyssey mission has been something of a curse on yer fambly," said she. "Seems every time we leave orbit, one of ya's is in my infirmary."

She held an instrument up to Lear's eyes. "Visual Acu'ty 100 %. Congratulations, I can certify you for duty again."

Doctor Reagan took a seat next to the Executive Commander, reflecting that, if only Commander Lear had bothered to learn to read a Bio-metric read-out, she would have seen by her son's Alpha-wave profile he was awake and listening to them. "So under yer religious beliefs, he's a man now."

"Under secular law, the age of majority is still 16, so, for the next three years, he's still my boy."

"Bovine Excrement. No matter how old he gets, he will still be yer boy."

"That is true, that is very true. In some ways, he is to be treated as an adult, expected to be responsible for his own actions, he is expected to begin choosing a first prerogative, develop a personal code of honor, choose a profession. He'll probably want to move through the command program. I started in the Logistics Directorate, and I think my son would be quote good at that. He is very good at planning things."

"Flight Core," came a weak voice. Goneril Lear jumped up.

"Trajan... Trajan... are you awake?" Goneril asked, sounding, for the first time on Old Doc Reagan's memory, like a real person, a concerned parent.

His voice was hoarse and delicate, emerging from a dry throat through parched lips. The last thing Trajan remembered before awakening in the Recovery Suite was the strong, reassuring grip of a man in a Flight Core uniform. "May I have some water please?"

His mother took the flask from beside his bed and held it to his lips. He drank too much at first and it choked him. "Easy, son."



He coughed and sputtered, sending fresh needles of pain through his back and abdomen. He winced. "It's all right," his mother comforted, then turned to the doctor. "Can you suppress his pain receptors?"

"He's a man now, does he want his receptors s'pressed?"

"I don't want any anesthetic. I'll handle the pain on my own," Trajan insisted, surprising his mother as much as anyone. "And I have decided to join Flight Core."

Lear decided not to argue. It was enough to have her son back, and she was certain she could persuade him to undertake a more promising career path later. "Very well."

Trajan lay back in his bed. He studied his surroundings. "I'm cold."

His mother warmed the blanket an additional five degrees. He huddled beneath it. "Dimmer lights," he said, and the lighting level dropped. He closed his eyes nevertheless.

"You should rest," said Lear gently.

"Did they catch the man who kidnapped me?" Trajan demanded.

"Kidnapped you?" Lear asked.

"The man in the UnderDecks who kidnapped me. He was tall, thin. He had a beard on his face. He wore all black. He tied me up and said he was going to exchange me to you for something. I don't remember what it was."

Lear became very alarmed. "Did he hurt you?"

"He didn't hurt me. He just kept me in this little chamber in the UnderDecks. He took my identity Sliver."

"Your identity Sliver."

"He took it out of my ..." his hand felt the back of his jaw, where a healing bandage was affixed.

His mother extended her hand to him, unrolled her fingers, and revealed the Sliver lying on her palm. "You mean this Sliver? It was lying on the canopy of the spacecraft you landed on. Apparently, you cut your jaw open on impact, and jarred it loose."

Trajan shook his head, which brought freshets of new ache to slosh around his brain.

"Son, don't," Lear cautioned gently.

"There was a man, mother... He took me and he held me and he cut out my identity Sliver. A woman came and set me free and I ran as hard and as far as I could. I tried to call you, but the comm-system wouldn't let me in. I had to climb all the way up to Deck... Deck minus Eight. Then, there were these two men in black suits... and an automech. They tried to catch me, too, and I had to swim through a water-processing channel to get away from them. I almost drowned."

Lear took her son's hand in a comforting tone of voice. "Son, you've been through a harrowing journey, and suffered a severe cranial injury. Your thoughts may be unclear. You may be confusing things that happened with dreams... nightmares..."

"There was a man... mother. There was a man who captured me and stole my pack and my Sliver."

"Your pack was found in the UnderDecks at the bottom of an access shaft. We think you got lost and dropped it while you were climbing."

"I did not drop my pack, it was taken from me."

"Trajan, if it will make you feel better, I will have security sweep the UnderDecks for unauthorized personnel. Remember when I used to check under your bed for monsters?"

Trajan's anger was making his head pound. "It happened mother. It wasn't a dream. It happened!"

She was quiet for a time. Then, she said, "Rest, Trajan. We will search the UnderDecks from bow to stern, from Deck 1 to Deck minus 212. For now, you rest, and in time, this will all seem like a bad dream."

Goneril Lear took his hand, and he felt warm metal pressing into his palm. He drew away and held it. Without looking, he knew what it was, the golden circle, one of the symbols of the Iestan faith.

"The circle symbolizes the universe," she told him. "God is at the center of the circle. All of our lives is a Passage, and in death, we will pass into the circle. However much we learn in life is what we take into the circle with us. The more we bring with us, the closer we are to God at the center."

So had he been told since he was an infant. He found the words comforting once again, and his eyes closed, and he drifted far away into sleep again.

Trajan Lear claims while he was in the UnderDecks, he encountered strange people, one of whom took him hostage, one of whom set him free, and some of whom chased him into a water conduit. Lear pretends she doesn't believe him. She should know better.

### **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

A tall, thin man with a pinched face and hair as gray as the old and patched utility coveralls he wore ran through a narrow passageway on Deck -133. On either side of him were food-processing artificatories, churning out vegetables for the ship's stores.

He was stumbling, almost out of breath. The chase had gone on across six decks, and through sixty-four separate sections of the ship, and it was almost over.

He turned behind to see if his pursuer was still behind him, and saw no one. When he turned again, he saw a black-suited Centurion standing at the end of the passageway. He raised his hand as if in greeting, and displayed a silver and blue palm-discharger.

"Neg, neg," the stowaway cried out just as a ribbon of light lashed out at him. He fell to the deck, unconscious and stunned.

His pursuer walked casually the length of the deck behind him. "Well, done, Tyro-Centurion Tiberius."

Tiberius bent over the fallen man. "Looks like someone from the construction crew. Simple stowaway. I wish we were catching more Isolationists. How many does this make?"

"Thirty-three," Centurion Lycius answered. "Probably the last, for now. We'll be breaking orbit in a few hours. No more launches after that."

Tiberius picked the man up and slung him over his shoulder. He was easy to carry. "We should have done this a long time ago."

From a cramped crawlspace on top of the food processors, Hunter, and the pale woman, watched, grimly as the two Centurions made their way toward the freezers.

The Centurions, sometimes in the disguise and company of regular ship's security and Marines, had been sweeping the UnderDecks for days. Security and Marines found no one, the Centurions made sure of that. The Centurions, however, had been capturing people, putting them into stasis. Some would be launched back to the homeworlds under the guise of a ship's

weapons test. Others would have to wait until opportunity afforded their departure. *Pegasus* was scheduled to make several re-supply rendezvous, the first coming up in three years. It was likely this 'cargo' would be off-loaded then.

He reached for the woman's hand and held it. She squeezed it back, warmly. She had betrayed him, it was true, but she was the closest thing to a companion he had down here, and in the UnderDecks, you took what comforts were offered.

By only capturing the one's dumb, careless, or weak enough to allow their own capture, the Centurions, he thought, were making his life much harder, as well as their own. He had counted on being the smartest man in the UnderDecks to get by. By getting rid of the easy ones, the Notorium was raising the curve. Only the wildest, and the most fanatical, would be left now. The UnderDecks were about to become far more dangerous.

Dr. Bihari is adopting the boy Alpha Landing Team recovered from the planet. He has already begun neuro-regenerative therapy and is progressing slowly, but gradually. Within two years, he should be functioning at a normal mental capacity for a human of his age. His assimilation into our society is expected to take longer. She is taking a leave from Medical Core to devote herself to his recovery full-time. I understand she intends to name him Sanjay, after her brother.

#### **Pegasus – Hospital Four**

In suite adjacent to that occupied by Trajan Lear, Medical Technician Bihari and Marine Nellen Dallas were sitting up in bed, each with her husband beside her.

"Ex. Commander Lear is nominating me for the Silver Medallion of sacrifice," Dallas said, referring to the award given by the Republic Ministry of Defense to Marines who were wounded in service.

"Seems odd to get a medal for not getting out of the way in time," Bihari teased, gently, and they all knew it was so.

"Too bad there's no medal for being attacked by a flying rat," Dallas answered.

"Captain Keeler tells me there is. The Shell of Vantra, an ancient crest dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Crusade," said Bihari's husband. Captain Keeler, after awakening, had visited both of them on a daily basis.

"It's too bad you missed the exequies for Goodyear and Hastings," Nellen Dallas's husband said. "The captain gave a moving speech. There were almost as many people in attendance, or observing, as there were at Meridian."

Dallas asked a question many on the ship had been posing. "Was Eden better or word than Meridian?"

Bihari considered the question carefully. "I will always remember the savagery of this world's people. Without it, this might have been a world of wonders. Also, I will always remember it as the place where I met the boy who would be my son."

She gestured toward an empty bed. Sanjay's mental rehabilitation required long periods in an enrichment chamber, where reconstruction cells were delivered to precise points in his brain and nourished by a rich flow of chemicals. Every hour in the enrichment chamber required four hours of rehabilitative therapy, to teach the new cells to work. It would take as long as two years to bring him to the level of Sapphirean and Republicer twelve year olds. This would be Bihari's full-time occupation during that time.

*As we healed our wounded and mourned our fallen, we also began to analyze the data the planet yielded to us. We tried to understand how the world worked, both geo-physically and culturally. Yesterday, Captain Keeler and his senior staff signed off the final report on this little world.*

### **Pegasus – Conference Suite – Deck 101**

Science Officer Morgan, standing before a holo-graphic cutaway model of the Eden planetoid, wrapped up his presentation on the report Geo-physical Survey would be submitting to Odyssey Project Directorate.

“From the tectonic seams through each level of strata we encountered, we concluded that the core of the Eden planetoid was constructed elsewhere and moved into an orbital position around its major planet. The surface features were added on top of this core and mantle through another process of laying down strata. The whole process probably took no more than sixty to one-hundred years.”

“Thank you, lieutenant.” Keeler said. The cat on his right had periodically pawed and clawed at him to keep him from nodding off. He was thinking to himself that if he ever needed to build a planet, the information would come in handy.

The geo-physicists left, and were replaced by philosophers and culturalists, people Keeler understood, if not actually liked, better. They filled the chairs around the horseshoe shaped table. Specialist Historian Brandywine, formerly of the University of Greater Carpentaria on Sapphire, delivered the final report. Brandywine was an imposing, gray-haired woman whose expertise in cultural reconstruction nearly equaled the captain’s.

“What you have before you is less a final report than a catalog of our observations,” she said as each one on the panel activated their copies of the report. Most of them had been keeping up with each draft version as it had been generated. “Data is abundant, but insight is rare. Our technicians scrubbed the ‘Temple of the Z’batsu’ from one end to the other with every scanning device we had available, not the least of which, human eyes. Barely a scrap of technology in it, apart from the tactile walls.

“The Temple of the Z’Batsu was probably a reception point for those newly arrived on the planet. We suspect that what the Alpha Landing accessed was a type of service entrance. The refrain in the background intended to provide instructions to personnel greeting them; a repeating theme of how to behave toward visitors.”

A model of the temple was projected in the middle of the table. Brandywine walked into it. “We believe this was the main entrance hall.” She indicated a large open area under the forward dome. “Lavishly decorated with statuary depicting most of the exotic life-forms they were creating, including a lot we didn’t see. Some were no more than walking sex organs. The surrounding halls contained planetary maps, utility areas, and so forth.”

She zoomed in on the walls. “The tactile calligraphy on the walls of the main hall has a background message, too. Would you like to feel it?”

The assembled men and women put their fingertips gently on the neuro-link interface. The message was loud and clear, practically beaten into the brain.

“Have a good time ... all the time.”

“What do we make of this? This world where genetics were employed to make humans into monsters, and where fairy-tale villages were constructed instead of real-towns?”

Brandywine picked up a wand, a kind of remote control. The Temple vanished, and in its place, they saw a team of eight Aves fixing graviton beams on a large plate impacted into the side of an icy moon. "This final clue fits all the pieces together."

It had taken days of lasering, melting, and tractor-beaming to pull the massive slab of gold and corundum from the surface of the frozen moon. At one point, it had been pulled exactly three meters from the surface, only to collapse again because someone had under-calculated the strength of the graviton beam. Change had been right. Olivetti was a twitch.

"Current Theory is that this object was intended either to orbit EdenWorld, or to be embedded on the moon Miyoki, which closely tracks Eden's orbit and whose face is always visible on the DaySide of the planet. It never made it. The people in charge of delivering must have been embarrassed when it ended up upside-down on the wrong moon."

When it was finally pulled free, and turned over to read the legend that had been inscribed in enormous, solid gold letters, kilometers high and wide, somewhat smashed by the impact with the surface. They were in an ancient language, so Brandywine imposed a translation window over them.

*Welcome to*

EdenWorld Equuleus

A Product of the  
Disney-Asia World Concern

**Have a Good Time All the Time**

There was a smaller legend at the bottom.

Visit Our Other Amazing and Perfect Recreational Planets:

EdenWorld Orionus

EdenWorld Centauri

EdenWorld Draconis

EdenWorld Cygni

EdenWorld Leonis

EdenWorld Perseus

EdenWorld Aquila

EdenWorld Ceti

EdenWorld Tucana

And Coming Soon

**EdenWorld Pegasi!**

She concluded. "This EdenWorld and the others, were constructed as great, planetary scale playgrounds. This planet was built to be one great entertainment complex. There were a number of Eden colonies. They were all specially designed for optimal climate and beauty. They were intended to be a kind of resort, or retreat or..."

"Theme parks," Keeler interrupted. "Huge theme parks on a planetary scale. Like someone

locked the gates on Bachannal Island? and everyone trapped inside were left to fend for themselves."

Someone else put in. "Did you know they were going to build a ring around the planet and run some kind of ultra-high-speed mag-lev rail around it?"

"An orbital roller-coaster," said Keeler. "That would have been kwazappy."

"So, it's possible that all the Eden colonies were built by the same consortium," said Brandywine.

"I'd say, likely rather than possible," Keeler replied.

Brandywine said. "All the extraordinary creatures they created were supposed to be the entertainment, instead, they became the ringmasters."

"The non-viable life forms probably died out," someone suggested, perhaps, thinking of the walking sex organs.

A thin and fussy man who had been assistant director of a minor department of the Ministry of Culture on Republic spoke up next. "What I don't understand is, the entire culture of that world was based on power. Those who had power were the masters. Those without any power – ordinary humans – were slaves."

"Correct."

"What about the Scion, hmm?" he said, eyes widening as if he had just torpedoed the whole theory. "Each one we encountered was just an ordinary man. He didn't seem to have any powers."

"Didn't he?" Keeler asked. "He told us to go to the Temple of the Z'batsu, and we did. He told us not to contact our ship, so we didn't. He told us to surrender our weapons, and we did. The people the Gamma Team encountered warned them, never listen to the Scion."

"Mind control?" someone put in.

"The power of persuasion, anyway," Keeler said. "That may be the ultimate power. If you did have a planet where you had people engaging in non-stop revelry, you would need individuals whose authority would be obeyed unquestioningly, for simple reason of public safety." A veteran of many Spring Breaks in Kandor, Keeler knew this well.

This left one thing to be decided. "So, now, what do we do with them?" The questioner sat in the seat on Captain Keeler's right sat a jowly, tall, and heavy-set man, about ten or fifteen years his senior. He had spent the meeting reclining as far back in his chair as possible. His name was Roarke, and he had chaired the Philosophy Faculty back at the University of Sapphire on New Cleveland.

"Here is the issue," Keeler stated. "One hundred and sixty million sentient life-forms on this planet, not counting whatever might live in the oceans. At least one-hundred and fifteen million of them are humans, living in conditions of slavery, servitude, or poverty. I know some of you may not be familiar with that word, but it means extreme deprivation. Do we have a moral obligation to do anything about it, and if so, what?"

"Morally, there is no issue against our intervention. Our society is clearly superior to theirs in that it maximizes human freedom and self-determination. We provide ourselves with a higher physical and spiritual standard of living. I would say, and every Saint and Priestess on the ship would agree," Roarke continued in his grave baritone, "that the moral question is moot. It leaves the question of what we can do, and there we have several choices, most of which won't work very well, and the rest won't work at all.

"We could use the force of arms to reconstruct their society. We have superior firepower. All we have to do is, well, kill a whole lot of people, and then stay in orbit for the next ten or

twenty years while we teach the rest how to stand up for themselves. Not to mention, we've got ten or twenty million down there as brain-damaged as the kid we brought back. We put all our regeneration chambers to work and, maybe, some time in the two-hundredth century, we'll take a bite out of that number.

"Alternately, we could just bomb the existing social structure down to the foundation, again, killing a whole lot of people in the process, but we have no guarantee that what gets rebuilt is any better than what we bombed.

"We could eliminate the ruling caste, or just render them sterile and let them die out. Then again, pardon me for splitting hairs, but I think our moral authority is limited to re-building their civilization, not killing off a significant percentage of the population."

"Then, again, we could arm the people who are most likely to bring about change. We've examined this planet's social structures, which are constantly shifting, but basically amount to 1,600 principalities, or prefectures. There are about eighty of these, located around the little comma-shaped continent in the middle of the planet, that are really bad. There are about eleven hundred more around them, further out. Still, not exactly model counties, but some are better than others.

"On the far periphery, you have a few, less than forty, that are actually pretty good, or at least as good as it gets on EdenWorld. We could give them weapons, technology, and let them over-run the planet, but the reason these societies are more egalitarian may be precisely because they have no real power, and what they would change into if they achieved power may be as bad as what exists now."

"Ranking Peter," Keeler interrupted. "You did this at Meridian as well. You always seem to have a rationale for doing nothing."

"I am just cynical enough, Ranking William, to think that as bad as things are here, well-meaning interference may not be what is best for these people."

"Make a suggestion, Roarke."

"Since you asked, good captain. My plan would be, not to give them weapons, not to fight their battles for them, but give them the truth and see what they make of it. Let's give them the truth of their world. Let's give them the truth of our worlds. Let's show them what humans can achieve and let them run with it."

Keeler grinned. "The optimist emerges from the cynic's closet."

"Bill," he knew Keeler hated it when he called him Bill. "Our mission is exploration. We are in no way equipped to occupy, re-make or re-model any world. Let a Phase II ship make that decision. We just give them the truth and let them deal with it. What's the worst that could happen?"

### *Eden - The DaySide*

Landing party Gamma had touched down in a Prefecture called Nanawat. Nanaway was one of the largest prefectures on the planet, mainly because it was largely scrubland and grassy prairies. Its people prided themselves on their self-sufficiency and on having enough common sense to keep their distance from the politics and intrigues of the "Inner Prefectures." They produced much more than they needed, and their ships plied the golden seas of Eden, carrying food, clothing, and tools to the other prefectures.

It was widely said that if Nanawat (and the bordering prefectures of Chulac and Tling, with which it had formed a loose confederacy) had anything worth conquering, they would have been annexed by another prefecture long ago. In truth, their independence had more to do

with the fact that every free citizen was expected to be heavily armed, and trained to defend his lands and properties.

They were also, as Lieutenant Morgan had observed “very good at making things.”

The settlement closest to the landing site had been led by a man called Dr. Cuthbertson, whose title was simply, “Headman.” Dr. Cuthbertson strolled down a large open field, along a pathway between two rows of framework constructions, where a fleet of aircraft was taking shape. They did not look exactly like Aves, but the resemblance was close enough. Another man, the man who owned the field, was watching a team of workers attaching a structural plate to the ship’s upper hull.

“Well met, Landowner Markab”

“Well met, Headman Dr. Cuthbertson.”

“I see you’ve captured the shape of the visitor’s sky-ships quite well. Will they fly?”

“I believe they will. We will need to synthesize anti-matter for fuel, but the gravitational drive principle is fairly straightforward.”

Dr. Cuthbertson nodded. “Very good ... and of the weapons?”

“Landowner Hale’s men tested the first prototypes at the firing range yesterday. We have managed to duplicate the firepower, but we will need to improve the targeting mechanism.”

“How long?”

“Another three gyres,”

Dr. Cuthbertson looked at the ships taking shape and his heart swelled. As a boy, he had been a stable slave in the service of the Scion of Ventana Prefecture, a vile and petty little man, who had abused him in ways ranging from perverse to sadistic. A High Guardsman had taken pity on him and convinced the Scion to sell him into the service of a Shipmaster. The ship had foundered off Nanawat, and only he had survived. Adopted into a family of tradesman,

As he stared through the morning haze, it was as though he could see the changes coming to his world. He was not the only one with contempt for the Hauptarchy. There were many Freedmen in the confederacy and in neighboring prefectures, and rumors of whole camps of escaped slaves on the far side of his world.

He patted his old chum on the shoulder. “See if you can do it in two. We will need weapons. Lots and lots of weapons.”

I have not seen Tactical Commander Redfire since his return, but I understand he underwent some manner of trauma on the surface. According to what I have been able to piece together from talking to the other people in the landing party, Redfire met a woman down there, and may or may not have mated with her. They disappeared together after returning from the slave rescue mission. (Note: All involved parties have been unanimously approved for commendations by the Command Core.) She has not been seen since, despite the best efforts of subsequently. Landing parties to locate her. The villagers do not seem alarmed by this, saying she sometimes leaves to hunt game in the nearby wilderness. (Killing and eating other animals seems distasteful to me, but I have always found the scent of raw meat erotic. Strange, isn’t it?) They do not suspect Tactical Commander Redfire of engaging in any foul play and expect their guardian to return “soon.”

Redfire’s life on board ship will not return to normal so easily.



## Pegasus – Deck 50

Flight Captain Jordan knew of a place few others on the ship did. Out on Deck 50, several sections forward of the last section of habitation, a single junior officer's quarters had been activated. It was listed as the inhabitation of Jojo Shabadu, which very few people knew was the occasional pseudonym of one of Sapphire's foremost destruction artistes.

She tapped on the reception plate. It returned a two-word message. **Go Away** in bright green letters.

She removed a small patch, about 10 centimeters square from an inner pocket. She placed this on the door panel, to which it adhered magnetically. She drew back her fist and punched it hard. There was a brief spattering and crackle of energy, and the door opened.

"I told you no to come in," came a voice, belonging to a shadow near the back.

"Then, you shouldn't have given me the tool," she said, holding up the door-jacker. He and his former art crew had used on in New Cleveland, once, burglarizing several homes to remind people what crime was like. They had given everything back, of course.

Redfire stepped out of the shadows, toward the dim light of the fore-room. He looked a fright, like he had neither slept, eaten, nor bathed since returning from the planet and receiving his summary physical exam — which was, in fact, the case.

"You weren't in your quarters."

"They don't suit me, just now. I feel like a stranger invading my own privacy."

"You always did get sappy when you're melancholy."

"I'm surprised you took the trouble to find me."

"I was worried about you. You have been off-duty for three days."

"I've been fasting."

"I didn't think you believed in that."

"I don't, but it feels like the right thing to do."

"I think we have some things to talk about."

"If you want a divorce now, you have cause."

She almost slapped him, then caught herself. "I don't want a divorce. You are not getting out that easily." She stroked his brow along the hairline, one stroke, not quite gentle. "I'm angry, and I'm hurt. I need to get through this. I don't have any pity for you, though."

"I am not doing this out of self-pity. I'm not even doing it out of guilt." He looked at her, something desperately hard in the shape of his eyes. "It's like poison, and the more you take the more you want, and when you stop taking it everything breaks down."

She was silent for a moment. Her eyes searched the back wall of the room, which was hung with holo-posters from his exhibition. Her eyes fixed on the one for the Matthias Civic Center bombing. "Demolition of Civic Responsibility: A Symphony in Three Parts." After the performance, while everyone else was sifting through the rubble, she had gone back to his control podium to find a pair twin sisters lying in wait for him, clad only in strategically-arranged flowers and vegetables. He had professed that he did not know them, had never met them before, which the two girls corroborated. Nevertheless, a fierce argument had ensued, which led to her relocating to an Auxiliary Defense Station in the Cerulean Ocean and he disappearing for nearly a year in the Arcadian Rainforest, emerging to destroy an abandoned environmental monitoring station, but spelling out a marriage proposal in the debris.

"I am very ashamed of what I did down there," he spoke in a hoarse, gentle voice. "I can't explain why I did what I did, what came over me. I ... when I met this woman. Her life was so different than anything I could imagine. I didn't even realize where things were going until it was too late to turn back.

"When we were on the ice, fighting for our lives, rescuing those people. I was so charged up, I felt like if I pointed at the sky I could shoot lightning from my fingertips. And she was there. Then..." He shook his head.

"Go on." It was killing her to hear it, but she had to keep listening.

He sighed. "Have you ever been sick with a fever, and your whole body felt like it was burning? Have you ever had a fever that made you shake, and your head swim, and you couldn't tell if you were awake or asleep. In Arcadia, monks eat the leaves of certain trees to produce the same symptoms. They do it to get out of themselves. That's what it felt like, like I was out of myself."

She closed her eyes. In truth, she felt a little bit that way now.

"Dr. Reagan largely corroborates your story. Your male hormones, and your sex markers were both off the scale. Your brain chemistry was altered, even your body. Under the circumstances, I have to forgive you." From the tone of her voice, forgiveness would be something she was working on for some time before she achieved it.

"I let it happen. I should never have let it happen."

"You shouldn't have, but you did. Where do we go from here? Seduction by an alien woman with overpowering pheromones was never covered in our marriage counseling."

"Do you want to stay together?"

"Za," she said, and hesitated. "We have always had a strange relationship. We don't live together. We see each other only when we choose to. It isn't what most would call a marriage, but we like it that way. Is either one of us going to find someone else who can tolerate that arrangement?"

"You shouldn't stay with me just because you can't think you'll find someone else. You're beautiful, Jordany, always the most beautiful woman I've ever known. Certainly more beautiful, and smarter, and stronger and everything than I deserve."

"Damb right." She put her palm on his eyelids. They did feel feverish. "I'll see you again in three days, and you can tell me how it goes."

As she turned toward the door, Redfire called after her. "There is something else, Jordany, something much worse, more terrible than anything else."

*Of course there was,* she thought.

He looked away from her. "Winter wanted a mate. She couldn't mate with any of the men in the village. They were slave caste. She needed an equal, and she chose me."

"How does that make it worse?"

"If she needed a mate, she must have been in heat," he explained. "She was fertile, my love. She wanted to procreate, and I think she succeeded."

She agreed. This was worse, far, far worse. "Don't you want to go back? Don't you want to find her?"

Against the screaming his heart, he shook his head. He went over to Jordan, put his arms around her and buried his forehead in her neck. Soon, she felt his warm wet tears soaking into the shoulder of her outfit.

Remember the jerk who carried me from the cargo bay to the commander's quarters. (I have a delicate sense of equilibrium. I don't handle being shaken around like a dog toy.) Unfortunately, he is not being frozen and sent back to Sapphire. He had been taken off the ship's active duty roster, and degraded to the level of Non-Core Civil Support. He dodged a bullet from XC Lear, and apparently managed to work a favor from LTN Change (whom, as I have stated earlier, is weird chick writ large. Of course, only the weird can navigate in hyperspace, but she is weirder than weird.)

## **Pegasus – The UnderDecks**

"It's in here," Eddie told them. "Come on."

"Eddie..." Change and Driver were being all but dragged down a dark and narrow causeway, chilled almost like winter itself, and silent, and silent.

"I know... Deck -112, you can't go any lower on this ship without a re-breather pack and a pressure suit. We're almost there."

He led them down the passageway, and finally found the hatch he was looking for. He palmed the latch panel and it open, sliding above and below into the deck to reveal another set of hatches that opened to either side. "Lights," he called into the room. "Look it over, compadres, Future Home of 'Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam 'n' Jam, Mark I.'"

It was a cavernous space, a curved ceiling was festooned with power conduits and structural supports. It was very cold. The floor curved at the corners.

"O.K. It may not look like much now," Eddie said. "But imagine it with tables, tastefully subdued lighting, a bar on that wall, a band in that corner playing Cayenne music..."

Matthew Driver touched the identification plate. "This used to be an emergency flush receptacle for radioactive wastewater."

"The key words are 'used to be' and 'auxiliary'," Eddie explained. "Tertiary, which meant two other systems had to fail before it could be used. We'd still have at least two minutes warning before the place would have to be evacuated, and the wastewater can always be re-routed." He shouted triumphantly. "This is going to be the coolest dive on this ship."

"Do you really believe the crew are going to descend to the lowest level of the ship, pass through a dark, cold passageway to spend time in a radioactive wastewater holding tank?"

"Cool people will," he said confidently, with a voice that said *you don't spend your youth being thrown out of bars without learning a few things*. "This place has something none of the Recreational Areas Topside has. Authenticity. That's what will bring them down here. Besides, I don't need a big crowd. As long as I can break even, I can stay in business."

"Good luck," Matthew said, with sincerity or the closest approximation his doubt would allow.

"It's not quite a deal yet. I need the approval of three senior officers to use the space... I got two already."

They saw that Captain Keeler's sig was affixed to the documentation. No surprise there. They were surprised at the other sig. "Flight Captain Jordan?"

"Za, I ran into her while I was camping out in front of Redfire's quarters. She agreed to sign it on his behalf. He's taken leave of duty for a while. I just need one more, Eliza Jane, one more sig, one more chance."

She took the pad from him and affixed her sig. "Good luck, Eddie."

"Boffo!" he enthused. "I knew you'd affirm." He reached behind into a barrel marked

"Contaminates" and pulled out two bottles of sparking Arcadian wine and one of non-fermented mauve and shineberry juice.

They drank and laughed into the night, and when she got tired, Eliza Jane Change rested her head on Matthew's shoulder.

*In the final analysis, EdenWorld had little to offer of interest. Its technology base had nothing useful. While its construction entail complex world-building techniques, its engineers left little to tell us how it was accomplished.*

*The genomorphic qualities of the population are nothing we have not seen before, and nothing we are not quite capable of achieving with existing techniques of genetic manipulation and bio-mechanical augmentation. That a societal structure has been based on these forms is interesting, but not very useful.*

*EdenWorld, I think, will remain in our memories as a monument to frivolity, to excess, to decadence. We do not need to pass judgment on this rotting shell of a world. History has already made that determination for us.*

The cat yawned and stretched. *Was it really so bad?* he wondered. Many of the crew had been to the surface, as part of a landing or shore leave party. In general, they came back in good spirits, having enjoyed the warm, fragrant air, and how the piddling gravity made them feel light and leap high and dance for days. It was only when they discussed the people, with whom few had actually had contact, that their moods turned sour.

He rolled on his back again, and, as he did at least twenty times a day, wallowed in his joy to have been born a cat.

He heard a door slide shut in the next chamber and rolled back onto his pause, his ears pointed alertly forward. It was just his commander, exiting the room where he kept the spirit of his ancestor, The Dead Guy, Lexington Keeler. "Dad says hi," he told the cat.

Queequeg's fur bristled. Dead People bothered him.

"He wouldn't answer anything about the about the other space-faring race, but I think he knows something he's not telling. He just wanted to talk about how he got Caliph to speak in cryptic, Delphic riddles to Commander Lear. Apparently, if you're dead, that's the kind of thing you think is hilarious."

He continued. "You can't reason with a Dead Guy, you can't threaten one either. He's dead. I even tried threatening to have his coffin painted over with smiley faces. It didn't work, he just said if I did that he'd do banshee screams every night until I took them off."

*He really thinks I care,* Queequeg thought. *That's kind of cute. Scratch my belly.*

The Captain scratched Queequeg behind the ears with his good hand. "I will be intrigued when the Intelligence Core finishes its report on the other space-faring civilization that contacted this world. We're not alone out here, and that simple fact, my feline friend, is far more profound than anything on that planet below."

Belly, stupid. "A theory has arisen that the other space-faring visitors to this world were actually one of the Olympic Missions from a thousand years ago." Keeler paused, "the Olympic ships were sub-light, their crews placed in stasis. None were ever heard from again after leaving the Republic System."

"Za, professor. Everybody in this room knows that."

*"What do you think, kitty-cat?"*

"The optimal speed of the Olympic ships would have placed them in the vicinity of this world less than a hundred years ago, but I don't think they were Olympics who came here. No Olympic ships had Eden as a destination."

"They could have proceeded here from other worlds."

"Why would the crew have entered into a secret alliance with the ruling powers?"

"We only have the Scion's word that there was a secret alliance. He could have been manipulating the facts for his own purposes. If they came, they came a long time ago, and there is no incentive on this world for keeping an accurate history."

Queequeg could tell they were repeating the points of an argument that had gone on in the next chamber. He used his paw to direct his Captain's fingers to his own belly and asked. "Do you think the Olympic ships stopped here?"

The captain looked troubled. "The question is, would I rather an Olympic ship came here and left the world behind, as we are doing, or would I rather believe there is another space-faring human race in the galaxy, maybe a part of our Commonwealth that survived the Great Silence, or awoke from it a century or two before we did?"

Queequeg flicked his tail. "When two animals of the same species meet in the wilderness, they usually either fight, or mate. Either way, the one who gets on top first usually prevails."

Keeler smiled. "I think you've just created the perfect summary for my tactical report to the Odyssey Project Institute on Sapphire."

"I think we are all eager to put that pit o' despair behind us. Hopefully, the next colony, will restore some of our faith in humanity. I believe it is called Medea."

*Set by my own paw – Queequeg*