

WORLDS APART BOOK 03



BODICEA

JAMES WITTENBACH



Worlds Apart Book Three:
Bodicéa



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CHAPTER ONE

Despite certain reckless metaphors, space is not a final frontier. It is, in fact, no frontier it

all. A frontier, by definition, is a boundary, a margin between the known and the unknown. Space, by definition, is nothing at all. Space is the absence of things, and the space between stars is empty beyond wanting, vast beyond measurement, and unknowable except to God.

The average density of matter in interstellar space, for the most part, is something like one hydrogen atom for every thousand cubic meters. In star systems, where planets, comets, and other miscellaneous rocks are most populous, the average density is only marginally greater. Galaxies might collide and pass through one another without a single collision between stars or planets or even specks of dust, there being so much more space than things for space to be between. Save for a few anomalous sprinkles of matter adrift in the cosmic winds, the universe is a boundless vacancy, an immensity of nothingness beyond human contemplation.

So, when the starburst pattern appears in one Empty Quarter of the cosmos, heralding the emergence of one of humanity's great pathfinder ships, what exactly is being moved aside? If there is nothing there, then what structure must be warped and parted to allow the massive ship to depart the anarchic dimensions of hyperspace and re-enter the orderly universe of stars, gravity, humans, and the Fathomless Void. What is it that splits open to allow the mighty ship to emerge from chaos into well-ordered nothingness?

A physicist and a philosopher would give the same answer, what Pegasus moves aside is whatever it is that holds the nothingness together.

Pegaus - Main Bridge/Primary Command

"...point-four-oh light days from the outer margin of system 12 822 Equuleus." Lieutenant Navigator Eliza Jane Change reported as some of the interface gear peeled from her face and arms, revealing a smooth-skinned woman with straight black hair and hard-edged beauty.

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

"Well done, lieutenant," said *Pegasus's* Commanding Officer, Captain William Keeler, a hearty fellow, whose bearing reflected a life of accustomed privilege and the routine satisfaction of appetites, both intellectual and gustatory. One of his hands was still bandaged from their last exploratory mission, to the very bizarre and dysfunctional world called Eden. In the course of his visit to the renowned hospitality planet, he had been attacked by winged guardsmen, ferocious beasts, vampires, and, worst of all, a breed of vile creature that had been driven to extinction on his own world millennia before ... politicians.

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

leadership had proven him to be more than any of them had expected.

The slim figure of Executive Commander Goneril Lear stood in the forebridge of Primary Command (PC-1); a seldom-used vantage point, with shields that could be opened to view space directly. To the crew, she was more Keeler's rival than First Officer, and the direction of the ship was a constant battle of wills between the laid-back former professor from Sapphire and the hard-charging Ministry bureaucrat from Republic. "Initial scans indicate we are 8.3 degrees off the plane of the system," she reported crisply, reading from the Astrogation report on her data pad. "If the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland Navigational Reconstruction team have come through for us again, we should find the ancient colony of Medea here."

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

"Shall I begin preparing the Surveyor probes?" Lear asked.

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

Lear ordered the lovely dark-haired woman at the science station, Specialist Kayliegh Driver, to prepare four probes for launch. Surveyor probes were long missiles, needle tipped with three large fins at the aft end surrounding their ion-drive engines. They reminded Keeler of a device used in recreational lawn games on his own world, and illegal for millennia on Lear's.

Keeler's world was called Sapphire, a warm blue planet that was the original home of nearly half the crew. Lear's world was a cold gray one called Republic, original home to nearly the other half. Neither half of the crew ever expected to see their home world ever again. They had left on a one-way mission to find the lost colonies of the Great Commonwealth, established during the two-thousand years when a triumphant humanity ruled over the galaxy and seeded every constellation with new communities of humankind. Before the Commonwealth had collapsed, it had planted a colony in the system dead ahead of them, and called it Medea, if their records were correct, of course.

Keeler had done some research, while in hyperspace transit, on the origin of the name "Medea." Medea was a mytho-historical figure of ancient Earth; a witch married to a powerful, charismatic, and deeply corrupt monarch, whom she had brought to power through her witchcraft. She routinely dispatched the Monarch's enemies, and convinced the rest of the court to look the other way. When the Monarch had carnal relations with a chubby courtesan, Medea had her killed, but the Monarch was blamed for the crime. Challenged by the Court to account for some of his evil activities, the King explained that as horrible as his crimes were, letting his enemies come to power would be worse. Medea bewitched his court into agreeing with him and the Monarch was absolved.

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

Unable to remain away from power, Medea secured herself a place in the Imperial Senate.

The monarch left her for another woman. Medea got revenge for the desertion by killing the new bride with a poisoned robe and tiara that burned the flesh from her body. The monarch died as well when he tried to embrace his dying bride. Ultimately, Medea became queen and brought ruin to her country.

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

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

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

"Where's Phil?" the Commander asked.

"Tactical Commander Miller?" Lear repeated, not for clarification, more out of her Republic-bred disdain for informality. Chief Tactical Officer, like all of the ship's officers, had the explorer's heart, the adventurer's soul. Missing an emergence was almost unthinkable.

Yet, standing at his post was Specialist Shayne American. A slim, dark skinned woman with close-cropped blond hair from the planet Republic. It was American who answered the Captain's question. "Lt. Commander Miller remains on personal leave."

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

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

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

"Threatening a superior officer?" asked Lear.

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

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

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

"No gossip on the bridge," Lear said, quietly but sternly.

The ship had been twenty-five days in transit through Hyperspace. Miller had requested

personal leave very early on, and had kept to himself ever since. Rumor had seen him talking with a Theologian Spiritual Advisor in one of the ship's garden areas. Rumor had seen him sparring with an and/oroid in one of the ship's gymnasias. Rumor had seen him sleepwalking naked through one of the Landing Bays. Rumor had seen him in an agro-botany bay sitting in a tree eating bananas. Rumor, apparently, had seen more of him than anyone in the crew.

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

Pegasus - Fast Eddie's Interstellar Slam-n-Jam (Deck Minus 221, Section 92:20)

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

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

The proprietor of this would-be dive was a young former technician third class who was determined to turn this into a meeting place for those in the ship's company who craved less structured and aesthetically calculated entertainments than the ship's recreation lounges provided. He had already persuaded some of his former colleagues from the landing bay to form a band, and he was planning on live cayenne music twice a week. Someone (a rather straight-edged and unimaginative Flight Core type) had also suggested singing contests using popular music from which the vocal tracks had been removed. It sounded barbarically uncool to Eddie Roebuck, a puffily handsome young man, with coffee-brown skin, who gave the impression he was always smirking at some private joke he dared not say out loud.

Three ship-days after *Pegasus* had entered hyperspace, he had been surprised when the ship's Chief Tactical Officer had appeared at the hatch with a crayola wand, asking if he could paint a mural. The same officer had earlier signed off on his request to use the space. As much as he wanted to refuse, that would have been rude and ungrateful. Besides, the officer in question was a Master of Pyrokinetic Art. Prior to becoming the officer in charge of all the ship's weaponry, he had made a name for himself traveling around the planet Sapphire, destroying buildings and bridges, setting cities on fire and starting avalanches; holding a mirror up to nature and then smashing it, finding beauty in the shards. What was the worst that could happen? At least he had at least not asked to blow up the place.

Now, Eddie stood back, looking over the mural. The Commander had done the faces last, but Eddie Roebuck had seen the direction this was taking for at least the last two weeks. He had spent that time working out precisely the most tactful way to convey his critique of the

work in progress. He had settled on the wording last night. "Beauty, that is one brutal painting."

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

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

"Spider-freaked?"

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

Miller's thin, crew-cut head gave a slow nod, then he returned to his work.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So long as it's topical," said Eddie Roebuck. "Maybe you can paint something happier on the other wall."

"Maybe." Miller paused, cracked his shoulders, and returned to work.

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

"Maybe," Miller repeated.

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

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

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

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

She said, "You missed the emergence."

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

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

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

"I find redemption in creativity."

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

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

"I always found his work interesting."

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

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

"One place."

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

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

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

He ignored her and continued painting.

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

"I haven't forgiven myself."

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

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

"You couldn't control yourself."

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

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

Miller sighed, and looked up toward some spot on the ceiling, away from her. "After New Sapporo, I vowed to never let my animal side take over. While you were off at the Flight Academy, I found a Theologian Master to teach me self-discipline, to help me achieve the mastery of my higher self over my lower self. I fasted for days, until my mind told my body I was not hungry. I spent nights meditating naked in the cold, convincing myself I was warm until I truly believed it. I put myself through that because of the look of hurt on your face that I never wanted to see again on the face of anyone I loved. I saw the same look again when you discovered me on EdenWorld. I failed you again. I failed you."

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

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

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

Her voice grew harsh, a tone he recognized as leaving no room for argument. "Don't deny it, I know you too well. You're thinking, 'this is what shame is like, this is what it feels like to have betrayed the woman I love ... again. I really hate myself, I'm disgusted with myself. I've opened up a part of myself I don't see very often, and I have to keep it open. This is a really deep emotion.' You're thinking, 'this is the kind of emotion I need to harness to make my art transcendent. I have to turn my shame inside out and let everyone see it. It will make me a better artist.' And, you sit down here, enjoying your misery, harnessing it... and to hell with the rest of the ship, to hell with everybody else, to hell with me." She reached down and snatched a crayola wand, a grassy green shade and drew a long, jagged line across the middle of the painting.

Miller put down his wand and turned to her. "I think you better go, now."

Flight Captain Jones stood. "I hate it when you get like this."

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

She left.

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

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

Space

Four Surveyor probes hurled in front of *Pegasus*, blazing a trail for the pathfinder to follow. *Pegasus* sent them all the data the ship's sensors collected about 12 822 Equuleus to help guide their courses. All six of the worlds in this small system were terrestrial-type, great spheres of rock. The two innermost worlds were barren, their atmospheres having been

burned off into in the turbulence of their suns youthful T-Taurii stage. Worlds four, five, and six were covered by thick, toxic atmospheres. If there were a human colony in this system, planet three was the most likely place.

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

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

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

They closed on the money planet, 12 822 Equuleus III. Its spectral profile said water was here, and oxygen, temperature within the habitable range for humans. It was the one planet in a million readily available for human colonization. The four probes zeroed in on it like giant space mosquitoes, and transmitted coordinates to *Pegasus*.

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

Pegasus – Geological Survey Core, Deck 65, Section 80:10

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

“The probes had been in orbit for only about two hours at this point.” He brought up a holographic display. Parts of the planet were sharply defined, but large areas were blurry or not filled in at all. “Since then, we have received some additional data, but, unhappily, we have not picked up any indications of human habitation on the surface. No urban areas, and no large structures, not yet, but, at twelve thousand kilometers up, they would be hard-pressed to find urban structures on Sapphire or Republic after only two hours.

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

“According to the analysis from Astrographical Survey, it looks like humans got here a little too late. At one time, this world had a huge number of plant and animal species. Then, a few million years ago, its sun underwent a change... it swelled up and cooled down. The climate of the planet shifted, it became drier and cooler, the spectrum of sunlight diminished to

a kind of perpetual twilight, and most of the species died off. Anyway, it still retained a reducing atmosphere, and the sun was stable in its new state. In terms of suitability for human habitation, it was a very good prospect. Oxygen atmosphere, water, fertile soil, warm, low surface radiation. If the Commonwealth found it, there's no reason to believe they wouldn't have planted a colony here."

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

"About nine percent."

"Have they detected anything promising?" Lear asked impatiently.

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

"...or could be regular, chunky rock formations," Keeler appended.

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

Lear took over the meeting. "By that time, *Pegasus* will be in orbit of the planet. Three primary landing teams will be deployed to the surface. I will lead the Primary Contact team, Lt. Consecro will lead the secondary team, and Lt. FireWalker will lead the science expedition."

"Let's review the background data on this world," Keeler said, drumming his fingers on the conference table.

"I refer you to the abstract I provided to you last week," said Lear, she sent a copy to Keeler's display. "In APR 4908, a few families were transported to Republic from Medea colony. They worked in the crystalline processors of Sector 18 South and returned to their colony twenty-two years later. They described the world as warm, humid, and sparsely populated. This behavior, coupled with the one existing contemporary account indicates that they lived apart from the other workers and kept to themselves.

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

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

Keeler drummed his fingers thoughtfully. He had skimmed over her report, but he

recognized misguided historical bunk when he saw it. Assumptions piled on bunk, to be more precise, but all in the service of not admitting that they knew next to squat about this world. "This was one of the worlds the Odyssey Project sent a probe to in advance of the Pathfinders. Lieutenant Alkema tells me there is no sign of the probe."

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

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

12 822 Equuleus III -- Orbit

Upon receiving the command from *Pegasus*, probe number one made a brief good-bye to its cohorts, dipped its nose toward the atmosphere and began a long arching descent to the planet. It bounced through the first soft wisps of the planet's uppermost atmosphere as oxygen, in mono-atomic form, and belts of gamma radiation, stung the surfaces of its tail fins.

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

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

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

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

As the probe closed, it saw that the geometry of the rock-shapes was far more regular than what was ordinarily found in nature. They were hollow inside, sheets of rock supported by internal skeletons of metallic and composite alloy. They described cubes, cones, rhomboids, hexagons - Euclidean shapes of no interest to nature, but basic to human architecture.

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

Pegasus had made orbit 100,000 kilometers above the ravished, murdered, annihilated world of

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

At one time, Medea had been a vibrant world, with perhaps as many as a billion inhabitants. (Probably not, but possibly if they lived a little more densely than the models suggested.) There had been hundreds of cities spread across its landmasses, connected by highways, airports, seaports, and rail networks. Its people had engaged in commerce, diplomacy, and the mundane business of everyday living. They had raised children, prepared meals, wrote books, played music and danced, while those who could do none of those things very well composed theories on how it all fit together.

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

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

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

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

In his conference room, Commander Keeler reviewed the holographic imagery the probes had collected on the planet. Behind his back was the observation portal, where the planet hung, accusingly, over his shoulder, like a ghost demanding vengeance. His top officers, at least the ones who had some expertise to offer, gathered around the table, looking grave. Keeler stood up, turned toward the planet where so many lives had ended without

memoriam, and gave them a kind of eulogy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Tarmigans," Lear continued, brushing some gray and white hairs from the front of her uniform, "were known for wiping out entire colonies."

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

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

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

"Evidence?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kennecott activated a hologram representation of the planet, a two-meter sphere projected in the center of the table. "The southern hemisphere shows evidence of flash irradiation, as

though the entire area was blasted with an instantaneous burst of intense gamma radiation. This would have incinerated all life down to the microbial level."

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

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

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

"There are."

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

"Also burned."

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

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

"In my opinion, we are getting a little off the track here," Lear continued, turning away from Kennecott. "It would appear our best bet for learning what happened here would be teams on the ground. How long before we can dispatch landing parties to the surface."

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

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

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

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

The walkways were hung with faded signs and flags covered in pictographs and many angled and curving symbols that had constituted the local alphabet. A number of these had fallen to ground level, where they quivered in the thin dry wind and banged against the sides of abandoned transport pods.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Neg."

"A swim?"

"Neg."

"Ill-fated practical joke by a smarty-pants cat?"

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

Lt. Honeywell was there as well, and an earnest Medical Technician named Jersey Partridge had been called to represent the ship's Medical Core. In the far-most corner of the

room, Lt. Commander Miller slumped in a chair, looking sullen and difficult, but, for once, at least sort of interested in the proceedings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That seems prudent," said the commander.

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

He would be closing the door on this planet forever. "I have your assurance that this is absolutely necessary?" He directed his question at the Lieutenant from Exo-Biology.

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

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

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

"We will need to study the pathogen further," Lear interjected, thinking the moment was right to focus their attention elsewhere. "It would be foolish not to devise a counter-agent, knowing what it can do. Therefore, before quarantining the planet, I recommend we acquire a sample of the pathogen for study"

This seemed incredibly risky. "Can't you develop a counter-agent without live samples?" Keeler asked. "We have computer models. We know what it does."

Lear shook her head. "We could never build a totally reliable counter-agent without testing

it on the real thing. Indeed, we will make it our prime objective. We will assign a team to secure an actual sample under extreme quarantine protocols."

"Absolutely not," Keeler told her after seeing Alkema give a slight, subtle shake of the head.

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

Keeler looked to Miller and Alkema. Alkema looked very doubtful. Miller looked bored and morose, but also disapproving. "Negative. Oz has spoken."

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

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

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

Alkema had the answer. "And/oroids."

Keeler and Lear looked him. "Explain."

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

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

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

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

"Just their sensory data."

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

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

"Excuse me?" Keeler said.

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

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

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

He looked around the room. "Lieutenant Mastermind, well-done. I want you to begin on

this immediately. You're dismissed. Dave, Lieutenant, I mean, *Specialist*, Alkema, will assist you when the rest of us are finished here." He pointed to Partridge. "Doctor-guy, you too, you're dismissed."

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

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

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

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

"Affirmative, commander."

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

"Whoever unleashed this weapon wanted to make sure all human life was annihilated," Honeywell said. "That strongly suggests aliens to me."

"No kidding," Keeler deadpanned. "The attack seems too direct for the Theans, remember, they remained in orbit of Sapphire for nearly twenty years and never fired a shot."

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

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

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

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

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

"I know we can count on you to cover that Executive Commander Lear." the Commander said drily. That Ex. Cmdr Lear sent clandestine reports back to her government was one of the

ship's most well-known secrets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Could you elaborate?"

Miller sighed, as though half-distracted, as though annoyed at having to explain something they should have considered for themselves. "Meridian was about infection and colonization through transformation. Meridian provided the main requirement for the alien infiltration, the vector, if you will, by having a centralized computer system. There is no sign of such a central network on Medea. Furthermore, there is no sign of an alien probe, such as the kind that carried the alien contagion to Meridian. It doesn't look like beastshit, and it doesn't smell like beastshit, so it probably isn't beastshit."

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

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

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

"Then, we have this third wave of attack, much larger, and with higher-yield weapons than any of the first two. Then, it's quiet for a while. You can see evidence of rebuilding in the cities the orbital bombardments partly, but not completely, destroyed." Miller highlighted some other spots on the planetary map. "We reasonably believe these twenty-five positions are all military bases of operations. We have looked at eleven of them up close, and all of them were

constructed just before the final extinction happened, each one near a major population center. Even when the population centers were destroyed by weapons of mass destruction, the bases came through without a scratch. Nations at war don't attack cities and leave military bases intact."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've looked at the tactical reports from every angle and I keep getting back to that. The pattern of weapon use, the sequence of events, the final total annihilation ... that's the explanation that fits the evidence best. If you want to call it target practice, or a practice run for a war with humanity, then call it that, but, I believe that these humans were systematically annihilated. The pathogen was only the final blow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More machines were coming to the surface of Medea carried. One pod, bearing identification marking "*Escape Pod EEV-49510-Pakuna Pathfinder 003 Pegasus*," landed at the side of the fourth largest surviving city, which stretched across a vast piedmont, backed up against a worn down mountain range and above a narrow coastal plain. The Medeans had built here because of three rivers, and three sets of waterfalls, which they harnessed for power. Its buildings faced the sea, and many, even the tallest, were faced with polished sea rock.

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

"What is it?" asked the Specialist monitoring the and/oroid's progress.

"An art museum," Tactical Lieutenant Commander Miller observed. His voice startled the two technicians at the monitoring station. He had come up behind them, like a ghost.

"Good Afterdawn, Commander," one of the technicians said.

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

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

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

"What have you got?"

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

"Mmm, delicious."

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

"Who?"

Omaha brushed his fingertips across a panel. "Exec. Lear."

Miller raised an eyebrow? "Really? Any way I could... cut in?"

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

"I'll want to look at her recording when I'm done.... but I'll take..." he studied the holographic map of the planet, and the feeds from the and/oroids and automechs on the planet's surface."

He pointed to a feed from one of the lesser cities, where night was coming on. "What's this one?"

"2527-JKW is exploring a residential complex."

"I'll take it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He found himself immediately disoriented. Nothing here was analogous to anything he would have expected to find in any room on his home world. No desk, but a kind of

oddly-shaped box, with several small oblong pads left across its surface. He scanned them, and found more microcircuitry inside, and display areas on their outsides.

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

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

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

"Are there always three of them?"

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

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

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

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

He found the power cell in the back and had the and/oroid connect to it to recharge. It took a few seconds to power the unit, and a few more for him to figure out how to activate it. Strange characters began flowing across the screen, making words and sentences in a strange, twisting scrawl.

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

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

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

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

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

Miller left the laboratory, and suddenly realized he didn't know where he intended to go. He had not been back to his quarters in weeks. He had slept in garden parks, in the landing bays, and spent one memorable evening in a Null Gravity pod. Now, suddenly it became urgent to return to his quarters. He needed to be there. He needed to anchor himself again. He was through with being a fugitive from his own life. Something else he knew, Jones had been

right about him. It had taken a planet full of ended lives, including the lives of people who had fought with their wives and never forgiven them, to teach him this. There might even have been someone among them who had refused to reconcile, because he thought feeling miserable was something he deserved and had a right to.

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

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

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

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

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

His door chimed. It was Executive Commander Lear, and she had a data pad in her hand. He guessed it would be the final navigational trajectory to the next system. He had forgotten its designation at the moment, but he knew it was relatively close. He bade her enter, "Come."

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

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

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

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

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

"And somewhere, there is planet called Anaconda, completely run by mechanoids, whose entire crust is the skin of a great world machine..." Keeler added. "It's legend. There's no substantial account of the Berserker Wars by any reputable, Commonwealth Era historian. It is possible they may just be an exaggeration of some events that happened during the Crusades,

or, as some have suggested, a complete work of fiction. It could be no more real than the one with the Evil Empire and the 'Death Star,' that blew up planets. We thought that one was real history for centuries before Simon RaptorBoy proved it was all bunk. There were an awful lot of red faces in the History Department when that happened, I can tell you."

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

"The Terminators, you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We never expected to discover anything like this."

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

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

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

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

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

Lear raised an eyebrow.

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

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

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

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

to go, and the crew was glad of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Actually, there is," Miller interrupted.

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

"It's very important," Miller assured them. "As important as any of the other tasks we have set out, maybe even more important."

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

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

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

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

Commander Keeler looked intrigued. "Explain your proposal, lieutenant commander."

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

Keeler smirked, "Be fruitful and multiply."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And/oroids can't possibly handle the complexities of building a civilization," Lear protested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

civilization of their own."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Forty-Two," answered David Alkema.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're really wondering if they'll remember who put them there, and if they'll build a temple to you," Flight Captain Jones said. She put her arms around him, and he rested his head upon her shoulder.

CHAPTER FOUR

12.12.4319. Note the arrival of the Commonwealth Interstellar Transport Amazonia.

Unloading: Five Element 151 Refineries, 135 Extraction workers and other humans, (100 male, 35 females), 16,000 iso-tonnes agricultural commodities, 1,500 self-contained energy rods, 52 aerial transports, 112 ground transports, 15 atmospheric processors, 110 soil processors, 215 water processors, 8,000 iso-tonnes medical equipment and supplies, 11,732 postal items. .

Uploading: 11,500 iso-tonnes Element 151 in stasis storage. 11,000,000 litres liquified Argon gas, 12,000 iso-tonnes barinium ore, 300,000 iso-litres tritium, 9,000 iso-tonnes processed beryllium-gallium crystals.

Destination: Kalahari Colony, (System 94 226 Cygnus. Coordinates 2-.1 x --.- x 4-.2 x 1.-.- Norma Quadrant, Cygnus Sector.) via Starlock 129 "Chesapeake"

*Port of Departure: **Esmerelda** Colony, (System 10 655 Vulpeculus. Coordinates 89.1 x 33.2 x 21.1 x 1.1.2 Perseus Quadrant, Vulpeculus Sector.)*

This scrap of data represented the extent of the Odyssey Project's knowledge of Esmerelda colony, a previous stop on the itinerary of a cargo vessel that paid a visit to Republic five thousand years earlier. No one on either Sapphire or Republic could trace an ancestor to Esmerelda colony and no written accounts could be discovered in any of the surviving literature of the Commonwealth period.

Things could be surmised from this account. The colony was relatively nearby, and so had probably been mapped and colonized within a century or two of Sapphire and Republic. Since

none of the workers embarking on the *Amazonia* had been from that colony, it was probably pleasant enough and prosperous enough that its inhabitants did not want to leave. (An optimistic opinion, to be sure.) Because no other mention of Esmerelda appeared in the shipping logs, it was not probably not a major port-of-call on the ancient shipping lanes. So, it was, or had most likely been, a rather small colony.

Linguistic Hermeneutics thought that the name possibly derived from one of the three ancient master languages called espanol, and may have referred to a precious stone. Perhaps there was some ancient kinship between Sapphire and this other colony?

Limited information did not keep the crew from hoping what they would find on Esmerelda. After seeing Meridian colony rotted and decaying under the sway of alien overlords, after seeing EdenWorld reduced to savagery and barbarism, and after seeing Medea scoured to a lifeless hulk by a virulent, life-destroying pathogen, what they wanted to see most was a world on which some semblance of humanity, and of human dignity, had survived. This mattered to them more than pretty landscapes, warm breezes, and glorious human achievement. Of course, none of them would have objected if Esmerelda provided those things as well.

The hyperspace jump from the dead colony of Medea to the system 10 655 Vulpeculus was relatively short. Thirty-seven-point-five Light Years in normal space or point-three-seven-five light years in the abbreviated realm of hyperspace, a distance *Pegasus* crossed in only twelve ship-days.

In the command center, PC-1, the crew prepared for re-entry into normal space.

"Transitional Speed in 30 seconds," Change reported.

"Light sails fully retracted," reported one helm officer. In hyperspace, *Pegasus* was surrounded by an array of coherent energy fields that drove the ship through the other universe by channeling the raw energy that coursed through it.

"Gravity Engines to full," Change ordered.

Lt. Commander Miller appeared from the right-side entrance to Primary Command One. Without a word, he crossed to the tactical station and drew an interface strip in front of his left ear. He was wearing the high-collared variant of the standard command uniform. It was immaculately pressed, and gave him an air of formality to which the crew was little accustomed.

"Twenty Seconds to transition," Change reported.

"All sections report secure," Lear reported.

"Tactical systems secure," Miller reported.

There was palpable tension on the bridge, little diminished since the first time *Pegasus* had emerged from hyperspace. Keeler hoped these emergences would never become routine. Every time space opened up before them, there was a world behind it, waiting to be discovered. Despite his past experience, the prospect still excited him.

"Ten seconds."

"Safety Systems on-line," reported an operations officer, which meant that the crew wouldn't be crushed into bean-bags when the normal laws of physics re-asserted themselves on the ship. This was good to know.

"Five seconds."

"Structural integrity systems to maximum." This meant the ship would not fly into bits when the laws of physics re-asserted themselves. This was also good to know.

"Shields holding," Miller reported, atonally.

Around the ship, space was filled with a brightness and color absent of light. (While the normal universe had photons, the hyperspace had a counter-part that resembled a photon the same way a fractal resembles a perfect circle. This was the kind of light that ate things. It surrounded *Pegasus* in a thousand shimmering sheets of not-orange, not-white, and not-blue, like a storm of light not meant to be seen by human eyes.

Commander Keeler stood up from his command chair and stared hard into the display at the front of PC-1. While in hyperspace, he had enjoyed a conversation with one of the ship's senior physicist, who had been studying the transition phenomenon and come up with strong evidence that at the exact moment *Pegasus* left hyperspace and re-entered the real universe, the ship and everyone on board ceased to exist. Keeler thought this was pretty neat. Although he didn't understand the quantum mechanics of it, he thought it might explain what had happened to all the socks and data pads that had gone missing since he had come on board.

Eliza Jane Change did the final countdown. "Transition in three ... two ... one..."

The moment of transition had come to be known as 'the Black Flash.' A specialist in the ship's exo-meteorology sub-core had sent a dispatch to her home-world, saying "if you could be a flash of lightning, retreating into a cloud bank, you might have some idea what it's like to transition from one universe to another."

When it had passed, *Pegasus* was cruising through normal space at half the speed of light.

"All sections report in," Lear ordered. "Astrogation, find the nearest star and identify. 10 655 Vulpeculus is a single star system."

"Scan the immediate vicinity for matter," There was always a slight danger that *Pegasus* would emerge from hyperspace and smack into a planet or asteroid, which would end the mission and all life on board in less time than it takes to tell.

"Systems check," said the operations officer, unnecessarily. If anything were wrong anywhere on the ship, an alert would have begun sounding by now.

Keeler looked around PC-1. "Well-done, people. Well-done. We simply must get together like this more often."

On *Pegasus's* exterior, sensors and telescopes deployed, scanning the sky, looking for the brightest and nearest star. They quickly found their mark, a brilliant point of light coolly shimmering in the night, not at all much brighter than some of the stars in its backdrop.

"We have identified a star conforming to the spectrum for 10 655 Vulpeculus," reported an Astronomics Specialist. "It is 42.3 light days away at heading 31 mark 52."

"Let me see that," Lt. Navigator Change insisted, her eyes sharpening, pony tail bobbing behind her neck. She brought up the readings at her own station, read them with incredulity, and then used a Mining Guild curse word involving anatomy and intra-familial relations.

"Is something wrong?" Keeler asked.

Change spun around, with a "damb-right-there's something wrong" look blazing in her eyes. "I missed," she said.

"Excuse me."

"I missed. I put us outside the thirty-light-day perimeter." She turned back to the astronomical charts.

"Lt. Navigator Change," Keeler said levelly. "No one expects you to nail every emergence."

She gave him a fierce look that would have wilted stone roses. "I do."

"You are still well within the accepted parameters," Lear assured her. "A few seconds more of transition would have put us closer, but you could not possibly have calculated..."

Change would hear none of it. "The astronomers on Republic miscalculated the star's proper motion," she snapped, her eyes scanning back and forth between across the displays.

"At optimum speed, how long until we reach the system. Ship-time," Keeler asked.

Change's shoulders slumped visibly. She turned away from the information displays and brought up some navigational calculations. A few seconds was all she needed to give an answer. "At maximum attainable velocity, we can be there in nineteen days, relativistic time."

"That's not so bad."

"Commander, I suggest in the future, we recalculate proper motion of our destination stars in the course of our exploration of new worlds. It will improve the accuracy of my calculations. The farther away from Republic and Sapphire we get, the greater the possibility and degree of error."

"That sounds reasonable, but, Lieutenant, you have nothing to apologize for."

Change was unaware, and did not care, that no one on the bridge had ever seen her so aggravated, or displaying any such strong degree of emotion for that matter. The inscrutability of the ship's lead navigator was as well-known as her mastery of the abstruse and arcane science of hyperspatial navigation. Most presumed the two traits went together.

There was time to fill before they would reach the system, to keep the crew and their families contented and efficient. For the pilots of the Aves, there were flight drills and simulations. For the Marines who protected the ship from hostile outside from hostile adversaries, there were battle drills.

The ship also had Guardians, a kind of internal security force. They were mostly staffed by part-timers from other cores and sections of the ship, since there was little need for them. Theses were sent on "familiarization" tours of the UnderDecks at the orders of Executive Commander Lear.

The technical personnel checked and double-checked the ship's systems, keeping everything at optimum. Science personnel reviewed the data from the other worlds they had passed.

Off-duty, more athletic competitions were scheduled. Sapphire trounced Republic in hockey, football, and ultimate frisbee. Republic prevailed in soccer and foosball.

The tavern houses and social matrices on the recreation decks were more crowded than usual, and six of the ship's women would become pregnant before they reached the colony they thought was called Esmerelda.

The day after emergence, Keeler returned to PC-1 and after seeing that the ship was, in fact, one day closer to the system but still surrounded by nothing of interest, he proceeded to

the tactical section. Miller was seated next to a member of the crew Keeler did not recognize, a wiry male in his later twenties, with the straight dark hair and folded, almond shaped eyes like Eliza Jane Change. Keeler always wondered where those came from.

"Good afterdawn, Commander," Miller greeted him.

"I had a dream about you, last night," Keeler told Miller. "I dreamed we were school children together, and you were much older than I was. You were trying to talk me into eating some brownies, but I didn't want to because I thought you were playing some kind of trick on me. Care to interpret?"

"Ummmm, I'll pass."

"As I was going through my morning hygiene exercises, I checked my log and it said you left a message to check in with you, first thing, and so I am here," Keeler announced. "This better be interesting. I'm supposed to give a talk to the ship's children tomorrow. I have yet to prepare the presentation."

"Words of inspiration for the next generation?"

"Nah, mainly I was going to flush some things through an airlock and watch them explode."

"I would consider that inspirational." He called up a series of sensor images. "The ship's sensors have been focused on the system, trying to map it and find a colony. The third and sixth planets look promising." His voice was very subdued, Keeler noted.

"While we have been focusing on the star system, Specialist BladeRunner has had the thankless task of monitoring the aft sensors. To his credit, the last two guys on his watch missed it entirely, but Bladerunner found a gravitational flux anomaly, almost directly astern of us. He initiated a mutli-spectral sensor sweep, and got some definition on it."

The image displayed looked to Keeler like a bowl of very lumpy cosmic mashed potatoes. "What is it?" Keeler asked.

"Something trailing *Pegasus*, about 5.4 light days behind us, moving at point-22 light speed, and leaving behind a wake typical of a gravity-based propulsion system, and radiating black-body radiation."

"You think it's a ship?"

"It could be a ship. If it is, it's got fifteen to twenty times the mass of *Pegasus*, maybe more."

Keeler shuddered. If there was a ship out there that big, he really did not want to cross paths with it. He had a Sapphorean sense of practicality, which meant that, regardless of the circumstances, he preferred being on the ship that was larger and better armed.

"Objects in your rear sensors may be larger than they appear," BladeRunner said. "It could also be planetary debris thrown off by a supernova or stellar implosion. Anything that large moving at that speed could create a wake that would resemble gravimetric propulsion."

"Stop making up words," Keeler said, raising his arm as though to swat him.

The specialist blinked nervously and continued. "It could also be a clump of dark matter."

"The point is, we don't know, and it is worth investigating,"

"What do you suggest, Phil. Probes?"

"I think it would be better to dispatch a reconnaissance mission. Two Aves, just to check it out at close range and identify it. They can rendezvous with *Pegasus* inside the system."

"Three ships would be better," Keeler said. "Other than that, I approve your plan. Coordinate with Flight Commander Collins. I assume you'll want to join the mission, Specialist?"

A grin broke out across the specialist's face. "Za, sir. I'd like that very much."

Keeler tapped him on the shoulder with his walking stick. "See how easy that was?"

Miller stood in the landing bay, just in front of *Prudence's* main hatch. He knew he would be spending at least the next fourteen days inside a space only 42 meters long and 14 meters wide, and intended to remain outside for as long as possible beforehand.

He had chosen *Prudence* mainly because he knew Matthew Driver was probably the most skilled Flight Lieutenant in the ship's company. He would be in the ship with Medical Technician Jersey Partridge, who had been part of the Meridian landing party, and Marine Specialist Ng, whom he had also worked with on that unforgettable mission.

The other Aves picked for the mission were *Xerxes*, under the command of Flight Lieutenant Dylan Canada, and *Hector*, under the command of Flt. Lt. Adrian Lowell. *Xerxes* would carry the ship's Marine Commandant, Lt. Honeywell. Miller had not requested Honeywell for this mission, thinking it not a good idea to have both ship's tactical officers engaged, but Honeywell had insisted, and had prevailed on Commander Keeler to weigh in on behalf of his conclusion.

Miller snorted, thinking of this. While he had been self-absorbed, he had left the commander vulnerable to the entreaties of other members of the crew. He had forgotten the degree of management his commander required and would have to be more careful in the future. Honeywell would bring Specialist Buttercup, an enormous, terrifying Marine, and a Medical Technician improbably named Honey Pilar, a middle aged woman who had to have been fabulous in her youth. Her curves were still inviting, but her breastline had inched closer to her navel, and there was too much regret in her eyes.

Hector would carry a science crew. There was a tall young woman from Planetology Section, Specialist Grace Jones, who was no relation to his wife although they shared the same rare and unusual last name. She was a tall, solid-looking woman who wore her hair in what Republickers called a "Sector Fourteen North" braid. Specialist Ahmed Ford Zoetrope from Astrophysics Section, as well as Specialist Cree BladeRunner, who had discovered the "trailing object," as it was being called.

"Good morning, Team Recce One," he told them, looking around from face to face. "If you like challenging the unknown, you've come to the right place. I'm Lt. Commander Miller, but if you don't know that already, you should return to your quarters immediately and send me back someone who is smart and aware enough to be useful on this mission."

He waved his hand and a mission display appeared behind him. It showed graphic representations of *Pegasus*, the system 10 655 Vulpeculus, and the mysterious trailing mass (which looked like a mass of potatoes labeled "Mysterious Trailing Mass"). "We will launch from *Pegasus* in 40 minutes. We will accelerate to point-seven *c*, and charge full on toward the MTM."

"I will be on *Prudence*, with Flight Lieutenant Matthew Driver." Driver stood off to the side, looking just a little bit sullen. He had gone to the quarters of Eliza Jane Change to say good-bye, but she had been too involved in making her navigational calculation revisions to

give him much attention. "*Prudence* will be on point. *Xerxes* will trail us on our right wing. *Hector* will trail *Xerxes*, directly on her tail. We will hold formation continually, and should encounter the MTM in five days."

"Our plan is to slow to point-oh-five light speed and make a pass to examine the object, or objects, and then loop around from behind and match the objects course and speed. We will try and hold off until we make a positive identification on the MTM."

Zoetrope raised his hand. He was an older man, with a politeness so complete as to be overbearing "In all likelihood, we are looking at some planetary debris. There is a stellar nursery about 1,100 light years from here. A supernova could easily have thrown off this pattern of debris."

"We will not be able to tell until we examine the objects more closely....," Miller began.

"We may also be dealing with an entirely unknown type of astronomical phenomenon," Zoetrope continued. "We may be looking at some kind... of disintegrating dark matter, neutron star debris, or something highly exotic that we have never seen before."

Miller nodded. "We have outfitted *Hector* with our best sensor and analysis equipment. You should be able to provide an analysis of the objects, or whatever they are, and enable us to project what will happen when they enter the system."

"So, it could be bearing down directly on the colony," Grace Jones said with some concern.

"That is a remote possibility," Zoetrope conceded. "At that velocity, even a piece of gravel could have devastating impact on the planet. We would have to map the trajectory of every piece of debris, assess the threat to the planet, and determine an appropriate action to take."

Miller had considered this possibility. The larger pieces could be vaporized with Nemesis missiles, the smaller ones with other elements of *Pegasus's* arsenal. *Pegasus* could also use its gravity engines to generate a kind of deflector shield to direct debris away from the planet. It would be complicated, dangerous, and require precise deployment of all the ship's resources. It would exhaust both ship and crew. On the plus side, he was imagining all sorts of interesting ways to smash bits of debris into one another, and into the uninhabited planets and moons of the 10 655 Vulpeculus system. That would make it all worthwhile.

"Another possibility is that those objects are artificial in origin," Miller said. "The sheer mass makes it unlikely. On the other hand, building the Pathfinder Ships took nearly every resource our worlds could spare. They are almost to the limit of our ability to build something this large and propel it through space at practical speed. If a species exists capable of building far larger ships, then we have to proceed with caution."

"The Aves *Xerxes* has been optimized for making tactical assessments, in the event these unidentified objects turn out to be artificially constructed."

"The best tactical decision might be to run like Hell," said Dylan Canada. He was the oldest of the three pilots, a dust of gray and white at the tips of his blond brush-cut. At one time, he had held the sweetest position in the Republic Defense Community, first pilot of Republic One, the President's personal ship. Republic One could make the transit to Sapphire in half the time of any other ship, and was as comfortably appointed as a First Rank Liner. However, Canada had found the most recent Republicer president, and his staff, quite insufferable. His re-appointment to *Odyssey* might have been looked on as a demotion, but the pilot of *Xerxes* could not have been happier at how things worked out.

Miller pushed back the display. "Some of you are wondering if this debris field, or

whatever it is, could have come from the Medea system. We have extrapolated its course and, it could not have traveled in a straight line from Medea, but that doesn't mean we aren't dealing with the same set of nasties. We'll keep it sharp, and be ready to execute Flt. Lt. Canada's suggestion if conditions warrant."

"Once we reach the MTM, our mission will be to identify the phenomenon, learn as much as we can, and assess the threat, if any, to the Vulpeculus system. Then, we will return. *Pegasus* will maintain a beacon for us to follow into the system. Depending on how long we stay with the MTM, it will take another ten to fourteen days to catch up with *Pegasus* once we depart."

"That's a long time to spend in the Aves, campers," he continued. "So, I expect we're going to know each other a lot more than we'd like to by the end of this thing. That's the price of being good enough to wear this crest." He touched the Odyssey Project crest on his uniform jacket. "Anybody who doesn't think he is good enough, you have twenty-nine minutes to bail on us."

He looked around the landing bay, knowing nobody would bail. "Very well. All right, that's my briefing. Um, there will be the standard pre-mission prayer and blessing, but otherwise, be on board in twenty minutes." He dismounted the stairway that had met the ship's top hatch, threaded through the others and met Cree BladeRunner. "Ready to go?" he asked.

The Astro-Physics Specialist nodded eagerly. "You bet, commander."

"Most of our time will be in transit. I hope you don't get too bored," Miller said levelly. "What's on the pad?"

An active datapad shook in BladeRunner's Nervous hands. "These are the latest set of sensor scans on the trailing objects. I thought you would like to see them"

Miller scanned it briefly. "A large spheroid object with a density of 5.72 kilograms per meter, surrounded by an array of oblong and spheroid objects of slightly greater density." He frowned. "It's looking more and more like a rogue planet and less like a ship, isn't it? A planet surrounded by a debris field." Miller thought of how he would have liked to have been there at the event that created such a phenomenon; an exploding star pushing out a pulse of dense, superheated plasma, blasting away everything in its path, stripping away the atmospheres of planets in milliseconds, shattering whole worlds from pole-to-pole — creative destruction on the scale of titans.

"Are you thinking of scrubbing the mission?" Cree asked, concern in his voice. Miller remembered Cree had not been on actual away mission yet.

"Neg, we'll proceed. There is no way of knowing what's out there unless we go in for a look. Besides, an occasional endurance mission is good for Aves and crew alike."

Cree looked pleased and relieved. "They're waiting for you on *Hector*," Miller prompted.

"Thank you, sir." The specialist left toward his ship. Miller reviewed the data again. If this was just a rogue planet, there would be no need for another senior tactical officer. Perhaps he should give Honeywell the option of remaining on *Pegasus*. Then again, perhaps not.

"Hey, Bladerunner," he called. The specialist turned around.

"If it does turn out to be a rogue planetoid, maybe we can name it after you."

"Or it could be a completely unknown phenomenon."

"I, for one, would consider it an honor to have an unknown phenomenon named after

me."

Cree grinned again, then rejoined the rest of the party, who were preparing to board *Hector*. He turned to his Marine Specialist, Ana Ng, who would accompany him on *Prudence*. "You ready?"

Ng was a dark-skinned woman, small and slight of build, but fierce. He had trusted her with his life on Meridian, and though he had seen little of her since, he knew he could trust her again. "I'm missing the Wally Ball Semi-Finals," she replied. "This better be worth it."

"It won't," he assured her. He didn't care for wally ball, but knew she was a fanatic.

"Is that your wife over there?" Ng asked.

Miller turned around. Flight Captain Jones was standing there, next to one gleaming wingtip of the Aves *Xerxes*, bathed in the harsh light and steam of the landing bay, almost like a vision. She came forward and gestured for him.

"Be right back," Miller muttered, handing his landing pack to Ng. Without looking back toward her, he walked toward the other Aves and met his wife beneath the Shriek at the end of its starboard wing.

"You came to see me off," he said, sounding pleased.

"I would have gone if you would have had me," she replied, sounding not.

"You're on point for Mission One to Esmerelda. I couldn't ask you to give up that for a Deep Space Bug Hunt."

"You could have," she told him. "What about you? Are you going on this Mission to get away from me?"

"Neg," he answered looking into her eyes for the first time in weeks.

"Honestly?"

"I think getting away from the ship will do me good. I'm through my guilt about what I did to you on Eden, but guilt is like deathweed. You may only see one plant, but its roots are all attached and tangled up in other plants. This whole... incident ... made me think about parts of myself I don't like to think about."

Jones sighed. She hated this beastshit, but she also knew the whole self-pitying, "I'm such a complex individual" speech would be over much more quickly if she kept her mouth shut.

"So, if you're asking if this trip is a Vision Quest, you are partly right. By the time we get back, I expect to have the rest of this all sorted out."

And it would only have taken you six months of our lives together that we will never get back, she thought. "You might have at least picked a ship from the Burning Skies."

"Flight Commander Collins picked the ships. The only one I requested was *Prudence*. Matt Driver is a damb good pilot. I've worked with Partridge and Ng before, too. I didn't want to have to break in anyone knew given the nature of this mission."

"Hmmm..." her arms were threading around his waist. He felt suddenly awkward. This was an adolescent posture. He felt like they were acting out a scene from some Hootch Grabr teenage romance. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"Have you forgiven yourself?" she asked.

"Mostly." He took her in his arms and she kissed him. He whispered to her. "Provided there really is a colony up ahead, and provided I don't get eaten or blow-up by an evil green-skinned alien, let's take some mutual shore leave and you can take me the rest of the

way to redemption.”

“I’d like that,” she whispered back.

“It would be good for both our souls.”

“Flight Core reporting Recce One Aves ships in position for launch.” Specialist Shayne American reported.

“Wrecky One?” Keeler asked.

“The Reconnaissance Mission to the Trailing Object,” American clarified. “Before they can launch, *Pegasus* has to re-orient 180 degrees.”

Keeler remembered being briefed about this. The Aves could be launched from the back of the ship, but to receive maximum velocity, they had to be fired off the ‘railguns’ – the electro-magnetic launchers, which only launched from the bow of the ship forward. In order to launch them at the object behind them, the ship would have to be turned completely around. However, *Pegasus*’s own velocity would be unaffected. The ship would continue on course for 10 655 Vulpecula and Esmerelda colony, traveling backwards for the length of time necessary to launch Recce One.

It made him dizzy to think about it, although he was assured nothing would happen. “Go to,” Keeler ordered.

Specialist Navigator Kedar Looks Twice was at primary helm control. “Commencing Starboard Thruster fire for y-axis re-orientation,” he said in a baritone that reverberated throughout the bridge.

“Proceed,” Keeler said in acknowledgement.

American reported. “Flight Core is releasing control to on-board systems. Railguns are charged and ready.”

“Give me a comm link to all ships,” Keeler ordered. The ship provided it for him. “Keeler to Recce One, good luck to all of you. We’ll leave a light on for you.”

Phil Miller answered him. “Thank you, commander. Try to stay out of trouble until we get back.”

“Define trouble,” Keeler answered. “PC1 out.”

The re-orientation took only twenty-seconds. In an emergency, the ship could pivot in .2 seconds without causing damage. There was no need to push the envelope to launch Recce One, and the pivot in space was almost leisurely. When it ended, *Pegasus* was hurtling through space at half the speed of light, ass-end first.

Prudence shot out from the front of the ship, closely tailed by *Xerxes* and *Hector*. The three small ships hit their gravity engines as soon as they were clear, and sped off into the night.

CHAPTER FIVE

Days went by.

Technically, hours went by in sufficient numbers to add up to days. *Pegasus* was far beyond sunlight, and did not revolve. Furthermore, a day was a period of twenty-eight hours for half of her crew, and forty-four hours for the other half. Officially, the ship kept a twenty-eight cycle (because the Sapphireans won two out of three rounds of asteroid- plane - calipers.)

In any case, a lot of time was passing by. The 6,961 people on *Pegasus* went through the rhythms of duty, recreation, and personal interaction as the star cruiser bore down on 10 655 Vulpeculus.

Virtual simulations continued to run and kept the pilots and Marines performing at maximum efficiency.

The UnderDecks underwent several additional security sweeps and “Intruder Simulations.”

Sensor data was provided to the Navigation Core, which made incremental adjustments to *Pegasus’s* course.

Hourly communications with Recce One were sent, received, and logged.

A gray tabby cat was ordered removed from PC-1 by an unamused Executive Commander.

A Water-Polo competition between the Burning Skies and the Quicksilver Angels was won by the Burning Skies, who would take on the Tactical Core in the semi-finals. An intermediate-school Biathlon was won soundly by the Sapphirean children, while Republic prevailed in a zero-g gymnastics competition among the Higher Schoolers. A quoits tournament was held on one of the Athletic decks, and the Commander came in second.

Goneril Lear celebrated a rather complicated birthday that was either her 48th or her 76th, depending on whether you were counting “ship-time” or “world-time.” In any case, it was an occasion for three score sycophants and well-wishers to gather in her quarters, sip wine, munch on honey cake and preserved sea cucumber, and drink toast to the health of the ship’s first officer.

A band, calling itself **Billy and the Boingers** gave its first performance in a recently established recreational facility in the UnderDecks, to uniformly awful reviews. A technician in Environmental Core wrote a very long, very bad poem called “Who Mourns For Medea?” but never showed it to anyone.

Caliph, the entity that resided within *Pegasus’s* central braincore, described several improvements to the mindware that maintained the ship’s trim, which were evaluated by a team of technicians for the possible implementation. Whether Caliph considered this duty, recreation, or personal interaction was subject to interpretation.

The ship’s ventral sensor array registered the passing of trillions of neutrinos, and billions times more photons (unable to make up their mindlessness whether they were particles or waves), a few million degrees of gravitational flux, waves of cosmic rays and gamma radiation, the complete unabridged electromagnetic spectrum, and the occasional stray hydrogen atom. From such data, the ship’s geophysical survey team was building a fuzzy map of system 10 655 Vulpeculus.

There were between nine and thirteen planets, four large gaseous ones and between five and nine little rocky ones, orbiting a large yellow star. The fourth, fifth, and sixth planet’s appeared to lie in the zone most likely to provide just enough, but not too much warmth, for

human-friendly eco-systems to thrive. Probes were prepared for launch, and a standard friendship message directed at these worlds. "Greetings from the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. We come from the human colonies of Republic and Sapphire on a mission of Peace and Friendship. Please respond on the frequency of this message."

No response was received, but the ship bore onward.

Keeler came down to the Geophysical Survey laboratory alone. There was no call to have a meeting at this point. Information on the system was trickling in and the laboratory had assembled a pretty good model of the system, which Lt. Kennecott had offered to show him at his leisure.

"This ... looks like the money planet. 10 655 Vulpecula Five," he activated the projectors. A one-meter sphere appeared. It was a blurred and fuzzy image, like a video receiver with very bad reception, but with enough squinting and imagination, one could make out a world of gold island-continent, pleasantly ragged around the margins with fjords and inlets, set on an emerald sea. The two largest continents faced off against each other like gigantic crabs, their outstretched claws embracing a squarish sea dotted with islands.

"Looks nice," Keeler said, squinting hard. It still looked to him like a bowl of soup made with unhealthy ingredients.

"It is nice. Oxygen-rich atmosphere, slightly denser than Sapphire's. Complete absence of polar climate, a few minor deserts, but overall, a near paradise."

"Great, I can hardly wait to see what's wrong with it."

She shrugged. "Very slow orbital period, if you can call that a problem. It takes more than twice as long as Sapphire to go around its sun."

That didn't really sound like a problem, but Keeler wouldn't say so. "Any life signs yet?"

"We have only been able to get a resolution of one kilometer, and that's only on four per cent of the planet. Most of the rest is 10 kilometers or worse. Give us another 56 hours, and we should have some candidates, if they have cities larger than a million people we should be able to pick up some indication."

Please be a good planet, Keeler found himself thinking. *Please be a good planet. Please be a good planet.*

"Any communication signals?"

"None in the high power range, and the low power signals are indistinguishable from natural EM at this distance." She dimmed the hologram of 10 655 Vulpeculus V.

"Now, take a look at the seventh planet," Kennecott said, bringing up a big icy sphere, shot through with speckles of black and blue. "Its surface contains water ice, frozen carbon dioxide, and very high concentrations of tritium, deuterium, liquid oxygen and and nitrogen."

Keeler nodded, with his hand under his chin. "I bet if you pick up that planet and shake it, you'll find a little representation of a Borealan Village inside."

Kennecott blinked at him. Like most of the others on the ship, not just because she was from Republic, she didn't get it. "Environmental Core thinks this might be a good opportunity to refresh some of the ship's air and water."

"And one unforgettable snowball fight."

"There may literally be pools of tritium on the surface. I check with Flight Core and Logistics Core. They say a few Aves retrofitted with external tanks could begin harvesting off the surface. The tanks are then mated to refinery inlets on the aft section of the UnderDecks."

"Do we need to exchange our water and atmosphere?"

"It is recommended that the ship's resources be regularly purged and replenished. About ten percent per year is sufficient. We do lose a small amount of air and water to space in the course of our operations. And finding raw tritium and deuterium is an incredible discovery. I think we should put a refining unit on the seventh planet as soon as possible."

"Living off the land... you have to like that, don't you lieutenant. Have Enviro-Core send me a plan and I'll approve it."

Fast Eddie's Inter-stellar Slan and Jam was not normally open during the ship's primary duty shifts (0600 – 1800 hours), but the Proprietor made certain exceptions.

After her primary watch on the Bridge, Eliza Jane Change repaired to the *Slam and Jam* to recline on a couch sipping a concoction of ale, ginger, and vegetable oil called a Death Spiral while a small automech named "Puck" cleaned up some spillage in the corner.

She held a small comm-unit, which displayed the face of Flight Lieutenant Matthew Driver.

"I guess I had forgotten how boring these Deep Space probes were. *Prudence* is mostly on auto-pilot. We check the telemetry every hour and send a message to *Pegasus*. In between, I've been meditating a lot. I try to get some physical exertion in. Lt. Commander Miller has been teaching me the Game of Resistance. He says I've gotten pretty good, but I still haven't beaten him.

"Maybe you could transmit to me some of the techniques you used to use in the Mining Guild. I imagine you had some long stretches with nothing to do. What do Mining Guild pilots do to keep occupied?"

Eliza figured that Matthew probably did not really want to know how pilots passed their downtime in the Mining Guild, and would be even less likely to follow their example. There were reasons you were required to sterilize your hands before touching the controls in a mining ship.

"I don't know what else to tell you, except to say that I miss you, Eliza. I kind of wish you were here, but, then you'd be bored, too. At least we'd be bored together. ... Oh, bugger, I wish I hadn't said that. I guess I'll be seeing you in a few days. Take care. Say hi to Eddie. Driver out."

When he heard the voice of the pretty and heroic flyer-boy finish, Eddie casually managed to find a table that needed to be wiped off in her vicinity. "You all right?" he asked.

"Fine, Eddie, what would make you think otherwise?"

"I don't know, you look, kind of weird. At first, I thought it was that slime cocktail you're drinking, but then I remembered you were used to it. So, now, I have to ask, is there something wrong?"

"Not really. I miss having Matthew around. I had grown used to having him around, and when he's not around, sometimes I wish he was."

Eddie had to smile. "Are you going to tell him that?"

Eliza shook her head. "There is no need to get the poor guy worked up. He would probably take it the wrong way."

"What's the right way?"

She sighed, maybe that was something she didn't know the answer to. "I also have an odd feeling about this mission."

"Like what, I mean, I don't follow the news too closely. I thought he was flying off to look at some rocks. You think he's in danger?"

"I have a very strong feeling things are going to be different when he gets back."

"Between you guys?"

She shook her head.

As *Pegasus* was passing through the huge cloud of comets that surrounded the 10 655 Vulpeculus system, Keeler was called to the Bridge. It was during the Night Watch, but Goneril Lear was already there.

"Thirty eight minutes ago, we detected an incoming message, carrier wave, audio-visual, two-dimensional."

"From where, from the colony?" Keeler asked sleepily, reclaiming his command seat from Lear.

"We think the signal is coming from the fifth planet. It's very weak."

Keeler called up a display in front of his command chair. It displayed a snowstorm of static interference, and some ghostly image in the center. He had an instinctive urge to strike it hard on the side with the flat of his hand.

The Communications Officer said, "I think I clean out some of the background noise."

Keeler nodded. *A new adventure begins*, he thought to himself.

The Communications Officer began peeling away at the interference pattern, taking out electro-magnetic interference from the sun and planets, and correcting the deflection of the signals that were bouncing from the surrounding cometary bodies. The static diminished, and a ghostly pale image came to the fore. A woman appeared on one of the primary screens. She looked to be a little younger than Lear, and rather on the heavy side. Her hair was blond and made a slightly unkempt bowl around her head. She wore a kind of teal sarong over a billowy garment with a pattern of blue flowers outlined on a background of white. She wore a very serious expression. Her lips were moving, but no sound came out.

"Raise the gain on the audio signal," Lear ordered.

"It's in bits and pieces. Lingotron is working on matrixing the facial movements with the bits of audio signal. Then, it can begin reconstructing the language," the words "Negative Analog," flashed repeatedly on the screen. Then suddenly, "Analog identified... Reconstructing 10% ... 20% ... 30% ... 50%... 65%... 75%... 78%"

"Lingotron is getting much better at this," Keeler observed.

"I think Caliph has been tweaking the translation matrix. She's much better at pattern

recognition than the baseline AI." Keeler sensed that Lear did not entirely trust Caliph, and was uncomfortable with the entity's access to ship's systems. In a way, he couldn't blame her.

"We have a translation. Lingotron says it should be about 40% accurate."

"I'm being Ciel. First advocate the Circle Interior. All the communication will do that canal otherwise exclusively. You cease at once educate broadcasting messages our planet a few organizes other!"

"Go Lingotron!" Keeler cheered.

A smile broke out across Lear's face. *"Our planet... this means they're unified. They have the technology to receive and respond to our signal."*

"We are a community very peaceful. We don't let's have engaging intention oppose! We do not have hostility to you. We do not have of arm and it been a threat the offensives you."

"They are peaceful," Lear said, reading over the Lingotron's extrapolator for shades of meaning contained in tone and context. "They have no offensive weaponry, they are not a threat to us."

"Good. Good. Incredibly stupid thing to broadcast, but good. Excellent. Good." Keeler thought.

The woman, Ciel, fixed the camera in a stern glare. "You can approach our nobody closer planet than the orbit the our exterior Moon. That use frequency orchestra when communicate you arrives! We will account then. If you have some hostile intention leave our system at once."

If I had any hostile intent, Keeler thought, I would find this message very encouraging.

"The message repeats," said the Communication Officer. "Would you like to see it again?"

"Neg, not now and not ever," Keeler answered. The woman reminded him uncomfortably of the Chair of the Department of Contemporary Culture Studies at USNC. Any meeting she was involved in expanded to three and a half times its scheduled length, and tended to leave him either with a severe degree of stomach upset or a total lack of will to live.

Lear crossed to the Telemetry Station. "Order our probes to hold position outside the outer moon." She turned to Keeler. "Isn't it wonderful? Another human colony, surviving intact with peace and order."

"I know, it makes me queasy just thinking about it."

"Shall we prepare a response?"

"Sure," Keeler said. "To the People and Government of the fifth planet, this is the Commander of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. We are on a peaceful mission to explore the galaxy and find the lost colonies of humanity. We are peaceful, but we are also armed to the teeth. We will remain outside the orbit of your outer moon and prepare to meet on your terms. We look forward to contact with your peaceful community."

"Commander!" Lear began to object.

Keeler held up a hand for silence. "Have Lingotron translate that into the native language, then translate it back our own using the same algorithm."

The Comm Officer nodded. A moment later, Lingotron read it back to them.

"At the People and the Authority of the Planet Fifth, these that it being the Pathfinder Commander Send *Pegasus*! We let's are a mission peaceful explore and the galaxy ascertain the lost settlements a humanity! We are peaceful we are also armed the prongs. We will let's stay the orbit a your exterior Moon you are about to and meet your quarters! We let's look touch your peaceful commune!"

"Oh, my..." said Keeler. "About what I suspected. The last time I look touched a peaceful commune, I almost had to marry the girl."

"That message is unacceptable," Lear said. "These are a peaceful people. There is no need for us to assert tactical superiority over them."

"Tell them whatever you want, then," Keeler told her, heading back toward the transport dock. "Prepare a First Contact Team, and have Tactical Core go to Alert Situation Three as we approach the planet."

"We should begin preparing for the first contact teams at once."

"You do that," Keeler ordered in a voice that was a near yawn. He returned to his quarters, knowing any attempt at sleep would be futile.

Pegasus came closer, passing by the outer planets and making a final approach to the fifth planet, the lost-and-found colony of Esmerelda. Their sensors had produced maps of the entire surface of the planet. It was a gold and emerald world dominated by two large continents shaped almost symmetrically, with two great peninsulas reaching toward each other across the equator. These peninsulas boxed in a vast sea whose warmth moderated the climate of both landmasses, except for the extreme north of the top continent, which would get very frosty in Winter.

The Esmereldans could only communicate by light-speed carrier wave, so contact primarily consisted of instructions from the planet, and acknowledgements from *Pegasus*. Questions about population, environment, and technological capability sent from *Pegasus* had been utterly ignored, perhaps misunderstood, although Lingotron's translations were presumably improving as more data was received.

It was always the same women making the transmission, a middle-aged and rather plain-looking woman. "Pathfinder ship. Your instructions are as follows: You will meet with the Inner Circle, representing the leadership of our people, at a location known as Fond Glacine, a remote locality which will avoid unnecessary contact with the general populace. You may send one vessel, and no more than five representatives."

"Demanding little crusts aren't they?" Keeler said, reviewing the latest transmission.

"We have to respect their concerns for security," Lear answered, sitting next to him in his private study off PC-1. "Our original broadcast signal was picked up by numerous receivers throughout the planet, and apparently caused a panic. Understandably, they want to restrict further contact to their leadership."

Keeler was clearly uncomfortable with this. As a Sapphirean, he despised the withholding of information from the population. Lear tried to sooth him. "It is their way. Until we understand the condition of their society, we are obliged to respect it."

Keeler pulled up a report from the Planetography Core. They had found thousands of cities on the planet, most smaller than 250,000 inhabitants. This was fine with him.

Sapphireans preferred smaller cities and open space. What perturbed him was the uniformity of the inhabitations. Nearly every city was shaped like a circle or a semi-circle, loosely fitted into the topography of the local landscape. The pattern of streets and buildings varied little, although there appeared to be a conscious effort to utilize local materials in construction. The cities were so well blended in with the surrounding areas that many were difficult to detect. Keeler wondered whether this was an aesthetic choice or a tactical one.

He would find out within hours.

Lear announced to him. "I have prepared my list of candidates for the contact ship." She gave him the list.

Executive Commander Goneril Lear

Flight Captain Halo Jones

Lieutenant Navigator Eliza Jane Change

Diplomatic Attaché Bridget Armatrading

Medical Technician Lance Murdoch

"Because their demands suggest a possible tactical threat, we had to exclude you from the list," she explained.

"I didn't want to go anyway," said Keeler, reviewing the list. "What about a Marine, for security."

"Technician Murdoch is trained as a Marine Medic, and serves part-time in the Guardian Core. Because we were limited in the number of people we could bring down, I chose a doubler."

Keeler decided not to argue the point. He was all set to approve the expedition, when an advisory caught his eye. "What's this?"

"That need not concern you."

"I'll be the judge of that. 'Advisory: Lieutenant Navigator Eliza Jane Change specifically requests not to be assigned to planetary excursions.' It's a codicil attached to her personnel file. You must have been aware of this."

Lear shifted uncomfortably. "I was, but I don't believe self-exclusion from these missions is to Lt. Navigator Change's best interests."

"Lt. Navigator Change may have another opinion." He touched his communication pad: "Lieutenant Navigator Change, would you report to PC-1 please."

Her face appeared. She was resting on a couch in front of a mural in some station of the ship with which Keeler was entirely unfamiliar. "Lt. Navigator Change responding, what's the situation commander?"

"There's no situation. Exec. Commander Lear has requested your presence on her first contact team. I note you have requested not to be assigned to any planetary excursions."

"That is correct."

He waited for further explanation, then remembered Change was the kind of person who seldom answered more than was asked. He was about to ask more information when Lear interrupted him. "Lt. Navigator Change, you have not visited any of the planets we've contacted, and, in the Republic year leading up to our departure from the home systems, you

never once left the ship. Don't you want to visit another world."

"No."

"Not just for yourself, but to broaden the range of skills and experience you bring to the ship."

"I guide the ship through hyperspace. How would flying down to a rock enhance my skills?"

Lear did not detect it, the hint of disgust on the word 'rock,' but it resonated with Keeler. "Why don't you want to be sent on this, or any other planetary excursion he asked."

From wherever in the ship she was, she fixed her eyes on him in a glare that might have melted concrete. "I don't like planets."

"What's wrong with planets."

"What's wrong with a planet? What's wrong with diving to the bottom of a gravity well just to be surrounded by filthy, unfiltered air that's filled with microbes, and walking on dirt that's nothing more than the decayed and digested remnants of other life forms?"

Keeler turned to Lear. "We could issue her an environmental suit, but that would look kind of silly."

Lear addressed Change. "Lieutenant, I have sympathy for your background, but personal growth requires us to have diverse experiences. A time may come when you must face your fears."

"I am not afraid," Change answered. "My duties are on-board this ship. I don't want first contact duty, and I would advise you to find someone else. Now, may I be dismissed?"

Keeler nodded. "This could be a delicate situation. I certainly wouldn't want anyone who was unmotivated to be on this team. We'll assign Specialist American in your place. She could use some landing experience."

"Thank you, commander. Change out."

"Keeler out," but before Keeler could finish, Change had already closed the channel.

"You indulge her too much," Lear said. "Part of command responsibility is the growth and nurturing of your crew. Sometimes, that means making people do things they don't want to do."

"I'm her commander, not her mother," Keeler answered. "When is the landing team schedule to depart?"

"0500 tomorrow."

"The Esmereldans still have not responded to our request to send an atmospheric probe to the surface. We can't dispatch a landing party until we have those surface reports." Shortly after leaving EdenWorld, he had developed an itchy rash in an embarrassing anatomical locality. Dr. Reagan said it was unrelated to the planet. Keeler had his doubts.

"I'll resend the request. They seem to respond more positively to messages when I send them. I'll emphasize that we request a course away from populated areas, it would help put their minds at rest."

Keeler listened to her tone, as casual as though she were ordering an order of Arcadian take-out. He shook his head. After only three planets and two contacts, had these missions already become so routine?

Pegasus maneuvered into position behind 10 255 Vulpecula Five's outer moon, a hunk of gray rock nearly 6,000 kilometers in diameter, a very large moon indeed. A thickish yellow-green atmosphere wrapped its surface, and the ruins of an ancient spaceport filled one large crater. Okay, not ruins exactly, just abandoned.

I would really to get a closer look at that, Keeler thought. *It might contain artifacts from the Colonial Era. It might even contain historical records.* He was almost giddy with anticipation. For some reason, the prospect of an abandoned spaceport was more exciting than an inhabited planet.

"We are in stable orbit, 1,670 kilometers above the surface of the outer moon, 730,000 kilometers above the surface of the planet," the helmsman reported.

"Send the surface a ready-to-receive signal," Lear ordered.

Lear would probably say we need permission from the Esmereldans, but they have no space-faring capability. Their sovereignty is only over their planet. I know it sounds bureaucratic, but dammb it, I want to see what's there.

"Receiving Response Signal."

"Primary viewer."

I'll just wait until Commander Lear is gone, then, I'll take in my own team. It's all for knowledge.

The woman appeared again, sitting at the head of a horse-shoe shaped table. Seated around the table were twelve others. They wore robes in pastel shades of blue, green, yellow, and orange. The transmission then shifted its focus so that only the woman at the center could be seen.

"Greetings. My name is Ciel. On behalf of the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and all the people of this world, we bid you welcome. We respect your achievement in crossing the millions upon millions of furlongs between your world and ours. We ask that you respect our world, our laws, and our sovereignty."

Earlier, it had been agreed that since Lear would lead the Landing Party, she would address their hosts first.

"First Advocate, greetings and well-met. I am Executive Commander Goneril Lear of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. Thank you for your welcome. We hope this meeting will mark the beginning of a long and peaceful relationship between the people of our colonies. We have come a very long way, and are pleased to see that your world has come through the long silent night since the end of the Commonwealth with your civilization and humanity intact."

"We have prepared a shuttlecraft to dispatch to the surface, to meet with your people. I will be leading this mission."

Ciel shuffled some sheets of paper on the table in front of her. "Your earlier, indiscreet announcement was heard by many of our people. They have been told it was a hoax. We do not want you to reveal yourselves to the rest of the population until the Inner Circle has determine the most positive way of disseminating this information."

This doesn't bode well, Keeler thought. *Not very trusting, are they.*

"We have assembled the Inner Circle at Fond Glacine, a large lake at the northern side of our northern continent. You will meet with us there. If possible, do not fly over any populated area en route. If you approach from the northern pole, this will not be a problem."

Lear mentally evaluated the descent. Very steep angle. Fortunately, she had a strong stomach. "Agreed, First Advocate. We desire a peaceful meeting."

We can cloak our ships, Keeler thought. *They don't need to know that.*

"As do we, and in that spirit, we have additional conditions for meeting with you. You will not bring arms of any kind to our planet."

"We will unarmed."

"And the vessel that brings you, will it also be unarmed."

"Its weapons systems will be deactivated prior to launch. It will carry no offensive weaponry."

"No weaponry capable of inflicting harm on anyone will be permitted."

Lear did not hesitate. "We will honor your request, First Advocate."

I am very glad not be going, Keeler thought.

"When can we anticipate your arrival?"

"One hour after dawn at the site you specified."

The woman leaned with the others, and a moment or so later looked back at them. "That is satisfactory. We will meet you here, then, one hour after dawn tomorrow."

CHAPTER SIX

Basil descended sharply over the northern pole of 10 655 Vulpeculus Five. As it broke through cloud cover, it found itself high above an emerald sea dotted with tiny ice floes. It bore down, quickly passing over the rocky, storm-tossed northern seaboard of one of the world's top-most great continental landmass.

In the forward part of *Basil's* main deck, Goneril Lear sat next to Bridget Armatrading at adjoining stations, watching through monitors as the dark of space and the curve of the planet became a bright and vast landscape beneath the steeply descending spacecraft. Jones eased off the speed as gradually as she could, but the descent and deceleration were still stomach-tightening.

Bridget Armatrading was dark of skin and hair, rather dumpy looking, older than Flight Captain Jones, but younger than Lear. She had spent most of her life in the Republic Diplomatic Core, and had been the Consular Representative to the Sapphirean Territory of Jutland when she was accepted to the Odyssey Project. Officially, she was part of *Pegasus's* Exo-Sociology Core. She was on this mission because Lear blamed Keeler for the disaster that had been the EdenWorld mission. An experience diplomat would have resolved the situation more tactfully, she had decided, would have opened lines of communication with planetary leadership. Lear had wanted a trained diplomat on her Contact Party to make sure the same mistake would not happen again.

"Did the Inner Circle ever respond to our request for a guide to local protocol and customs?" Lear asked her trained diplomat.

"Unfortunately, they did not. I can assure you I made the request repeatedly, but I never got a response from them," Armatrading answered. "It's possible no such guide exists."

Lear nodded. "We'll just have to ... figure it out as the situation evolves."

"I will follow your lead, Commander," Armatrading said, with a little too much gusto and Lear did not mind that at all. Armatrading was one of the few people who actually seemed to thrill to her company.

At the rear of the ship, American and Murdoch reclined on couches, wondering if Armatrading would suffer a broken nose if Lear sat down too fast. American monitored the planet's electronic communication network. It was very limited, and the traffic on it consisted of little more than exchanges among government organizations, boring stuff like requests for supplies. No one was talking about visitors from another planet. Murdoch reviewed data from the atmospheric sampling probe. He was an unremarkable looking Republicer, of medium build and dark, molasses-colored hair worn in a short simple cut. He did not mind dressing in his Med-Tech Uniform, without the Marine Crest. If he had been an ordinary Marine, he might have wondered what use he was, completely disarmed, on his mission. Instead, he considered how he might protect Executive Commander Lear with only his training and Centurion implants as weapons, should the need arise.

Basil closed on the surface, breaking through the topmost deck of clouds. Rocks and tundra soon gave way to an immense, trackless forest of enormous conifers. Their orbital maps had shown that the entire northern third of this continent was uninhabited. The cities were clustered in the mid-latitudes, and along the coasts. The nearest population center to their landing coordinates was 1,100 kilometers away.

Their bearing was a lake 800 kilometers long and 60 wide that made an immense gash just to the right of the continental divide, as though a giant had stuck a knife into the planet just there. The latest scans showed the lake all but completely hidden beneath a weather system of harsh teal clouds.

"This forest has been untouched for thousands of years," Armatrading said. "I don't think they have even explored their northern expanse. The land looks almost completely untouched."

Lear had seen the same reports. "Our studies show a planetary population of under two billion. Perhaps they've never needed the resources."

"Admirable example of planetary resource management," Armatrading gushed.

Lear agreed, but did not show it. She touched her communication panel, and called up to Jones in the command module. "Is there a place to land?"

Jones responded by displaying a diagram of their destination. On the southeastern shore of the lake was a cluster of stone and timber buildings with slate roofs. The largest was an oblong structure surrounded by four large rectangular buildings. There was no access road. Four air vehicles had arrived at the site. They were parked near a gravel landing strip and had probably provided transportation to the planet's leadership. Lear was eager to meet them.

"I think I am going to put down on the lake itself," Jones answered. "There's a dock near the structure." She indicated a wooden structure jutting from the shoreline.

"Send them a message," Lear ordered. "Let them know our E.T.A. and where they can expect to meet us."

"Conditions at landing site --- heavy overcast, intermittent rain," Jones reported. "Transmitting E.T.A. and Landing Coordinates."

"I hope you don't mind a little rain, specialist," Lear said, almost confidentially, to Armatrading.

"The weather is no impediment to good diplomacy," Armatrading responded.

"Used properly, it can assist. It rains on everyone, so it's a common experience. Things we have in common are the girders on which the bridge of friendship is built."

"You are correct, sir," Armatrading spurted effusively.

"Secure for landing," Jones ordered from the command module. It would take some maneuvering to bring *Basil* down on point, but after listening to Lear and Armatrading, she was pretty certain that if anyone vomited, it would not be from her flying.

Basil slid down over the lake, breaking the last layer of cloud cover, drawing wisps of foggy moisture into whirling ghosts that spun away from the gold-white tips of its wings. The ship continued to descend until it cast its own reflection on the dark aquamarine surface of the lake, where wind was churning the water into agitated battalions of waves.

The ship came lower still until it skimmed over the water at less than thirty meters of altitude. The field of limited-effect gravitational drive made a dent on the surface of the lake that broadened to a V-shaped wake and tracked and trailed the ship as it speeded toward the shoreline. Jones eased off the thrusters, and the ship slowed as *Basil* approached its landing point. The atmosphere was heavier than she had expected, but her ship responded nimbly to her piloting. Ahead was a rocky shoreline approaching, with jagged, snow-capped peaks and a dense curtain of forest as backdrop. It was beautiful, even breathtaking. If this planet was anything like Sapphire, there should be a fabulously comfortable resort nearby.

Basil eased up to the side of the dock and hovered above the water on a gravity bubble. Jones maneuvered the ship precisely, making tiny adjustments in the ship's position until it was exactly where she wanted it to be. When it was, the side-hatch slid open and a ramp deployed. Lear led the way off the ship, followed by Armatrading, then American, then Murdoch, and then Jones.

A cold, light rain was falling, and a chilly wind was blowing through the trees, carrying a scent like pine and skunk. A complement of inhabitants, numbering twenty or so, stood beyond the dock in a clearing, shapelessly hidden under green, blue, and black rain ponchos.

"Everyone, pleasant demeanor, no sudden movements, do as I do, do as I say," Lear ordered. She strode forward. Strong sure steps, shoulders relaxed, hands in front. The shoreline was paved with roughly hewn stones forming a pathway into the clearing where the colonists were waiting for them.

Armatrading turned to the others. "Pleasant demeanor, no sudden movements, follow the Commander's example." Jones had a feeling that *Basil's* stabilizers were going to malfunction on the return trip whenever a certain person went to the euphemism.

Lear approached the group that was waiting, measuring her pace, neither too fast nor too slow, until she and the rest of the landing team stood just on the outside of the clearing where their reception party waited.

"I am Executive Commander Goneril Lear of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*," she announced. "I come from the colony of Republic, in the 10 669 Pegasus System. These are my adjutants, Specialist Armatrading and Specialist American, also of my planet. This is my pilot, Flight Lieutenant Jones, of the planet Sapphire, and Specialist Murdoch of Republic, my medical technician."

One of the inhabitants stepped forward. She raised her hood, and showed herself to be Ciel, the First Advocate who had been communicating with them the whole time. "Welcome, on behalf of the Inner Circle. Please, tell us why have you come here."

"Our mission is peaceful. We are looking for the other colonies of the Galactic Commonwealth, our brothers and sisters throughout the galaxy. There are thousands of colonies, like yours, spread across the stars. We are seeking them out, trying to re-establish contact."

Before she finished, the clouds opened up and gray-green rain lashed out of them. Squalls were rolling in from the lake.

"Perhaps we should take this inside," Ciel suggested. She gestured for the landing party to precede them down the pathway toward a large two or three story building, the oblong structure they had seen from above. Despite efforts to harmonize it with the surroundings, the edifice jutted from the landscape like a gravestone in a meadow. It was circular, all gray stone and timber except for one quarter, a wedge, that was dark glass from roof to ground. Jones thought it curious that the glass section faced neither the mountains nor the lake, but other thoughts pre-occupied the others. Murdoch, for one, could not shake the uncomfortable feeling he was being stared at.

Four exceptionally large women wearing what looked like body armor guarded the doors. From their humorless expressions, it was easy to tell that they were security guards. One of these women wrapped a meaty hand on the metal crossbar and opened the large, ancient double doors. She stood aside and held them open, waiting for the party to enter inside. Another one of the guards ushered them through. Several more women waited inside, staring at the visitors with undisguised curiosity as they entered.

Suddenly, the landing party heard arguing breaking out, frantic hisses and whispers toward the back of the group. Lear turned to see that three women had converged on Ciel, and were heatedly whispering about something.

"Stay," Ciel called out. The Landing Party stopped. Ciel moved forward from between the cabal of arguers. She pointed at Murdoch. "That man, what function does he provide?"

"He is ... my medical technician," Lear answered smoothly. She had practiced this. "He is unarmed. You may search him if you wish."

The women convened again. More frantic whispering. Ciel emerged. "He may enter the Chamber of the Inner Circle, but he will sit behind you, not at the table."

Lear hesitated for only a moment, then said, "Agreed."

With that settled, they were led inside through an entrance that bulged on the side opposite the glass atrium, and found themselves in a rather dank smelling hallway that led upward in a lazy spiral. The passageway was lined with offices and rooms. The air had a stale taste to it, as though the building had not been opened for a long time.

They were escorted into a largish auditorium on the top-level. It was paneled in dark wood with a kind of moss-colored carpet on the floor. There were two semi-circles of heavy wooden chairs arranged behind three long, curving tables in the center.

As their hosts stripped out of their rain ponchos, the Landing Party realized that every one of them was female, mostly middle-aged women, rather plain overall. The entire Inner Circle, the Supreme Council of this planet, was made up of women. Lear's mind raced through the possibilities. This planet was ruled by women, unless the sexes had diverged and the men had their own counter-government. The Outer Circle?

"What is this place?" Lear asked.

"Fond Glacine," an owlish, gray-haired woman, not Ciel, answered. "In the past, it was used as a place for negotiations among the various provinces. Representatives were sent here, far from the distractions of provincial life, to settle their differences. That was before the circles unified our people. Now, it is used as a retreat for the Inner Circle."

"Rarely, at that," offered another woman taking her seat.

"It is a privilege, we are honored that you would receive us here," Lear's voice dripped with well-rehearsed sincerity.

"This location keeps us safely remote from the prying eyes of the general population," Ciel added. "It takes more than a day to travel to this location by airship, and it is inaccessible by ground transport, which made it ideal for..." Ciel broke off suddenly, grabbed Lear's sleeve and gave her a hard look. "Why your clothing isn't even wet."

"Water repellant fabric," Lear explained.

"Yet it's so soft. You really are an advanced civilization." She walked to the front of the table, and removed two ornamental rods, one gold, and one silver. She handed the silver one to Lear. "Our custom is that who holds the scepter may speak. One for your people, and one for ours."

Lear took the scepter in her hands, it was heavy, unornamented, and very old.

"This will be your table," one of the Inner Circle women announced, placing both fists down on the tabletop. "We are sending for water and food."

Ciel took a position at the center of one of the tables. Lear realized that she would have to lean over to face their hosts, and this position was likely to become uncomfortable after a while. Ciel struck the tabletop with her gold scepter. "I, Ciel, First Advocate of the Inner Circle, convene this Special Council. May The Goddess and Her Daughter Vesta guide our path."

She waved the scepter toward Lear. "The matter before us concerns these others. They claim to be our sisters from across the stars, and they claim to extend to us a hand of peace and friendship. The issue before us, do we take that hand."

"There are three views to be presented here. A minority of the Circle says 'Bid them welcome.' A minority says, 'Send them away.' The rest have not yet decided. We shall give our visitors the chance to speak first, to make their case. Visitors, the Circle bids you speak."

Lear stood, and tried to strike a pose that was at once humble and confident. She didn't quite pull it off. "So that I might know who it is I have the honor of addressing, is this the former human colony known as 'Esmerelda.'"

"Esmerelda?" A look crossed Ciel's face, bemusement was part of it, and a kind of embarrassed surprise. "That term hasn't been used since the time of the Patriarchy. I would be surprised if more than one woman in a thousand even knew of that name. No, for over two thousand years, this world has been known as Bodicéa."

"Esmerelda died with Patriarchy, and a new world was born," said another woman eagerly.

"A better world," someone rejoined.

Ciel tapped her golden rod against the tabletop. "I hold the scepter. I will speak now. The Dissent will extend every courtesy to our visitors. Goneril Lear, you will continue."

"We come to you from two planets in the Pegasus sector. Our worlds, like yours, have been

alone in the night these five thousand years. We have struggled hard, and we have achieved great things, interstellar space flight comfort and prosperity, technology, art, literature. We now ..."

A woman seated to Ciel's left was bending her ear, staring at Murdoch and whispering. Ciel raised her hand. "If I may interrupt, the Circle wishes to know, how many men are there on your world. What part of the population are they? Are they one in five, as represented by your party?"

How many men? "Half," Lear answered. "Fifty per cent of our population is male. As I was saying..."

She got no further. The entire assembly was chattering away before Ciel, pounding the scepter could silence it. "Half of your population is male, do we understand that properly?"

"That is correct. Half of our population is male."

"And on your ship, half your crew are men?" Ciel persisted, trying to temper her voice to credulity.

"Are you saying there are no men on this planet?" American asked. There were legends, or at least stories, of colonies that were entirely female. No one had seriously believed them, for obvious reasons.

"Not so many," Ciel answered. "Two thousand years ago, a plague came to our world. Ninety percent of the male population died, and most of the remainder were left sterile. We had always assumed that this same plague had been the cause of the collapse of the Human Galactic Commonwealth. Instead, we see now, it was just our own world."

Flight Captain Jones gestured for the scepter, and Lear handed it to her. "Something like that happened on my world, Sapphire. There was a plague that sterilized twenty per cent of the male population. It was thousands of years ago, just before the Great Silence. We called it the White Plague."

"We knew it as 'The Bloodening,'" Ciel responded, darkly. "It struck quickly, the legends say, and burned through our population in less than two years. When it was over, ... there were so many dead that the living could not even bury them. Our planet was changed forever. To this day, we have only five men for every hundred women."

"Because of the Bloodening, our fore-mothers had to re-structure our entire society. Every form of work that had once been shared now became for women only. Men were too few, and could not be ... "

A woman at Ciel's table stood and interrupted. "Men became returned to the role for which the Goddess had designed them, genetic repositories. "

"Once more and I will take a vote to send you out," Ciel rejoined like an angry parent rebuking an insolent trial.

American gestured for the scepter, and Jones handed it to her. "Do you mean that men have no status on your world?"

"Not at all," Ciel answered. "Men are very precious. Our men are very well-treated. They are provided with all manner of food, shelter, entertainment, and health care. In return, they provide women with the means of procreation."

Lear retook the scepter. "I apologize if our questions give offense. You must understand, in our worlds, because men are half of our population, the sexes share responsibilities. The commander of our ship is a man, as are about half of our officers."

This resulted in some vigorous chattering. Ciel raised the scepter, but one of the other women, a rather elderly and hatchet-faced type demanded incredulously. "Are you telling us that *you* subordinate yourself to a ... a *man*?"

"Subordinate is a very strong word. He outranks me, and his authority in some areas is greater than mine. Our form of leadership is cooperative. We hear each other's view and, most often, we try to arrive at a consensus."

American had to fake a cough to avoid smirking.

Ciel shook her head, as though trying to chase off unwelcome images from her mind. "The notion seems perverse to us. Why would we want to seek the counsel of a man on anything. Frankly we regard men as, well, ill-suited to the task of governing, of consensus-building. They are too aggressive, too competitive, and too reckless. The woman's spirit, of compassion, nurturing, and stability, that is what has guided our world to our present state of ... serenity."

"Our world has prospered under a benevolent system for millennia. Most of our women work as agrarians, growing grains and vegetables for food. Others weave cloth, others build. Others heal and care for families. Our society was made better for the passing of men."

"No wars?" Lear asked.

"Not as men would have fought. Not for territory, or wealth, or power. There have been conflicts throughout our history, but always in the name of fairness, of sharing resources equally. For many hundreds of years, each province maintained a standing army, the sole purpose of that army was to go into regions that would not share their resources equally with the rest of the world. Two hundred years ago, we recognized that army for the anachronism it was, and we abolished it as well. We have been at peace ever since."

"And what do your men do?" American asked.

"Our men are kept comfortable and entertained until they are needed."

"They don't live among you?"

This set off what could only be described as contentious tittering. Ciel slammed down the scepter again. "They are isolated from other pursuits of society. At first, this was of necessity. Men were simply too valuable to risk on the dangers and stresses of responsibility, of work. Now, everyone agrees that the system benefits all, especially the men, who enjoy lives of leisure, comfort, and sexual fulfillment. When one is needed, for breeding purposes or for certain rites of passage, his services are negotiated."

"We treat our men as a precious resource. Like any resource, we regulate their use responsibly. We try to preserve our resources through simple rules. For example, if a tree takes one hundred years to grow, whatever is made of the wood of that tree must last for two-hundred years. So, it is with men."

No one in the party grasped the connection, and Murdoch, especially, was afraid to ask. A couple of the women were already giving him furtive, inviting glances. He was beginning to feel like an all-meat lunch buffet in the presence of dogs.

"What about marriage and children," Jones asked. Lear cringed. She had been praying no one would be so tactless as to ask.

"Our familial arrangements are communal, with four or more women sharing nurturing responsibilities over their collective daughters."

"Ideally," interjected another woman.

There was a kind of gasp from many of the others. Lear's well-honed political instincts

smelled a scandal. Lear jumped to the rescue of whoever was being offended. "It appears we have much to learn from each other."

Ciel looked grave, if slightly rattled. "When we first received your broadcast, we barely considered the possibility that we would be dealing with a male-dominated society. Perhaps because the prospect was so very alarming to us. While I have to apologize if our greeting has been ungracious, you must appreciate our concern that your very presence here may disturb the populace. The Inner Circle's first duty is always to preserve peace and social order."

Ciel ignored her and continued. "No one on our planet goes hungry, no one on our planet is uneducated, no one is without shelter. No one goes around armed. Every aspect of life is designed to be as safe and comfortable as possible. The Inner Circle is entrusted to protect the peace and order of our society."

"Which is exactly what I and the Dissent have been arguing," The other woman, younger, darker, and leaner than Ciel, put in. She had been glaring at the Landing party with hard, dark eyes since they had first landed. "I will be heard."

Ciel sighed. "Not all of the Circle were in favor of extending welcome to you. In accordance with our customs, the opposition will now be permitted to address you. Advocate Solay."

The other woman, Solay, took possession of the scepter, almost snatching it from Ciel's hands. She stood and crossed in front of the podium. She had the pace of a determined woman with a cause. She faced the landing party, and gestured toward them with the scepter as she spoke.

"On Bodicéa, we have achieved a peaceful, equitable society. We have cast off the ways of the Patriarchy, and built a harmonious civilization in accordance with the ideals of sharing, nurturing, and pacifism. We do not need or desire to have our society upset by outsiders. Our culture has survived these three millennia and built a world of unsurpassed beauty. Our world is our home, and we have no interest in other worlds. We have chosen a way of life that we love, and we do not want another. You say you came in peace, we bid you leave as you came, and let us have our world to ourselves."

"We have no intention of disturbing your world, or your way of life," Lear answered. "We respect the sovereignty of other worlds. Our own two worlds co-exist peacefully, and retain distinctive cultures."

"I would be interested to know how you overcame the will of your men to do so. Men are the impediment to peace and serenity. Men thrive on conflict, on competition, aggression. They consume beyond their means, and leave the mess for us to clean up. We are reluctant to expose this society, which we have strove so long to build, to the possibility of Patriarchal contamination."

Murdoch sneezed. He saw most of the women recoil, as though his masculinity was an infectious disease they needed to protect themselves from.

The woman Solay continued. "How can we protect our world from your influence, and how can you presume that we would agree to such an arrangement? You can not appreciate the love we have for our planet, and for one another. You understand nothing of our world."

"We wish to understand," said Lear.

"And we wish to understand you," Solay continued, her tone growing sharper. "How many people did you bring with you? How many people are on board your mother ship?"

"Nearly seven thousand." The hall erupted in murmuring, some of it excited, most of it

worried.

"What do you want from us?"

"We want to know your world. We want to know your history. We want to know everything about you. We did not come to conquer you, only to learn about you, and offer to share whatever we had with you."

"How many ships like yours are coming to our world?"

"Just ours. With your permission, more ships will follow, but they will be smaller."

"Once you learn about our world, why should you send more ships, if you only wish to learn?"

"We are exploring the galaxy, rebuilding... re-connecting the lost colonies of the ancient Commonwealth. We invite you to join with us. There are thousands of lost worlds ... "

"Or perhaps, you wish to force us into some sort of alliance. What kind of armaments does your ship carry?"

"Defensive weapons only," Lear insisted. "We are not an aggressive culture."

"Have these weapons ever been fired in anger?"

"They have not been fired in anger. They have only been used defensively."

"Against whom?"

"We were under attack by a hostile entity. Our ship was threatened with destruction. We acted in self-defense and no one was killed by our weapons."

She delivered the next questions in deep, almost funereal tones "Could your ship destroy this world with its armaments?"

"We would never attack a peaceful world."

"That does not answer my question. Does your ship have the capacity to lay waste to this world, to destroy it utterly?"

"Our weapons are not designed to be used that way."

"I ask you a third and final time, could your weapons destroy all life on our planet."

Lear answered reluctantly, in the back of her mind cursing the Sapphireans and their damnable insistence on Nemesis warheads. "Aye," she said softly.

"Could you repeat that?" Solay said, suppressing a triumphant grin.

"I mean, I answer in the affirmative. It would be possible to destroy this planet with certain of our weapons." As if on cue, the Inner Circle began arguing harshly. Solay, looking strangely satisfied, made no effort to stop them.

"So, you could threaten us with annihilation if we refused to give into your demands."

"We would never use those weapons in that way," Lear insisted, genuinely shocked at the implication.

"Then why carry such devastating armaments, if you never intend to use them? If you did not come in conquest, why is your vessel so heavily armed?"

"Some of our people believe that the reason the Commonwealth collapsed is because of a powerful alien species that conquered humanity. We wanted to be assured of self-defense in the event we encountered hostile alien."

"So, you went out into space expecting to find conflict. We have saying on our world, 'you will always find whatever you look for if you search long enough.'"

Lear decided it was a good time to say nothing, and let Solay finish.

"Even if all your assertions of trust and peaceful intentions are true, what becomes of us if we welcome you, and give you license to walk through our cities, our orchards, our fields?" She turned back, addressing the Dissent and the Undecided in the council. "If we let your men come into our homes."

She let the last thought sink in before continuing. "If we do align ourselves with a larger culture, of such impressive accomplishments, however benign they are, what do we open our world up to? Will more ships come? Will the inhabitants or other worlds, covetous of our peaceful and prosperous way of life come flooding in, bringing with them diseases, perhaps another Bloodening? Will they bring dangerous influences to disrupt the peace and take away the security that every Bodicéan woman enjoys? What if these peaceful emissaries encounter a hostile planet? Will we be drawn into conflicts that destroy life and nature, but have nothing to do with us? Will our voices even be heard if we are few among many?"

She stepped away from the podium. She was working her people now. "We see how powerful they are. They may be even more powerful than they realize, like a child playing in a garden, tramping on the flowers and crushing insects beneath her feet. She may have no malice in her heart, but she can not help what she does."

"Consider carefully how you decide to receive them. What you decide here will decide the course of our world for the next three thousand years." She dropped the scepter on the floor next to Ciel, forcing Ciel to bend over and pick it up.

Ciel slumped, and hid her face behind her hand. "Knowledge, it is the real burden of being an advocate. We now know of you, and unlike our citizens, we can not afford the luxury of ignorance. You are here, now how shall we deal with you?"

A woman in the corner gestured for the scepter. "First Advocate, until the Circle reaches consensus, we would suggest that the 'Tenets of Hospitality' be invoked, and the visitors be treated as guests of the Circle."

Solay took the scepter back. "The dissent counter-proposes that the 'Dictates of Public Protection' be invoked, and that the visitors be detained at Fond Glacine until their intentions are better known."

"Lady De La Tesse, as Reconciliator of the Inner Circle, do you have a compromise."

De La Tesse, an especially corpulent woman, rose and took the scepter. "The compromise should be to invoke both the Tenets of Hospitality and the Dictates of Public Protection. We will hold the off-world delegation here, at Fond Glacine. They are to be treated with the utmost courtesy, but they are not to be allowed to leave until the Inner Circle has come to a consensus."

Ciel raised the scepter. "The compromise is out before the Circle. You may cast your votes."

The women removed small paper cards from their seats and passed them to a short, bespectacled woman on Ciel's flank who duly tallied them up.

"The Compromise is passed on a vote of 65 points to 55," she reported. Lear figured, rather than vote in the affirmative or negative, the women here were each given ten points, and could divide them according to their feelings on the topic at hand. Interesting.

"Let the Compromise be written on this date," Ciel announced. "The off-world delegation may remain, and we shall discuss what to do with them."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Outer Moon of 10 655 Vulpeculus V

Bathed in pale orange light, two Aves dropped from a starlit sky to alight atop circular landing pads, squarely positioned over the cross-shaped markers, kicking up small clouds of dust as they settled down. Airlocks cycled, and the side hatches slid open. Ten figures, five from each ship, emerged, wrapped in thick yellow suits, faces hidden behind dark eye-masks colored blood-red by the curious light. The visitors surveyed an almost perfectly flat and alien landscape that surrounded the abandoned lunar base.

The main building was a large geodesic dome constructed of some type of rocky composite with a large rectangular block to one side. This structure was surrounded by eight landing pads connected to it with tunnels that slightly protruded from the ground.

Commander Keeler walked ahead of his team, looking up in wonder at the ancient structure. It appeared undamaged. He hoped the inside was similarly intact. If it followed the design of the Old Hyperion Base, Keeler thought, the primary operational and inhabitation structures would be contained underneath the dome. The underground tunnels would contain a kind of tram system connecting to a large hangar area underneath the main structure.

The landing team passed lightly over the landscape, the half-gravity of the moon amounted to little more than a nuisance. A technical specialist pointed to an aperture protruding from the side of the dome. Following his lead, the party soon came to the airlock at the side of the structure. Using a simple crowbar, they pried both sets of the airlock hatches open, and entered into a dark, cavernous space. They switched on their suit-lights and cast beams into the darkness. Some of the technicians took lightballs from their landing packs and tossed them into the air. They lit up the scene like miniature suns. Beneath the dome was a campus of structures, squared-off, pre-fabricated blocks arranged into functional areas, reaching almost to the top of the dome in all directions. Wrapping around each was ductwork, containing the long dormant atmosphere and heating conduits.

It was not identical to the Old Hyperion moonbase, but it followed similar functional and aesthetic lines, like two franchises of a fast food chain in distant towns. The resemblance was enough to strike an eerie chord in Keeler's heart, reminding him that humans had once had the means and the will to pursue a thousand Odyssey Projects from a hundred different worlds. The men and women who had built this moonbase might have been the same that built the station on his own planet's largest moon.

He motioned with his arm for the party to follow him toward the largest structure, which was in the center. It was a circular structure with straight walls and a domed roof. Large round windows circled the outside walls in four staggered rows.

Keeler led his crew through another, secondary airlock, and into the big round structure. The inside was plain, institutional in appearance, with walls that had once been painted a dull, medium gray, though it was hard to tell through the yellow-tinged atmosphere. He consulted a map of the internal structure that *Pegasus* had made from probe data and quickly found the course he wanted. He led them down another institutional passageway and into a large, half-oval chamber. The walls of this room were lined with banks of machines and displays. These were in the Commonwealth style, simple dark boxes and panels with little buttons and displays, silent and dark now. Seats (formed of padded H-shaped seats joined to

V-shaped backs mounted on top of spindly, wheeled bases) were arranged in the center around two large tables, each with an individual display in front. The focus of the room was a large display screen, three meters tall and five wide, surrounded by an array of colored lights (currently inactive, of course.) The controls, and the lettering around them, were unreadable, but recognizable as two of the ancient human alphabets. This had been the Command Center of Moonbase Whatever-They-Called-Their-Moon.

Keeler crossed to the large chair at the center of the room. From here, the base commander had once surveyed his empire, had once welcomed ships from across the galaxy, had once answered communiqués from the very center of human civilization, possibly from Earth herself. Unfortunately, *Pegasus* had found no sign of a TPT antenna. It would have been nice to be able to talk to the homeworlds.

"Did I ever mention," Keeler communicated to Specialist David Alkema, as usual, on his commander's right arm, two steps behind. "That my great-great-et cetera grandfather, Jojo Keeler led the first expedition to the Hyperion Moonbase during the Renaissance?"

"Neg, sir, I didn't know that."

"When they entered the ancient command center, a bucket of lubricant fell all over one of the Mission Specialists. Before abandoning the base, the ancient crew had positioned the bucket over one of the hatchways. Later on, they found a table where they had arranged empty environmental suits to look like they were playing poker. One of them was even cheating." Keeler sniffed, beneath his mask, a tear had formed in one of his eyes. "They were Sapphireans to the end. God bless them."

"I don't think the crew of this moonbase shared that sensibility," Alkema said. "This place seems immaculate."

"Have you ever been the Old Hyperion Base?"

"I went there on a Field Trip when I was about twelve. It looked a lot like this." He dusted off one of the consoles and attached a hand-held device to it. "Just as I feared."

"What?"

"All the records were stored in an electronic matrix. When the energy cells died, all the stored data was lost. Those cells only lasted about a thousand years after they abandoned the base."

Keeler frowned. That was disappointing, but part of him had expected it. "How is structural integrity. Could we restore a breathable atmosphere in here? It would make it easier to work."

"Possibly, you would still want to wear a mask though. There's a high concentration of sulfur in what passes for an atmosphere, here."

"Planet Stinky," said Keeler. He put his voice onto an all-party channel. "O.K., team, lets begin mapping this facility. Lieutenant Alkema ..."

"Specialist Alkema, sir."

"*Specialist* Alkema and I will remain here, in what was, in ancient times, the Command Center. Team one, try to locate the Engineering Facility or Main Power Plant. Team Two, try to locate a central Brain Core or Data Storage area. Team three, move out toward the Hanger Bays. If any of you find something interesting, check in. Go to."

As his team shuffled out, he tapped his communicator again for an addendum. "Remember, if you do find artifacts, tag them and leave them in place. Make a holographic

image of the area, showing precisely where you found them. Don't disturb anything if you can avoid it. Keep your eyes open for personal effects, logs, and examples of Commonwealth Era technology."

When they had gone, he looked around the Command Center again. How cold and silent it was, he thought. After determining that the command seat would not be disturbed if he sat in it, Keeler sat in it, and surveyed it as the ancient Base Commander would have.

Alkema set a data pad on one of the console stations and activated a three dimensional map of the entire base. "We can track the progress of the survey teams from here. There's about 990,000 sq. meters of space in the complex, not including the landing pads. There's another team standing by on *Pegasus*. Should I send the 'Go' signal?"

"Go to," Keeler answered, settling in. "After Team Three is finished with Engineering, I would like to see the medical facilities." He highlighted several areas on the screen. "They could be in this area, or in this area, possibly both. I would also be very interested to see if there are any science labs. That's where we found the most artifacts on Hyperion. The science labs on Hyperion were deep underground. This base only extends four levels under the surface, and they all look like storage areas. On the other hand, if they weren't cleaned out before the base was evacuated, we may find interesting things there as well. Perhaps cargo from distant colonies." Keeler was hoping when *Pegasus* reached the rendez-vous point with the re-supply ship, about a year from now, he would be able to send back enough material to add a wing to the Commonwealth Museum in New Cleveland. The Commonwealth Museum in Corvallis currently had the largest collection of colonial-era artifacts on the planet, and he was determined to beat those arrogant bastards.

"When will we deploy the next team when they get here?" Alkema asked.

"I want to bring the next team to go through the crew quarters, most likely located in this structure here, and this adjacent structure. Notice the number, size, and uniform layout of chambers. There might have been two hundred humans living in this base at one time. If we're lucky, we'll find some personal effects, something to tell us how these people lived, what their lives were like."

"This base is about a third as large as the Old Hyperion base. Same number of landing pads. One would expect it to have had accommodated the same level of traffic. It would make sense. Esmerelda is a very appealing world. Moderate climate, fertile biosphere, very pretty, even from space. It would have been as attractive a destination as Sapphire. It's curious that in all the centuries records were kept, we have only one ship traveling from Esmerelda to Sapphire. I wonder why that was. Maybe once they got to Esmerelda, they never wanted to go any further."

"Maybe only one record survived. There could have been more," Alkema suggested,

"True, history plays some curious games. There could be a wonderful colony right in our own backyard that we don't even know about simply because no record survived. I wish there were some records here. I hope there still are. Have you ever wondered what might happen if *Pegasus* visited every world on our itinerary, and none of them could tell us of any more colonies that we did not know about? What would we do then?"

"I don't know," Alkema answered. "Wouldn't it take something like three hundred years to visit every world on our itinerary?"

"Good point."

"Commander Keeler," came a voice on his exterior link. "I have a communication link

from Executive Commander Lear on the planet's surface."

"Thanks, Queequeg. Put her through to me and Dave, keep my response signal on audio only."

"You got it, boss."

Lear's face appeared in a window that gave it the illusion of being projected two meters in front of his eyepiece. In fact, only he could see it. "Commander Keeler, this is Executive Commander Lear, I have a report on our initial contact."

"I receive your signal, Executive Commander. Report."

"First of all, the inhabitants of this world, which they call 'Bodicéa,' have survived and produced an intact, cohesive, and united society on a planetary scale. While technologically inferior to us, they possess a high degree of social cohesion, and are receptive to further contacts with us. I am meeting currently with planetary leadership to determine the next step."

"Sounds good so far."

"They are terribly protective of their culture. They do not want us to announce our presence to the general population, and whether or not to continue discussions with us at the leadership level has been the topic of pointed debate."

"That doesn't sound so good. Why the xenophobia?"

"There was a catastrophe back in the Colonial Era, the full details are in my written report. As a result, they have developed a very distinct and very insular culture. They have an understandable concern about the delicate balance of their culture being upset by our arrival."

Keeler thought *Substitute "irrational" for "understandable" and I follow your reasoning.* "How do you suggest we overcome their concerns?"

"We are negotiating the terms for limited contact. Myself and Specialist Armatrading will accompany the leadership to another location. The others are to remain here as guests of the Government. If I can negotiate an agreement, you will probably be able to meet with them sometime in the next two days."

"I'll have my dress uniform cleaned. It still has mustard stains on it from the Co-Ed Nude Wally Ball tournament we didn't invite you to."

Lear twitched visibly. "Commander, when you meet with planetary leadership, I strongly suggest you refrain from making some of your more colorful comments."

"Why, is planetary leadership very ..." he searched his mind for a diplomatic synonym to "tight-assed." "... easily offended?"

"One never knows when an ill-considered comment is going to offend. You must also bear in mind, ninety-five percent of this planet's population is female, and the leadership is entirely female."

Keeler was silent for a moment. "Really?"

"It is, commander, as a result, they have a dramatically different social structure from ours. We have to tread very, very carefully here." She paused, and a curious look crossed her face.

"Commander, where are you?"

"Exactly where I was when we started talking."

"Where is your physical location, your exact coordinates. Are you on *Pegasus*?"

"Neg, I am on the surface of the outer moon. We launched an archeological expedition since you left. Alkema is here with me. Say hi to the Executive Commander, *Specialist*."

"Hi to the Executive Commander, *Specialist*," said Alkema.

"They never granted permission for us to explore their moon."

"They haven't been up here for at least four thousand years. Unless I am mistaken, this base was constructed by the former Commonwealth, which makes it the common property of all humanity."

"Commander, our hosts might be very upset if they knew we had gone onto their moon without their permission."

"Perhaps you ought not tell them, then. You also shouldn't tell them we're sending ships to the seventh planet to refresh our air, water, and fuel supplies, a mission you personally authorized."

Lear's lips flattened to a line, then she smiled. "I can see we are going to require an extensive debriefing before we can make formal contact. I will be travelling using indigenous transport systems. I will contact the ship again upon my arrival, I hope you will be there. Lear out."

"Oh, you got her good," came a voice on his line.

"Queequeg, how many times do I have to tell you not to listen in on official channels."

"As many times as you want, but it won't do any good. Wow! A planet with twenty females for every male. I like those odds."

"Somehow, I can not believe that is nearly as nice as it sounds. Since you're listening in, have my dress uniform prepared and sent to the moon base on the next shuttle."

"You're going to stay on the moon, then?"

"Correct. If Executive Commander Lear requires my presence, I'll be leaving directly from here."

"Got it."

"I want another Aves prepared for launch within an hour. I need engineering personnel, techies. I need energy cells, converters, lights, re-breather packs, a roast beast sandwich on brown bread with mustard and mayo, tomato, onion, lettuce..."

Another voice cut in. "Team Three. *Specialist Brando* to Commander Keeler."

"Keeler here, Go ahead, *Brando*."

"We're down in one of the Hangar Bays. There is definitely something down here you'll want to see."

Two airships plied through the clouds. They were silvery-gray, gliding almost silently through the sky. Their forward edges were shaped and tapered like the prow of a sailing vessel, and indeed, a triangular flap of glittering silver cloth decorated the forepart, filling with breeze. Seventy meters aft, a double set of fins and rudders protruded from the twin, catamaran hulls where they connected at the rear of the gasbag. Two short fins protruded underneath, a small pattering engine attached to each, driving immense curving propellers that pushed the arrangement through the sky.

Within one hull, Goneril Lear was looking out over the passing landscape. By her

chronometer, four hours had passed since they had boarded the airship and cast off from fond glaciene. In that time, the forest had given way to a kind of mixed woods and grasslands, streams and undulating hills below them. Once, they had passed over a large lake and, on the shoreline, two herds of animals had gathered. Bulky quadropeds with thick, shaggy fur and elongated trunks stretching from their foreheads made up one herd. The others looked like large deer with spotted green and orange coats.

She had yet to see a part of this world that wasn't beautiful. An occasional long and straight trail that might have been a road appeared beneath the ship, which was only 2000 meters above the ground, which meant they were approaching the more inhabited areas. She had glimpsed a few cities in the distance, and they had seemed like small but quiet, pleasant enough places to live.

"A different mode of travel than that to which you are accustomed?" came a voice. She turned to see Ciel and another woman standing beside her on the observation deck.

"We do have airships on my world," she answered. "Although they are lifted on the anti-gravity principle, not by helium. Our atmosphere is much thinner than yours."

"That ... that ship that carried you down here, it was also powered on this anti-gravity principle?"

"It utilizes what we call a 'Limited Effect Gravity Engine.' The range of true gravitational force is infinite, but we can generate short-lived particles called anti-gravitons and confine them to a certain distance around the ship. The gravity engine is the primary source of our interplanetary travel."

"So, to propel yourselves, you have to forcibly defy nature's laws," said Ciel, frowning. "It seems like a very masculine approach, brutal, concerned only with the immediate result. Our airships may be slow, but they do not give offense to nature."

"And they are most comfortable," Lear added. "And they provide one with a very pleasant view of your world."

"What is your world like?" Ciel asked.

"Not like this. The atmosphere is very thin, quite cold. Most of my world is raw, gray rocks, and the seas are a faint pink color. Our cities are very impressive. My city, the City of Alexander contains nearly forty million people, and its towers ..."

"Excuse me," Ciel interrupted. "Did you say forty million people in one city?"

"That's correct."

"By law, we limit most of the cities to 200,000 in population" the other woman, who was older, shorter, and stouter than Ciel. Her silver hair hung around her face in what the ancients had called a "page boy" cut. "Only Concordia has more people, and only because Concordia is our capital."

"We have to concentrate our population in the cities. The atmosphere of my planet has to be processed in order to be breathable."

"Why would anyone settle on such a world," Ciel mused. "So harsh and inhospitable. Only a man would have chosen such a caustic environment."

"True, perhaps, but the conditions on our world gave us the impetus to develop standards of community and cooperation. Because resources were so scarce, we had to learn to share and manage them carefully. For us, it was an adversity that ultimately made it possible to enjoy our present culture, much as the Bloodening forced you to create a more compassionate and

egalitarian society than would otherwise have existed."

A cloud passed in front of Bodicéa's sun, and the light shifted to a kind of olive color. Ciel leaned in conspiratorially. "What is like working among men?"

Lear was taken aback by the question. "Well, I suppose my society, because there are so many men, we've been conditioned to work together. I seldom give it any thought."

"You said the commander of your ship was a man."

"Affirmative."

Ciel shook her head. "I can't imagine being second-guessed by a man."

"The commander can be a challenging individual to work with."

"What sort of a man is he?" Ciel asked. "What sort of man gains such a position of authority in your... culture?"

"Prior to the mission, he was a scholar, a historian of some repute."

"I had expected you to say he came from the warrior class. Isn't that the way with patriarchal cultures, choosing leadership from the class of killers, conquerors, and destroyers?" She did not sound harsh, merely dismissive. "Of course, men are equally dangerous as historians."

"How so?"

"They glorify war, conquest, revolution, individual achievement. Men are focused on changing history, on making it. Women focus on continuity, on the nurturing environment for families. Women have a communal spirit."

"Some of the greatest leaders of my planet were women," Lear said.

"All of the great leaders of this planet were women," Ciel answered quickly, almost like a retort. "So, you would trust a man to do anything a woman could do?"

"Generally, with some exceptions, accounting for anatomical differences and personal preferences."

"Men participate equally with women in your culture?"

"The goal of my culture is that every individual should contribute to the utmost of his or her ability. I have two sons. One of them wishes to be a pilot, and I discourage him from it. Not because it is a bad choice, but because it is not a promising career. My other son is too young to have made up his mind yet, but he will also choose ..."

"Two sons?" Ciel said. "How extraordinary."

"My next child will be a daughter," Ciel told them. "I would like to think she would aspire to the command grades as I do. Perhaps, one day, she will even command our ship."

"Are you pregnant?"

"Not at the present time, but I have decided to have a female child."

"Your technology permits you to make that selection."

"No technology is involved, I simply will myself to have a female. Do you not have this capacity?"

"Indeed we do not," Ciel and the other woman were staring at her now, as though she were an alien creature. "Because of the virus, almost all children are born female any way."

"So, you chose to have sons," the other woman said. "Why?"

"At the time, I was very involved with the Odyssey Project, the Project that brought me to

your world. I knew my husband would handle the raising of the children, and I thought it more appropriate that he raise boys."

"You let a man raise your children?"

"It was the optimal arrangement."

"When you say 'husband,' you refer to a single consort, belonging only to you."

"Aye," Lear answered.

"So, your society maintains the monogamous marriage model," said Ciel.

"Most people on my planet's are Iestans, and Vesta taught..."

"Vesta," the other two women said in unison and made the sign of the circle.

Sensing a breakthrough, a common point of reference, Lear seized on it. "You know of Vesta?"

"Vesta, the Daughter Goddess, Vesta, the Guide, Vesta the Life-Giver," Ciel repeated.

"Indeed, she is the Prophet of our world. She appeared to us ... to many of us ... shortly after the Bloodening, told us not to despair. She said our world was in her care."

Lear quietly pulled out the golden perfect circle that was Vesta's symbol. She had worn the amulet on a chain around her neck since she was thirteen.

Ciel beheld it, and took it in her hand. "Amazing, after all these millennia, that you should come here, and also walk in the path of the Daughter."

"I have always walked on the Daughter's path," Lear assured them, she added a quote from *Between the Darkness and the Light*. "'The path of truth is open to all who seek it, and the guidance of the Daughter is availed to all who ask in Her Name.'"

"'Wherever you pass along the path, acknowledgement of the Daughter affirms the truth of your passage,'" Ciel finished. "It is as though the Goddess's blessing were upon our meeting,"

"I do hope so," Lear said. "I think it's... it's very significant that, despite our centuries of isolation, we have kept our faith."

"How did you learn of Vesta?" Ciel asked.

"Mostly from my mother, grandmother, and aunts. I also spent two years at an Iestan school, as is customary in my family."

"When I was a young girl, I was taught in the wisdom of Vesta, raised in it, by my commune-family," Ciel said wistfully. She leaned into Lear as though conspiratorially. "That's changed in the last two generations. Some on our world have come to believe that expressions of Vesta are somewhat ... vulgar."

Ciel drew back, paused, as though she had said too much. "But that you should cross so much space and after so many centuries retain the spirit of the Goddess." She turned to the other woman, words were failing her.

"I think, if you give us a chance, you will find we have much more in common than you realize," Lear told her. "Our history may have worked out differently, but we are your sisters."

Ciel nodded. Although she said nothing more, there was a sea-change in her demeanor. Lear sensed that she had gained an ally at last.

After a few wrong turns in the confusing warren of service tunnels beneath the Moonbase, Keeler and Alkema reached the Hangar Bay. Team three had already set lights on the walls and hovering near the ceiling. Keeler adjusted his facemask to the new brightness.

The greater part of the bay was empty, dusty, and old. There were pipes and conduits on the walls, and many old tool and equipment racks, now empty and abandoned. Near the front was a kind of lift that reached from the floor of the chamber up to the landing pad above.

No one had to point out to him what they had found. Parked just off the side of the landing pad, where it would have descended into the ground, was a spaceship.

The ship was elliptical in shape, a bit more than half the size of an Aves. Its skin was smooth as an eggshell, thin around the perimeter then blended in toward the main body. It appeared to gleam in the midst of the dark landing bay beyond the light that was available to reflect. The middle section made an egg-shaped bulge, top and bottom. It rested on an articulated tripod of landing legs.

Keeler moved slowly around it. There was no obvious hatchway, not even a seam showed in the surface of the craft. Nor, could he spot anything like thrusters, viewports, or weapons of any kind.

"There's no energy signature," the Leader of Team Three told him. "Our scans read it as a solid body all the way through.

"Your scans are wrong," Keeler told them. "This is a ship, a ship from the Colonial Era."

"Do you recognize the design?" someone asked.

Keeler shook his head. "Never seen anything like it. Some of the Commonwealth ships were shaped like giant disks, but something this small... it must be a shuttlecraft, perhaps an escape pod."

"Or a probe," Alkema suggested.

"Looks a bit like a personal transport pod," said someone in Team Three.

"It does," Keeler agreed.

"It looks too small for inter-stellar travel," said someone else. "Unless it's some kind of stasis pod."

"How can we be sure its Commonwealth and not, something local, or alien?" one of the crew asked.

In answer, Keeler waved his hand over the rear quarter of the ship. In response, a very weak and faded logo appeared, the Crest of the Commonwealth. It remained for a little time, then vanished.

"It was a Commonwealth Ship, all right. Civilian, as opposed to military. The crest would have contained arrows and swords if it had been a military ship. Someone brought this ship here, and then left it behind."

"What are you?" Keeler asked of the ship, his voice quaking. He reached out toward it, but stopped short of actually touching it. It didn't matter what it was. It was an artifact of the Commonwealth, and it had been waiting here for thousands of years to be discovered. He turned to the crew. "My friends, whatever else happens from here, the entire Mission to Esmerelda has just been made worthwhile."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Honey World!" Eddie Roebuck exulted at the top of his lungs. "World of Women. Twenty woman for every man!" With that, he jumped on the bar and pounded on his chest like an ape in heat.

Eliza Jane Change stared up at him from the other side of the bar. "I don't think you really appreciate..."

"Twenty Woman for every man!"

"This planet is not ..."

"Twenty-to-one. Twenty One! I'm outnumbered, but no sweat ..." Eddie sang. "I might just have to call up my notorious alter-ego, 'Professor Night.'"

"Professor Night?"

"Za, Professor Night, Interplanetary Man of Mystery! Babe Magnet from the Rings of Gigantor to the Deuterium Clouds of Archon."

Eliza Jane Change raised an eyebrow. "Deuterium Clouds?"

Eddie was singing, "His name is Pro-fessor Night/But you can say his name is/Pro-fessor Night/It's the name you want to touch/But you must not touch/Because his name is Pro-fessor Night/ And you must have no fear/Because his name can be said/ By anyone ..."

It was times like this when Eliza Jane wondered whether it would be worth developing social skills if only to avoid spending so much of her time with someone whose development had been not just arrested, but tried, convicted, and sent to a juvenile rehabilitation complex. "You do realize the reason there are so few men is because a disease killed off most of them."

"What, the White Plague? That burned out thousands of years ago. We're immune to it." He raised a glass of ale and yelled to everyone in the bar. "To immunity!"

"To Immunity!" no one answered. Eliza Change sighed and moved away from him toward a private booth, trying to focus her attention to the large data pad she had brought down with her. Its face was covered with frighteningly complex numbers and equations, as though an insane mathematician had begun speaking in tongues and someone had transcribed his rantings. These were the Vanguard Equations, one of the primary tools for hyperspatial navigation. Eliza Change was studying the parallax component of the stellar motion formula. She thought she might find away to improve its accuracy.

Eddie climbed down from the bar and left the small robot, Puck, in charge of the glasses and drinks. He sat down on the back of the seat of her booth. "Hey! Is it true if you're a man on the planet, all you do is watch sports all day and wait until a woman wants to nail you?"

Change did not look up from her pad. "I think that is what Specialist American's report said. Not much of a life, is it?"

Eddie dismissed her with a snort. "It's better than living a giant space-faring shopping mall and almost getting wasted by killer mutant space nasties. What do you want from life, anyway?"

"What does life want from you?" a voice inside her asked. She kept it to herself.

Eddie looked at her data pad and saw that it obviously did not apply to him. "I think an assol like me could thrive in a good way on that planet. I visualize myself being in prime

demand among those bodacious Bodacian females."

"I can almost guarantee they have never seen anyone like you, Eddie."

"Truth."

Her datapad chirped at her. "Incoming message for Lt. Navigator Eliza Jane Change."

"Receive."

It was a text message from Executive Commander Lear, requesting confirmation that she was uninterested in attending the reception on Bodicéa, then encouraging her to come, and finally reminding her that she would be in command of *Pegasus* during the absence of Keeler, Miller, and Lear, with sub-references to the appropriate command protocols. The message seemed to disappoint her.

"Are you going to go?"

"No."

"Beauty! Can I go instead?" Eddie said.

"I don't think so," she closed the message and turned to him. "Have you heard from Matthew? He hasn't sent me a message since yesterday."

Eddie laughed. "Beauty, like he would send a message to me. I'm not the one he spends tortured nights dreaming about." He hesitated. "On the other hand..."

Eliza put up her hand. "I don't want to hear it."

Eddie slid down in the booth next to her. "Must be tough. I don't know how I could without once a day hearing him say, 'I'm still on the ship. Nothing is happening. Everything is exactly the way it was yesterday. I miss you. See you later.'"

"Matthew's the kind of guy who sends a message even if he doesn't have anything to say. It's not like him to miss a transmission. Maybe something happened."

Eddie got what passed for a thoughtful expression on his face. "Let me ask you something, Beauty. Have you sent a response to any of Flyboy's boredom reports?"

They both knew the answer to this was negative.

"Let me ask you this. Any women on his ship?"

"One... some Marine ..."

"Married Marine?"

"I don't know."

"A Marine, what are they like? Organized? Efficient? Devoted to Duty?"

"What's your point?" As if she didn't already know.

"I'm just saying, maybe they got to talking and ... he just forgot to send you a message today. That's all. Man gets tired of talking to himself."

Eliza wanted to protest. Matthew was as loyal as a Carpentarian Spaniel. She knew, though, that Eddie would point out that she had never given him anything to be loyal to. She turned herself away from it, and tried to whip some sense into the Vanguard Equations.

Sensing, finally, the termination of the conversation, Eddie climbed to the top of the bar and announced at the top of his voice. "Attention crew! For the duration of our stay at the fair planet Bodacious, every night is ladies' night at Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam 'n' Jam."

It would have been a more effective announcement if the bar had been open.

Zilla swooped down over the southern sea of Bodicéa, making a descent even sharper, defined into an even narrower corridor than *Basil* had followed on its northern trek a few days earlier.

In the main cabin, the commander of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus* was struggling into his dress uniform. Less than an hour before, he had received a message from Executive Commander Lear. His presence had been requested by the Inner Circle at some tropical island that was described as a "Diplomatic Retreat." Two days of negotiation and she had given him one hour's notice. His hair was still wet from the shower.

"Do I still stink of sulfur," he asked.

David Alkema hesitated. Delivering bad news was not the most effective part of his repertoire. "I think so, commander. It could be residue from the environmental suits."

The commander sighed. "Right, right, you're dambled right."

Alkema reached into his landing kit and pulled out a small plastic device, shaped to fit into the palm of the hand, with a metallic nozzle at the edge. "Use this."

"What is it?"

"Electro-static ionizer. It will ionize any sulfuric molecules on your person and strip them away."

"Do you always carry one of these with you?"

"When I think I'll need one. It works on lint, too."

Keeler activated the device and waved it around his cuffs. "You know, if General Hazzaz had had a man like you by his side in the Sixth Crusade, he could have conquered the known universe."

"Thank you, sir."

"You realize that would have meant a thousand years of slavery for most of the human race."

"I'm relieved you've never expressed a similar ambition, sir." Alkema checked his reflection. *Sailor beware*, he thought. "A planet of women, this should be very interesting."

"If by interesting you mean, scary beyond human imagining, I couldn't agree more."

"What do you mean?"

Keeler sighed. Alkema was very clever, very quick, and very sharp-witted, and as he matured, wisdom would either temper those qualities and make him a leader among souls, or would render him pedestrian, slow, and dull, consigning him to mediocrity. Keeler only wished they had met at University, but Alkema had been in his first year at some second-tier regional college when the Odyssey Project had chosen him. Keeler sat down heavily on his landing couch and began lacing up his favorite pair of dress boots.

"Nature seeks balance," he explained. "Balance is maintained by an alternation of tension and harmony in all things. Men and women are fundamentally different from one another, each possessing fundamental strengths and fundamental weaknesses. Of course, there is a great deal of difference among individuals. A man picked at random may be more like a woman in some aspects than a given woman, or vice versa. Over the broad brush of society, however, these differences still define us as men or women. From this tension, and from the

effort put forth to harmonize and control this tension, emerges the shape of our culture.”

“However, take away one side of the equation, one set of checks and balances, and the culture will swing entirely the other way. This is not a situation God through nature intended, not a situation contemplated by the Grand Design. Men and women were meant to cooperate, to share equally the responsibility. Our yin and their yang complement each other. When you were a boy, I am willing to bet your mother was always telling you things like ‘don’t climb on that bell-tower, you’ll fall off and break your arm,’ or, ‘Don’t play with the Thean battle-staff, it’s not a toy, you’ll put your eye out and possibly knock the planet off its axis.’ Whereas your father, he probably encouraged you to take risks, let you stay out late, gave you your first drink of moonshine when you were nine, things like that.”

“Except for the bell-tower, the battle-staff, and the Moonshine, that’s pretty much true.”

“And you probably did hurt yourself a few times, and your momma cried out, ‘Oh, my baby, my poor little baby,’ and your father said, ‘Here, put some Moonshine on it, it’ll be fine.’ In the end, they created you, a well-balanced individual.”

“*But* what if all you had growing up was one parent, or two parents with identical agendas? Suppose you were never allowed to get hurt, never allowed to do anything that could remotely possibly result in harm. You would have grown up cowardly, tentative... you would never take a chance on anything. On the other hand, if you grew up without someone to hold you back from your more reckless impulses, you would have developed gangrene in your broken arm and had it replaced with cloned tissue and cybernetics. It would look the same as the previous arm, but you would know.”

“Now, imagine a whole world, where everyone was raised with all the influence coming from only one direction.” He shook his head direly. “A world out of balance, I am curious to see such a thing, but I would not want to live there.”

Alkema digested this thoughtfully, and could only say, “At least it’s a pretty planet.”

Keeler turned around to face the geographical display behind him. Far, far below the ship, the sun was gleaming over the middle sea that separated Bodicéa’s two great landmasses. In the distance, just passing behind the curve of the planet into night, the small inner moon of the system made a pale crescent against the stars.

The Isle of Mab appeared on the horizon, a sand and stone outbreak from the ocean floor, its shape recalling nothing so much as a frightened cat with an arched back, like Night of the Living Dead decorations children made on Sapphire. Its margins were traced in golden sand, diminishing into the warm waters of a yellow-green sea that glistened like polished jade.

The sun was just beginning to swell and settle when *Zilla* made final approach to the sea-island, crossing a shoreline where aquamarine waves broke on iridescent rocks. Another Aves was parked on the ground already, resting on an expanse of grass that might have been an athletic field. Flight Lieutenant Toto maneuvered his ship to a point near and above, swinging it around to fit the two ships tightly together in the limited space. The four landing skids deployed, emerging smoothly and silently from the ship’s under-belly as *Zilla* settled onto the ground with but a whisper and a sigh as its gravity engine eased off.

Keeler studied a cabin display of the island. There were twenty or so largish buildings, built of an enamel-like stone, yellowish, square at the foundation with rounded and domed roofs of clear glass, open to the sky. The tallest was near the harbor, and might have served as a Lighthouse. Between the buildings, paved walkways wandered through manicured gardens and led to a large collection of smaller structures that might have been dwellings. The

architecture, the plant-life, and the color of the sky were all off, but otherwise, it faintly recalled any of the resort islands in the Archeopoli region of Sapphire, where people went for more sedate entertainments and quieter surroundings than the notoriously festive beaches of Kandor or the Awkward Islands.

"They're coming," said Alkema. "Shall I open the hatch?"

Keeler crossed the cabin, making the final adjustments to his cape. "Za, let's get this over with. Frankly, I'll be happy to leave the jawboning to Lear. I have to get back that moon." Two exploration teams were picking through the crew's quarters by this time, while engineers made plans for removing the spaceship they had found. He walked passed the hatch and called up into the Command Module. "Nice landing, Mr. Toto. Would you like to join us?"

He was answered by a rhythmic snoring. "I guess not. Mr. Alkema, the hatch."

The hatch opened, sliding four ways into the top, bottom, and sides of the craft. Standing outside were Goneril Lear and her family, who had come down in the other ship, and another woman in an OP uniform whom he did not recognize. Around them stood a dozen or so middle-aged women in gray and green sarongs. They looked to Keeler like a particularly militant branch of the New Cleveland Garden and Bridge Society.

Lear spoke. "First Advocate, advocates of the Inner Circle, I present our ship's Commanding Officer, Commander William Keeler of the planet Sapphire."

This was the point where polite applause should have broken out. Instead, there came a brief smattering of handtaps that awkwardly diminished to silence almost immediately. Keeler saw that it had mainly been from John Rebbeck, Lear's husband, and the other officer from his ship. John was about Keeler's age, but looked older. His dark hair was going rapidly to silver around his temples, and his carriage was heavier. Keeler secretly liked John Rebbeck, among other reasons because he knew the man would be much happier studying the local plant-life than standing around being a diplomatic prop for his wife. The two Lear *kinder* were also in attendance, the older, blonder one who looked like his mother and, Keeler suspected, was kind of a brat, and the younger, darker one who took after his father and, Keeler supposed, was a pretty good kid.

Keeler stepped forward onto the ramp landing. Lear and one of the women moved forward to meet him. The sun was setting into the sea, and its light had grown heavier, washing the scene in a kind of warm olive color. Dust suspended in the still air. It had been a hot day, Keeler guessed, but a continuous cooling breeze from the sea brought relief as evening wore on.

"Commander, this is Ciel, the First Advocate of the Inner Circle of Bodicéa." She said "Bodicéa" with a certain gusto, which Keeler supposed was meant to be ingratiating.

"Hello," Keeler said calmly, using an anachronistic form of greeting. "It's a pleasure to be here, and to make your acquaintance, First Advocate Ciel. This is my adjutant, Lieutenant David Alkema."

"Specialist, sir."

Keeler sighed. "My patience with making that mistake is exhausted. I hereby grant you a field promotion to Lieutenant. Congratulations, you can pick up your new jewelry back on the ship."

As usual, no one was quite sure whether the commander had meant it or not. "Thank you, commander, uh, which core would that commission be under?" Alkema asked.

"Uh, pick one."

"Tactical."

"Done, you are now Tactical Lieutenant David Alkema. Now, bring me a drink."

"Uh, Commander, wasn't there something else ... ?"

"Ah, za," Keeler gestured for his pack, which Alkema handed to him. He reached in and produced two books, one bound in blue and one in gray. He presented the blue one first to Ciel. "The Sapphorean *Writ of Common Wisdom*, a compendium of all the knowledge of my planet, along with three hundred examples of our finest literature, drama, and Music. May I recommend Trainman Brightspark's take on Cayenne Jazz, *Lifetime Number 5*." He passed the book to Ciel. "We have more copies for each of you. And this, this is the *Encyclopedia Republica*, which contains far more than anyone would ever need or want to know about the planet Republic."

"Thank you," Ciel said, looking over the two small bound volumes a little doubtfully. These had been prepared in advance of the Odyssey Mission, but this was the first time it had been deemed appropriate to give them to the leadership of the planet.

"There are twenty more on the ship," Keeler told her, gesturing back toward the Aves. "Feel free to ask Tactical Lieutenant Alkema to schlep them out."

Ciel awkward leaned toward the commander. They hugged like a pair of very young and awkward children being forced to make up at a family reunion. "Executive Commander Lear is fortunate to have such a capable man as I'm sure you are in command of this vital mission."

"That's what I keep telling her."

Ciel drew back and ushered some people forward. "May I present my daughter, Pieta, and my consort, Tobias."

The man behind was slight, but smooth and handsome of face in a disquietingly feminine way and Keeler would eat his boots if he was more than half the age of Ciel. Some of the other women were regarding this man scornfully. He was the only Bodicéan male present. He stared hard at the visitors, as though trying to figure them out. He held the hand of a girl, lean, with bright eyes, a reflection of his own face, and long dark hair that came from neither mother nor father. She was staring fixedly at David Alkema.

"My daughter and consort were recreating here when your ship arrived," Ciel added, sounding apologetic. "The Isle of Mab is used as a retreat for members of the Inner and Outer Circles, and our families and guests. We agreed it would be a very secure place to receive your people."

"This island is absolutely beautiful," Lear said in an almost gushing tone of voice. A warm breeze, sweetly scented like butter and oranges, rustled through the palm and fruit trees that lined the walkway.

"It is sufficient," Ciel said agreeably.

"Only the ruling class?" Keeler asked. "Commander Lear's report said your society was profoundly egalitarian."

"It is, and there are many other islands that are open to the general citizenry. Many of them are quite as pleasant as Mab. However, being an advocate is so very demanding. At any other island we would constantly surrounded by people petitioning us to ... to increase the water supply to this province, to open up so much land for agricultural production, to lower the production quota for such and such a vegetable. We need places where we can be away from our duties."

"I am sure my commander appreciates the burdens of leadership," Lear said gently.

Another woman added. "And eighty-three per cent of our planet is designated as wilderness. We leave nature untouched as much as possible."

"I am curious about one other thing," Keeler continued. "When you intercepted our signal, the entire planet heard it. Your government denounced it as a hoax. If, in the end, you do announce our arrival, isn't the public going to be perturbed at your initial deception?"

Ciel turned to Lear. "Your commander underestimates the Bodicéan people. They understand that their leadership always acts in their best interest, and then when a deception occurs, it is only for the public good. We had no idea whether you were a threat or a hoax or something ..." she gestured vaguely, and turned a little more back toward Keeler. "The people will understand that the leadership did not wish to cause alarm, or panic, and they will appreciate that we took it upon ourselves to evaluate the risk. Goneril tells me the people of her planet would understand."

Another advocate picked up Ciel's line. "Open contact, if it comes, is still a long time away. We would have to very carefully plan how to introduce you to the Citizenry, and very carefully control the release of information about you people. Some of our citizens might be upset by your arrival. They might be emotionally upset enough to do harm to themselves, or to others."

Ciel gestured toward the pathway. "We can discuss those details some other time. Now, we have prepared an evening meal that we hope will be to your liking. Come this way." She turned and began walking down a stone-paved pathway. Garden-Parks on Sapphire and Republic had similar footpaths, albeit with a higher quality of workmanship.

The path took them toward the center of the island. They passed under some stately columns and into a large, tiled courtyard. Large tables had been set up under a galaxy of tiny white lights, aglow against the coming night. The tables were laden with plates and bowls of food, native fruit, things that looked like olives, a variety of multi-colored breads in different twisted shapes, and great lots of plates of what looked like cubes of leaves and grain. Large graceful jars with handles were arrayed at the end of each table, containing wine or fruit juice or water, Keeler guessed, or perhaps something even more exotic.

"This meal features a crop or delicacy from every province," Ciel announced. Keeler still had the uncomfortable feeling she was directing her voice much to Goneril Lear than to him. "Our planet is divided into ten provinces, with a member of the Inner Circle from each province, and two at large, including myself."

Bridget Armatrading leaned over to Keeler and whispered harshly. "They respect moderation in eating and drinking. Try not to take too much. It will reflect badly on us."

Keeler gave her a withering *'Who the perdition are you and why should I care?'* look, but she had already turned away from him. He sighed and took a handful of something that looked like earth-toned jellybeans.

Ciel took a seat at the head of the table as the others arranged themselves nearby. "Come, Pieta, Join your mother," Ciel called.

"No!" the girl insisted petulantly. "I want to sit next to Tactical Lieutenant Alkema."

This provoked some mild amusement from the Bodicéans and a flush of embarrassment in the cheeks of the young officer.

"Dear, I'm sure Alkema would rather sit with his own friends."

"Perhaps Pieta would like to sit with my son, Trajan," Ciel suggested. "Marcus, dear, would you move down and make room for Pieta?"

Both the little girl and Trajan put on expressions of complete disgust. It was less noticeable on Trajan, who had not wanted to be here in the first place and had looked faintly disgusted for most of the evening.

"I don't mind," Alkema put in. He was thinking of his little sister back on Sapphire, and what an absolute harridan she could be when she didn't get her way. He saw some of that in the young girl before him, and he knew she would be a constant distraction from Ciel's conversations with Lear and Keeler.

"Way to take one for the team," Keeler muttered, unable not to grin.

Alkema reached out and took the little girl's hand. "Hello, Pieta."

"Hello, Tactical Lieutenant Alkema."

"Call me, David." Her eyes lit up like the first evening star. "How old are you, Pieta?"

"I'm five."

"You seem very ... mature for five."

"This planet takes twice as long to go around the sun as yours," Armatrading reminded him, loud enough for everyone to hear. "She's more like ten."

"You still seem very grown up," Alkema assured her. "Maybe you can tell me what each of these foods is called."

At the head of the table, Keeler sat next to Lear, who sat next to Ciel. De la Tesse, Solay, and Livia, a large, hearty woman with unruly curls of black hair framing a round, bespectacled face, sat opposite them. Solay drank only water, and had only an olive paste and one variety of bread on her plate, which she touched little during the meal.

"This food is excellent," Lear told Ciel. "I think this may be the first time we've actually been able to sample the cuisine of another world."

"It is sufficient," Ciel replied. "The shallot compote is a special favorite of mine."

Commander Keeler found the meal rather too bland for his liking, but the drinks were almost enjoyable. He said little, but took in the conversational exchanges between Ciel and Lear, who were obviously kindred spirits. When he thought the time was right, he made a request of Ciel.

"First Advocate, my crew has been in space for a very long time. Usually, when we come to a habitable planet, we like offer them shore leave."

Conversation around the table ceased. Keeler saw the consort, Tobias, nearly drop the two-pronged eating utensils he was holding.

Ciel frowned, "More people coming to our world, I don't know ..."

"Absolutely not," Solay corrected her, almost snarling. She fixed Keeler with a dead-eye look. "I didn't even want you to come here."

"You were out-voted!" Livia interrupted, gesturing dangerously with her wineglass. "You know, I fear our new friends are forming entirely the wrong impression of us. You should know, the women of Bodicéa are warm and friendly, and we *love* visitors. We would love to share the beauty of our planet with the women... and *men*... of your ship."

"It's just that ..." Ciel interrupted.

Livia leaned across the table conspiratorially. "Ciel and Solay vie for leadership of the

Circle, I have no such ambitions, and as such, I, Livia, am free to speak my mind."

Ciel took a deep breath, but seemed to rise to the occasion. "All right, then, perhaps fifty, here and at Fond Glacine, ... of course."

"Fifty, out of a crew of more than 7,000?" Livia called out. "Why not just send them a box of sand?"

Ciel sighed. "All right, I will put a proposal before the council for one hundred, at each location, and we shall debate the issue tomorrow."

Lear thrilled to this exchange, but tried to keep it from showing on her face; another little insight into the inner workings of the Inner Circle. Was Ciel simply weak and indecisive, or did this Livia have more influence than was apparent? Perhaps, the forces for open relations were stronger than anyone had let on.

"Hey, hey," Livia winked at Keeler. "You owe me a boon, ..." There was a pause, then a word Lingotron translated as "Babycakes." Keeler felt a bare foot nudge his ankle beneath the table.

Ciel leaned over to Lear. "I was wondering if you would consider a proposition."

An eyebrow rose, almost involuntarily, as Lear answered. "A proposition?"

"The establishment of contact between our people might be a very long process, requiring permanent diplomatic representation. Would you consider a permanent diplomatic post on Bodicéa?"

Caught by surprise, Lear almost stammered. "Why, Ciel, that would be such a great, ... great... honor."

"I feel I have a very sufficient rapport with you," Ciel whispered. "It would be very agreeable to have you as the Diplomatic representative in Concordia. The Circle would find you a comfortable home."

A home? Then, Ciel must imagine that this arrangement would remain in place after *Pegasus* had left orbit. It would be decades before a Phase II ship would call.

"You look doubtful," Ciel said, sympathetically.

"I apologize," Lear answered, briskly. "I was only thinking of my family."

"Would they have to stay with you?" Ciel asked.

"It is our custom for families to live together."

Ciel nodded in understanding. "Normally, our custom would be to separate your sons from you, although I could arrange for a dispensation for you to keep them with you. Of course, there would have to be compromises to protect the women of my planet."

"Compromises?"

Ciel waved her down. "As I said, this is all premature speculation. A long, long period of discussion and understanding lies ahead."

As the meal progressed, the night came on, and the stars came out, it was easy to forget they were on a distant planet. The night sky became as dark as velvet and the stars glittered warmly. Nightbirds chirruped in the trees and the local wines lulled senses into a warm sense of self-satisfaction.

While politics and intrigues held sway the head of the table, David heard from Pieta all about her family history and how her mother lived alone with Tobias instead of in a commune and how they *always* went to the Isla of Mab for their holidays. From her tone it was clear that

this was a distinct privilege and he should be impressed. He also learned of her favorite forms of clothing, food, and entertainment, and that she intended to become a physician before being elected to the Circle.

Alkema broke his conversation with Pieta long enough to excuse himself, and explain that he wanted to bring a package of food and drink back to the pilots waiting in their Aves. Pieta asked to come with him. Keeler agreed it was a good idea.

Ciel's consort, Tobias, had been waiting nearby, listening, but parrying David's attempts at conversation. He was dressed in pale clothing, loose-fitting pants that bunched at the cuffs and waist and a tunic of the same color that showed his flat and hairless chest. He stood with David, "Let me help, the food is heavy, and the path is easy to lose in the dark."

"No, I'll help," Pieta insisted.

"Pieta, my precious daughter, if you come with us, you may miss the dessert table."

She seemed a little hesitant, even cross. Alkema urged her, "Why don't you get me a plate of the best dessert? I don't know what kind I'd like best." he asked.

The little girl seemed confused for a moment then broke into a smile. "All right, *I* will get a dessert for *you*," she giggled, and then skipped back toward the dessert table. "Don't take too long," she called back, as David and Tobias each prepared a basket of Bodicéan foods.

"My daughter seems to have developed a case of tankaria for you," Tobias said, when they had gone a little way down the path back for the ship.

"Tankaria?"

"When a little girl first desires a man for her consort," Tobias explained.

"They grow up so quickly, don't they?" Alkema said, nervously, realizing that social norms on this world might require the father to kick the ass of any potential consort behaving inappropriately toward a pre-pubescent female.

"Indeed," Tobias said, it was then Alkema picked up that Tobias was as nervous as he was. He was twitching, his hands were shaking, and he continually searched around, as though to see if someone were listening.

"You don't have to worry," Alkema reassured him. "I would never hurt a little girl. If you want, I'll even go back to ship."

"It isn't that," Tobias said, his voice hoarse and a little frightened. He was silent for a time, and they were almost back to the landing field when he spoke again. This time, his voice was a whisper, scarcely above the breeze that rustled through the palms. "Why are you really here, on Bodicéa?"

"As my commanders explained, we have only come to explore your world."

Tobias hesitated, unsatisfied with the answer. "I know I am Ciel's consort, but you have to trust me. I will not betray you."

"How could you betray me?" Alkema asked.

"I would never tell Ciel if your real plans were ..." He stopped, as though afraid to continue.

"Our real plans?"

"Why did you really come to this planet?" Tobias asked again, in an urgent whisper.

"We came in peace. We're explorers. We're... trying to find other human colonies."

Tobias seemed frustrated. "Is that all? Is that all you have come for? I have heard the you

possess powerful weapons.”

“We would never use them against you.”

“Be truthful with me,” Tobias insisted, almost desperately. “You can tell me, I swear by Vesta and the Eight Adherents, I will not betray you.

Alkema finally began to get a clue. “Why do you think we are here?”

Tobias put a smooth, warm arm around David’s shoulder and bent him until the lieutenant’s ear brushed his lips. “The men on this planet, we have no status. The women treat us as resources, resources to be managed, shared, divided out according to the edicts of the Circles. I am lucky that Ciel keeps me as her exclusive consort. It allows me to live in a house apart with my family, but I am the only man on this whole world who is allowed this privilege.”

“For all my life, I have prayed that all men would be set free. I must know if you are the answer to our prayers. Have you come to liberate us. Have you come to overthrow the Matriarchy and restore the Rights of Men?”

Alkema turned to face him, to look directly into his eyes. They were so close, their cheeks brushed as he turned. He saw in Tobias’s eyes fear and sincerity. “Why do you think we have come for that purpose?”

Tobias answered him. “For many years, a rumor has circulated among the men, that liberators from the Old Commonwealth would return to our world and set us free from the ownership of women. Is that why you are here? To liberate us from the Sorarchy?”

Alkema took a long time to come up with something to say. “I can not answer that question without consulting Commander Keeler, but I will do just that. Come on, let’s get this food to our pilots.”

Tobias nodded, recovered himself, and they prepared to take the meals the rest of the way to the ships.

After the meal, the others repaired to their bungalows. Keeler had been assigned a two-room dwelling about half the size of his quarters on *Pegasus*. He had a small double bed, a writing desk, a table and two couches in the larger of the rooms, and a pool of water and a shower in the smaller room. The furniture was quite old, not too comfortable, but adequate. The bed was soft, the sheets smelled of flowers and the pillows were abundant, and Keeler looked forward to the sound of the sea lulling him to sleep that night.

The communication node on the sleeve of his jacket activated just as he finished putting on his pajama pants. “Voice only. Keeler here, I’m alone, go ahead.”

The voice of Eliza Jane Change came through the unit. “Commander, Recce One is now twenty-eight hours overdue for check-in. Their last transmission was just before they entered scanning range of the astral anamoly. An hour ago, we lost the transponder link to all three ships.”

“We have lost all contact with Recce One?” Keeler rubbed his chin. “No distress call, nothing?”

“Their last check-in was perfectly normal. According to our calculations, they would still be about twenty-two light days outside the system at this point. We have four Search and Rescue Aves on the rails, ready to launch at your command.”

"Command is given."

Change sounded very relieved. "Acknowledged, Commander."

"Update me whenever there is any news. I'll return to the ship..." He paused. He had a breakfast meeting with the Inner Circle tomorrow. Let Lear do it, he thought. Even though there was nothing he could do, the crew would expect him to be on-board. "As soon as I and Lt. Alkema can get there."

"Acknowledged."

She held on the line to see if there was anything further. There was. "Lt. Navigator Change, Go to Defense Situation Three until we find Recce One."

CHAPTER NINE

Flight Commander Rocky Collins walked behind Commander Keeler as he supervised the loading of the Old Commonwealth spacecraft onto the landing pad. Collins was a well-built woman, strongly proportioned, rumored to be a champion at bar-room games. On Duty, She wore her long, honey-brown hair in a thick braid that swung down between her shoulders.

"When we asked for volunteers for the Search and Rescue Mission, most of Flight Core already knew that three ships had gone to explore an unknown phenomenon, and we had lost contact with them just as they approached their target. Naturally, this made the task of finding volunteers somewhat difficult."

"I wouldn't think our pilots would be afraid to volunteer," said Keeler.

"The problem wasn't lack of volunteers, the problem was every Aves crew on the ship wanted to volunteer. Eventually, we had to settle it the old fashioned way."

"One-leguminous tuber, Two-leguminous tuber?"

"Thumb-wrestling," she explained. "I have four ships out. They won't reach where we think the ships are for a few more days, but I think four more ships should go. Space is huge, really, really huge, and they could be anywhere in the system."

In the previous four days, engineering had re-established atmospheric integrity and limited power to the ancient lunar base. The air still stank of rotten eggs and burnt matches from the residual sulfur compounds. Eye-masks and nose-guards were still *de rigueur*, and it gave Keeler's conversation with his Flight Commander an irritating, high pitched, nasal quality.

"Will four more make that much of a difference?" Keeler asked. He was concerned for the crew of the three ships, to be sure, but did not know what productive good worrying about them would do.

"Probably not, but some deep space rotation would be good for my crews. Right now, we're only allowed four flights per day to the planet, and shuttling to this moon isn't exactly hard duty."

"We'll supplement them with every probe we can spare," Keeler told her. He had had to consider, in the past several hours, that something catastrophic had happened to his men. A dozen of his best people were on those two ships. The loss would be keenly felt.

Collins nodded slightly in agreement. Collins had been born on Republic, in a suburb-pod of the City of Industry. At the age of twelve, she had relocated with her father to the distant

Space Guard Outpost on Archon's largest moon, where her father was Base Commandant. She had received her formal flight instruction at the Ministry of Planetary Defense Flight Training Academy. Prior to the Odyssey Project, she had served in a Republic Home Guard Squadron.

"The extraction missions to the seventh planet..."

"Are nearly completed," Collins finished for him. "We have to consider the possibility that the three Aves of Recce One were intercepted and either captured or destroyed by forces unknown. I would volunteer to lead a second reconnaissance mission against the trailing mass to determine if a threat exists to *Pegasus*."

Keeler had known she would ask for this. "We have already dispatched long-range probes toward the trailing mass. We will not have any more manned reconnaissance flights until we have a better idea of what we're dealing with."

"...but, Commander."

He raised his hand. "Oz has spoken," he stated firmly. An ancestor of his, Smart Keeler, had used it when he was governor of Oz province in response to any suggestion that Oz join a continental or planetary government.

Collins understood.

Goneril Lear paced in her quarters.

She had returned to the ship two days earlier. The Inner and Outer Circles were now debating their fate in the Capital City of Concordia. She kept an image of that city, and of the Chamber of Advocacy, projected on the major wall of her quarters.

The cities of Bodicéa were almost all laid out in circles and ellipses. Concordia, seen from space, was three sharply defined circles within circles. It lay near the Eastern Coast of the Northern Continent, and encompassed two large lakes. The Chamber of Advocacy occupied an isthmus between the lakes, and was also shaped like a circle within a circle. She fingered the perfect golden circle that hung around her neck that had been the connection with these people.

Bodicéa was the most favorable planet *Pegasus* had yet discovered. Lear was determined to make an alliance with her people. What would they decide? Her best estimation was that she had the votes of Livia and four others in the inner circle. Solay and four of the others were in solid opposition, which left Ciel and Delatesse as the swing votes. She felt very strongly that they wanted to vote for diplomatic relations, but she would have to give them a very significant incentive to counter the political fallout from such a decision.

There was no time limit on a vote, and Lear sensed that this was not a culture that quickly embraced change. The repeating theme from all of her meetings had been "social disruption," which was, apparently, as much to be feared on Bodicéa as a repeated flare-up of the White Plague. Ciel had seemed very willing to table the motion for diplomatic relations pending the issuance of a "Committee Report on the Potential for Adverse Social Impact Arising from Contact with Humans from Other Planets." The report might take a Bodicéa n year to produce.

Could *Pegasus* wait that long? Bodicéa was enticing enough, a beautiful planet with a united, socially cohesive culture. On the other hand, the planet had no technology to offer,

and no interest in the technology Sapphire and Republic had to offer. There might be other worlds, better opportunities, that *Pegasus* might miss if too long delayed on Bodicéa.

She doubted Commander Keeler would have that much patience. The greater likelihood was that *Pegasus* would depart the system within a few months, and let a Phase II ship return in thirty or forty years to see what the Council had decided. Lear hated that option. It would feel almost like a failure.

Someone cleared his throat behind her. She turned to see Trajan, standing in the entrance to her study. She smiled and reached out to ruffle his hair. "Trajan, how are you?"

He extended a data pad toward her. "My application to the Flight Core Apprentice Pilot program."

She sighed a little bit, just to remind him that she did not approve of this idea even though she tried to maintain an understanding tone. "So, you still think you want to join Flight Core."

"Just approve it, and I can begin training with the next sequence."

"The age of admission is fourteen, you still have almost two quarters to decide. This decision could affect the whole rest of your life. Maybe you need a little more time to really, really thought this through?"

"I don't need more time," Trajan insisted. "I've completed my Passage and earned the right of self-determination according to our laws and customs."

"Only partially. Until you turn sixteen, I am still responsible for you as your parent."

This was the part of the conversation where Trajan usually said something to the effect of, "Then, why did I bother going through with your stupid ritual. I almost died, you know." Maybe they had had this argument so many times that he recognized the futility of going down that path. He tapped the datapad. "This is what I want."

"Come here to me," Lear said, taking a seat on her couch and gesturing to the cushion next to her. Trajan met her half way, coming toward the couch but not sitting down. "Do you remember the pilot who ...came to your aid after your accident?"

"Of course, I remember him."

"Well, his ship is lost. He went out on a simple reconnaissance mission, and we lost contact with his ship and two others. He may not come back."

Trajan looked away from her, but not fast enough to hide the look of hurt and near-despair on his face. "I know all about it," he said. "I've been praying to Vesta for his protection."

As have I, Lear might have added. The last night in Corcordia, she had spent in the Meditative Gardens, and had lit a candle for the lost pilots and the others on board. "That's very good. But you see how dangerous his profession is. Perhaps it seems heroic to you, and I understand that." She tried to put her arm around him. He pulled away. "There are other ways to serve this ship."

And if it were you out there, she thought, *my very heart would be broken.*

"Not for me," he insisted. "I want to fly."

She put her hand on his shoulder. He had never expressed any interest in Flight Core until the incident at EdenWorld, when he had fallen onto the command module of an Aves whose pilot aborted his launch and stabilized his vital signs, probably saving his life. Only since then had he wanted to join Flight Core. She admired his determination, but could not bring herself

to believe that in a normal state of mind, he would have made the same choice.

She was about to ask him to defer the issue for one more quarter, when the communication panel on her desk came to life. "Incoming message from the planet Bodicéa."

"I will take it," she called to the machine, rising and straightening her uniform. A screen was projected over her desk showing Ciel sitting at a large, bleached-wood desk that Lear recognized as being in the chief executive office suite in Concordia. Her expression, as always, was inscrutable. "Greetings, First Advocate."

"Greetings, Executive Commander Lear," Ciel said levelly. "I have news to report. The Inner Circle has passed several resolutions regarding relations with your people."

"What has the Inner Circle decided?"

"We should discuss these at length. The one resolution we have passed that is of most concern to you is that we have accepted an invitation to visit your ship. We will deliver the contents of the other resolutions there. When will you be able to accommodate us?"

"We are at your disposal, First Advocate." Lear tried to clamp down hard on her excitement. This was indeed a great breakthrough.

"Then we will give you a full day to prepare. We will arrange to depart from Concordia exactly twenty-seven hours from now."

"A ship will be waiting for you at the landing area in Concordia," Lear told her. "We are most eager to receive you."

"And we are most eager to see your ship," Ciel assured her. "May the Goddess nurture you."

"And you as well." Ciel's image vanished. Goneril Lear turned to her son and smiled. "You see son, diplomatic work may not be as exciting as Flight Core, but it can be very rewarding to. It's like making friends with an entire planet at once."

Trajan Lear rolled his eyes and extended the pad again, but he knew his mother would only ask him to wait.

Eddie Roebuck was angry and bitter. "And then, Ex Commander Lear wouldn't even consider putting the Slam 'n' Jam on the tour for the visiting V.I.P. Kittens from the Honey Planet," he ranted, slapping down a plate of small bit of meat wrapped in baked dough before Eliza Jane Change.

Change pushed the plate aside, not feeling the least bit hungry. Eddie continued, "I mean, is it too much to ask that I get my chance with the women of this planet? I wonder if Lear would let me defect? I mean, from what I understand, all the men do on that planet is eat, sleep, drink, and stud. Here I was thinking we would never find a planet as good as Sapphire. She should at least let me go to the beach, but neg... but I got no priority on account of being non-essential personnel. Non-essential personnel? I'm the slugging strong force that holds this ship together."

"Damb," said Eliza, suddenly, throwing aside the data pad she had been so assiduously trying to focus on.

"Agreed," said Eddie Roebuck.

"Still no word on Matthew's ship," she muttered. "They have a double squadron of search and rescue ships looking for them. Communications hasn't even picked up their transponder."

It's as though they vanished without a trace."

Eddie didn't know what to say, but as usual, this did not stop him from trying. "If there's anybody who could survive an encounter a giant space nasty, it's Captain Starbuck? . I mean, okay, he has zero personality, and he's short, but beauty, he can fly. I mean, it's like he got short-changed on everything else, just to be a good flyer. I mean, he's gonna come back. He'll always come back."

Eliza scowled. That was not what she was worried about. "There's things out there, Eddie," she said. "Terrible things. It's like when the ancient proto-humans on Earth wandered away from the campfire and were eaten by predators."

Eddie met her deep brown eyes and saw in them something he had never expected to see from Eliza. It was not vulnerability, but it was perilously close. It made him want to hold and comfort her, but he knew she'd snap his wrists, this from experience.

Instead, Eddie put his hand on Eliza's shoulder. "Well, supposing now, just supposing Captain Starbuck doesn't come back, I'll always be here for you. You know that, don't you?"

He was surprised that his hand was quivering when he finished, more surprised when she enfolded it in her own warm hand.

The commander tugged at the collar of his dress uniform. "I honestly don't think I have ever been more *annoyed* in my entire life."

"*Aves Susan has cleared the Inner Marker,*" announced a disembodied voice from Flight Control. A display showed the small ship angling toward the landing docks on the rear of *Pegasus*.

David Alkema, now sporting a lieutenant's emblem on his dress jacket, offered him solace. "Just get through this evening, commander. Tomorrow morning, we'll fly back down to the moon base."

"Za, my moon base," Keeler said, feeling a little lighter. This job would not have been so bad if he could dispense with ceremonies like these and concentrate on archaeology. Earlier in the day, the small ship from the moon base had been received aboard *Pegasus* and quickly and quietly taken to a cargo bay for additional study. They knew little more about it now than they had when it was first discovered. The material of which it was constructed was still unidentified, and the interior had proven resistant to all manner of scanning technology.

"*Aves Susan has docked.*"

Keeler and Alkema stood a little straighter. Ex. Commander Lear was already in the Landing Bay, with a detachment of Senior Officers, including Eliza Change from Navigation, and the Chiefs of some of the ship's minor departments. Lear had specifically requested that no one from Tactical Section attend. Lt. Cmdr Cuahatemoc Ojala, Chief of Engineering Core, had also begged off. Flight Cmdr. Collins reported that she would remain in Flight Operations, coordinating Search and Rescue Operations related to Recce One. A few of the other chiefs were stranded on the Isle of Mab owing to a systems problem on their *Aves* that was unlikely to be resolved "until we run out of tanning butter." Nothing, however, made Commander Keeler feel the pang of absent friends more than the absence of Lt. Cmdr. Miller.

The side hatch slid open and two (female of course) technicians from the landing bays ran a safety ramp to the side of the ship. Several long minutes passed before Ciel emerged,

followed by Tobias and Pieta. In clumps of threes and fours, the women of the Inner Circle emerged from the ship with their families and aides. Solay exited last, and stood at the hatchway overlooking the landing bay. She surveyed the half dozen or so Aves positioned in this particular bay, in various states of readiness, the machinery and technology that service and maintained them. She made no effort to veil her disgust. She seemed to take especial horror at the site of two mechanoids, working on the reactor-dome of one ship.

Lear led the visitors toward the reception area where Keeler and the others were waiting. The commander turned toward the floor, a gloomy and bitter expression on his face. Alkema heard him count "3... 2... 1... and..." he raised his head again, smiling this time, a ritual that had served him well over a lifetime of fundraisers, staff meetings, and family reunions. "Greetings, First Advocate Ciel. So good to see you again."

Ciel still could not bring herself to look him in the eyes. "Greetings to you commander."

"I trust you had a comfortable flight."

"It was sufficient."

Solay, who had earned herself an unpleasant nickname in Keeler's private thoughts, pushed her way to the front. "I made some calculations during our flight," Solay said, showing a bit of paper with some calculations written in an alien alphabet on it. "You may find this interesting. Based on the mass of your vessel and the speed of our journey, I calculated that one of your ... *Aves* ... uses more energy in a single transit to your ship than the city of Concordia generates in one hundred and forty-five days."

"Really?" Keeler responded.

"How can you justify such a massive expenditure of energy?"

"Because walking to the ship would take too long," Keeler answered. "Now, if you will all follow Executive Commander Lear, I believe she has arranged a tour for you. I am sure you will find any number of things that will amaze and offend you. So, let's not tarry."

"Come this way, everyone," Lear said quickly, leading the group to a waiting caravan of transport pods. When he was sure Solay wasn't looking, Keeler turned to Alkema and made the twirling finger "loony tunes" gesture next to his ear.

The tour proceeded through the ship's recreational gardens to the inhabitation area, where Lear showed them guest quarters where they could, if they so desired, remain on board. She then took them to Hospital One, where Dr. Cingulus explained the available medical technology to them. They were taken to Primary Command, and shown various operations centers for Environmental Systems, Flight Control, and Navigation. (Lear had intended to show them the Power System Distribution Operational Center as well, but thought that Solay might be a bit overwhelmed figuring out the *Pegasus* could produce more energy than her own sun.) They were then shown a few of the scientific laboratories where the biology, geology, and anthropology of various worlds were studied.

After deliberately avoiding anything related to the ship's weapons systems or certain disreputable establishments in the UnderDecks, the tour ended in the Jade Ballroom, where a sumptuous dinner and reception had been prepared.

The walls of the Jade Ballroom were constructed of artificial marble, colored soft green and alabaster. Luscious green velveteen draperies hung from the wall. Lear had ordered the light adjusted to the visible spectrum of Bodicéa. Music, the *Overture and Concerto for Public Service*, by the renowned (on Republic) Republic composer Gavin Nestlé, wafted unobtrusively over the main floor.

A large table was set up in the center of the dance floor. No one expected dancing at this event. The table was matched to the walls and floors. Its surface was cut through with geometric shapes and inlaid with colorful tiles. Thirty-two of the ship's officers and their families, along with the Inner Circle of Twelve, even with some of their family members or life-mates in attendance, made for less than one hundred people in total in a room designed for events of three hundred. Lear wondered if she should have chosen an even smaller space. "Everyone, if I may have your attention, everyone," Lear called out. "Everyone, please, if you would please find a seat at your table, we may begin dinner, and afterwards, the ship's children would like to perform a song in your honor."

Oh, Mother of God, Keeler thought.

"Trajan, why don't you go extend your greetings to Pieta," Lear suggested to her son.

"Why not Marcus?" Trajan countered. "She's not as much younger than he."

Marcus gave a rather sickening grin. "I don't want to move in on Trajan's girlfriend."

Somewhere, there was a law of dramatics requiring Trajan to say "She's not my girlfriend," but the boy refused, defiant child.

"Both of you go," Lear ordered. "Try your best to make a favorable impression... make friends with her I mean."

Having dispatched the children, Lear took a seat between Ciel and Commander Keeler, looked at the array of spoons, forks, and eating sticks and realized to her horror that the catering crew had set a traditional Republicker table service instead of the Bodicéan service. Armatrading had dropped the ball. Lear would have to have some words with her when this dinner was over.

She had, however, managed to cobble together enough volunteer food servers to dismiss the and/oroids who usually served at these occasions. Lear had thought they would make the Bodicéans uncomfortable. It had never occurred to her that having inexperienced personnel drip wine and drop dishes would make them any less uncomfortable.

"Is this meat?" Ciel asked, holding a piece of roast beast in her eating sticks, a distasteful expression on her face.

"Roast beast," Keeler answered heartily. "If you squeeze a bit of the juice into your dipping sauce it will enhance the flavor. It's the custom in the city where I lived."

"We don't eat meat," an advocate explained. "The Goddess teaches that killing animals for food was wrong."

"Very wrong," said another advocate darkly. She both looked rather harshly toward Executive Commander Lear, as though she were the ambassador of the Goddess's Will on *Pegasus*.

"What Vesta taught was that sacrifice and cruelty to animals was a form of evil," Keeler put in, academically, not being a follower of Vesta himself. "At the time of Vesta's First Incarnation, Earth was over-run with pagan and animist cults that sacrificed animals in rituals intended to call up dark power. Vesta wanted her followers to honor life, so, according to her version, keeping animals alive let one draw continuously on the power of life and of light. She never forbade killing animals for food, only that such animals be humanely maintained prior to their harvest."

"Most of us keep animals for that reason," one of the Bodicéans said.

"Which was impractical on Republic," Lear explained. "On our planet, the custom is to

keep gardens and plant life throughout our homes."

"Anyway, we don't kill animals for meat," Keeler continued insistently. "I'm not sure of the precise mechanics of the process, but I know we can produce meat without killing the beast."

Alkema knew of course. "We can extract a sample of cells from an animal, and then culture the cells to produce meat. It actually is advantageous, because the same animal can produce hundreds of times its own weight in protein over a lifetime."

Solay was not placated. "You still eat the flesh of the animal, which is potent patriarchal symbolism. You kill an animal, establishing your male dominance, and then you burn and consume it. That's how male-dominated culture works, conquer, destroy, and consume."

"Well, admittedly triumphing over a plant isn't very challenging, but I assure you, good woman, no animals were harmed in the making of this meal," Keeler repeated. He dug into his roast beast, and heartily extracted a dripping slice. Of course, cloned meat was not as juicy or as tasty as the real thing, but he kept this datum to himself.

This seemed to placate them, although they all passed on the flesh course. The Bodicéans did manage to find objectionable content to the soup course (too rich), to the wine (too refined, a good wine retains some essence of the ground and the Earth in which it grew {*referring to bits of mud, presumably, thought Keeler*}), and the desert (apparently, cooking fruit was inappropriate to the present season).

At the conclusion of the meal, the dishes were cleared. Then, Lear gave a overlong speech praising the beauty of Bodicéa, praising the great compassion its leadership had for their people, hinting at the wondrous opportunity for both peoples, and then, perhaps having run out of good things to say about the leadership, praising the beauty of the planet again. She then, passed the speaking wand to Ciel.

"I wish to thank the commander for her warm greeting and for the sufficiency of her cordiality," Ciel began.

"I would like, now, to discuss certain resolutions approved by the council with regard to our present situation. Commander, our resolutions should be just between the Council and your ship's senior leadership. Perhaps, this would be a good time to dismiss the children and civilians."

Lear agreed of course. "If your people will accompany Specialist Armatrading to the reception hall, the children will be performing a song and dance."

Probably a lot more entertaining than the song and dance they'll be performing here, Keeler thought.

Tobias stood and approached the dais. "If it is acceptable, I would like to pass on the recital."

"Impudent man," one of the advocates hissed.

"Ought to keep his place," whispered another.

Tobias walked forward as though not hearing them. "It is really more a show for the women, and I fear I would not appreciate it. Perhaps, I could see more of your ship, instead. Maybe, Lt. Alkema would deign to accompany me."

"He may," Keeler said. "If he wants to."

"Will you be needing me, sir?"

Keeler leaned over and whispered, "This is your chance, go for it."

Alkema stood. "There are some other places I could show you."

"I want to go with Lt. Alkema," Pieta shrieked across the ballroom.

"Pieta!" Ciel called sternly, but the little girl was already walking up between the tables.

Pieta shrieked again. No words came with it, just the shriek and the implied threat to keep shrieking unless her demands were met.

"It's okay," Alkema said. "I would be glad to have the lovely Pieta come with me."

Trajan stood. "I would like to be excused, as well," he asked.

Lear gave him a severe look, but Lt. Alkema was already on it. "It's good. In fact, anyone who wants to pass on the song and dance recital, come with me." He gestured toward the door and left, followed by Tobias, Pieta, Trajan, and Marcus. The other officers and civilians followed Armatrading.

Keeler looked around. "Well, now that there's no one here but us kids, let's get started."

Alkema led Pieta and the guys eleven decks down and two hundred meters forward to a large open space on the mid-deck of *Pegasus*. "These are the Midnight Gardens."

The Midnight Gardens were dominated by a domed ceiling outlined in wrought iron, producing the effect of walking through some ancient botanical garden. Projected behind the girders was the image of the night sky on Sapphire, during a conjunction of three full moons. Ulysses, looking dark and sullen like the face of a petulant child, hung just underneath Hyperion, who blazed brightly, pastel yellow and pink like a ripening melon. Making a transit high above and behind was Rogue, little more than a small white disk.

The garden itself was filled with strangely delicate plant-life. Pale white flowers and leaves were turning outward toward the moonlight. They seemed almost luminescent, seeming to produce the halo-effect Sapphireans called "night-glow" that hung around them like angelic auras.

"These are the moon-blossoms, and those are the ghost-flowers, and faded lilies, night-clover, and on the side of that tree, there's a vine of lunar lilacs growing."

"It's beautiful," said Tobias.

"They only flower in moonlight. We believe they were discovered on a planet with a very long day-night cycle. Possibly, during the day, the sunlight became too fierce for flowers to thrive, so they adapted to a night-time existence. Some of our agro-botanists think they might be native to Sapphire, though, because their cellular structure is identical to our native plant life. Those trees over there are growing moon fruit. It isn't ripe yet, when it is, you peel it and eat it like an orange. The fruit itself is blue. You have to eat it at night because it sours in daylight."

Pieta, was holding on to Alkema's hand, and held it still as she reached with the other one and brushed the petals of a moon-blossom. It recoiled from her touch, as moon-blossoms did. "You can make a garden like this when you come to live with me in Serenopolis," she said, swinging his hand. Alkema blushed. He heard Trajan Lear snort in an undiplomatic way.

"It sounds like she has her mind made up," Alkema said to Tobias.

"Her mother is the First Advocate," Tobias said by way of explanation. "Her grandmother was in the Inner Circle, her great grandmother was as well, and her great-aunt was First Advocate. She knows she'll always get what she wants, and after all, you're just a man." He

looked admiringly over the arboretum. "We could never have anything like this."

"I thought your world was big on gardening."

"Not this... your ship. Spaceflight. We would never go into space. Far too dangerous. Avoidance of physical injury is an obsession with the Outer Circle. They've banned contact sports, mountain climbing, anything that could potentially cause injury. They would never allow anything as dangerous as space travel."

"Most of the things that make life worth living are at least a little dangerous," Alkema said. Suddenly, he remembered Commander Keeler's speech in the Aves. Most of the things that made life worth living weren't things you discussed with your mother, either.

"Have you spoken with your commander about what I told you, on the Isle of Mab?"

"I have," Alkema answered.

"And...?"

"The commander has a lot on his mind. Normally, he would assign one of most trusted officers to investigate, but his most trusted officer is ... is missing right now. That leaves me, I'm afraid."

"What have you concluded?"

Alkema turned to the girl. "Pieta, do you need anything to drink?"

"I need to pass water," she said.

"There's a euphemism over there. I'll be waiting when you come back." Pieta let go of his hand.

When he was alone, he told Tobias, "I need to know the source of this legend. It's possible, according to our culture anthropologists that the men of your planet have created a legend of rescue, based on memories of the Commonwealth, to help cope with the situation in which you live."

Tobias considered this. He looked as though he were about to say something, then changed his mind.

Alkema continued, "None of the people I have spoken with think the way men are treated on your planet is right. If we can secure relations with your planet, there would certainly be an opportunity for things to change."

"Ciel would like to change things, or so she has told me on occasion. However, she is in a weak position. Her seat on the Inner Circle was given to her more by heredity than merit. She can not do anything that would offend the Neo-Traditionalists on one side or the Progressive Reactionaries on the other, or she will lose her seat. To even suggest expanding men's rights would surely bring her down. If she thinks this would be the result of forming relations with your world, she may oppose them for that reason alone." He looked forlorn by this information.

Alkema put his hand on Tobias's shoulder. "Even if we aren't the literal fulfillment of your legend, you should know that most of us on this ship stand with you. Maybe we can find a way to make it come true regardless of what Ciel or the Council decide."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know yet," Alkema said, "but if there is a way to help you out of your situation, we'll find it."

In the Jade Ballroom, things were turning ugly.

Ciel had turned speaking duties over to Fraya, who had been designated the Speaker of the circle. She was, like the others, middle-aged. Her long brown hair was neatly brushed and shot through with white and grey. She might have been pretty were her expression not so perpetually dour.

"The Inner Circle has studied through your Mission Logs. They confirm what we had feared. In your first mission you unleashed weapons of mass destruction on a populated planet."

"That was an accident," Keeler wanted to shout, but he realized how it would sound.

"After destroying the caretakers of that planet, you turned your back on its population, leaving them to suffer and die in the absence of the beings on whom they had become dependent for survival."

"On your Second Mission, you came across a society that practiced *slavery*," the last word came out almost as a shriek. "You did nothing."

Except risk the lives of our crew to save some of those slaves, Keeler wanted to retort.

"What do have to answer for yourselves?"

Lear spoke up, tentatively. "A thorough reading of our mission logs will show that, in each case, we seriously debated the consequences of our actions. We weighed what we could accomplish against the needs of each planet. If we did not do more to help the people of Meridian, it was because our resources and understanding were too limited. If we did not end slavery on EdenWorld, it was because our mission was not to end slavery. Our mission is to find and evaluate. Follow on missions will address each planet in a tailored, responsible manner. Furthermore, I have given your Council repeated assurances that we have no intention of enforcing our will upon your planet's culture. Certainly, you must see now that I spoke honestly."

Keeler put it differently. "I can say that the people of those worlds are better for us having called there than they would have been had we not."

Fraya continued. "This ship confirms our worst fears about the patriarchal excesses of your two cultures. This ship is too large, uses too many resources, and carries too much weaponry to be regarded as a ship of peace. The First Resolution of the Inner Circle is that you should immediately disarm this ship. Strip it of every weapon and go in peace. If you go looking for peace, we are certain that peace will find you. If you set out prepared for war, then you shall surely find war. Therefore, the Council passes a First Resolution on a vote of seven to five, that the Mission of the Starship *Pegasus* be redefined along lines of peace. The ship should disarm itself of all weaponry, and pledge to correct social inequalities and injustice on worlds it encounters, but not to interfere with worlds where social inequalities and injustice are not present."

Keeler almost choked on his wine. He had to check to make sure Fraya had a straight face, even though he doubted she could make any other kind of face.

She turned a page. "We have also studied your own writings on your own world. After much debate, it was decided that these writings ought to be viewed in the light most favorable to you, because they were undoubtedly intended as propaganda for any new worlds you encountered."

"We have determined that Sapphire is a world that allows inequalities to thrive, does not allow its people to participate in self-government, is too dependent upon technology, and has taken inadequate measures to protect its environment."

"The Second Resolution of the Inner Circle, passed with eight in favor and four against, is that the planet Sapphire must enact the following reforms before relations may be established.

- The planet Sapphire must establish a system of electoral representation open to all citizens of the planet and must abolish the distinction its law makes between citizens and non-citizens.

- The planet Sapphire must declare, at minimum, 80% of its land area as protected wilderness and protect it from development.

- The planet Sapphire must reduce its dependence on technology

- The planet Sapphire must secure, by law, equal access of every citizen to all the necessities and comforts of life, including food, shelter, medical care, clothing, education, entertainment, art..."

"Excuse me," Commander Keeler asked. "I know this is going to seem impertinent, but who, exactly, are you to be ordering us to reform our planetary culture?"

"Commander, all women ... all *humans* everywhere in the galaxy are entitled to an equivalent standard of rights and an equivalent standard of living. If your world desires an alliance with ours, then it is our social responsibility to see that your people have the same rights as ours."

"Our Third Resolution concerns the planet Republic. The Inner Circle admires Republic for its diligent efforts to secure the rights of its own citizens to representation and all the previously enumerated necessities and comforts of life."

Keeler stole a glance at Lear. She was trying hard to keep from smiling, but not hard enough, and her chin was raised just a little higher than usual.

"However," Spokeswoman Fraya continued darkly, "Republic forces its citizenry to live in cities of up to forty million in habitants each. Forty million people!" She shook her head.

"Such megacities are an affront to the notion of human continuity. The first term of our Third resolution is that the Planet Republic begin drawing up plans to disperse its citizenry across the planet, into communities of less than 500, 000 people, over the next 200 years."

"We recognize that technology is vital to the sustainment of human life on the Planet Republic. However, we believe that current use of that technology is inappropriate. Instead of adapting Republic to support human life, humanity itself should change, gradually, to adapt to life in the natural environment of Republic."

In other words, everyone on Republic should learn to breathe methane, Keeler thought.

"Finally, we note with supreme disappointment, current efforts to alter the environment of the fifth planet in the Sapphire system, the world known as Loki. It is wrong to alter an environment solely to make it fit for humans. The planet ought to be left in the condition the Goddess intended. For that reason, these efforts must be halted. This is the Fourth Resolution of the Inner Circle, passed on a vote of ten-to-two."

"We regret any discomfort that may have been caused by hearing these resolutions. Criticism of one's own culture can never be pleasant to the ears. However, it is the consensus of the counsel that to merely accept your worlds, as they are now, would be an abdication of our social responsibility to the people and the native environments of your worlds."

"May I ask a question," Keeler said. Fraya handed him the speaking wand. "Thank you. How do you expect us to effect policy changes on our homeworlds?"

"If your worlds value relations with us, they will hear our words. If they care about the wellbeing of their people, they will adopt our resolutions. If they do not, then, perhaps it is best that our world remain on our own."

If it were up to Keeler alone, the next words the Inner Circle of Bodicéa would have heard would have been, "Don't let the airlock hit you on the way out." However, he had a sense that Lear viewed the Bodicéan resolutions as an opening position for future negotiation. Well, fine then. Let her spend six weeks cooped up in a conference room with these blattering nags. Tomorrow, he would be back on the moon base, picking through the crew quarters.

"I, for one," Lear said, rising, "I would like to commend the Circle for their frankness, for their openness, and their willingness to share their open opinions with us. Let me propose a toast, to ..."

The communication link on Keeler's cuff-link began calling urgently. "Commander, this is Specialist Shayne American on the bridge. The Aves *Prudence* has returned."

CHAPTER TEN

Report of Lt. Commander (Tactical) Phillip Miller

Mission Commander

Reconnaissance Mission 1 – System 12 055 Vulpeculus

Following a standard launch, our ships accelerated away from *Pegasus* achieving a cruising speed of .7 c within fourteen hours after departure. We set our course for the trailing anomaly in a vector formation with *Prudence* on point, followed by *Hector* and then *Xerxes*.

*For about four days, nothing interesting happened... um, except for an inconsequential food fight for which I apologize. Specifically, this resulted from an assessment made by Specialist Ng and myself regarding the unpalatable nature of a Republicer food item known as sea foam jelly, and a defense on the part of Flight Lt. Driver regarding its nutritional and general health benefits. Probably because of the boredom of the crew, this led to a discussion of how the waste evacuators might be deployed to expel globs of this substance into space and whether the aforementioned jelly could maintain its cohesion in a cold vacuum. That the interior of *Prudence* and several exterior points of both *Prudence* and *Hector* suffered from these experiments, I also regret.*

*At the end of four days travel, we were finally closing on the objects. We maintained continuous sensor scans, but because of our speed, our distance, and some kind of energy field surrounding the anomalous mass, we were unable to make any further analysis beyond what had been determined on board *Pegasus* for several days. We were almost five million kilometers out before we could get a high-resolution sensor fix. We didn't recognize that the objects trailing *Pegasus* were ships until we were almost on top of them.*

We were closing in on the objects, very rapidly. At our cruising speed, we would have shot through the entire fleet in a matter of seconds. I ordered the pilots to intercept and match course and speed with the objects so we could study them. So we swung around and altered the field geometry of our engines to match their speed.

It looked like an asteroid debris field at first, but then we realized the asteroids were all

virtually identical, and far too geometric in form to be accounted for as ordinary interplanetary phenomena. There were hundreds of them. Our sensors identified 668 separate returns. They spread out in a vast, irregular crescent shape, and we were on a course to intercept near the edge of the outer point.

They were almost more like slabs of rock than ships, tapered and smooth on one side, with kind of segmented sections on the opposite edge. We couldn't tell which side was top or bottom. They looked like they had been hewn from rock, like asteroids fused with extremely dense material. The rock was dark colored, and very difficult to pick out against the backdrop of space. It did gleam slightly when light hit it. They gave off no light whatsoever, no internal illumination, no formation lights, no marker lights.

Each ship measured between 600 and 800 meters long, 45 to 60 meters wide and about thirty meters high. They were separated by an average distance of 600 kilometers and were travelling at .25 c.

They didn't appear to give notice to our presence. We moved along-side one of the ships at a safe distance, we guessed, and scanned its entire surface. We didn't detect any kind of markings or external instrumentation. We did detect an intense gravitationally-based propulsion field, but no energy output. Most likely because their hulls focused all energy back into the ships. Our sensors could not penetrate their outer hulls. Our instruments suggested they were solid all the way through.

As we studied the data coming in, we began speculating Honeywell and I entertained the notion they were some kind of weapon. A solid rock traveling at a quarter the speed of light could destroy a planet in quite a spectacular fashion. If impact were initiated at precisely the right point, the planet would be pulverized, all its matter sucked through the point of impact like a doughnut, and the debris would coalesce into a kind of halo.

Depending on the impact pattern, you could also produce a starburst effect, or, conceivably, any other debris pattern you desired.

We then produced a model showing that if enough of the rocks could encircle the planet at a precise distance and catch it in their slipstream, they could drag the planet into the sun. Can you imagine what that would look like from the surface? The sun gradually fills the sky until it is ablaze with fire. Then the atmosphere burns off into space under the relentless solar wind. The seas churn and boil before finally boiling off into space. The crust bakes into a hard glassy shell and finally the whole planet is swallowed into the fusion-fueled furnace of the stellar interior.

We also speculated that if the rocks could be accelerated even further, they could punch through the planet cleanly, leaving perfectly shaped entry and exit wounds and turning the planet into one great Jutland cheese. Molten core material would then gush through the open holes, vaporizing the oceans and covering the surface in red hot magma.

In a similar vein, Lt Honeywell suggested that if the impacts could be staggered, rather than simultaneous, you could blow a planet apart one-piece at a time over a course of days or weeks. We speculated as to how long this process could be prolonged before there was no habitable surface area left, or at what point the planet would lose integrity and collapse on itself.

As you can imagine, this discussion persisted for several minutes, and I'll spare you further details for the purposes of this report. We returned to studying the alien vessels.

That these ships had no running lights, no external markings, no indication of any one inside seemed to support our hypothesis that they were, in fact, simple weapons. On the other hand, they seemed to have been built in deliberate shapes, and protected by a coating of armor plating not known to be found in ordinary asteroids. Such extra work would not have been necessary if the ships were just guided weapons. Eventually, we also detected what seemed to be signals bouncing between the ships to ensure proper separation, kind of a quantum sonar.

We decided to move in closer so as to check out one of the ships at close range. Honeywell and I argued over whose ship should go in. Eventually, we had a contest, whose details I would

prefer not to discuss, but at the end, he won. So, I pulled rank on him and ordered Flight Lieutenant Driver to bring us up alongside one of the ships while the other two Aves held back.

I note that, at this time, we attempted to send a transmission to Pegasus, through both electromagnetic and neutrino-burst transmittal systems, detailing our analysis to that time and explaining our next course of action. I am at a loss to explain why this transmission was not received. It may have been internally reflected by the same energy field that enveloped this alien fleet.

Flight Lieutenant Driver executed a series of maneuvers that put our ship within one meter of one of the unidentified vessels. Specialist Ng scanned the surface and found a circular seam we believed to be an airlock. Driver maneuvered the ship over the airlock and extended the ventral umbilicus. We connected, sealed the umbilicus, and began analyzing the material on the external hull of the ship.

The outer shell was built from a very complex molecular matrix, mainly a kind of uranium, incredibly dense. Its molecules were laid down in a crystalline matrix, interlaced with atoms and molecules of other dense materials with strands of neutrons forming a sheath. There was a layer of the same material beneath, with a different arrangement of the same elements. This went down to a depth of at least sixteen centimeters. It was heavy-duty armor-plating, easily twice as strong as the hull of Pegasus.

Our first challenge was to break through this material. Our best bet was the quantum disruptor, but we weren't sure we could re-seal the hole afterward. We decided to take the chance, and began peeling through the ship's outer armor.

For all we knew, these ships could have been constructed of this solid material all the way through. We could not fathom a reason why this would be, but we had to consider that we were dealing with an alien logic system potentially completely different than the way humans think. Also, that these machines might have some terrible purpose beyond our ability to comprehend.

After about forty minutes of careful penetration, the entire assembly gave way and collapsed into the ship. We had access to the interior of the alien vessel, but we could not see inside.

After stowing a sample of the shell material for additional study, we dropped a micro-aerial probe into the hole and scanned the atmosphere. It was very thin, carbon dioxide and nitrogen with a trace of hydrogen hexafluoride, at a pressure of less than 0.1 standard atmosphere. Internal temperature of the ship was minus 140 degrees. The Micro-aerial probe detected no life forms, and limited electro-mechanical activity apart from the drive systems.

That we would enter the ship was a foregone conclusion. However, we did pause at this point to consider what we were dealing with. The other ships had paid us no attention whatsoever, and we detected no life signs in the ship we had attached ourselves to. We considered that these might be a fleet of uninhabited probes, like Caliph. Medical Technician Partridge speculated that the alien inhabitants might not register life signatures our instruments scanned for. Specialist Broadway, on Hector, speculated rather fancifully, that the ships themselves could be a life form, either evolved or bred specifically to live in space.

The only way to resolve our speculation was to enter the ships. We consulted with Honeywell on the best strategy for entering and exploring. Ng and I put on environment suits. We considered the possibility that whoever built or inhabited these ships might take an armed entry as an act of aggression. Nevertheless, we decided it was prudent to carry some means of self-defense. Specialist Ng and I armed ourselves with pulse cannons and descended into the hole.

Immediately upon passing inside, we were both overcome by violent nausea and disorientation. It took us several seconds to regain our footing and allow our environment suits to clean themselves. We realized our disorientation was partly caused because we had believed we were entering from the top of the vessel, instead, we had come through the floor. Also, this part of

the ship was not completely shielded from the fluctuations created by the gravity drive engine. So, we were feeling conflicting pull from the walls and the floor. Our stomach and our inner ears, consequently, were receiving mixed signals and responded the way human bodies are programmed to respond in such a situation: violent up-chucking.

Specialist Ng and I remained stationary while we recovered our equilibrium and activated our helmet and arm-lamps. We saw that the interior of the craft was as stark as the outside. We were in an empty cell, about eight meters around. The walls were dull gray. The structure supports were silver and glittered slightly in the light. The whole interior looked like it had been hewn from solid rock, and it was more like walking through a cavern than a ship. We picked out a kind of ladder leading upward. The ladder was very wide. I remember standing in the center and barely being able to hold the rails on both sides. Specialist Ng had to pull her self up on one rail. The rungs were twice as far apart as we would have expected. The ship seemed to have been built for creatures of enormous proportions.

We proceeded upward through several cells more or less identical to the one we had entered. We were concerned about losing contact with Prudence, so we left a trail of micro-transceivers along our route. Then, a set of horizontal rungs led away from the ladder we had been ascending toward the centerline of the ship. That was where we had wanted to be.

As we made our way along the passageway, Ng remarked that our environment and circumstances had an eerily cinematic quality to them, and this did not bode well. Whenever a space crew in a holo-drama entered a dark alien spaceship, they had about a 96% chance of having their face chewed off by an alien. We didn't think this was likely, but we both had a bad, bad feeling about the ship we were inside.

As we exited the passageway and entered a large chamber in what we guessed was the fore of the vessel, the character of the ship changed, somewhat. We could see the internal structure, and how it had been hewn from rock, then infused with the composite material that coated the outside. Maybe it was just because it was larger than the chamber we had been in before, but it seemed different in a way we could not place except to say that, we had a sense that this part was intended to be inhabited, while the other areas existed solely for utility.

Before going further, we needed to have some idea of where we were going. We were already beginning to doubt, between the gravity and strangeness, that we could find our way back to the airlock, even with the markers we had laid down. Ng had a resonance mapper --- one of those things that sends out sonic pulses and can map an interior space based on the echo returns. She pressed it against the wall and it built a three-dimensional map of the ship's interior.

We saw from the model that had accessed a kind of antechamber near the front of the ship, separated from a series of far larger chambers. The section through which we had entered was self-contained, but behind it stretched a row of large, jettisonable chambers down either side of the hull.

It was as though the ship we were on were a kind of carrier vessel, to which two-dozen smaller vessels were attached, but ingeniously designed to function as one ship. Each one roughly shaped like the egg of a bird, neatly arranged along the horizontal access, contained within a separate superstructure. They were enclosed by an intricate mechanism. I studied the mechanism intently, but was not able to determine its purpose until I had more time to contemplate it. I believe each of the segments on the underside of the ship is capable of being launched at a high rate of speed, where it would function as either a warhead or landing craft.

An engineering and drive section occupied the middle of the last third of the ship. The gravity drive was fairly conventional, but based on the old Diminishing Wave principle, rather than the limited effect principle. It meant the gravitational effect was not contained to a defined area, like the ones use in our ships, but rippled throughout the cosmos.

The forward section on the other side of us was heavy with weaponry. We both recognized the return signatures, long, pointed metallic objects slaved to the primary power-plant with direct

energy conduits. We know weapons when we see them, and these were powerful ones. They harnessed directed energy, accelerated, amplified, and phased to act as molecular disrupters. Nasty stuff, but, as I estimated in the ship on the way back, well-within the tolerance of Pegasus's shield grid.

Aside from the large chambers, the ship was divided into a propulsion segment, and a weapons section as I described previously. There was no central control area, and I subsequently identified the propulsion area as a control locus for the ship operations, as though they combined their bridge with their engineering section. However, I detected no life signs there. It was also possible all ships were directed from one ship, a master control vessel.

We decided to proceed toward the propulsion chamber in order to explore it further. At close inspection, we thought we could analyze the equipment and determine how the ship operated. We might also gain access to a central braincore, if there was one, which would tell us where the ship came from, who built it, and what their motives were. We mapped out a path and programmed it into the guidance system of our environmental gear. Ng activated a motion detector, to scan the pathway in front of us, but the only thing she got a reading on was us.

We found a hatch separating our antechamber from the rest of the ship. The design was strange, like multi-layers of thick, oblong material joined into an irregular shape. It took us several minutes to figure out how to disengage the latching mechanism. Opening it was like peeling an orange. Then, we had to push the pieces of the hatch apart in order to gain entry.

We were not prepared for what was on the other side of the hatch.

The Chamber was as large as an auditorium, extended four decks above and five decks below, lined and stacked with hundreds of vertical glass tubes. They were clear, like glass, and shaped like sarcophagi. There was a metallic band around the center of each one with some kind of instrument attached to it. It was covered with a light coating of frost.

There were catwalks running throughout the chamber, and we carefully stepped out to the nearest of the chambers. The chamber was dark, and we could not see what was in the capsules. We brushed off some of the frost off the first one and tried to look inside. It was filled with a murky liquid, and it took multiple vision enhancements before we could see what was inside."

It was a creature, and it looked exactly like the creature we found in the bunker on Medea. It had the same elongated head with the teeth. It had the same arms and claws, the same thick hide. It was immersed in some kind of cryo-stasis fluid, and there were at least a thousand of them on that ship.

Naturally, we were somewhat perturbed at that point. We had broken contact for several seconds, and anyone listening would have heard nothing except Ng and screaming "Oh, slag" at each other. Finally, Honeywell broke in on my com-link, demanded to know what was going on. I described the scene to him and told Partridge to scan for the pathogen and break the umbilicus if he detected it anywhere on the alien ship.

We inspected the capsule to see if there were some way it could be detached from the ship and brought back to Prudence for additional study. We spent about forty minutes examining the connections, trying to determine how the capsule was connected to the ship's systems and if there were alarms. We concluded that we did not have the knowledge or technical resources to attempt such an operation. We decided to attempt a complete molecular-resonance scan of the chamber and its contents, that would at least give us a complete picture of what was within, down to the molecular level. We would have to go back to the ship for the equipment to do this. We told Partridge to prepare it for us.

Ng and I also decided to continue onward toward the engineering center. I was more determined than ever we must find a computer core or communication equipment that would let us access and confirm what their plans were. I didn't know if we would ever get this close again, and I wanted to learn whatever I could.

We proceeded toward the aft part of the chamber, where we found another hatch. We began peeling back the closures when I received a message from Honeywell. His ship had detected several types of energy beams being directed at our ship, at Prudence. He concluded we were being probed and suggested we evacuate as soon as possible.

Ng and I debated moving on and pulling back. At first, we agreed that the value of potential strategic or tactical data outweighed the potential risk. However, we also agreed the risk factor was almost critical, and that even if we reached the braincore, we might not be able to find or retrieve such information.

At that point, Honeywell informed us that two of the alien vessels were altering position and closing on our ship. We decided to evacuate and made our way as quickly as possible back to the airlock.

I can not say for certain whether our presence inside the alien ship had been detected. There were no internal alarms, no flashing lights, and no attempt to pursue us as we escaped. However, the aliens may have required a lengthy re-animation sequence.

We reached the umbilicus and re-entered Prudence. I quickly apprised myself of our tactical situation. I ordered Xerxes and Hector to move off, and said we would catch them later. I ordered Flight Lieutenant Driver to detach the umbilicus. We pulled away from the alien ship on thruster power and engaged the main drive engine as soon as we were free. The alien ships were shifting position, moving in around us. I ordered Driver to find an escape route.

I stripped my environment suit off and joined Driver in the command module. From there, you could very easily spot the alien ships moving in on our position. We had detached the umbilicus without sealing the hole we had made in the hull of the ship. Even though there was very little atmosphere inside, it was still enough to kick us further away from the ship than we had calculated, almost directly into the path of another. Driver put the ship into a crash dive as the other ship passed just barely over our top quarter.

I determined our sole priority was to get out of there with our lives, so that we could give Pegasus such information as we had already acquired. That meant putting as much distance between ourselves and those ships as quickly as we could.

There were four closing around us in a diamond formation. We continued our crash-dive, trying to go below them. They slowly realized what we were doing and began dropping with us. They were not as maneuverable as Prudence, and we were able to evade them by continually altering course.

Honeywell had been monitoring our situation and sent a message indicating that an additional eight ships were also shifting position and giving chase, making for twelve ships on our tail, not counting the one we had evacuated.

Driver was completely focused on his task, and ably trying to navigate our way out of danger. He took us backwards, then down, then up, then hard to starboard in an effort to shake our pursuers. It looked like he was going to succeed.

Then, the alien ships began firing on us. They were little pulses of charged particles, like our phalanx guns but only a fraction as powerful. Our shields activated and were able to hold their own against the barrage. However, there were four to six enemy ships firing on us, and they rapidly increased power and altered the energy signatures of the weapons. The cumulative effect began to weaken our defensive shielding. Their attacks were concentrated on our propulsion systems. They may have been holding back in hopes of disabling us without destroying us, and trying to ratchet up the amount of energy necessary to do that.

Still, we were managing to pull away from them. More ships started dropping out of formation to try to block our exit. They were trying to move around us, to box us in until they could wear us down.

I told Driver to go to stealth mode and alter course. I recognized a tactical limitation to the enemy vessels. As heavy assault ships, all of their weaponry was locked forward. They could

only fire from the front of their ships. I told Driver to position himself accordingly, staying in the blindspot of their weaponry.

With our ship invisible to their sensors, they began firing blindly. I can not say how many ships were involved in the assault at this point, but we were hemmed in by fire, and one of the ships was closing on our position. Our room to maneuver was diminishing by the second, and getting out would require a tight squeeze between the alien ships.

The next thing I knew, Xerxes was coming in from overhead with guns blazing. They blasted away at the front of the nearest ship that was firing on us, and when they got in close, fired off a brace of missiles directly into its gunnery. The guns exploded.

Apparently, this explosion, caused some kind of feedback surge, because a few seconds later, the entire ship exploded and spewed out debris in every direction, some of which struck some of the other ships.

Meanwhile, the first ship was ablaze and spiralling out of control. The destruction of the ship distracted the enemy and as they maneuvered to avoid its runaway course, they created a breach in their lines. We passed through it, up and out. We managed to climb above the line of ships, with Xerxes hard on our tail.

We thought we were home free, but the alien ships then adopted a new tactic. As our ships retreated, they began combining their assault into powerful energy pulses. We saw patterns of energy leaping from ship to ship like lightning in stormclouds. The charge would build to a critical mass then explode outward in a massive front of charged plasma that slammed everything in its path.

One of these fronts overtook Prudence and Xerxes as we retreated. The waves dispersed over range, and the hit we took did not seriously damaged our ship or the hardened propulsion, sensor, or short-range systems. The plasma-energy fried some of our unshielded sensors and destroyed our long range communication transmitter.

Xerxes dropped into stealth mode and we both altered course to stay away from the enemy fire. We transmitted to Hector, ordering them to go into stealth mode and follow evasive maneuvers, but it was already too late for them.

Hector had tried to run ahead of us. Honeywell had ordered them to proceed back to Pegasus at maximum speed while our ships distracted the aliens. However, the aliens locked onto Hector with their pulse weapons while they were still fleeing. When they combined their weapons again, Hector was too close to bear the combined energy. They took a hit at close range that took out their shield and primary propulsion. Another hit and they were finished. We lost their telemetry link. I wanted to move in and try to rescue them, but it was already too late. We saw an alien ship moving in on Hector's last position, but I couldn't see Hector. Alien ships closed around their last position and we lost visual contact. No tried to raise them on inter-ship, but there was no response. Whether they were dead, or their communications were disabled, we were never able to definitively determine.

I still wanted to go after them, and Flight Lt. Driver was willing. However, our sensors were fried, and we had no way of detecting them. Our systems had been moderately damaged already, and the aliens, having realized the potency of combining their weapons, were already preparing another pulse.

Honeywell convinced us that we would only succeed in being destroyed ourselves, and our key objective was to warn Pegasus.

Reluctantly, I ordered Flight Lieutenant Driver to lay in for Pegasus at maximum speed. I ran a diagnostic on ship's systems, and set about making repairs. Long-range communications were completely destroyed. We had a ship-to-ship link with Xerxes, and learned they were in the same situation.

Alien ships were still chasing us, still firing on us. We were picking up speed and increasing the distance between us, but those plasma waves were still hitting us, though the intervals between

were growing longer. The charges were weaker each time, but wreaking havoc on our systems. I ordered Flight Lieutenant Driver to Redline the engines to get us clear while we still had propulsion.

Flight Lieutenant Driver expressed a concern about over-stressing his ship's engine and systems. Nevertheless, over the next eighty-four hours, he managed to accelerate his ship to .935 light-speed. The record speed for an unassisted Aves is .9372, by the way (and, presumably, that ship had not been attacked by aliens). The best speed Honeywell's Aves could manage was .83 lightspeed, and we soon became separated. I have since been informed his ship was recovered by search and rescue, and is proceeding back under escort.

As we high-tailed it back to Pegasus, I contemplated what we were facing out there. I meditated on what we had learned on their ships, and also what we had learned from studying the ruins of Medea. That they wiped out the entire human population suggests that they are intent on extinguishing human life. They did not conquer the planet, and they did not remain on it. One would have expected them to at least exploit the planet's resources, but there was no evidence that this had been done on a wide scale. They did not bother even to loot through the ruins, they extinguished every human life on the planet.

We can tell much from an enemy from the design of the ships and weapons. Their ship's design may reflect their stark inner brutality. We build ships that are elegant and functional, satisfying our human notions of beauty and efficiency. Their own ships were brutally plain. Their weapons were equally brutal, relying on the brute application of force rather than precise application of energy. I believe this means we will find their tactics and philosophy as severe and unsubtle as the ships in which they arrive.

If they did indeed, wipe out life on Medea, it raises the questions of why. I considered what their pathogen had accomplished. It had wiped out all animal life on the planet down to the bacterial level. (They may be vulnerable to microbes. Must investigate further.) However, they left the structures intact. It is also possible that this fleet is the advance guard for alien colonists. They sterilize habitable planets. Then, when their colony ships arrive, they are able to counteract the pathogen they release, and move into the cities and homes of the previous inhabitants.

It makes sense when you consider the difficulty of adapting non-native life forms to new biospheres. Our ancestors required considerable genetic upgrades to tolerate the environment of Sapphire, for example. (I came to regret not programming our and/oroids with a capacity for self-defense.)

After what seemed like a long, non-relativistic time, we passed by the seventh planet of this system and picked up a beacon. We altered course and made for the planet, where we encountered the tritium extraction operation on the surface. We were travelling too fast to stop, and the communication gear was still out, but we were able to engage the planet in a braking maneuver, that cut our speed back to .625c. We repeated the maneuver, slowing to .5c. The energy we transferred, though, was great enough to slow the planet's rate of rotation by .8% each time we orbited. We hoped this would be a signal. Our lower speed should have enable the mining operation to detect us, but apparently they did not. We proceeded inward toward the sixth planet. We detected Pegasus in high orbit over the fifth planet and laid in a course.

We engaged the deceleration sequence and slowed to approach speed. We were coming in with communication gone and partially blinded, but we made it.

I subsequently learned that Xerxes had also detected the extraction works on the seventh planet, but unlike us, had opted to land there to repair their ship and communicate with Pegasus. I was greatly relieved that Marine Lieutenant Honeywell and his crew had survived our encounter. All crew on all ship's involved in this operation are hereby submitted for commendations.

In conclusion, I am convinced that the aliens we encountered are the same aliens who destroyed the colony at Medea. The resemblance between the creature we encountered and the creature on the surface of Medea could not be an accident.

Furthermore, I am convinced that they represent a threat to the colony in this system, to Pegasus, and possibly to the Home Worlds. As such, we must be prepared to mount a vigorous defense.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In the Slam 'n' Jam, Eddie placed a steaming platter of flash-fried plant and animal components and three kinds of hot dipping sauce in front of Matthew Driver and Eliza Jane Change. "Compliments of the Deck Minus 221 Merchants Association," he told them, "to fill up our local hero on and celebrate his coming back alive from battle with alien nasties."

More accurately, a maximum speed retreat from alien nasties that almost melted down my fusion core and has my ship in for a 560-hour refit, Matthew thought, but he took the plate. He was not fond of ethnic foods, but the decent thing to do was consume and smile.

Eddie put a large stein of ale in front of him. "This tub's for you, beauty," he said.

"Thank you, but I'd rather just have a glass of mauve juice."

"Come on, beauty, your religion's gotta let you suck a tall one when you cheat death."

"It doesn't, but thank you." He slid the stein over to Eliza.

"Come on, assol. One drink to honor your fallen comrades."

Eliza looked at him expectantly. Reluctantly, Matthew lifted the stein. "To fallen comrades."

Eliza raised her glass of wine. "To fallen comrades."

"Vesta Krishna guide their souls," Eddie finished. Their glasses met in the middle with a solid *klink*, and they drank. Matthew choked and sputtered as the stinging liquid entered his throat.

Eddie rolled his big brown eyes. "Aw, come on, beauty. That's a *lite* ale."

Matthew wiped his mouth. The harsh liquid was pouring into his gut, like a rainstorm washing poison into a lake, and something like a mean kid entering a playground. "Now, can I have some mauve juice?" he asked.

"All right, but I'm charging you. You can have all the ale you want, but I'm charging you for the mauve juice. Also, any more food you get after the sampler platter." He stood and walked to the bar, where Puck was preparing drinks for one of the ship's Mind Doctors and a pair of men from the ship's Technical Core. Matthew took a piece of birds' wing and dipped it in a honey-yellow sauce. "I wonder where he gets these supplies."

"He seems to get more than his allotment," Eliza agreed.

Matthew put the food into his mouth. It was like eating raw fire. Eyes stretched wide, he searched the table, but there was nothing to drink but the ale. He grabbed the mug, hoped God would forgive him, and guzzled as much as he could intake.

"Are you all right?" Eliza asked.

"Hot..." Matthew managed to squeeze out. "What..." His mouth still burned, in fact, there was a fire line down his esophagus. He took another long swallow of ale. His face had turned so crimson red that even Eliza was showing concern.

"What is that?" Matthew gasped.

"I really don't know, but if yellow was that bad, stay away from red. The green should be okay."

Matthew nodded, unaware, until now, that Eddie color-coded his dipping sauces. He saw with some dismay he had consumed almost three-fourths of his ale, and his mouth was still on fire, his lips were a smoldering ring. He might as well finish it, he decided, and he did.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so." Matthew extracted a sliver of fried vegetable from the platter and began chewing it. Minus the sauce, it had a palliative effect on his frying mouth. He took a breath of air, directing it over his tongue to try to cool it more. "Has *Pegasus* managed to track the alien fleet?"

"Our sensors have begun picking up gravitational distortions beyond the outer margin of the system. The aliens are getting closer," Eliza reported.

"Flight Core is on Alert Status Three. Have we prepared a tactical response?"

"No one has asked me to plot an escape course," Eliza reported.

Matthew took another bite of meat, looked as though he were about to say something, then decided against it.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"We barely escaped," Matthew told her. "Lt. Cmdr. Miller's report doesn't do justice to how close we came to ... Maybe *Pegasus* could hold her own, if we used the Nemesis missiles. I'm sure our weapons are better, but there are so many of them."

Matthew found a curious, warm, tingling, lightheaded sensation arising within him. His face felt numb, his hands and eyes seemed somewhat disconnected from his brain. The sensation was not entirely disagreeable.

Eliza laid a hand on top of Matthew's. "I didn't know if you were coming back or not."

Matthew was taken aback. "Really? That's strange." Words started to pour out of him, as though passing straight from wherever they came from through his mouth without stopping by the part of his brain that checked ID's and kept immature thoughts from getting him into trouble. "Because usually you don't worry about things like that. You're the most fatalistic person I have ever met, and most of my friends are pilots."

She glared at him, in that smoldering way he had always considered sexy before. He now found it hackneyed. Eddie returned to the table and set the glass of juice in front of Matthew, who did not drink it right away.

The words continued to come out of him, like he had cut open an artery of thought and could not stop the words from gushing out. "I didn't know if I was coming back, or not. I was never, ever, as scared I was when we were running from those aliens... but it was a long flight back, and I got less scared, eventually. I had a lot of time to think after the fear subsided. I had time to ask myself a lot of questions."

He became aware that he was speaking more loudly than usual, and consciously tried to lower his voice. "Like, why am I spending every spare minute of my life thinking about someone, and trying to get close to someone, who doesn't return my feelings and probably never will."

Eddie's eyes volleyed back and forth from Matthew to Eliza, trying to read her reaction. Offense? Anger? Sympathy? Relief? The whole ground underneath their three-way

relationship was shifting. He would have to be cool.

Matthew picked up the mauve juice, but seemed to forget about drinking. "I thought about the people I knew back on this ship, and it came to me that I wanted someone on this ship, besides Kayliegh, to be praying for me to return. I wanted someone to come back to. I know that's very selfish, but, when I wasn't trying to keep my ship from exploding or trying to keep a bearing back to *Pegasus*, all I could think about was who was worrying about me."

"It's not like we weren't worrying about you," Eddie put in.

"I believe you were worried about me. Everybody on the ship was worried about me, but what I want to know is...um..." Suddenly, he had forgotten what he had wanted to know, or maybe that was the wrong way to begin the sentence. "The point is, I need more from this relationship. If what we have now is all you and I can ever have, then, I think maybe it's time I started looking around. There are 6,000 people on this ship ... maybe one of them ..." He couldn't find away to finish the thought, so he took a deep draught of his mauve juice and looked away from them. "I've had a lot of time to think about my life on this ship, and my life with you two. We're all friends, and that's important, but I want more than friendship."

Eddie spoke in his best calm-the-drunk tones. "Beauty, you're going to embarrass yourself."

"I want to keep my friendships with both of you, because I care about you guys a lot, but I want a family life. I want something that's going to lead to a permanent situation, with children. I was never really planning on that with Eliza, but ... we never even got to the point where we could even think about that, where we could even consider if it was possible. I either want to take that next step or I want to know that it's never going to happen."

"If you want someone to care for you that much," said Eliza, levelly, "will you promise to never make her worry about *you* never coming back. Would you promise never to go on another Deep Space probe again? Because you're right, it is selfish to expect a woman to wait and worry while you do as you please. If you want someone to pray for you, find a priest."

She stood up, banging her thigh against the table. It had to have been painful, but she didn't show it. "Don't try to box me in. I won't be boxed in. I refuse to be boxed in. I've been a good friend to you. If you don't want what I am willing to give you, I can always keep it for myself. "

Matthew watched her pony-tail bobbing as she walked through the inner hatch. He picked up the empty ale stein.

"Eddie, I think I'd like another ale."

In another corner of the Slam 'n' Jam, and a little later, Philip Miller was sharing a booth with his wife. Two tall glasses filled with honey-colored liquid stood in front of them, but they had not decided whether they wanted to eat or not. She was asking him, "Were you scared?"

"I don't have enough common sense to be scared."

Both of her hands were on his forearm, and holding on so tightly it was as though she wanted to burrow inside of him. He kissed her on the cheek, but his mind was elsewhere. "If the aliens move against us, or if they attack the planet, we're in trouble."

"Are you absolutely certain the aliens' intentions are hostile?"

"They attacked us, and almost destroyed our ship, and did destroy *Hector*, that's pretty hostile, babe. Those ships were troop carriers. Heavily armed troop carriers... and I am sure

those are the same aliens that destroyed Medea.”

“You can not be absolutely certain of that,” she replied. “There are other possibilities. *Pegasus* is heavily armed, but we’re not aggressive. If an alien ship had attached itself to the side of *Pegasus* and started looking around inside, we would probably shoot at them, too.”

Miller finally lifted his beverage for a drink. “You sound like Ex. Cmdr. Lear. Maybe the aliens are just going to come to the planet and shower us with candy and toys, but even if I thought so, I’d still make sure I was ready to fight.”

Jones picked up her own glass, and fixed him in her sea-blue eyes. “So, you spent eighteen days on a ship with just Lt. Driver, Jersey Partridge and Specialist Ng for company. What did you guys do all that time?”

“We played The Game of Resistance a lot. Driver had never played it before, and Partridge was terrible, but Ng was competitive.”

“Is that the same Ng who was in your party on Meridian?”

“Za, the same woman.”

“She’s pretty, isn’t she, smart... tough...”

Miller glowered. He could not believe she would bring this up. “Nothing happened....”

“There is no need to be defensive. I didn’t say anything had.”

“Za, there is a need to be defensive. You never said Flight Lieutenant Driver was pretty, smart, and tough.” He took a drink, then set his glass down hard. “Nothing happened between me and Ng, not on Meridian, not on this mission, and not ever.” He stopped himself from leaving the table. “I can’t remember. When I left, were we fighting, or had we made up?”

“I can’t remember either,” she lied. “It’s been very busy around here. Apart from trying to find you guys, we’ve been trying to establish relations with the people on this planet.”

“I’ve seen the reports, but I haven’t studied them in detail, but I’ve got the gist of it – the planet is beautiful, the weather is nice, the people are pleasant, and they hate us.”

“That’s gross,” she said, shorthanding gross simplification.

“You’ve been there.”

“Za, the weather *is* nice, the planet *is* very beautiful. Borealan topography, sub-tropical climate.”

“And the people.”

“They’re very ...” she had to think hard to come up with a way to describe the Bodiceans in a way that Miller would not turn around. “They care for their planet and their civilization very much.”

“I’m sure they do. So do Sapphireans. So do Republickers. Guilders think of planets as big rocks that you have to break up to get to the valuable minerals inside, but in general, people tend to like their planets. Civilization is also commonly regarded as a good thing.”

“They’re a very gentle people, but very proud of their civilization, and very protective of their way of life.”

Miller took on a skeptical expression. “I read the sociological digest. Men treated like possessions, like property, I don’t think I’d like that very much.”

“I wouldn’t even try to defend that, but I understand why it is.” She took a drink. “We probably could have approached them better. How would we have reacted on Sapphire if a more powerful human civilization showed up one day and asked if we wanted to give up our

ways and join them?"

"Now, you sound like Commander Keeler... and no one has asked the Bodiceans to change anything. Have you taken a liking to the Bodiceans?"

"I understand them. They are a big improvement over any other civilization we've come across. They're peaceful and they just want to be left alone."

Don't we all, Miller thought. Sooner or later, though, some force of nature always intervenes, demands to be attended to.

He took her hand in his own, looked as deep into her eyes and tried to reach her mind. He wanted her to feel the same malevolence he had felt pulsating from the alien life forms when he stood in their ship, the overwhelming dread, the sheer determination to conquer and consume whatever lay in their path.

She resisted him at first, as she always did. Perhaps this was why their marriage had never quite succeeded, because of their inability, or unwillingness, to connect mind-to-mind.

He kept trying, though. *It was bad, my sweetest thing, it was so very, very bad.*

David Alkema was traversing one of *Pegasus's* busier passageways, a broad pedestrian bridge that led from the Command Tower and overlooked 'The Mall' as it had come to be called. "The Mall," officially, "Amenities Nexus, Deck 73 Alpha," was a park-like expanse featuring the ship's primary food court, several small stations for clothing and other non-essential supplies, and recreation areas. He was off-duty, thinking about the meal that lay ahead and the delightful evening that lay on the other side of the meal when he spotted a small blond head of curly hair about twenty paces ahead of him. "Hoy, Trajan Lear."

The boy turned and saw him. His face showed an expression of recognition, but gave no read on whether Trajan was happy to have been called out. He stopped, waved, and let Alkema close the gap in between them. "I just saw you walking back there and thought I'd say 'hoy.'"

"Hoy," Trajan answered. "What's your name again?"

"David Alkema," he reached toward Trajan's shoulder, the Sapphirean way, then just let it dangle. Trajan took it and shook it, which was the Republic way, but only with one hand.

"Oh, I remember you, the one the Commander gave the fake promotion to."

Alkema turned to show the two and a half stripes on his collar. "It's real," he said.

"I guess my mother was wrong, then. Congratulations, I guess."

"Not an immensity. So, where you going?"

"I was going to the Air Hockey match."

"So was I. Are you going to meet up with friends or what?"

Trajan shook his head and looked away.

"Why don't you join me and my buds, then. We've got great seats. After the game, we're going out with Achilles Tenderloin and some of the team."

Trajan's face got bright and curious. "Achilles Tenderloin? The captain of the Sapphirean Suicide Squad?"

"Za, he was in my training group. I helped him out on Transitional Quantum Mechanics.

He's pretty cool, just don't talk about his sister. He's very touchy about that."

"Will he mind that I'm a Republicker?"

"Only if Republic wins the match, and I have it on good authority that won't happen. So, do you want to grab some food?"

Trajan Lear had eaten already, but was at that fantastic age where it didn't matter. "Sure, where we going?"

"There's a place just outside the arena that serves incredible chili beasts. Let's go, if you don't like Sapphirean food, they do have a mild version."

"Nay, I like Sapphirean food." They set off walking side by side. The Second Watch was transitioning to Third, and the mall was crowding with hundreds of personnel going to or coming from duty stations, along with families and groups on their way ways to recreational events, or back to their quarters. They made their way through the closest thing the big empty ship could muster to a throng and took a booth that overlooked two of the lower levels of 'The Mall.' A food-service mechanoid took their order and went to the food kiosk.

Alkema looked across the table at the Executive Commander's son and thought quite deliberately about air hockey statistics. Most of the ship thought of Trajan Lear as a spoiled brat. He had few, if any friends, but Alkema thought he could find something to like about the kid. "So, what's going on in your life?" he asked.

Trajan shrugged. "Ask my mother, she has it all planned out for me."

"Don't you have plans of your own?"

Trajan gave him a despairing look. "I want to join Flight Core. The first training group is being assembled next quarter. I need my mom to sign off on my application. She won't do it."

"Why not?"

"She says it's too dangerous, but I think the truth is, it's not what she wanted for me. Is there any way I can get around it?"

"What about your dad?"

Trajan shook his head. "Father would never contradict mother. They have to agree on everything. What about Commander Keeler, or Flight Commander Collins? Do you think they could get me in?"

"They might, but family always rules first. How old are you?"

"Fourteen... almost fourteen."

"If you wait until you're sixteen, you won't need their permission. Isn't that the law on Republic?"

"That's two years," he said, very sadly. Two years at fourteen were a lifetime. "If I were on Republic, technically, I'd be almost forty. Thirty years have gone by on Republic since we left. Something like that.

Alkema shook his head in the midst of taking a big bite of chili beast, smearing juice on his cheek. "That won't work." *If it worked that way, your mom would be pushing out the commander on mandatory retirement grounds.* "I don't think even Executive Commander Lear could last two years if you brought it up every day and stuck to your guns. You just can't let it drop. Maybe we can think of a way to persuade her."

We? Trajan looked at Alkema curiously. Why was he just dropping down and offering to help like that? No one had ever offered to help him out in this way before. Was this a

Sapphorean thing, or was the lieutenant attempting to ingratiate himself with Trajan's mother by proxy. "Why do you want to help me?"

Alkema shrugged. "Something to do, I guess. Why do you want to be in Flight Core, anyway?"

Trajan's young face looked into him, searching. Alkema couldn't read his expression. He was either about to reveal something he didn't want to admit, or he was trying to come up with a plausible lie.

Finally, the boy sighed. "Why do you think? It's to get away from my mom."

"Executive Commander Lear?" *For a Mom?* He had not thought about it that way. A chill went down Alkema's spine that could have flash frozen a thousand kilogram milkbeast into cryo-stasis. "That... that would be pretty tough."

"She gave me *her* name. I'm Trajan Lear, my brother is Marcus Rebbeck. He took Dad's name. So, she never really expected much from him, but me, I was supposed to take the name. I was a Lear. I was supposed to make her proud." He shook his head. "Every Generation of Lears has produced a Minister, a President, a Senator. If you only made it as far as the Diet or Assembly, you were a disappointment."

"When I was a little kid, she was always at the Ministry. I had my school, my friends, a whole life of my own she never knew about. It was great. Then, we left This ship, there is no place to get away from her."

"Except on an Aves."

Trajan nodded, a little smiling curling his lips. "That's it. That's exactly it."

"What would have happened if you had stayed on Republic?"

"If had stayed on Republic," Trajan said, managing almost to sound wistful. "I don't know. My life was so planned out for me. I think I would have escaped somehow, gone to Sapphire or one of the outer stations." For a moment, a sharp grin split his lips, and his eyes glinted with dark mischief. "I was going to be a spectacular disappointment." The look evaporated as quickly as it had come; disciplined lad, Trajan Lear.

Alkema reached over and clapped his shoulder. "Trajan Lear, against all odds in the universe, you're all right."

Far below the ship, a thick and woolly front of clouds had moved over Fond Glacine. They scraped against the shoreline and spat cold gobs of rain onto the outpost there, the first harbinger of the coming winter, when the rain would become snow, the lake would freeze, and the forest would gradually disappear into a featureless sea of white.

Heavy drops of rain plopped against the tall, narrow windows of Ciel's office suite, spreading and merging like liquid mercury. The far wall was a face of heavy rocks surrounding a single pair of window slits. Strange lavender tapestries bordered her tall, narrow windows. The other walls of the chambers were paneled in dark polished timber, but hung with pastel portraits of native bird-life, which were apparently four-footed creatures with dual sets of scaly, dragon-fly like wings and large insect-like compound eyes. Fresh flowers in elaborate arrangements filled colorful, oddly-shaped vases by the windows, their petals shot through with shades of lavender that complemented the tapestries. The contrast between the architecture of the structure and its contents put Commander Keeler in mind of a

fortress garrison hosting an army with serious gender identification issues.

Exec. Commander Lear and her assistant, Bridget Armatrading had presented Lt. Cmdr. Miller's report to the three senior members of the Inner Circle --- after first editing out Miller's too-vivid description of the debris field that would result from an impact against the planet. Ciel, Solay, and De La Tesse, the heavy-set woman with dark skin and wild black hair that sported skunk stripes on either side. De La Tesse was the oldest member of the Circle, and her job was to mediate between contrary opinions.

Commander Keeler sat in the back of the room, and observed.

Lear had done the talking, providing a framework for the mission of Recce One, beginning with the sensor readings *Pegasus* had picked up outside the system, and proceeding through the mission and sensor logs brought back by *Prudence*. A holographic projection display had the ominous alien ships lingering in the space of the room; an effect that seemed to make the women uncomfortable. She showed images of the alien creatures Miller and Ng had found in stasis on the inside of the ship, and compared it to the creature they had discovered on Medea.

Upon finishing the presentation, Lear zoomed in until the scale was 1:1, and showed how each alien vessel was larger than the structure they stood in. She briefly revisited the devastation of Medea and concluded with an offer of assistance in assessing the threat against Bodicéa.

When Armatrading deactivated the projector, the room was silent but for the rain. Ciel and De La Tess waited, collected their thoughts knowing Solay would speak first. Solay had watched attentively through the presentation, but her expression had only wavered between skepticism and contempt. She took a drink of water from the glass in front of her and then stood. "Is this supposed to frighten us?" Solay said finally, striking a tone of voice that managed to sound amused and contemptuous all at the same time. "Is this supposed to make us think that unless we submit to cultural annihilation, big, scary monsters from outer space are going to devour us. Is that what this little light show is supposed to mean to us? Submit to the patriarchy or pay the consequences?"

"It is only meant to inform you of the situation you may be in," Lear answered. "We have provided you with all of our reports and sensor readings on both the alien ships and what we learned on the planet Medea. We are very concerned about your planet's ability to defend itself."

Solay stared at Lear with an incredulous expression. "You expect us to believe that the very day we denounce your warmed-over patriarchies, you suddenly learn of a terrible, terrible threat to our world. Suddenly, you... *you* ... our brave heroines, our saviors, are the only ones who can protect us from the evil alien invaders. Isn't that all terribly convenient?"

"I have to concede, I would be suspicious in your place as well," said Lear. Keeler was unable to suppress a groan, but no one was paying attention to him.

"Aye, we would all be suspicious," Armatrading echoed. Lear shot her a look, and her subordinate remembered her place.

"We have been completely open with you from the beginning," Lear reminded them. "We have hidden nothing, not even information that should have embarrassed us. You must conclude from this that we ... "

Solay had no intention of letting her finish. "That Medea story is a load of shit, too. Complete man-shit. Why destroy all life on a planet? Even by the standards of a male-dominated culture, it would be excessive. The planet would have been useless for

inhabitation or exploitation. I never really believed in Medea, and now I doubt it even more. I think you engineered this threat to coerce us into an alliance that we do not want. Perhaps, this was your plan from the very beginning.”

“Why would we want to do that?” Lear asked, clearly not realizing how defensive that sounded.

Solay stared her down. “Because it’s what male-dominated cultures do. You have to control everything in your path, you have to subjugate everything to your will. You can’t buy us with your technology, so you seek to frighten us with pictures of monsters, and hope we will cling to you like damsels in distress. Well, we are not children. We are a planet of women, strong, independent women and we don’t need you. I am sure the Inner Circle will see right through this idiocy and send you back where you came from.”

The strain was beginning to show in Lear’s voice, she leapt in as soon as Solay paused for breath. “We are telling the truth, and without us, you have no hope of defending yourself against what’s out there.” Lear turned to Ciel. “Can you take that risk, First Advocate, with the whole survival of your world at stake?”

“Don’t let her lie to you!” Solay interjected. “Don’t listen to them. It’s a deception, a clumsy deception at that. Send them off our planet now. Don’t let their warship darken our sky for even one hour longer. Tell them to leave and take their belligerent phalluses with them!”

De La Tess held up a hand and shook her head slowly.

“I swear to you, by the Goddess, there is no deception,” said Lear, an edge of pleading in her voice. “You have talked with us. You have dined with us. You know us. We have hidden nothing from you, even things that do not reflect well on us. We walk together with Vesta. Even if you oppose our ways, you must know by now that we are good people.”

Solay snorted contemptuously. Ciel spoke, her voice quivering with uncertainty. “Many will share Solay’s view. It isn’t that we don’t trust you, necessarily. It is more that... this a great deal of information to process. We are a culture of consensus. We can not move forward until all voices have been heard and a solution put forth that satisfies as many as can be accommodated. Why, even the simplest decision as to whether to designate additional cropland, or determine the proper length of hemlines, requires many weeks of debate.”

“The last thing we would want you to do is to act harshly,” Lear countered. “But, surely, you must see that denying the existence of these creatures is also rash and short-sighted. For the sake of your people, you must consider that we are telling the truth...”

All this time, Commander Keeler was thinking, *if we had wanted to, we could have conquered your world without even breathing hard. You think we would have to concoct this ridiculous plot if we really wanted to conquer you with our ‘belligerent phalluses.’* He was keeping his counsel to himself, for now, knowing that this observation would not be received as convincing logic by these people. He chose to let Lear do the talking while he tried to picture Solay naked; not so much because he necessarily wanted to see her naked, but he thought it would be the kind of thing that would irritate her. He also thought “Belligerent Phalluses” would make a great name for a college football team.

As he kept quiet, the women ignored him. They did not expect him to have anything to say worth listening to. After all, he was just a man. Lear, of course was loving it. She lorded, or laded, over every meeting with the Bodicéans. To them, she was the commander, she was the one in charge. She was full of importance and he was a trivial bystander. Furthermore, she got to make parliamentary speeches and diplomatic intrigues in the time-honored tradition of

Republic. It was as though she were living out every fantasy she had had since she was old enough to stand behind a podium.

"...danger." Lear was saying. "At least until we can determine what kind of threat, if any, these creatures represent."

"Have you attempted to make peaceful contact with the creatures," said De La Tess, seeking for an avenue of compromise.

"We have been sending peaceful messages since Recce One returned." Lear answered. "We are sending messages of peace and friendship on every channel, continuously."

"Even though they attacked and destroyed one of your ships? I doubt that!" Solay interjected.

"You can intercept our signals. You have that capacity," Lear told her, knowing full well, the Bodicéans already had been doing so.

"Perhaps, it was a misunderstanding," Lear argued. "We have to ... maintain the possibility that the aliens have no hostile intent."

Tell that to Medea, Keeler thought.

"They could be on a peaceful voyage of exploration as we are, but traveling in different numbers by different means. Everyone hopes we can resolve this peacefully." Lear paused, and added importantly. "However, we can not put all our hope in their peaceful intentions. We must be prepared in the event that their intentions are not peaceful."

"If you look for war, war is what you shall find," De La Tess put in, sounding like she was quoting some ancient nugget of knowledge.

"You both are willing to presume that they are telling us the truth, with no more evidence than what they are telling us." Solay said in exasperation. "I haven't seen any ships! I haven't seen any aliens! All I've seen are some clever tricks of the light and some imaginatively written reports!"

"Why don't you take a look for yourself?" Keeler asked, provoking a kind of gasp from Solay, and surprised, annoyed looks from Ciel and De La Tess.

"What did you say commander?" Lear asked, as though she had not heard him.

"Let's get into an Aves and fly out to the alien fleet and see for ourselves. You don't trust us. I don't blame you. The only way to convince you is to show you the threat first-hand. So be it. I am ready, Let's go."

"Fly into the dangerous alien fleet?" Solay said skeptically. "How reckless. How ill-advised. How like a man."

"Solay," De La Tess rebuked her. "I know you are the leader of the Progressive Purists, but I will choose someone else from your Coalition to represent your viewpoints in these discussions."

Solay persisted as if she had not heard a word of it. "One moment they are telling us aliens are about to conquer our world. The next, he proposes going out and meeting with them. Which is the truth? Which is the truth?"

Then, blessedly, Solay shut up, and Lear, still stinging and steaming from Keeler's imprudent suggestion, was unable to find words to fill the space. For a few seconds, everyone could hear the rain again.

"We do not know," Ciel said quietly. She was staring at the top of her desk, at nothing, but

avoiding them all, specifically. She sounded very tired, as though all the events since *Pegasus's* arrival had drained her life energy. "To know, we will have to find out for ourselves. If that means going into space and meeting the creatures, than that is what we must do."

"You can not move on this without consensus," De La Tesse warned. "Consensus is the heart of our democracy. The Inner Circle most argue this, must consider every viewpoint, and frame a response that respects everyone's point of view."

"We both know that would take months," said Ciel wearily. "If they are telling the truth, we don't have months. You are right, we can not order the Inner Circle to go without consensus, but I can decide to go on my own, and anyone in the Inner Circle can choose on her own to go, or not to."

Solay seethed. "No, you will not get rid of me that easily."

Ciel nodded. "I suppose this means you may prepare your ship, commander. We shall depart at the hour of sunrise at Concordia."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"These ships' redundant power and communication systems have been hardened against the effect of the alien pulse weapons," Lieutenant Grumman, Chief of Flight Engineering was explaining to Lt. Cmdr. Miller. "You should be able to take three or four times as many hits if you get attacked again."

"Winnie will be carrying the Commander and the Bodicéan delegation. Lt. Honeywell, and the others will hold back out of weapons range in the Aves Chloe, Quentin, and Victor. Have the upgraded weapons systems been installed on their ships," Miller asked.

"Aye, commander, they have." Grumman sighed. He was a heavy, gruff man, with a little black left in his thick head of steel gray hair. Grumman somehow managed to keep grease stains on his uniform even though not one system on the Aves was lubricated with grease. The weapons system upgrade was actually a pod attached to each ship's belly containing a heavy-duty pulse cannon several times more powerful than the Aves' standard weaponry. "Commander, can I ask you something?"

"What's that?"

"Is Keeler out of his gleaming mind?"

Miller shook his head dourly. The loss of Hector and its crew weighed heavily in Flight Core. Now, the commander was sending another flight into the breach, well armed but horribly outnumbered. "I don't know. He's relying on your enhancements to protect the ships."

"I can't guarantee these will hold. This is all theory. If we lose Winnie, we'll lose the Commander, the Exec, the entire leadership of Bodicéa..."

"That would indeed be a tragedy," said Commander Keeler, stepping up behind the engineer. "I'd hate to lose that ship. Captain Wang just put woolbeastskin covers on the landing couches. They're fabulous!"

Grumman said nothing, but turned back to adjusting the power pack that boosted the strength of Winnie's defensive shields. Miller had something to say, though. "You can't

trivialize the danger involved in this mission."

"Can't I?"

"What do you think you can accomplish with this?"

Keeler turned to Grumman. "Lieutenant, this could be a long journey with nobody to talk to except a bunch of female politicians. For the sake of your commander's sanity, would you double-check to make sure my personal entertainment suite has been installed in the ship's data bank?"

"I'll get on it right now, sir," Grumman answered in a tone of voice that conveyed exactly that he knew he was being told to get lost. When he had gone, and they were alone, Keeler addressed his first officer in a confidential tone of voice.

"I trust you implicitly, Phil. I know you saw what you saw, and before we leave the system I am going to have to preside over a memorial service for another lost crew. We've lost people at three of the four planets we've been to, and I understand what a terrible thing that is. However, the Bodiceans will not believe there is a threat until they actually see the guns pointed at them. "

"So, in the instant between seeing the guns and being blown up by the guns, they will believe. I ask you again, what will that accomplish?"

"If we survive, they should at least be good and scared," Keeler answered, The seriousness in the commander's tone increased by a factor of two. "You've seen the same analyses I have. This planet has no capacity to defend itself against a threat of this magnitude. It would be up to us to defend them. They are a sovereign world, and they have the right to accept or refuse our assistance. They will not do so unless they are convinced the threat is real. If we wait until the aliens are at their doorstep, it will be too late."

"Why not take Pegasus, then?"

"I won't endanger the whole ship. We have too much important work to do, here and elsewhere." The commander put a hand on Miller's shoulder. "Pegasus needs to stay here and plan a defense. No one on this ship is more capable of planning a defense than you are."

"And if the aliens do not know about Pegasus, then we will have the advantage of surprise," came a voice, firm and resolute, somehow poetic in its inflection. Keeler and Miller turned to see a young man standing behind them ... and over them, he was easily two meters tall and change. He was lean in a way that suggested a hard-worked body and a discipline that would not tolerate a gram of excess mass. His hair was black and clipped short and his eyes as dark and attentive as a bird's. His face was handsome, but something suggested he considered his own good looks a distraction. He stood so straight as to mock the shortest distance between two points. He was dressed in a simple black outfit and a crew jacket that identified him as part of the ship's Marines.

"Commander, you would be better advised to put your flight crews to battle drills," he continued. "Simulated battle drills against the alien ships. The pilots have been briefed on their known capabilities and weaknesses, but only by practicing and simulation can that knowledge become an instinct that will preserve them when the battle is joined."

"Do I know you?" the Commander asked.

The young man bowed slightly. "I am Tamarind, officially, Lt. Tamarind, of the First Order of Sumac, I am a Marine on Pegasus. Our situation requires me to offer my services to your first officer as his tactical officer."

"The First Order," Keeler said out loud. A warrior-monk, trained by the Masters at the Unreal City.

"I am pretty certain we conduct readiness drills whenever we're in orbit," Miller said, awkwardly, sure the warrior in front of him was well aware of this fact. True warrior monks always set him ill-at-ease, made him feel like a pretender to something he had neither the discipline nor the fitness to be. The Odyssey Project may have named him to the post of tactical officer, but it was merely a profession to him. To the Warrior-Monks, battle was religion.

Tamarind shook his head. "You are in error, sir. Executive Commander Lear has ordered a suspension of tactical training missions."

"That's right," Keeler remembered. "She didn't want to 'alarm the Bodicéans at such a delicate stage in our negotiations."

"The simulations are continuing," Miller countered, although he had also not agreed with Lear's decision.

"To know the environment of the battle is critical to the warrior. Our pilots must move within the battlespace in order to know it. I recommend reinstating and accelerating tactical rehearsals."

"That sounds reasonable. Coordinate with Flight Commander Collins."

"I also propose activation of the Pegasus Battle Command Center."

"The what now?"

"You may refer to it as the War Room. It is a secure command cell underneath the primary command tower, designed for optimal display and analysis of tactical data and coordination of all ship's defensive systems."

"Um," the Commander's gut reaction was not yet. It seemed premature, and possibly threatening to the Bodicéans (much as he hated thinking like Goneril Lear).

Sensing his hesitation, Tamarind had a second line of argument ready. "The Battle Command Center can be brought to hot-ready status, ready for immediate activation in the event of a threat. We could conduct drills in the Battle Command Center discretely. I can identify sufficient tactical personnel who require readiness training as it is. It would not be an unusual function of the ship to train them there."

"All right," Keeler replied. He knew something of Sumacians, too. They were the Chosen Defenders of God, of Mankind, of All That Was Holy and Good. They were seldom wrong. They were also able to get into your mind and convince you of whatever they wanted. All things considered, it was best to agree now and apologize later. "Conduct readiness training in the War Room."

The monk's face conveyed no satisfaction. "There is another matter of some concern. Your adjutant reported to me a conversation with the consort of a high government official, who stated that according to local rumor, liberators from the Old Commonwealth were coming to free them."

It took Keeler a moment to recall that. Alkema had reported the conversation to Keeler at the end of the evening, after they had been led to adjoining suites in a collection of stone and wood bungalows on the western end of the island.

Miller frowned. "That wasn't in any of the reports."

Keeler explained. "When we were on the surface, Ciel's consort, Tobias, spoke to Lt.

Alkema about some legend, or rumor, about an invasion force coming to his planet and liberating the men of his world."

Miller looked a little stunned. "You're joking."

"Neg, I had almost forgotten about it until now. We assumed it was related to the Commonwealth, that they expected the Commonwealth to return to their planet one day and set them free."

Tamarind: "It may not mean anything, it may be just a story. However, if there is forewarning of the alien arrival, it means they may have agents, or collaborators, on the surface already. We must learn the truth of this."

"Agreed," Keeler said. "See to it, Phil."

"Sure thing."

"I believe that Tobias will not be accompanying us on this mission. I suggest you arrange to speak with him."

Tamarind added. "He has left Concordia and returned to his city of residence, which is called Serenopolis. It is located on the tip of a peninsula near a large bay on the western coast of the southern continent. We are not permitted to fly there, but an Aves in stealth mode could land on the sea near Ciel's home..."

"How did you find out that?" Keeler asked.

A slight smile was the only answer the warrior-monk would offer. That was part of the mystique, Keeler thought. The Warrior-Monks of Sumac possessed extreme physical and mental abilities, but were forbidden to explain their ways to outsiders, a prohibition that had endured for 4,000 years.

Keeler then asked, "Are you an Adept, or a Master?"

"A Master."

"Indeed," Keeler struck an appropriate, but never excessive, tone of respect. "Begin preparing for your mission. You may leave no sooner than two hours after we have departed the landing bay." Keeler paused, then added. "No one but the three of us needs to know about this."

Miller agreed. "No one but ourselves and the pilot will be advised of this mission, but what about Tobias. He might tell Ciel we were there."

"I don't believe he will," Tamarind said. "I will begin preparations, commander." He indicated the pulse cannon pod on the belly of Winnie. "A wise innovation. All of our front-line ships should be retrofitted with them, for the battle that will soon be upon us, as surely as a summer storm."

"Fear no evil," Keeler told him.

Tamarind made no response, but bowed his head slightly, with a little smile, then walked back into the bay. The ships arranged there, the lights, the technicians all somehow because a backdrop to him, a scene made especially for him to stand out from. Keeler had to pull himself back to Miller and address him.

Keeler felt the need to shake his head, as though the contents inside had shifted in the presence of the monk. When he felt they were properly arranged again, he spoke to Miller, very quietly.

"If we don't come back, you will assume command. Queequeg has a specific set of orders

for you, but the gist is, save the ship. Defend the planet if you can, but do everything to make sure Pegasus survives."

"Understood."

Keeler turned away from him, then cupped his hand to his ear as though listening for something over the noise of the Landing Bay. "Do you hear it?" he asked.

"Hear what?"

"History, it's stalking us in the darkness, but you can almost hear it breathing, it's waiting to see what we will do and then it will judge us. In the next few days, the next thousand years of this planet's history, perhaps all of human history, is going to be set on a new path." He tapped his walking stick twice against the deck. "Pay attention, and bear that in mind."

Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam and Jam was almost completely dark except for the faint emergency lights around the two exits and the Emergency Wastewater Alert sign that, in the event of an emergency that required the space occupied by Fast Eddie's to revert to its original intended purpose, would warn anyone inside that 2,000,000 liters of radioactive wastewater were about to flood the chamber.

The Primary hatch recognized Eddie Roebuck as he approached, followed by a silver automech homunculus named Puck. The hatch slid open and the regular lights came up. Eddie looked across the mess left by last night's crowd; beverage glasses were scattered around, some in pieces on the floor, some with lukewarm stagnant liquid dregs at the bottom. Eddie guessed there were seventy-two glasses for the sanitizer and perhaps eight for the recycler.

As much as this disorder meant work, it still did not bother him. This might have come as a revelation to him had he given it much thought, which he did not. This was his own space, his own business, and he minded little the upkeep of these things that were his own. "Puck, get after those glasses," he ordered. The robot bowed and obediently set about its task. Eddie made for the bathroom, and addressed the figure sprawled on the floor. "Wake up, Beauty."

"I'm blind." Matthew responded grimly.

"You said what?"

"I'm blind. I drank alcohol and it made me blind. I'm blind."

"Beauty, you're passed out in the urinal."

Matthew made a weak attempt to raise his head. Eddie helped him to his feet and half carried him to a seat at the bar. When he was sure Matthew would not fall over, he left him to pass behind the bar. First, he handed Matthew a flask of water. "You're dehydrated."

As Matthew swallowed the water, Eddie drew out another flask, filled with willowfine. "This will help, but you'll want to save some of that water to wash it down."

Matthew warily lifted the flask of milky-white liquid and emptied it into his mouth. It stung sourly as it coursed down his throat. His stomach seemed poised to reject it.

"Hold it down, beauty," Eddie counseled. "Hold it down. Use the water." He helped Matthew lift the flask of water to Matthew's mouth.

"You're head should stop pounding in a few minutes."

"What about the fur on my tongue. It tastes like I've been licking a cat."

"You tried. He wouldn't let you. I'll get you a shaver."

Matthew buried his face in his hands. "I must have been a complete ass."

"Beauty, not even close."

"I seem to remember throwing up a large quantity of fried meats and vegetables last night."

"True, true, you did, but a real assol wouldn't have gotten a mop and a bucket from the utility closet and cleaned it up." He handed Matthew a moist towel to wipe the dried vomit from his cheek.

Matthew blinked at him. He vaguely remembered doing that. Perhaps, this meant he had not gotten too far out of hand, which would be a good. On the other hand, perhaps it would have been better if he had forgotten.

"Eliza..." Matthew said, and could not think of any viable direction to take any follow-up conversation.

"She wasn't here when you retro-digested your food. She missed the whole thing," Eddie reassured him. "She left right after you told her how you thought you were wasting your time caring about her when she didn't care about you and she never came back."

When he was in flight school, Matthew had once been in the jump seat on a trainer when the other student had under-calculated the escape velocity of the gas giant Colossus. The ship had reached the peak of its trajectory, then lurched backwards into the planet's gravity well. His heart had felt like a heavy lead weight while Matthew had been helpless to do anything about it. Eddie's words had the exact same effect.

"I guess that's it," Matthew finally said. "Eliza won't want to have anything to do with me... ever."

"Nunh-unh, 'zact opposite. If she wanted you even a little bit before, she will want you more now... all the way."

Matthew gave him a dark, dark look. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Beauty, if you don't give up this idea that women are supposed to make sense, I predict a long, lonely life for you." He handed Matthew a warm, steaming cup of hot chocolate. "Let me explain it to you. Last night, you basically told Eliza that you're not a sure thing any more. All this time, she was knowing she has you no matter what, so she doesn't have to give you anything back. Now, she can't know that any more. She's going to have to give back now, or you'll go to somebody else."

"You're senseless. Why would she want me now that I told her to go away."

Eddie sighed. "You're not hearing me. Sometimes telling a woman to go away is the only way to make her come to you. That's the way their minds work. See, women were put in the universe to counter-balance men. Okay, so this means there is a whole big part of being a woman that a man can't understand, and you can't even try, so don't. You either gotta accept that women don't make any sense, or you might as well start looking for another man, which you probably can't because of your religion."

"Nay, my religion permits that."

Eddie took a step backward. "Umm....don't get any ideas."

"Eddie, there isn't enough alcohol on this ship to make me get that idea."

"This has got to be the first time we agreed on anything. What I was trying to tell you was

this, if you're right and she wasn't interested before, and she's not interested now, you haven't lost anything. Right? On the other hand, if I am right, she didn't know she was interested before, now she does."

Matthew sighed. "If you're wrong, she was a little bit interested before, and now she thinks I'm repulsive."

"Not repulsive, more like crude, but that's not what she thinks, 19,000-to-1, that's not what she thinks."

"So what do I do about it?"

"You go back to your quarters, you clean yourself up, and you go on like nothing happened. You let her come to you, that's what you do," Eddie said, inarguably, coming around the bar to help Matthew to the door. "You get out of my bar and stop thinking unnatural thoughts about my fine self. Don't think about last night, it's only going to make you feel bad. Don't think about Eliza, because if you break down and go to her, you are going to lose your advantage."

Matthew wavered at the hatch. Do nothing? It went against everything he was feeling at that moment. He wanted Eliza to know he felt terrible about how he had treated her. He wanted her to tell him it was all right, that she forgave him. He wanted to throw himself at her mercy.

"Don't even think about begging for forgiveness," Eddie told him. "She will never respect you again if you go back to her on your knees." He shoved Matthew through the hatch and grabbed the mug of hot cocoa just as it closed.

There was a brief flurry of knocks on the door, then Matthew gave up and went away. Eddie called back to the bar. "Puck, add a mug of hot cocoa and a flask of willowfine to Flt. Lieutenant Driver's tab."

"The interior of this spacecraft has been optimized for your comfort," Ciel was explaining to the Bodicéan delegation as they entered Winnie a few hours later. There was no sign of woolbeastskin covers on the landing couches, but someone had taken the time to arrange for privacy curtains in floral prints at each couch. Comfortable robes lay folded on a bench, and there was a scent of flowers in the main cabin. In the front of the ship, technicians had installed a blond wood conference table, surrounded by ten luxuriously stuffed chairs.

Eight of the Inner Circle had chosen to come on the voyage, and they poked uncertainly around in the cabin, selecting seats for what boded to be a long journey. Lear guided Ciel to a seat at the front, where they could sit face to face. "Perhaps not as comfortable as your airships, but we have made every effort to assure your comfort. We have a fairly long flight ahead of us. The landing couches will recline and reshape to support whatever position you find comfortable. We have plenty of food and reading materials, as well as dramas and interactive recreational experiences."

"How long will this journey last?" Ciel asked.

Lear smiled ingratiatingly. "That's a question with a very interesting answer. As you accelerate toward the speed of light, relative time slows down. The effect only becomes noticeable above about .5c. We will be traveling at about .75c. Although it will take us about six days to reach the approximate position of the alien fleet, it will seem like less than two days on board this ship."

Ciel daubed at her temples with the hot, wet cloth Lear provided her. "It seems so unnatural, to be hurtling through space at such speeds, time itself being distorted."

"Technically, it's us, not time that's being distorted," said Alkema, unhelpfully, stopping as he passed her seat on his way to join Commander Keeler in the Command Module. Alkema did not want to be on this mission. He was almost certain they were going to die, and he had barely begun to enjoy his lieutenanthood.

"Thank you, Mr. Alkema, for advising us on that distinction," Lear said, in a tone that indicated she considered herself neither advised nor grateful, and a look that said, I wonder what your head would look like on a stick. Alkema shouldered his landing pack and continued toward the front of the ship.

"I don't think I like the idea of being distorted in time," Ciel sighed. It must have offended her deeply, Lear thought. She longed for harmony with nature on her own terms. Space travel probably isolated the human from nature more than any other activity. This was of necessity. Nature in space was cold vacuum and instant death, and travel at any speed that didn't boggle the mind meant months between planets.

"At least the airships have private sleeping accommodations," Ciel continued, looking doubtfully at the cabin dividers.

"The ship is equipped with sleeper units," Lear interjected quickly, and instantly regretted it.

"Sleeper units?"

"Aye, sleeper units. On long space voyages, they help enhance your sleep experience by providing you with an optimally comfortable environment and ensuring that your dreams are peaceful and satisfying. Many of our people keep them in their homes."

Ciel shook her head and laughed in a sighing, grandmotherly way. "You can not even sleep without assistance from your technology."

Lear doubted anyone of the Bodicéans would be using the sleeper units.

Within an hour, they had fired off the launch-rails, joined in formation with their escort ships, and set a course for the out-system. The hours after launch were uneventful. As though avoiding the "hen party" in the main cabin, Keeler, Alkema, and Wang remained in the command module. Keeler taught them to play simultaneous games of Chess, Backgammon, Yahtzee, Poker, and Resistance, but Alkema was too good, and the game far less interesting without shots of alcoholic beverages.

Lear announced it when they passed the outermost planet of the 10 225 Vulpeculus system. The women seemed unimpressed.

Winnie headed into the darkest part of the night.

"There," Alkema said, a few hours later. He brought up a sensor reading. A line of small yellow dots were moving in from the outsystem.

Winnie analyzed the sensor readings and cross-checked them from the readings provided by Recce One, confirming the identity of the alien fleet. "Alien ships, ahoy," said Keeler.

"Four degrees off the plane of the system at bearing 270 by 15."

"Reversing propulsion field," Wang announced. "Slowing to .25c."

"Time to intercept?"

"Eleven minutes," Alkema answered.

"This would probably be a good time to pray," Keeler said, clasping his hands together,

and bowing his head. "Dear Lord, this may be the stupidest thing I have ever done, but if You let me live through this, I promise to top it. Fear no Evil."

"God is Near." Alkema answered.

"Amen."

Keeler touched a communications panel. "Executive Commander Lear, we are approaching the alien fleet. Advise our passengers."

"Acknowledged."

Alkema touched some switches above the co-pilot's stations. "Let's bring those enhanced shields on-line."

On the open line to the cabin below, they heard Lear announcing that they were closing on the alien fleet, and advising the women to return to their landing couches. She explained how the safety features would protect them in the event of "violent maneuvering." It all sounded so mundane, and Lear sounded like a cabin safety hologram. All the while, tension in the command module built as the tiny dots on Alkema's monitor slowly took on the shapes of chunky hexagons and cubagons, finally resembling abstract sculptures of legless, wingless, insects.

"It's awfully warm in here," Keeler said, tugging at the collar of his uniform. Now what happens? He had turned this over in his mind almost continually since he first suggested the idea. On the one hand, he could point out the window and say to the Bodicéans, "See, nasty aliens. Told you so." From what he knew of the Bodicéans, they would then say "So what?" or want to give the aliens a hug or something. Perhaps the aliens would make his case for him by attacking the ship, and if they survived, his point would be made.

The alien ships, he reflected, did not seem all that menacing. They looked more like big ugly cargo containers or concrete egg boxes or roadway barriers than warships. He wondered what they would have looked like, hanging in the pink sky over Medea, raining bombs and shooting cannons, laying waste to that world.

"Slowing to .1 c," Flight Captain Wang reported.

"Do you think they detect us?" Alkema asked a few minutes later, breaking the commander's doomy reverie.

"Lt. Cmdr. Miller and some of the laser-brains from Technical Core analyzed the scans of the vessel he boarded. He thinks their scanning capacity is limited."

"How limited?" Wang asked.

"I think they've detected us," Alkema said.

"Why?"

"Because they're moving."

They were close now, close enough for the internal monitors to display the alien ships in detail. The great slab ships were drawing away from each other, like an honor guard, creating a long straight corridor for the Aves to traverse.

Lear called up to the command module. She sounded nervous. "Commander, what's happening?"

Keeler, though his heart was racing and his breathing intensified, answered. "The alien ships are pulling apart, producing a corridor approximately 1,800 kilometers wide. I think they intend for us to travel through it."

"Why?" Lear asked, as though she expected him to know.

Keeler studied it. "That corridor is outside the estimated weapons range of their ships. It is as if they are creating a safe passage for us." Probably so they can close in behind us and annihilate us, he thought, but did not say aloud. "It could be a trap," he soft-pedaled. "Are the Bodicéans impressed enough yet?"

There was a long pause, and some muted discussion in the background. Keeler could make out phrases like, "how do we know..." and "they don't look..." and "what proof..." Lear returned a moment later to confirm his hypothesis. "They need additional confirmation commander. The alien vessels are still outside of visual range."

Keeler nodded grimly. "Break out the excursion suits, I think we're going to have to dock with one of those ..." He almost said flying tombstones, but held his tongue.

"Acknowledged."

"Mr. Wang, slow to 1,000 meters per second, and prepare for docking maneuver."

Alkema stared at him. Didn't Lt. Commander Miller almost get killed doing this? he wanted to shout, but he guessed that this is what being a Tactical Lieutenant was all about. From that perspective, he guessed, perhaps it was best that he might not be one for very long.

Keeler caught a hint of the young officer's thoughts. "I don't think there is any other way to convince them of the danger to their planet. Mr. Wang, bring us around. Oz has spoken."

"Commander, I am detecting something at the end of the corridor. Something massive."

Keeler and Alkema bent over the tactical station. Four hundred thousand kilometers ahead, back behind where the line of alien ships ended, was something so large it bent light around it.

"Up ahead," said Flight Captain Wang. There was nothing more to be said. No way to describe the indescribable.

Up ahead loomed a bright sphere, radiating a brilliant inner light. They were still too far away to pick out details, only its gleam.

"It must be a thousand kilometers across."

"A thousand and change," Wang whispered.

Winnie closed on the sphere. It was constructed of some kind of white material forming a latticework around plates of gray-black metal, an alloy the sensors could not identify. It was not a perfect sphere, but around its center was a ring with thousands of smaller domes, like bubbles in soap.

"Can you scan it?" Keeler asked. Alkema directed the Aves sensor toward the great sphere. The image of the sphere peeled away in layers on the display, showing what lay inside. Beneath the domes were glimpses of water, plant-life, and thousands of layers of structures.

It was a ship that aspired to be a world.

"A world-ship," Keeler said out loud. "Commander Lear, are you seeing what we're seeing?"

"We certainly are, Commander Keeler," she responded.

"Commander Keeler," said Flight Captain Wang. "I am receiving a transmission, it's a landing beacon, on Pegasus's own standard frequency."

Keeler looked at the display Wang was pointing at, and realized for the thousandth time

he was expected to understand what it meant when he did not have a clue. "Does this mean they want us to land?" he said out loud, a good enough dodge.

Lear interrupted. "Commander, that ship must be where the alien leadership lives. They are clearly sending an invitation. This might be the chance we need to work out a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the crisis. We have to take it."

Keeler did not agree at all with her reasoning. "Mr. Wang, follow that beacon and take us in. David, download all of our sensor readings into one of our missiles."

"Za, Commander."

"Before we get too close to that sphere, jettison the missile. Don't launch, jettison. We don't want to appear provocative. Let the missile track our course into the sphere. Once we're inside, send the missile back toward Pegasus. Set an evasive course to keep it out of the weapons range of the fleet."

"The missile will never reach Pegasus in time," Alkema said.

"As soon as it reaches the outer system, have it send a signal to our extraction facility on the seventh planet. Send all of our tactical data, and tell them good luck."

Alkema completed the operation in seconds. "Missile away."

Keeler leaned over the front seats of the command module as the giant alien sphere filled the canopy. "Gentlemen, let's do this thing. Fear no evil."

Wang unconsciously chewed his lower lip as he guided Winnie into a long latitudinal groove in the globe's surface. "God is Near."

There was a brief impression of huge structures looming over them. Suddenly, what had been the surface of the globe became a sky. There was a dazzling light all around then, and then they were inside.

Winnie passed through a chamber that must have been hundreds of kilometers long, and lined with long metal racks, from which hung a variety of shapes like folded origami. Presently, two of the shapes took wing and began flying alongside the ship, wheeling and shrieking.

Seven hundred meters below, according to the sensors, was a vast landscape that defied the mind's attempts to categorize its patterns, like a circuit board done in metal and stone, like a vast plain covered in children's blocks, runes, and hieroglyphics, an impressionist landscape painted by a robot Monet, fractals seen through the tessellated eyes of spiders and flies. Looking at it made the eyes hurt, and the brain scream out for a simpler geometry.

"There," said Wang, pointing through the canopy. Ahead of them, a great shape loomed, like a pyramid made by stacking lots of little pyramids on top of one another. He eased off the throttle as the ship drew up to one of the many flat spaces on the side.

"Tell the women to prepare for landing," said Keeler. Gee, that sounded heroic. Oz has spoken.

Part of the pyramid began reconfiguring itself before their unbelieving eyes. Blocks slid apart opening into a vast space that must have been a kind of hangar.

"Life signs," said Keeler to Alkema quickly. In all the confusion, they had not scanned for life signs, Alkema picked up on it and ran a sweep of the hangar.

"There are sixteen people below us... I think... Wait a minute." As the Aves passed inside the walls, the visual sensor made a contrary analysis. "Eight life forms," Alkema corrected. He looked at the data. Eight bodies, but sixteen heartbeats, and a bio-electric field twice as strong

as a normal humans. He half-whistled. Aliens.

The ship settled to the ground.

"The atmosphere outside is generally breathable, nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, with traces of methane and hydrogen hexafluoride," Jersey Partridge reported.

"Hazardous levels?" Lear asked.

"Depends on how long we're out there." Partridge pulled out the smallest of the breathing filters. "This should be sufficient. If your skin begins to sting, let me know. You should return to the ship immediately."

The hatch slid open. Keeler was the first to lay eyes on their hosts. He was shocked by their appearance, having expected to see creatures like the one they had encountered on the surface of Hearth, or that Miller and Ng had discovered in the hold of the attack ship. The beings assembled in the hangar looked nothing like them at all. They were so different, so shocking in appearance, that Keeler had to suppress a gasp when he laid eyes on them.

They looked like people.

There were four men and four women waiting for them. They were giants. In stature and in proportions, they were like statues of pagan gods. They were beautiful. Men and women alike shared the chiseled muscularity of Olympic champions. Their skin was uniformly bronzed, long hair flowed past their shoulders held in place by a golden band around the forehead. They were almost naked, wearing nothing but thin slips of cloth that hid nothing that was ordinarily hidden; and what was normally hidden was, proportional to the rest of their physiques.

A man and a woman stepped forward, and spoke with a voice that echoed and reverberated impressively. The woman spoke. "We extend our welcome to you fellow travelers. On behalf of Coronado, Welcome to the World-Ship of the Eighth Echelon of Aurelia."

Lear wondered whether Keeler or Ciel should respond, this being Keeler's ship, but Ciel's system. Keeler simply stepped forward and said. "I am Commander William Keeler of the Pathfinder Ship Pegasus."

"We know who you are," said the man. "Come with us."

They were led down a long corridor, lined with engraved gold tiles. Midway up the wall was a strip of light about 10 centimeters across with brightly colored ideograms running along it.

They were dwarfed by their guards, next to whom the members of the excursion party looked like adolescent children. The Bodicéans, in turn, looked like lumpy pre-teens.

At the end of the corridor, a pair of large round doors rolled aside, one to the left and one to the right, revealing a large, brightly lit chamber beyond, where another woman waited to receive them. She stood on a kind of balcony, and behind her stretched the vast landscape of this planet that was her world.

Like the others, she was a giantess. You could have disassembled her body, used the good bits to make a normal sized woman and the rest to make a champion shot-putter. Her mass was great, but her proportions were right. Reduced to 70% scale, she would have been a heartbreaker. Her breasts were as large and firm as watermelons. Her face was framed by a cascade of brilliant blond locks. She walked forward, and wrapped a sheer robe over her naked body.

She smiled, and Keeler almost immediately sensed his mind being probed. He deflected it, easily. "I am Coronado, the First of the Eight Echelon of the Aurelian Union."

Keeler step forward and looked up to Coronado. "I am Commander William Keeler of the Pathfinder Ship Pegasus, this is my Executive Officer, Goneril Lear, and this is ..."

"Ciel, First Advocate of the Inner Circle of the planet Bodicéa, a fine and compassionate leader, a credit to the wisdom of her people for choosing her." Coronado stepped forward and embraced Ciel warmly. "It is an honor to finally meet you."

Ciel returned the embrace awkwardly. "You knew of me."

"Of course. We have been studying your world from a distance for a very long time."

"Do you come from Earth, or one of the former colonies of the Commonwealth?" Keeler asked.

"We come from Aurelia," she answered him.

"I have never heard of that world."

Ignoring him, Coronado laid a hand on Ciel's shoulder. "Your people should be proud of what you have achieved. We have encountered many of the lost sisters of the human family, but none have achieved a world of social justice and equality to the degree yours has. Your world is a wonder, and you should be proud of it. Come, let me show you some of our world."

A kind of royal barge was docked behind her, all gold and silver. It hovered a few centimeters above the deck, and was large enough to accommodate all of them. Coronado swept her arm toward the barge, bidding them on board.

"There will be just enough room for all of you. Come, let us show you our Megasphere."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The walls and deck fell away, evaporating as though they were no more than mist given form. The barge floated in an immense space, a golden sky suffused with light. Above them, below them, and on every side, the inner surface of the sphere was covered with parklands and structures shielded by clear crystal domes. An inner sphere, thousands of meters below, was similarly covered. A thin, bright, yellow haze, like dust suspended in the summer sky, clung to each landscape.

"We live on spheres within spheres," Coronado explained as the barge drifted downward. Her voice was musical, and when she spoke, it was like listening to a choir. "We have freed ourselves of planetary existence, and travel free among the stars."

"How many spheres are there?" Keeler asked.

"Sixty-six in all, many of them unfinished spheres used for structural support and not inhabited. Most of the interior spheres are utility levels. We seldom go there. The innermost sphere contains our power and propulsion system."

"How many people live here," Lear asked.

"Billions and billions," Coronado said proudly.

Keeler, Lear, Alkema, and Partridge were beginning to feel the first low throb of what

would come to be known as “the Aurelian Headache.” As though an enraged village of thoughts was pounding at their minds with a battering ram.

“I don’t know how to break this to you,” Keeler continued. “But your world-ship is surrounded by alien vessels.”

Coronado laughed with gusto. “Oh, Commander Keeler. You have a lot of spirit. The ships that surround us are also a part of the Aurelian Body. They contain the Swords.”

“The Swords.”

“The sphere is home to the Echelon, and to the Cups, and the Wands, and the Pentangles, but not the Swords. The Swords were created to protect us from any harm as we travel through space. We adapted their bodies to thrive in any environment, deep space, the ocean floor, fire, intense radiation. They are our Protectors.”

“Are they alive, or are they machines?”

Coronado answered in the voice of a schoolteacher, wearying of having to explain something that should have been obvious to children persisting in ignorance. “Both and neither. They are artificial constructs, but they have living minds. We afford them the full measure of Aurelian Rights, unlike your and/oroid servants.” A smug smile played at her lips. Keeler sensed that this display of knowledge was intended to intimidate him.

The barge dipped and carried them inward, toward the next sphere down. There was a vast lake that aspired to be a sea, surrounded by landscaped meadows and flowering trees. Nearby, a structure of blue-white domes laid out like flower petals nestled in some artificial hillocks. Coronado guided the Barge toward that structure. An iris opened in the top and they dove in.

The interior was faintly pink colored and scented with rose essence. Music filled the air, although not from any scale or instrument Keeler or Lear could recognize. There were pools of water of sizes ranging from a few meters across to large enough to host a Pan-Galactic Swimming Tournament. Hundreds of naked Aurelians strolled and floated about, and mixed among them were people they at first took for children, and then realized were ordinary humans.

“Who are they?” Keeler asked.

“They are humans who have been chosen to live among the Echelon. Eventually, they will be reborn as Aurelians.”

“What do they do until then?”

“They serve the Echelon.”

“Willingly?”

“Of course.”

Keeler felt his heart begin to beat hard, his skin went flush and he felt a powerful erection pressing against the front of his uniform pants. His skin tingled with arousal, as though he was in the throes of passion, but it was not him. He surveyed the Aurelians. “I do believe that many of these people are copulating,” Keeler said.

Coronado laughed, her eyes gleaming. “The Hanged Man warned me your ideas on sensuality were horribly provincial. Within the sphere, we enjoy sex almost continuously. We have entire art forms, sports, and fields of study devoted to sexuality. We do not reproduce sexually. However, in our enhanced stage of evolution, we do experience orgasms beyond anything you can imagine.” Stupid, primitive man, he heard her think.

"Enhanced stage of evolution?" Keeler persisted.

"We Aurelians have evolved beyond the stage of human progress you represent. We are more enlightened, of course. Our bodies are more powerful, and more beautiful. We live for hundreds of years. Far more intelligent, our minds contemplate ideas beyond your imagining. Your most complex theories are like nursery rhymes to us. We cast off your primitive superstitions and religions long ago."

La-di-da, thought Keeler, now becoming aware of why the emotions and thoughts that he had been sensing from Coronado and the other Aurelians were so strong and clear. Perhaps their evolution had made the bio-electrical signatures of their brains stronger, strong enough to intrude in his thoughts. Could she read his mind? he wondered..

"The Domes of Joy are available to all, and you are welcome to partake of their pleasures at the end of our tour, but first, there is more to see."

If she knew what he was thinking, then she would know that he knew what she thinking. If she knew that he knew what she was thinking, then he would know she knew what his thinking. He could read her thoughts pretty clearly, so he would know if she knew that he knew what she was thinking, and as far as he could tell, there was no sign that she knew that he knew what she was thinking.

Keeler decided to drop that line of thinking before he gave himself another headache.

"Am I to understand that you have no religion?" Lear asked.

Coronado's aura of self-satisfaction fairly glowed. "We have passed beyond the need for metaphorical relationships to describe our relationship to the cosmos. We accept that we are all that is, and this has enabled us to become like gods ourselves, better in fact."

"Better than gods?"

"The old gods of myth reserved knowledge and power for themselves, but our belief is that we must share our enlightenment with the other worlds of the galaxy. To those whom much is given, much is expected, as your philosophers put it. Pay attention, you will wish to see this."

They make it sound so nice, Keeler thought. Another iris opened in front of the barge and it slid through. They passed quickly along a flower-lined path and picked up speed as they headed toward a towering structure that mated the sphere below to the one above. The barge picked up speed, and the structure before them, grew larger and larger. The ground flew by beneath, a maze of crystalline structures and exotic plant-life. He saw other barges flitting by, containing happy naked Aurelians.

"What is the energy-source of your world?" Alkema asked. He had been doing some rough calculations in his head. How much power would it take to move this world-ship through space and produce enough light and heat to sustain it? He could not scale up a fusion reaction or a quantum perpetuity large enough to provide the necessary power.

"Do you know what a white hole is?" Coronado asked.

"Za."

"It is something like that. That is all I can say. That is all you could understand."

In her mind, she pictured them as apes, contemplating a computer. Alkema felt a strange urge to grunt and scratch his private parts. Keeler pictured himself throwing dung at her, but he had already been thinking about that before the ape at the computer image came into their heads.

The barge entered the structure through a large aperture in the side. Coronado dipped the

barge to direct their attention downward. From this vantage point, it was possible to look down into a huge shaft running for hundreds of kilometers into the very depths of the sphere. They saw levels upon levels stretching below, whole communities, and eco-systems. At the bottom was a small sun, burning with fierce blue light.

"A ship like this must take centuries to build," Alkema said.

"Not quite so long as that, but the point remains," Coronado said in a voice dripping with import. "Your fears about us conquering your world are not justified. We do not need to conquer worlds. We build our own."

"Then why have you come here?" Lear asked.

"We realize it is impossible for you to imagine, but in our state of advancement, we have no need of conquest. We only seek to raise other people to our level."

Keeler then said something he would forever wish he had not. "Have you encountered a human world known as Medea?"

"Medea?" said Coronado, an inscrutable expression creasing her features. "Medea? I don't recall ever encountering a world called Medea."

"You would remember it, I think. Lavender skies, seas the color of clotted blood, land the color of moldering cheese, and one other detail might have stood out ... every single living thing on Medea had been exterminated."

Coronado's lower lip trembled. "How terrible. What a tragic waste of life."

Now, Keeler could sense her discomfort, though she hid it well on her surface, resentment, hostility were in her mind, radiating a mental flavor like burning wire. "Indeed. Medea lies 43 light years from here, in the direction your fleet is coming from. At your rate of speed, you would have been there around the same time we think the catastrophe took place."

"Assuming we traveled in a straight line," Coronado answered seriously. "No, the last system we visited was twenty-seven light years from here. There was no colony there. There was no life on any of its worlds."

They passed through the great pillar and emerged from the other side, making way toward what looked almost like a city, with a great towering structure in the center.

"What do you want of Bodicéa?" Ciel asked.

"She speaks at last," Coronado said. "For a moment, I had been concerned that you had fallen under the sway of Keeler and Lear and their frightening little fables. Not that I fault them, the Aurelian Way is far beyond their comprehension. Humans often fear that which they do not understand. We live a world of beauty, of enlightenment, of endless pleasures. We think Bodicéa is ready to join us."

"Apparently Medea was not," Keeler interjected.

"Look around you, Commander," Coronado said, but with a little anger beginning to flare, like a flame at the edge of a piece of paper. "We build worlds, we have no need to conquer them."

In his mind, Keeler could feel the emotions behind Coronado's words. Contempt and disgust were effete cousins to what she was feeling. She wished him dead. She wished him ground in the gears of a horrible machine. She wished him smothered in hot plasma.

"How can we humble mortals ever hope to join your enlightened perfection," Solay asked cynically.

Coronado recovered her beneficence. "If you are thinking that challenges lay ahead, you are right. Not within your generation, nor the one after you, will you become like us. However, until that time, you and your people may walk among us, as we guide your people on the path toward the next stage of human evolution. Look below you."

They were passing over an immense city, with streets broad and narrow, and buildings rising high and low. There were thousands of people below them, not Aurelians, but simple humans. They dressed in simple robes or one-piece coveralls, all with numbers and symbols on them. Some wore nothing at all. They waved and blew kisses toward the passing barge.

"Do they not look happy?" Coronado asked. "We have set them free from infirmity, from uncertainty, from insecurity, from inhibition."

"Do they provide you anything in return?" Keeler asked.

"We ask only that they strive towards enlightenment."

That was a lie. Keeler sensed there was something else the humans provided the Aurelians, something so dark and awful Coronado would not let herself think of it. Slave labor? Food? Whatever it was, Coronado did not want them to know about it.

"... but how would we become like you?" one of the Bodicéan women asked.

"We were once humans, like you. We raised ourselves up. We achieved the next level of human evolution."

"Genetic engineering?" Partridge asked.

Coronado almost chuckled. "Please. Nothing quite so charmless and primitive. I could explain it to you, but it would take a century just to teach you the fundamentals."

Another lie, Keeler sensed.

Coronado turned to the Bodicéans. "We can raise some of you up to our level, and some among your people, but you must understand, the power we hold is great. We are selective in raising only the finest minds to join us in the Echelon."

Ciel looked downcast. "That feels unfair."

Coronado spoke in a reassuring voice. "Even those that do not become Echelon will enjoy lives of comfort, pleasure, and enlightenment."

The central structure loomed every larger. It was as though a great cathedral had mated with a suspension bridge. Flying buttresses took off on flights to nowhere. Great towers supported parabolas of cable, from which were suspended walls and arches large enough to accommodate a congregation of tens of thousands. A great set of doors unfolded like rose petals in the morning sun, and the barge entered into a great space decorated with water flowing upward and splashing on the ceiling in an immense pool.

The barge drew to a stop near another balcony. Some humans were waiting there for them.

Coronado smiled, radiant with magnanimity. "As proof of our friendship, I am going to reunite you with some friends of yours."

She gestured skyward. A kind of disk emerged from the watery mist and descended. They could make out four people on-board as it drew closer.

"The crew from Hector," Lear whispered, possibly to herself.

The disk drew near. Keeler would not have known if she were right or not. The four people on board were dressed in white robes. Alkema, naturally, had Hector's flight manifest

with him. He confirmed the four from the disk were Flight Lieutenant Adrian Lowell, Planetology Specialist Grace Jones, Astrophysics Specialist Ahmed Zoetrope, and Specialist Cree BladeRunner.

The disk pulled alongside, and finally settled onto the balcony next to them. For the party from Pegasus, joy leapt into their hearts. They knew the whole crew would rejoice at the safe return of their personnel.

Lear was first off, shaking hands with Flight Lieutenant Lowell and expressing effusively how glad she was to see them all alive and well.

Keeler wanted to speak with Cree BladeRunner, the young specialist who had first discovered the Aurelian fleet, sent off on his first away mission. "Glad to see you alive and well, Specialist BladeRunner," he told the young man. "How have they been treating you?"

"We've been treated very, very well," BladeRunner assured them. "They thought we were attacking their ships. They only wanted to communicate with us."

"Pegasus will rejoice at your return," said Lear, and turning to Coronado, "Thank you."

"You see, we are hardly the monsters you would make us out to be."

"What about their ship?" Keeler asked.

"Damaged, but salvageable. You may tow it back to your ship, or use its auto-pilot."

He heard a couple of the Bodicéans making tsk tsk noises behind his back. Untelepathically, he knew what they were thinking. How could you worry about a ship more than the people inside. Shame!

A group of humans, tanned, slim and naked, began filing onto the balcony, bearing robes and vessels filled with liquids. Two comely females arranged themselves on either side of Keeler, Alkema, and Partridge. Prime cuts of Aurelian slave-manhood interposed themselves next to Lear and each of the women.

"The Cups have prepared a feast for us," Coronado told them. "You may wish to wash, change, and have sex before we eat. When all of you are ready, the meal shall convene."

Ciel spoke up, "Is it..."

"Vegetarian? Naturally."

Lt. Commander Miller gathered the best of the ship's Tactical and Flight Core into the large, secure briefing room on Deck 27; "The War Room." The War Room, or "Primary Tactical Combat Command Center" as it was formally known, could take over all ship's functions in an attack. It set the right mood for the meeting, Miller thought. Most of the command functions of PC-1 were duplicated on the stations around the periphery, but in an austere setting stripped of the bridge's pleasing aesthetic refinements.

The forward part of the room, where he stood, contained holographic generators, which he was using to outline his plans. On his left, a one-meter sphere representing the planet Bodicéa glowed in the dim light. On his right, hundreds of alien (actually Aurelian Sword-ships, they would learn some days later) formed a spearhead directed at the planet. A tiny hologram of Pegasus stood between them, swinging leisurely around the larger and outermost of Bodicéa's moons.

"Pegasus's forward Missile Hatchery contains sixteen pods that can be ejected and

reassembled as orbital battle platforms. Each would include a full complement of Hammerhead missiles and Phalanx guns. I would propose that these be deployed in two rings around the planet Bodicéa; one ring at equatorial orbit, the other in polar orbit." Obediently, sixteen battlepods departed Pegasus and arrayed themselves in the prescribed orbital patterns, buzzing around the planet like tiny space-mosquitoes.

Shayne American looked doubtful. "It doesn't look like enough, not even nearly like enough."

"We can mine the planetary approached as well with self-activating, proximity-sensing Hammerheads. If we coordinate Hammerhead defenses with attacks from Aves and Shrieks, We may be able to destroy enough of their fleet to drive them off."

"It looks like you are committing the entire ship to the defense of this planet. What about the Odyssey?"

Miller frowned. "This would be a short term solution to defend the Bodicéans, but it would give them enough time to construct their own planetary defenses and bring them on-line."

"How long would that take?"

"If they poured every planetary resource into the task, at least one year." He quickly directed their attention to an alternate set of holograms. "That's supposing we remain on the defensive. I propose taking a force of Aves and Shrieks out to the seventh planet. We would lay in wait under the south pole of the planet until the fleet had passed. While our orbital defenses keep the aliens occupied, this force would strike from behind."

"Hang me!" Flight Commander Collins interjected. "We would be outnumbered ... what, ten to one?"

"Za, but you would have the element of surprise."

"I would rather have the element of overwhelming numerical superiority."

"I've been on board one of their ships, and I've seen them in action," Miller continued. "All their weaponry is concentrated in the forward section. These ships were designed for planetary assault, not for fighting in space."

"However, nothing can stop them from rotating in space and pointing their weapons at your surprise attack while still maintaining forward velocity," said Tamarind from the front row, wearing an interested yet detached expression. His black Marine uniform pressed and neat, his hands resting elegantly on the arms of his chair except when he reached over to scratch under the chin of the cat in the seat next to him.

Miller had done some research on Tamarind. Before taking the name Tamarind, he had been known as Jarad Dar Lufthansa, from the City of Assurance on Republic. While it was not unknown for a Republicer to subject himself to the rigor and discipline of the Sumacian Order, it might as well have been. All of the Republicers who had passed the gates of the Unreal City in the past two thousand years could have held a reunion in one of Pegasus's lavatories, with plenty of room for a banquet table.

"Naturally, I am open to additional suggestions," said Miller.

"Your primary problem is that you do not yet know your enemy," Tamarind told him.

"Our Intelligence is limited," Miller conceded. "Keeler's party may provide us with more. I think what Recce One found is sufficient for us to begin planning."

Tamarind shook his head vigorously. "That is not what I meant. What we know about their ships and their numbers is sufficient to our needs. That part of them that is alien can

never be understood by us. What I meant was that you do not understand your real enemy." He rose and walked toward the display.

"All you need to do to defeat this enemy is to destroy their ships," he said, indicating the alien fleet in Miller's surprise attack display. "The real enemy is here," he pointed to the other display, to Bodicéa, and to be picky, to the capital city of Concordia on the planet's surface.

"I don't understand."

"You can destroy the enemy fleet, but there will be no victory unless you can win over the inhabitants of the planet as well. They will defeat you. They may even prevent you from attacking the alien enemy. They pride themselves on their peaceful ways. Convincing them to take up arms will be as difficult as teaching a cat to bark like a dog." He gestured at Queequeg.

The cat glared back at all of them. "Don't even try it."

"We have to go to the surface. We have to learn the lay of the land, and we absolutely must investigate this rumor of an alien liberation."

"Have you seen the aliens?" Miller asked. "Believe me, they would have been noticed."

"A rumor does not need a physical presence," Tamarind persisted. "They could have been in contact with their surrogates on the ground for years, laying the ground-work for their invasion. In any case, the mere fact of the rumor is too much coincidence to ignore. We must go down there. We must speak with Ciel's consort and find out the truth of it."

As soon as he said it, they knew it would be done.

The diplomatic party passed on the sex.

They did, however, take advantage of the other amenities offered by the Aurelians. These included hot baths, and an abundance of libations. About half of the Bodicéans had changed into the brightly colored robes offered to them by the naked men who had soaped, lathered, and rinsed them in the pool.

The Pegasus crew had washed up, but kept their uniforms. Keeler had tried to pump the servants of the Aurelians for information, but each of his questions was met by a giggle and an invitation for coitus. Alkema had scoured the bath chamber for a data terminal, although he knew that trying to use, let alone extract information from, an alien data terminal would likely be a lesson in futility. He didn't find one anyway.

Dinner was served in a banquet hall on a long table that came up to their knees. Everyone was expected to position themselves on low couches and cushions. Some of the more elderly members of the Inner Circle had trouble getting comfortable, and it occurred to Keeler that he had yet to see any old Aurelians, either among the humans or the Echelon.

Aurelian cooking favored raw fruits and vegetables and a variety of dipping sauces of varying viscosity and color, but almost all were variations on the 'sweet-and-sour' theme. There were also plates of different kinds of bread and pasta formed into pods, wrapped around different fillings. All of which were offered to Keeler from the fingertips of a pair of tawny and naked female servants who appeared slightly younger than general age of admission to USNC. The Aurelians referred to their servant class as 'The Cups,' Keeler considered ironically as their breasts dangled enticingly in front of him.

Coronado sat beside Ciel, occasionally hugging her, whispering into her ear like a sister. Something she said made Ciel laugh and blush. Most of the Bodicéans seemed ebullient, and

from snatches of conversation he heard, Keeler could tell they were falling in love with the Aurelians. They expressed wonder and amazement at the world-ship and all it contained, unbridled joy at the Aurelian achievements in longevity and sustainment of youth. Keeler wondered if he would even be able to get them back on the shuttle, let alone overcome their thrall. It was as though someone had just told them they could go to heaven, and they didn't even have to die.

A few of the circle remained cautiously reserved, most especially so, the young, dark-eyed wonder known as Solay. She remained dressed in her Bodicéan robe, and partook sparingly of the food and drink she was offered. She has even dismissed the pair of comely males that had been assigned to see to her every need. The other members of the circle were eagerly partaking of the exotic foods placed directly into their mouths by the strong hands of their man-servants, but Solay sat alone, said nothing, and cast Coronado hard, suspicious looks. Keeler remembered being on the receiving ends of those looks before. He reluctantly found himself giving Solay her due credit, she at least distrusted indiscriminately.

"Eating should be a sensual experience," said Keeler's maiden, not for the first time. She then rubbed a generous dabble of sauce on her right nipple and bade him to partake of it.

Keeler realized half his crew was staring at him, waiting to see how he would respond. "Neg, thank you, I'm lactose intolerant."

Finally, Coronado gestured. One of the men, not a human, but full-sized male of the Aurelian Echelon rose to his feet and brought her a piece of cut crystal the size of a fist. Coronado presented it to Ciel.

"It's beautiful," said Ciel, contemplating it. "What is it?"

"A treaty," Coronado said. She waved her hand over the crystal, and a selection of golden sigils began dancing in the air above the table. "The treaty that describes the future relationship of the people of Bodicéa and Aurelia."

Ciel was hesitant. "Our relationship... and what kind of relationship is Aurelia proposing?"

Coronado's voice was purring with reassurance. "A gradual, voluntary integration of Bodicéa into the Aurelian Union. Over the next century, your people will begin to join ours. You will receive the full benefit of our enlightenment, lives of complete security, freedom from want, a life of endless pleasure. The finest among you will come to join us in the Echelon, but all of your people will receive the full benefit of our advanced, enlightened way of life. You will not find it a great difference from the society that has prospered under the gentle wisdom of the soroarchy, except that instead of family-collectives of six or eight, you will be part of a community of billions."

"Still," Ciel said quietly, looking all around her. "It is very different. The Bodicéan way of life will be lost."

"Hardly, it will become another color in the palette of Aurelia. The best part of your planet, your open-ness, your peacefulness, will be preserved. The part that is taken away... want, conflict, unfulfilled desire... within a generation, they will be no longer be missed."

Coronado turned, so that she would be addressing the entire Bodicéan delegation. "We love your people as much as you do. Your integration would honor both of our peoples."

Ciel turned. The Inner Circle was regarding her expectantly. She held the treaty in her hands, the treaty that was their future. "We shall have to consider this carefully."

"This is a momentous decision," Coronado agreed. "You will need time. And of course, we

are patient, and willing to guide you to make this decision. We will hold our fleet on the orbital margin of the sixth planet until you have had a chance to discuss how we are to be received."

"What if they refuse?" Keeler asked.

Coronado shrugged. "I doubt they will, but ultimately, that is their own choice."

When she said this, the image came to him, unbidden. There was the world-ship, rising over the Bodicéan landscape, like a large golden orb. The assault ships ringed the planet and launched projectiles across the surface. Bright yellow explosions broke out across the surface. Over the cities of Bodicéa, great fireballs lit the sky and death rained down.

Overall this was an attitude, a mixture of bloodlust, ecstasy, and overweening self-satisfaction. Aurelia triumphant! The Bodicéans harvested for the greater glory of Aurelia. He could feel from all of the Aurelians now, contempt disguised as compassion for these mere humans, who were like dogs, milkbeasts, and wooldbeasts ready to be herded into service for the enlightened minions of the Echelon.

Keeler knew, he knew as surely as he knew his whole name that what he saw was what the Aurelians intended for Bodicéa. They truly believed themselves to be enlightened and beautiful. They truly believed they could raise up the Bodicéans to be like them, but first, all of the beliefs and structure that made up their culture must be smashed, the debris cleared aside and washed clean to make way for a new Aurelian order.

Keeler felt faint, and began to choke. Immediately, two of the naked women wrapped themselves around him and massaged his neck and throat.

"Are you all right?" Coronado asked.

Keeler gasped. "Quite... Thank you, I think we should be going soon."

Coronado smiled at him, and he knew she was relishing his future defeat.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Basil, silent and almost invisible within its holoflage shields (If you looked right at, you might see a random glint of sunlight, like ice crystals high in the atmosphere), bore down over a bright blue bay on the ragged western peninsula of Bodicéa's major southern continent. All three occupants were in the command module, looking at a row of houses atop a cliffside the overlooked the bay. Flight Captain Jones guided her ship with a sure hand. Behind her, Miller and Tamarind compared their scans with the hologram maps *Pegasus* sensors had provided from orbit.

"Ciel's dwelling is the fourth one from the end ... here," said Tamarind.

Miller aligned the orbital map with the current ground readings. "Do you have it, Jones?" Like Tamarind, he was wearing only a simple, loose fitting black coverall.

"Za, we're 54,000 meters out, proceeding toward the dwelling at 50 meters per second."

Miller switched to a three-dimensional topography display. "We can set the ship down just off this side of the beach. We will have to rappel up the cliff side, but with our landing gear, we should be ..."

Jones flight helmet shook in firm disagreement. "Let me save you a climb. Strap yourselves in." She pushed the thrusters forward. (Jones preferred a more primitive, baroque instrument

environment than most Aves pilots). The ship began to rocket straight on toward the cliffside. The ship's voice announced "Warning, collision with terrain imminent. Alter ..." Jones cut it off before it could finish.

Before anyone could ask "What the hell are you doing?" she pulled the ship hard up and it parked on the sheer vertical cliff, to which it clung like the proverbial fly on the wall."

She leaned over behind the seat and looked down on them. "Aves aren't limited to horizontal landings, but you all knew that, didn't you?"

"I seem to remember something about it from the training." Miller said, but his heart was pounding.

Tamarind released the harness on his seat and found his footing on the ledges built into the command module to accommodate vertical landings. He swung through the shaft that connected the command module to the main cabin. When he reached the primary deck, he leaned against the floor and opened the belly hatch. Before he opened the hatch, he turned to Miller. "How is your acumen for sheer vertical climbs?"

"Are you kidding? I once climbed the east wall of the Dawnstar building in Corvallis."

Tamarind nodded, pursing his lips. "Fairly impressive."

Miller chuckled and tried to sound as casual as he could. "I imagine Sumacian mountaineering training is pretty severe."

"We begin training on the walls of the Kobeye mountains and proceed through the vertical glaciers of Stovalcor in Boreala."

"I'm not familiar with those places."

"Not many people are," Tamarind explained, slipping his pack onto his back. This struck a nerve in Miller. He resented the idea that there were places others could go that he could not. Between years at the university, he and his college-buddy, Roman Ov had once tried to infiltrate the Sumacian Desert Training Range on the far side of C'thulu's Spine. After by-passing the barriers, they had been almost immediately captured by a four-man-squad of Warrior-Adepts, taken to a cave, fed a sumptuous meal, and woke up three days later on a beach 900 kilometers away, with no memory of how they had come to be there.

He took a moment to look back toward the command module, and saw Jones looking down on him. "Coming along?"

"Neg, it's too nice a day for testosterone driven posturing. I think I'll stay here and degausse the sensor array."

Miller double-checked his pulse-cannon. "Shall we dance?" he whispered, and then jumped through the hatch.

The cliffs of Serenopolis were slate gray, and overlooked an expanse of water that sparkled green and blue like low grade turquoise. It was magnificent. On Sapphire, they would have established a recreational park around the summit and base, and on any given day, there would have been climbers in brightly-colored climbing suits mounting its walls and the bay would be filled with brightly colored sail boards and boats.

There was no one to be seen, even on this bright magnificent day. There were two large boats in the bay, nondescript cargo carriers. These cliffs and waters had the unhappy fortune of being on a planet where the culture did not approve of recreational activities in which death or injury was a possible side-effect.

Miller and Tamarind found that rappelling up a hundred and forty meters of rocks was

much easier than getting over the four meters of safety fencing at the top.

"I can't believe they built a city overlooking the most beautiful seascape on the whole planet, then built a wall in front of it so you can't see it," Miller said, after thunking to the ground opposite a short stretch of well-landscaped walkway from the row of houses.

"A culture obsessed with the prevention of physical injury," Tamarind said. "Their medical facilities are probably not well suited to treating the kind of injuries associated with combat."

"Is everything in life a combat assessment with you?"

"It is a way of analyzing things that is useful to the warrior, and every other endeavor society depends, ultimately, on armed men willing to give their lives in its defense."

"Considering I am never going back to Sapphire again, no one on *Pegasus* ever will, maybe you could tell me some secrets about ... the Unreal City."

Tamarind shook his head slightly. "Neg, that will never happen. The keys to the city are in my heart, and my tongue is a chain that binds them to me. I can tell no one of its secret without forfeiting my own heart."

Miller worked a shrug into his gait. "I had to ask."

"I am aware." They arrived at a tall white gate at the front of the property.

"Is this it?" Miller asked.

"The house of Ciel, za." There was a brass mallet attached to a chain by the gate. Tamarin lifted it and tapped the metal plate beside the door. It rang out musically.

Miller looked at the row of houses. They were large, solidly built and well-maintained. All were painted white, with slate-gray roofs, and built almost against each other, with spaces in-between barely large enough to accommodate the shoulders of a man of medium build. Otherwise, everything around them spoke of a prosperity that had been in place for a very long time.

"You don't suppose the enlightened egalitarian rulers of this planet rotate the less fortunate into their fine houses every few years?" Miller asked. Tamarind smiled politely and shook his head.

The gate parted slightly and a pair of pale blue eyes peered out at them through the painted white rails. "Hello."

"Are you Tobias?"

The man opened the gate a bit wider. "Yes, you must be from the *Pegasus*."

Miller and Tamarind looked at each other. So much for being incognito. "How could you tell?"

"Men, walking around unaccompanied, you can't be from this planet. What do you want?" Tobias voice was cheerful, with an almost sing-song lilt to it.

"May we come inside?"

"Ciel is not here."

"We have not come to see Ciel, we have come to see you."

Tobias's eyes shifted back and forth from Miller to Tamarind, studying them. Finally, he unlatched the gate and bade them enter. He was dressed in a white satin robe with small blue designs on it. The small yard in front of Ciel's house was exquisitely landscaped. Two elegant trees, whose bark was white, whose trunks were gnarled, whose branches seemed to braid around each other, framed either side of a stone pathway. Sprays of green and gold leaves

fanned from the branches. The house was stark white, tall and narrow, four stories in height with a portico on the lowest level and verandahs on the second and third. It looked ancient, but well-kept. Tobias led them to the front door, but held them there. "Wait here."

Tobias disappeared inside. Miller and Tamarind waited. A few minutes later, he returned. "All right, you may come in now."

The inside of the house was filled with expensive-looking things. Every couch and chair was upholstered with sumptuous materials featuring elaborate designs. The walls and ceilings were wood painted white. Tobias offered them seats around a table, and laid out an arrangement of cups and serving vessels. He poured liquids from two of the vessels into three of the cups. "To what do I owe this honor?" he asked.

Miller went straight to the point, "On the Isle of Mab, you said something to one of our people. You related a legend about the Commonwealth returning to the planet."

"To put our society back in order after centuries of oppression under the Soroarchy," Tobias said, offering each of them a black and white cookie on a porcelain serving tray.

Miller took the cookie. "We were curious about that aspect of the story."

"You think I was referring to the aliens Ciel went to meet," Tobias finished for him.

"We don't know," Tamarind admitted. "We would like you to provide details about the legend, so that we can see if there are any parallels to things that are happening."

Tobias's eyebrows arched, "I don't really know what I can tell you, it's just an old story. Probably just a fairy-tale."

"It may be coming true," Miller countered, darkly. "But in a terrible way, because these aliens are monsters. We believe they destroyed all the life forms on the Planet Medea, they are coming to destroy you." He withdrew a pad from his pack and handed it to Tobias. When activated, it catalogued the atrocities on that planet and ended with pictures of the alien body recovered there, and an image of the alien Miller and Ng had discovered on the ship.

"Scary," Tobias sang, he shivered and wrapped his robe more tightly around him.

"All we want to know is what specifically does the legend refer to, and how long has it been circulated?" Miller asked.

Tobias wore a pensive expression. "I thought *you* might be coming to help the men of this planet, but apparently I was wrong. I don't why you would want to take the story so seriously at this point."

Tamarind fixed Tobias in a firm but gentle stare. "People living in submission sometimes make up stories about saviors coming down and liberating them from their oppressors. Another thing that people who live in submission do is to form opposition cells. They make plans, they exchange information, try to plan for a day when they can end their submission, bring their own liberation. If they are very lucky, those in submission, one of their number manages to infiltrate the highest levels of government, becomes a confidante of planetary leadership."

Tobias reached for a glass and knocked it over, sending streamers of orange and blue liquid across the table. He began swabbing it up with a napkin, sparing Tamarind a wide-eyed glance.

Tamarind continued, "The last thing a man in such a dangerous position would ever risk is betraying his comrades to those who hold them in submission."

Miller took this in. Was this telepathy or beast-shitting. It was said that Sumacian warriors

knew how to hypnotize an enemy with the sound of their voice, knew a technique for establishing a rhythmic cadence, could seek out the words in a person's mind, draw out the keys to the mind, like a locked box with secrets inside.

Tamarind's voice kept on steady, calm, almost mesmerizing. "Submission is a terrible state for a man to live in, but you have to trust us, these aliens are not your liberators."

Tobias threw his hands in the air. "How am I supposed to know any of this? I am just a man. I was never educated in politics or... or space. They don't let us learn anything, here."

Tamarind looked up, a bright expression on his face, as though the key had been delivered to him. "I'll make you a bargain. Help us now, and when *Pegasus* leaves, you can come with us."

"You can do that?" Tobias whispered skeptically.

"We have done it before," Miller said, trying to sound casual while feeling like his mind was drizzling through the base of his skull. A few more minutes, and *he* would have told Tamarind the information.

Tobias rubbed his temples. "The man you need to speak to is called Corbiya, but he lives in the Compound."

"The Compound?"

"It's where the men are kept, near the center of the city, not the exact center, but deep enough inside that no man could flee it without crossing passing thousands of women's homes, any one of whom could alert the Monitors."

"But not you."

"I have even less freedom than one of the shared men who live there," Tobias sighed. "I am Ciel's consort. As the leader of Inner Circle, she is permitted some deviancy from established convention. Her enemies, however, regard me as a political liability. She has rejected the communal circle, she lives alone, with me, and raises her daughter alone. It is a scandal."

"I believe I know the place of which you speak," Tamarind said. "It is just west of the center of the city, a walled compound of nineteen buildings, blue-white in color, with roofs that curve downward to the ground."

"You'll never make it there," Tobias ensured them. "It is illegal for men to walk through the streets unaccompanied."

"I've got that covered," Miller said, tapping his wrist. "Miller to Jones."

"You're not going anywhere," came a girl's voice. Miller and Tobias turned to see Pieta, watching over them from the bridge that overlooked the room and served as the house kitchen.

"Pieta," said Tobias, a weak admonishment. She descended, chin held high.

"I could have you arrested," said the little girl. "And I will, if you so much as pass through that door."

She stood before them, only a child, yet possessed of a measure of arrogance, of haughtiness as though the world were hers, had been and always would be, and no one would dare tell her otherwise.

"Then we shall leave," Tamarind said, rising. Miller found himself rising involuntarily with him, as did Tobias. Tamarind had that effect on people, the same way a moon has an effect on an ocean.

Pieta held her chin up. "Don't go. I heard everything. You men can not walk through the streets unless a woman goes with you, but I'll escort you, if you'll do something for me."

Tamarind knelt before her and took her hand. "All right, Pieta. What can I offer you in return for your escort?"

Pieta knew exactly what she wanted. "I want Lt. David Alkema."

Tamarind looked deeply into her eyes. "If you promise to take us to The Compound, I promise Lt. Alkema will come back and visit you... just you and he. You can do ... anything you'd like to do."

Pieta smiled, she was radiant, incandescent with joy.

"We'll be making a low speed launch," Captain Wang announced. "You may make yourselves comfortable, but there is no need to secure yourselves. Low-speed launch. I am awaiting clearance from Aurelian Flight Control."

Lear reached across the landing couch to Ciel. "I know you must be alarmed, but I swear to you, we will do everything in our power to protect your people."

"Protect us from what?" Ciel asked, in her tone, a midst of defensiveness and puzzlement.

"From the Aurelians," Lear answered. "We will not let them attack your planet. We will stand with you."

"Take our planet? What makes you think they're going to attack your planet?"

Lear blinked. "Didn't you pick up her thoughts? She was thinking about ruination, about bombing your planet from orbit."

Ciel fixed her with an incredulous stare. "How could you know what she was thinking?"

"You remember my people are somewhat telepathic."

"You said that was only with family and close acquaintances."

"Among us, but his mind was very powerful. I could see exactly what he was thinking."

"Who?"

"Coronado."

"Coronado was a woman."

Lear checked herself. Coronado was a woman of course, what an odd mistake. "Ciel, listen to me. Coronado is planning an attack on your world. Even if you couldn't see the images in her mind, or the sound of explosions, you must have felt... you must have sensed her contempt for us, her desire to claim your world, her hunger for conquest, her anticipation..."

"I saw nothing but a woman, far more wise, far more benevolent than either of us." Ciel looked downright cross, now.

Another member of the circle leaned over from the couch across the aisle. "Perhaps they feel threatened by Coronado," she suggested. "She is a very strong woman, far stronger than they are."

"I thought she was marvelous," gushed a third woman. "I know how I will vote on the treaty."

They are not telepathic, Lear thought to herself. They believe Coronado. She wants to devour them whole. They can't sense it.

"Launch thrusters to fire in ninety seconds. Secure yourselves."

The Aves pulled away from the Aurelian landing dock. It rose and banked toward the inner edge of the sphere, leaving behind the elaborate, artificial world of the inner-sphere. It navigated through an exit channel and emerged in space. *Hector* emerged from an adjacent exit channel and joined *Winnie*. Kicking their gravity engines to full power, the two ships rose above the plane described by the fleet of alien ships and drove into the night, back toward *Pegasus*.

Keeler paced the forward conference room. This little trip had not turned out as he had expected. He had expected to be dead, so, on that score, it had turned out better than anticipated. When he had set out, he had been commander of one of the nine most powerful ships in the galaxy. Now, he was facing an enemy who built veritable worlds in space and were about to lay waste to a beautiful world that he did not like very much, but felt honor-bound to protect. How far would he go, and how much would he risk, to carry out that duty.

While Keeler ruminated, Ciel slept in the back of the ship. She had rejected the notion of using a sleeper as unnatural. Someone had found some blankets and reclined a landing couch to full horizontal. Her snoring, a horrible and grating sound, would have carried almost to the forward cabin had not Commander Keeler ordered Lt. Alkema to seal the emergency decompression hatch. Alkema now sat in the Command Module, receiving a piloting lesson from Captain Wang.

After bedding down the First Advocate, Goneril Lear came forward to join him, and to inform him that Partridge was tending to the personnel from the *Hector*. They were tired, for the hour was late. Their heads throbbed with a sore pain that none of the analgesics prescribed by Med. Tech. Partridge seemed to allay. She suggested they set up a conference with Honeywell to discuss the tactical situation, and Keeler called Alkema down to join them.

Honeywell provided them with a technical report on *Hector*. "The logs show that there were repeated attempts to access the central braincore. None were successful. The core data is intact."

"Current status?"

"*Hector* is maintaining pace with the other Aves. We should be back at *Pegasus* in another 28 hours."

"Thank you, lieutenant. I think I can guess what's on everyone's mind, The Aurelians are going to destroy these people," Keeler said, "and they don't know it."

"What can we do about it?" Lear asked. "Do we have the firepower to stop them?"

"Did you read Lt. Cmdr. Miller's tactical assessment?" Keeler asked. He had the data projected before him. "With Hammerhead missiles and tactical Shriek and Aves deployment, we could destroy 80% of the Aurelian fleet, but Miller did not know about the World-Ship."

"One Nemesis warhead at 40% yield could take it out," Lear answered him.

"And kill one billion people," Keeler shook his head. The display of the sphere was still activated, and hung in the air at one side of the table.

"There are two billion people on Bodicéa. We have to have that option open."

"It's not necessarily viable," Alkema offered, as he tapped out some calculations. "The World-ship has over 500,000 times the mass of *Pegasus*. Therefore, it must have an energy-source at least 500,000 times more powerful than our QPG's. Coronado said the power

source of the world-ship is a kind of white hole, which, if she is making a kind of simplistic analogy, is like a slow-motion supernova that disgorges large amounts of energy in a sustained way. If that's true, it must be kept in some kind of containment system. One nemesis bomb could destroy the containment for that system. If that happens, the energy would all be released at once, and if it's as much energy as I think it is, it would be like setting off a full-blown supernova."

They all knew what this meant, but only Lear found the need to say it out loud. "The entire system would be ripped apart."

Keeler was impressed with the young lieutenant's analysis. "I'll tell Lt. Cmdr. Miller he has a protege," he said, drily.

"It wouldn't have to come that," Honeywell put in on the commlink, a second's delay later. "Based on our preliminary scans, the world ship does not have an offensive capacity. If we destroy the assault ships, the Aurelians would not be able to mount an onslaught on Bodicéa."

"We have only seen a small part of the world-ship," Lear corrected. "It may have a larger offensive capacity that we estimated."

"The Echelon don't strike me as the type to dirty their hands with weapons," Keeler put in. He brought up another display. "Lt. Miller's report forecasts a fifty to sixty percent depletion of *Pegasus's* conventional armaments if we engage the Aurelian fleet... with no re-supply for three years. If we ran across the Aurelians again, we would have no choice but to run." He leaned back in his chair.

"Or use the Nemesis weapons," Lear's face was etched with lines of concentration. "If the Bodicéans asked for our assistance, we would give it to them without hesitation. Can we agree to that?"

"I think *we* can," Keeler agreed, "but I don't think *they* will. They think the Aurelians are as peaceful as they present themselves to be. They can't read minds. It's unfortunate that Odyssey Project Training never dealt with how to deal with a race of genetically superior humans who let you eat off their bare breasts or how to deal with a planet of pacifists who don't recognized their imminent annihilation at the hands of the aforementioned... aliens"

"The question is: do we have the right to interfere on their behalf, acting on knowledge only we possess?" Lear asked.

"Of course we have the right," Keeler said. "'*Should we*' is an easy question to answer, '*could we*' is a question we can reasonably answer. It's when they both gang up on us at once that the issue is hard."

"A battle with the Aurelians would not endear us to the Bodicéans," Lear answered. "In all likelihood, they would be even more suspicious, and unwilling to have relations with us."

"At least, they would be alive to be mad at us." Keeler tapped his fingers on the top of the table.

"Why do they want to conquer the Bodicéans?" Honeywell asked. "Why did they destroy Medea? What's the motivation?"

As he asked, Alkema suddenly realized that if the Aurelians conquered Bodicéa, the little girl named Pieta would either die or be made into one of those hand-maidens, running around naked and engaging in intercourse with hundreds or thousands of men before she even left adolescence. The thought sickened and horrified him.

Lear answered Honeywell. "'We don't need to conquer worlds,' Coronado had said. 'We build our own.' There must be something they need on those worlds. I refuse to believe they

would blow up worlds for entertainment.”

“Sometimes, small children kick over insect mounds,” Keeler told her. “A throwback to our more violent past. I got a very strong feeling of contempt and disgust from Coronado, from the rest of the Aurelians, too. Perhaps, they do look on humans as insects to be played with, and casually destroyed.”

Keeler sighed and began rambling, tiredly. “The first three worlds we have visited have been, respectively, invaded, barbaric, and ruined. This world retained some semblance of human civilization. It was largely intact. It may not have been what we liked, but it gave us hope that humanity as we knew it had survived the Great Silence. It seems like each world we come to is either beyond our repair or, like this one, terribly in need of our help. Is this what we expected when we launched this Odyssey Project?”

Alkema tried to comfort him. “We were only meant to find these worlds. We were the Pathfinders. The Phase II ships were to ... see to the rebuilding.”

Keeler sighed. “What must they be thinking back on Sapphire, on Republic. None of them could have estimated how low these worlds had fallen, or how much strength would be required to keep them.”

“Let’s try to stay on topic, people” Lear said toughly. “We have to convince them that they are in danger. Then, they will have to ask for our help.”

“Wasn’t that the purpose of this very mission?”

The hatch slid open and they turned to see Solay entering the forward cabin in what could be considered a brisk stalk. “May I join you,” she asked, taking an open seat at the head of the table.

“Of course,” said Lear.

“Would I be correct in assuming you have been discussing the fate of my world?” she asked.

“It has come up,” Keeler answered.

Solay looked at Alkema and Honeywell. “Commander, I would like to discuss something with you and Commander Lear, just us three.”

Alkema stood before Keeler could ask him to leave. “I think I’ll join Captain Wang in the command module.”

“Honeywell out.” The holoscreen vanished.

Solay leaned across the table, and spoke in an almost confidential tone. “Quite a show these Aurelians put on for us.”

“Were you impressed?” Lear asked.

Solay tented her fingers in front of her at the table. “When I was young, all the girls of my commune had to make these little ecosystems in glass globes. We were taken to a glassworks, and each of us helped an artisan make a globe for us. There were six daughters in my commune who went, and making each globe took two days. I remember how much I hated having to be away from my books in my studies, but the reverend teacher assured us the exercise was necessary, to teach us the value of artisans, and to teach us about the ecology of our planet.”

“We took our globes and put dirt and small plants in them, and insects and water. We created little eco-systems in our globes. The reverend teacher said that each little globe was a world of its own, and we were to guard and protect them, because someday we would be the

guardians of our own world. I remember thinking that these little globes weren't really worlds. They were pieces of our world, selected and artificial, sealed off from the real world. Every one of those little worlds we made eventually died. Some of the girls neglected their globes, and their worlds died quickly, but even those who tried could not keep them alive for very long."

She poked at the projection of the Aurelian sphere. "That's what this is, you know. A glass globe with some dirt and water and plants inside. That's what they want for us... for my world. That's how they want us to live."

Keeler's lip curled a bit. "What did you think of Coronado?"

Solay looked around the room before she spoke, as though to be sure no one was listening. "She spoke beautifully, and she told Ciel exactly what Ciel would have wanted to hear, exactly what most of the Circle wanted to hear. She praised them for the all things they want to be praised for, and promised them the fulfillment of their most ... ambitious dreams."

"I noticed that," Lear put in.

"Coronado knew our world perfectly. She knew exactly what to say to Ciel to nurture her into trust. She spoke our language flawlessly, even using some of our idioms. She knew of Ciel's politics, her concern about us, her position in the Circle. It felt like manipulation."

"I begin to suspect that it was not to your liking," said Keeler, levelly.

Solay joined her hands together, clenched into one fist. "Coronado spoke too sweetly, and too knowledgeably about our world. I found myself asking how she could possibly know us so well. Her sphere has only a few days ago arrived at the very edge of our system. How can she know us so well."

"Advance probes?" Lear suggested.

"Her intelligence must come from within our own planet. How else could their knowledge of our world be so vast and so intimate?" Solay looked terribly serious. "I believe the Aurelians have agents on our planet, and they have been spying on us and reporting to her for years."

Or, she really can read minds. Keeler thought. "How can you be sure? How do you know we're not part of the Aurelian Advance Guard, providing them intelligence on your world, softening your world up for conquest?"

Solay, for the first time he could remember, laughed. "Please, you are nothing like the Aurelians. Your attempts to secure an alliance with us have been clumsy and incompetent. You know nothing about us. What possible motive could Coronado have had for sending such a group of crude, heavy-handed amateurs as an advance party."

"I think your people would have noticed if there were giants walking around, especially naked ones," Keeler said, partly in jest, but mainly to see how thoroughly Solay had thought this through.

"There were humans among the Aurelians, probably many more than we saw," Solay answered. "They could have slipped unnoticed into our cities. They may even have a base of operations hidden in one of the Wilderness Areas of my planet. 85% of my planet is designated permanent wilderness."

"There have long been rumors of... of subversive elements within Bodicéan society. To say more would be a betrayal of my people's secrets, but they may have allied themselves with the subversives, or instigated them. I can not believe she would know us so well unless she had a spy among us, perhaps..." she cut herself off.

After a moment, Lear prompted her. "Perhaps what?"

Solay stared at both of them, her eyes glaring with resentment at being reduced to confiding in these people she was so convinced were her enemies. With as much reluctance, as resignation, she suggested, "They may even have operatives in the Circle itself. It would ... it would explain much."

Her tone of voice spoke clearly that no further information would be forthcoming. "I resent being spied upon," she hissed. "The point is, I don't want anyone to manage my planet except for the women of my own world. Bodicéa must be managed by Bodicéans, led by Bodicéans, and have her development determined by Bodicéans. I don't want to be a part of Coronado's worlds any more than I want to be a part of yours."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They made their way through the streets of Serenopolis, three gentlemen and the young girl, in the back of an odd sleigh-like conveyance that scraped over the ground on rails into which were set hundreds of tiny cylindrical wheels. Four brightly-scaled reptilian beasts (mammals never evolved on Bodicéa) drew the vehicle, trotting quickly and smoothly through the city, but not quietly. At each stop, they raised their heads, snarling and howling in protest against their burden. A driver, a large, dark-skinned woman, with an impassive expression etched into her face, kept them in line with snaps from her several whips.

"Neat," said Miller. "What do you call those beasts?"

"Sh'val," Tobias answered. "At one time, they were the most useful animals on the planet. We once raised them like cattle, and ate them. The meat was said to be wonderful when cooked over an open fire."

"Eating meat is disgusting and barbaric," Pieta sang out with the assuredness of proclaiming commonly accepted wisdom. "You should never eat anything that has a mother."

Miller decided not to break it to her about Lt. Alkema's fondness for chili dogs. He craned his neck over the side of the sedan to watch the street scenes pass outside. Serenopolis was a curious city. It occupied a high flat cliff that ran along a large bay. On the other side was the open sea, but somehow, the city seemed to have no relation to it. There were no docks, no shipyards, no dangerous pubs filled with exotic characters, not even a fish market. For all the influence the sea gave to Serenopolis, it might as well have been on a high plain a thousand kilometers from the nearest water.

Most of the buildings were built of some material that was like both wood and stone, and some bricks. Most of them were painted the same shade of white, as bright as moonstone but flat. The architecture was simple. In the residential sectors, the houses tended to be large and boxy, with deep-set windows. Only in the better neighborhoods were houses tall, like Ciel's, and everywhere built even closer together. The buildings became larger, and more substantial, as they approached the city center, all built of stone. There were none of the decorative flourishes, the statuary, or the unexpected displays of color Sapphire's architects loved. The simplicity of these buildings lent them a certain elegance, Miller conceded, as though they were deliberately toned down in favor of the natural beauty of the hills, the sky, and the sea. Tobias explained that most of these buildings were shops that made things for use in the city. The production areas were in the back, and goods were exchanged in the front.

"Do you trade with other cities, other regions of the planet?" Miller asked.

"Very little," Tobias answered. "The Circle has made it almost impossible to get a trade permit, and only absolutely necessary items can be traded. They believe transporting goods over long distances is an unnecessary waste. You're only allowed to consume products produced in your environmental sector. Every city is supposed to be self-sufficient in the basic necessities of life."

Miller thought about this. "Those drinks you served at the house tasted very tropical... citric acid, fructose. Are those grown those locally?" He hadn't seen any greenhouses.

Tobias blinked at him slowly, as though waiting for Miller to come to his senses. "Ciel is the First Advocate of the Inner Circle... and she likes tropical fruit. Somehow, she always manages to have some."

A large, bean-shaped streetcar trundled past, spitting steam from its rear. Miller saw heaps of women jammed inside. He scanned it quickly, detecting a hydrogen-powered engine in the rear quarter. The driver snapped the whip. The beasts roared and pulled them with a jerk onto the next street.

Somehow, he had expected a city of women to be prettier, to have planters with trees and flowers at every corner, he was a bit surprised at how functional it was. For that matter, there weren't very many women in the street. Those that were did not seem to be in any especial hurry. They tended to be in clustered in groups, making their way collectively, and stopping collectively when they saw something of interest or encountered another group.

"The Compound is at the end of this circle," Tobias announced. Miller craned his head again. Ahead was a tall white wall that encircled an area the size of a very large city park. Four large women in dark blue jumpsuits were positioned at the gate, faces protruding from plain, dark head-dresses. The vehicle halted in front of them, and Pieta leaned out.

"Good day, mistresses," she called out.

Two of the women leaned over her as the draft beasts snarled. "Child, what is your business here."

Pieta spoke confidently, "After last night, none of the women in the Familial Circle were in any kind of condition to make the journey this morning. Look at these specimens, and you will understand." For once, her precocious-ness was useful, although still annoying.

One of the women stared at Miller and Tamarind. She looked like the kind of woman who derived purpose from causing trouble for others. Her expression grew sour with anticipation. "Cali, I don't believe I've seen these men before."

The other woman, a large-set blond, poked her head into the sleigh, squinted, furrowed her brow. "You remember us," Tamarind said with a voice of total assurance and a slight wave of his hand. "You remember seeing us here before, many times."

She withdrew suddenly, shaking her head like a swimmer with water in her ear.

"You okay, Agni?" said the other woman, just as heavy, but dark.

"It's all right, I didn't recognize them for a second, but I've seen them many times before. Pass on through." She waved them through the gates. The driver snapped the reins, and the reptiles pulled them into the compound.

"How do you do that?" Miller wanted to know.

"Do what?" Tamarind responded.

"Did you put a thought in her mind?"

Tamarind shook his head. "There were only two paths. They would either let us pass, or they would not. I simply directed us on the path that would allow us to complete our mission without further difficulties. Her mind had nothing to do with it."

Tobias giggled. "I thought she was going to have us all thrown into incarceration. How embarrassing that would have been."

"I would not have allowed that to happen," Tamarind said firmly.

Tobias looked at him and grew serious. "I don't believe you would have."

Except that the people on the inside were almost uniformly male, aside from a few guards, the compound looked little different than the city outside. Somehow, though, just the presence of men made it an entirely different world. The air was charged with something different here, subtle but different, a psychic residue of forced subservience, of natural will and prerogatives denied. Pieta directed the driver to stop the vehicle, and she held the door as the four of them exited.

Miller looked around. Men strolled between the buildings, alone or in pairs, reminding Miller of students between classes at the university. Something else was different, too. Thin grass lawns divided the buildings and the walls into quadrangles. They were marked, possibly as some form of athletic field.

"This is how men live on my world," Tobias told them, as he led the way. "I lived here for the first twelve years of my life, before Ciel became a member of the Inner Circle. After I fathered Pieta, she declared me her 'Privileged Consort.' At which point, I moved into her house." He squinted around, like a university alum surveying his old stomping grounds. "This place has hardly changed at all. The paint looks fresh. They repaint every two years. Over there is the adolescent hall." He pointed to one of the buildings, although they all looked alike. "That's where the boys live until we are old enough to service the needs of women."

"You know, I used to have a coital simulation fantasy that went like that," Miller said.

"The Halls of Honor within the Unreal City are not like this very much," Tamarind said. "However, it has some of the feel of the Unreal City, it is a place apart."

"What is the Unreal City?" Tobias asked.

"It is the place where I went when I felt the call of my destiny. It was established by the great Warrior-Prophet Sumac, who founded the order of Cenobite Warrior Monks to whom I belong. Most of it was built by Rian, the warrior-architect. I entered as an Acolyte when I was seventeen of our years old, eight of yours. I became an Adept, and finally a Master of Sumac."

"Is the Unreal City populated by men alone?"

"Women may join the Order, but they are bound by the same strictures. No exceptions are made to accommodate them. The warrior's life is a life of great discipline, and purpose."

Tobias leaned over and spoke in a hushed voice. "My pater used to tell me, in secret, the forbidden stories of Jo-Jo, a boy who disguised himself as a woman, gained access to the Outer and Inner Circles, and made fools of all the women there. When he was found out, they castrated him, let him bleed to death, and forbade anyone to ever speak of him. Such is the fate of any man who aspires to a life of purpose on Bodicéa."

"Why do you think it is?" Tamarind asked.

"We live only to serve women. When not serving them, we are kept here, fed, and entertained. They tell us it's because we are precious resource, to be protected."

"Do you think that is the true reasoning behind it?"

Tobias cocked his head. "They do it because they can." He looked as though he were about to elaborate, when a trio of women approached them on the path.

Two looked to be in their thirties (their teens on this planet), one was an adolescent (and so on). The youngest stared Tamarind up and down, then addressed Pieta. "Is that one available?" she asked.

"After last night, I doubt it. You know how things get when the moons are both full."

"Hm," the girl said haughtily. She had a full head of long, curly, shaggy hair, wide lips, slightly protruding eyes, and a large nose. Her voice was reedy, and her tone demanding. "How soon can he be ready again? He looks like he could go tonight if you fed him and let him rest a little."

"Sorry, sister," Pieta shrugged. What can I do about it?

The girl grimaced, her disappointment seemed tinged with contempt. "But I want him. He's much better than that other sire."

Miller guessed that on a planet where women ruled and men were possessions, there was no need for an ugly girl to compensate with a pleasant personality.

"Perhaps next time, Lowren," said one of the older women, appraising Tamarind and Miller. "Maybe we can reserve them."

"But I just want one."

"You can try," Pieta said. "Our collective was on the waiting list for over a year."

"Aren't you a little young?" asked one of the women.

"I haven't gone through the Rite of Moon's Blood yet," Pieta admitted. "But my mothers were so exhausted after their consummation, and these men had to return by today at zenith. I offered to take them back so my parents could rest."

The two older women giggled. "What a considerate daughter you are."

Miller had a sense that Tobias was seething, either at the casual attitude of possession the women displayed toward him and the other men, or because of the sophistication his own pre-pubescent daughter displayed, he could not tell. The women concluded their business with a few gropes at Miller and Tamarind, and went on their way.

The men proceeded past a large domed structure. Tobias told them it was a recreation facility, where the boys and the young men were encouraged to engage in sport, both for the entertainment of the men in the Compound (and compounds in other cities) and to keep themselves fit and healthy for the service of women.

They finally came to the furthest building from the front gates, the building for men past the age of service to women. It was the tallest structure in the compound, an eight-story edifice consisting of two sets of four wings, arranged in a double cross, and linked along the center. It seemed less well-maintained than the other dormitories, its front stained grain where rainwater had washed. "Jubal lives on the east side. They entered. "It's the weekend, so the reception desk should be unattended." Tobias was right. The front desk was closed and shuttered as they walked past.

They found Jubal's room on the sixth floor, near the very center of the building. Jubal was a middle-aged man, with silvery hair and a careworn face, not much taller than Tobias. He was dressed in a gray nightshirt and a pair of striped pants. His room was small, a simple rectangle about six meters deep and four meters wide, with a bunk, a desk, a tele-viewer, and a sink. He smiled when he saw Tobias, "Son, it is good to see you."

"It is good to see you," Tobias answered, and hugged the Old Man. He looked over Tobias's shoulder at Pieta, who did not enter the room, but remained in the hall.

"I would like you to meet my friends, Tamarind, and Philip Miller."

"Ciel permits you the company of other men, now?" he grinned. "You must be keeping her well-satisfied."

"She doesn't, they come from... another world."

Jubal's eyes widened. His hands began trembling visibly. "Like the Traveler." He ushered them quickly into the room and closed the door behind them.

Tobias nodded. "The signal we picked up, some weeks ago, it was not a stray broadcast, like the Circle of Communication said. It was from their ship."

"Have you come from one of the Commonwealth worlds?" Jubal demanded.

"Two of them, actually. Sapphire and Republic, colonies in the Pegasus sector."

Jubal held up his hands. "The what sector?"

"We don't have much time. We came here at great risk." Tamarind explained, with preternatural calm. "We were wondering what you know of this Traveler."

"The Traveler was not one of you?" Jubal asked.

"We don't know. We need to know exactly what the legend said," Miller told him.

"Why?" Jubal asked.

Miller repeated, essentially, what he had told Tobias before. Jubal proved no less suspicious than Tobias, demanding to know why they wanted to know, and proving who they were.

"I trust them," Tobias assured his father, sounding slightly detached and not notably convinced.

Jubal sighed, and turned toward the girl. "Pieta, if you should wish to go downstairs, they are setting lunch now, I should imagine."

"I don't want to go," she answered him haughtily.

"Really? Then, good, because I am going to tell these men about my athletic accomplishments in the days when I was young. I am going to tell them how I accumulated 14,400 points in Unifying Fumble Whelp when I was a boy about your age. I remember the day as though it were the day before yesterday. It was hot and dusty, and myself and thirteen other boys were standing around the pole. There was me, and there was Israel, and Gilbert, and Mackay, who we all called 'Stinky.' And, let's see, who am I forgetting... Shamel, Increase... he had a lazy eye..., which in those days, we called the ebullient egg-sac of ennui."

Pieta was bright enough to know adults would never discuss anything interesting with her around. So be it, she thought, I'll just stand here. I have no where else to go.

Tamarind turned to her. "I would be interested to know what they are serving. I would consider it a favor if you found out for me."

With a reluctant sigh, she disappeared down the hallway to check on lunch.

Miller turned to Tamarind. "I'll give you a month's if you can make Ex. Commander Lear think she's poultry."

"I can only use my power for good."

"Okay, then make her think she's a cocktail waitress in Eddie's bar."

"Perhaps, later."

The Old Man gestured for them to sit, and there was no other place for sitting than the floor. He heard his tale looking up at him from the ground. "I first heard the story of the one called the Traveler shortly after my first orgy. As the women rested in each other's arm, myself and my mentor, Belac, stepped out into the night. He showed the stars to me and told me of the Traveler."

"He came here some two centuries ago. The story goes that he came from the stars. His ship crashed into the sea, but he ejected before it was lost, and came ashore near the city of Apollonia. He ... he hid in the sea-woods that abutted the ocean, and studied the city and its women for two years before he made contact. After learning enough of our language to pass among us, he made his way into the city. He was captured by the monitors and, having no identification on him, was presumed to be a rogue male. He was bundled into a net, beaten severely, and then taken to the Compound of Men."

"The men of the city took care of him. As they nursed him back to health, he told them he came from another world, a world that had been a colony of the Commonwealth. They, of course, believed he was delusional on account of his injuries. It took a very long time to convince them, partly because he knew so little of our language, but also because there was little memory of the Commonwealth among us, only that it was a male-dominated empire and we were better off rid of it.

"The Traveler told the men in the compound of his own world, a world that had been held enslaved by aliens for centuries, before another Traveler came to his world, and taught them to rise up and fight. They drove the aliens from their planet and liberated themselves. They stole the aliens' technology and now sent Travelers throughout the galaxy. They were looking for other worlds that lived under these aliens, but he said, he had found a different kind of oppression here. He said that men should be free, should be equal to women, and he would help us achieve that."

"The men hid him in their compound, stole parts that enabled him to construct a beacon. He told them how to organize, and how to prepare so that when his comrades arrived, we could help them overthrow the existing order, and claim a place in society equal to women."

"What did he teach you?" Tamarind asked.

Jubal paused a long time before he answered. "He taught us not to tell strangers what we had been taught."

Tamarind nodded, and bade him go on.

"Years passed. The Traveler grew old. Too old, and too injured to be of use to the women, he moved in secret from city to city, from Compound to Compound, spreading the word, organizing. I was told he was in Allyssia when he died, cold and forgotten, lying in a gutter."

"Since that time, we have tried to maintain his teachings, passing along the story to certain boys we mentor, the ones who could be trusted, not the frivolous ones, the lazy ones, the stupid ones. We have maintained a hope that one day we would be set free. So much time has passed, with no sign of liberation from space or elsewhere, I am afraid there are few of us left, far too few to support any kind of insurgency."

"Are there any current contacts with off-worlders?" Tamarind asked. "Is anyone communicating with agents, or secret spies in hidden places?"

"One hears rumors," Jubal said, matching his stare.

"Of what does one hear rumors?"

Jubal answered. "Rumors of men, having escaped, hiding in the deep recesses of the planetary wilderness. Rumors of Travelers who have come to join them and who will, when the terrible liberators fall from the sky, rise up against the monitors and the protectors of the Circle. If someone were to come down to this planet, and lead us in a fight against the Soroarchy, many would follow him."

Tamarind persisted. "That is not what I asked."

Jubal turned to Tobias. "Have these men any intention of liberating us?"

"They have promised me asylum aboard their ship," Tobias answered, with his eyes pinned shamefully to the floor.

"Oh, alas, the hundred million other men will covet your good fortune. What do they have to offer us?"

Tamarind concentrated, lifted his head and stared hard into the old man's eyes, then stood. "We can leave now. He has nothing more to tell us." He stood, and managed a gesture of respect, but not too much respect, to the old man who had been their host.

As Tamarind went for the door, Jubal grabbed his arm. "Wait!"

Tamarind gently took the man's hand away. "You have no contact with the aliens. You suspect others have been in contact with them, but not the men. I understand. That is all I wanted to know."

"What are you going to do to help us?" Jubal pleaded.

"I was not bred and trained to fight your Sororarchy. If you wish to cast off your chains, then do so. This is your life, if you can't fight for your own freedom, you do not deserve to have it."

"How dare you?" Tobias screamed, very indiscreetly.

Tamarind stood firm. "We must go now."

"Oh, fine," Jubal moaned. "Leave us. Go back to your spaceship and forget about your brothers. Go on, go..."

Right at that moment, Miller's communicator chirped for attention. Miller touched it to his ear, taking the message privately, then announcing. "Commander Keeler's shuttle is returning to Pegasus. The commander wants us to see him in the War Room ... now... Super-Duper High Priority. I'm going to signal Jones to pick us up in the compound. Is there a way to the roof?"

"Yes," Jubal answered bitterly. "You go up."

Just outside the outer marker, Winnie hooked up with Hector and transferred Keeler, Alkema, Partridge and the ship's original surviving crew. Hector continued and returned to Pegasus's landing bay with the rest of the ships, except for Winnie, which transported Lear and the Bodicean representatives back to Concordia.

The friends and relatives of Hector's crew greeted them in a raucous ceremony in the landing bay. Keeler, Alkema, and Honeywell left quickly and proceeded directly from the Landing Bay to the War Room, where Miller and Tamarind were waiting. They began with an exchange of intelligence. Alkema reported their meeting with the Aurelians, and provided them with a schematic of the world-ship. Honeywell provided his tactical assessment of the

Protector Ships. Keeler then talked about Coronado and his vivid mental impression of the assault she was planning on Bodicéa.

"They seem to have a greater depth of knowledge of this planet than we did when we entered the system," Tamarind observed.

"Solay suspected there was some kind of ... agent network at her planet," Keeler hazarded. "She may have been right."

"Collaborators, but even if there are any left, they ... they have been deceived." Miller responded. "We can not hold it against them."

Tamarind said, "That assumes they were, in fact, contacted by the Aurelians 400 years ago, and not some other Commonwealth World. It does not matter. The Aurelians are the enemy now, and you believe they will attack even if the Bodicéans approve the treaty."

"Za, I saw her thoughts clearly. There was an overwhelming impression of inevitability about it."

"Why will they attack?" Tamarind asked, emphasis on the why.

"The only sense I had of that is... an almost predatory motivation. As though, they need to consume other planets."

"Perhaps eliminating the weak," Honeywell suggested.

"Did you get a sense of when they plan this attack?" Tamarind persisted.

Keeler had to think very hard. "Soon."

"How did they treat the crewmen they captured?" Tamarind asked Honeywell.

"They all say they were well-treated... even spoiled."

"Were they questioned?"

"Nay, they said the Aurelians never asked about our ship, our defenses... not even where we were from."

"Hmm," Tamarind grunted.

"So, what next, Commander?" Miller asked.

As if in response, the doors to the War Room slid apart, and Flight Captain Jones entered, followed by Tactical Specialist Shayne American. The women took two of the open seats at the table.

They're timing was a little off, Keeler thought. A few minutes later, and their entrance would have been perfect. He continued. "Ground reconnaissance was an excellent idea. In our present circumstances it's as important to understand who we are defending as it is to understand who we're fighting. I commend your thinking"

"We can read the Aurelian's minds easily," Keeler went on. "The Bodicéans can not. We know the Aurelians are planning to conquer this planet, possibly destroy it as they did Medea. I can not convince the Bodicéans of this. The Aurelian leader has told them everything they wanted to hear and they believed it, most of them." he sighed and rested his head in his hands.

"Not all of them?" Miller asked.

"Neg, not all." Keeler raised his head slowly, and sighed again wearily. "I don't know whether my ship is strong enough to hold off their fleet. I don't know if I should try and do so over the objection of the planet's inhabitants. I don't know if I have the moral authority to fight on their behalf. So far, we have only met the leaders of this planet, and we have been

forbidden from making contact with... with the common citizen, the person on the street. Does the leadership truly speak for them? If I made an appeal to the people, would they want us to intervene?"

"The men would," said Miller. There was an unspoken question, too. Are these people good enough to be saved, at whatever cost to the ship and its crew?

Keeler swiveled his chair away from them, toward the bank of monitors showing Bodicéa, Pegasus, the moons, the position of the Aurelian fleet, and the seventh planet. "Miller, Honeywell, Tamarind, I want you to begin conceiving and implementing defensive strategies. Plan for initial minimum engagement, and then graduated escalation up to complete engagement using all ship's resources. We have to get maximum effect from each weapon if we are going to defend Bodicéa."

"We will do that," Miller answered.

"Executive Commander Lear is on the surface now, working to secure a meeting with planetary leadership to discuss the defense of their planet. Phil, prepare to go to the surface to present our strategy for their planetary defense."

Miller was skeptical. "Are they going to listen to a man? Shouldn't someone like Lt. Nasa, or even Specialist American be more suitable?"

"Even...?" American seethed.

"Also, if they have just been offered a peace treaty by the Bodicéans, are they even going to give half a thought to planetary defense. Their Pacifism seems... almost pathological."

"The first thing, that's your problem, take along a whole staff of female tactical officers, except American, I need her, and the second thing, that's also your problem, make the most of that almost."

Jones and American looked at each other. What did this have to do with them? They were about to find out.

"In the meantime," Keeler continued. "I want to know what the real people of this planet think. I need ground intelligence. I need people I know and trust to move among the common people and tell me how life is lived on Bodicéa."

"You want us to spy on them." Jones said.

"Neg, neg, ... well, not spy exactly. Think of it as ... anthropological tourism. Tell me how real Bodicéans live, and if they are likely to share the views of their leadership."

"Why us?"

"You're women, first of all. You are also senior officers whom I know I can trust. I asked Lt. Navigator Change if she would lead this mission, and she refused, rather adamantly."

"The next time you take an excursion party to Isle of Mab, I want you to drop them off, climb to altitude, hit the holoflage shield, and travel to this city." He pointed to a settlement on the interior of the southern continent. "Our Cultural Survey tells us, this is just about the most ordinary city on the planet, the Matthias, Graceland of Bodicéa."

"Don't oversell it," Miller said. "They might be disappointed when they get there."

"Spend a day down there, mix with the regular folk, come back and tell me. You'll be provided with typical Bodicéan clothing and identification, if you accept the mission."

"I still don't understand this mission," American said. "If we get down there, and if we find out the 'regular people' aren't worth fighting for, are we still going to fight for them?"

Keeler looked at her in a way that said his mind had already been made up. "Do you accept the mission."

Jones nodded. "Count me in."

American agreed. "Affirmative."

"Message incoming," said Communications Specialist Eads, on the bridge of Pegasus, a few hours after Keeler's meeting had concluded and he had gone to bed.

"Message incoming," Eads repeated after several seconds had passed with no acknowledgement from the commanding officer.

Eliza Jane Change had been thinking about Matthew. She had not heard from him in several days. The last time she had seen him was at the Slam-N-Jam, the night after his return from the first reconnaissance mission, the one that had given them totally the wrong idea about the Aurelians. He had not called to apologize, which she had expected. She wondered if she ought to...

"Message Incoming," Eads repeated, more loudly.

Eliza Jane cursed herself. "Origin?" she asked, not knowing whether it was time for a check in from the surface of Bodicéa, from the exploratory party on the moon, or from the extraction team that was wrapping up operations and preparing to evacuate the seventh planet.

Eads studied the message, an expression of perplexity wrinkled her fine Republicker figures. Eads was, for the record, the most elderly of the regular bridge officers, being only a few years before the age at which most Republickers retired from full-time employment and began receiving pension stipends. "At first I thought it was the extraction team on 10 225 Vulpeculus VII, but the prefix sequence is all wrong. It's on a standard communication frequency." Her wrinkled fingers worked across the comm panel. "Lieutenant, I believe it is originating from the alien fleet."

Matthew left her mind. "Show it to me."

Coronado appeared (not that Eliza Jane knew it was Coronado). She had dressed for the occasion, in something that almost looked like a formal uniform in white silk and spun gold. Eight other Aurelians stood beside her, similarly appareled. She wore a large, inviting smile, and oozed good cheer.

"This message is addressed to Executive Commander Goneril Lear. The Aurelian Body extends greetings to you, with all good wishes for your continued health and well-being."

"We could not but feel, upon your departure, that we had failed to convey the full measure of our peaceful intentions and hospitality to you. We understand the uncertainty you must be feeling, your doubt about the goodness of our intentions. I want to offer you my personal assurance, we have absolutely no intention of acting violently against the people of Bodicéa, nor any intention of subjugating them under our rule.

"We are convinced that further contacts will help build an atmosphere of trust between our people. We bid you to return to our world ship, where I will present you with a proposition that will ensure a permanent peace between all of our peoples.

"I sincerely hope you appreciate the gift we are offering you. I hope to see you very soon." She clasped her hands together and raised them, her voice turned almost pleading. "Let's not

give up on peace, the future is too important."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Commander Keeler was reviewing the latest reconnaissance report on the Aurelian fleet.

They had taken up position near the sixth planet, just outside its orbital margin, spreading out in a great crescent over ninety million kilometers from tip-to-tip. The image projected in the war room made him think of little iron filings, surrounding a small metal sphere like a ball bearing.

The World-Ship had moved into position at the rear of the formation near the center. However, prior to taking this position, it had circled the sixth planet at an orbit of 19 million kilometers for six hours, and had fired approximately 14,000 projectiles at its surface. Target practice? The reconnaissance probes weren't sure. The projectiles disappeared into the crust. No detonations were detected, and little dust was kicked up on the rocky surface.

10 225 Vulpeculus Six was called Kevil by the Bodicéans. It was a chunk of solid iron and nickel 2,200 kilometers in diameter, pocked with a few craters.

What are they up to? He wondered. *What are they up to?*

"*Pegasus* is in the prime launch position," Specialist Kyle McCormick reported at his station on PC-1. "Aves *Winnie*, you have a forty-five second optimal launch window, and a two minute nominal launch window."

Captain Wang's voice came back. "Winnie will launch in fifteen seconds."

"Acknowledged, Flight Control, *Winnie* is yours."

Commander Keeler looked over Specialist McCormick's shoulder. Hovering to the left of him, one display showed *Winnie* secured on the launch rails. Another display hung in the air on his right, showing a schematic view of the Aves with all systems green except for a large purple pod in the upper cargo bay they had been instructed not to ask about. A third display showed the course of *Winnie* projected to the margin of the sixth planet.

"Message for you, incoming, Commander," said the other Specialist McCormick, twin brother of the first.

"I'll take it, audio only." Keeler activated the comm unit on the collar of his command jacket. "Keeler here."

"Hoy, boss." There was a note of mocking irony in the way Queequeg called him boss that Keeler never quite cared for.

"Hoy, Queequeg. Can you confirm the passenger is secured on-board *Winnie*?"

"Transfer is complete. Package and passenger on-board."

"Automated systems."

If Keeler had not failed to talk Queequeg into traveling with *Winnie*, to make sure the mission succeeded, his stomach would not be tossing so much now, at least not so hard. There were risks attached to what they were doing, of that, the cat had been unequivocal. He had been just as intractable in his refusal to leave *Pegasus*, precisely because some of those risks meant *Winnie* might not return. Instead, the cat had assured him the automated systems

would do the job.

"All clear. Keeler out. Godspeed, *Winnie*."

The launch count dropped from ten to zero. Winnie fired down the rails and shot from the fore-part of the ship at an almost ludicrous speed. Keeler hoped his kitty-cat was right.

Lear had succeeded in convincing the Inner Circle to entertain (the exact word) a tactical presentation of Lt. Cmdr. Miller accompanied by the able Bridget Armatrading. Tamarind also came along, but only to observe. Miller noticed, with some amusement, that the pacifistic Bodicéan women stared in a kind of fascinated horror at the warrior in their midst. He had learned that the preponderance of Bodicéan literature equated warriors with monsters and demons. They didn't seem afraid of Tamarind so much as intrigued, perhaps even aroused.

"The Security Circle has not convened in over a century." Solay intoned at the beginning of the meeting. She had assured Lear that only those members of the circle who were most skeptical of the Aurelians' good intentions would be present. "However, our charter remains in effect. We have the capability to mobilize planetary resources to ensure the safety of our people, if we feel a sufficiently grave threat exists."

"You may not feel a threat at present," Solay continued. "However, our ability to defend our planet, perhaps ... and I emphasize *perhaps* ... with the assistance of these people, may be necessary to preserve Bodicéa on our own terms. In the spirit of our foremothers, to preserve everything they have bequeathed to us, we owe them an audience. Consider their presentation carefully, and consider the lives of your daughters and grand-daughters, and the world they will inherit."

Miller let Armatrading present the outline of his plans while he studied the Bodicéans' reactions. The effect with the two-dimensional projectors used by the Bodicéans was considerably less impressive than the full sensory engagement displays he was accustomed to, and he had a tough room to begin with. The women were polite however, and did not raise objections until almost four minutes into the presentation, as Armatrading presented a schematic of one of the Orbital Defense Stations.

"Orbital Battle Stations," said one woman, older than she would have like to admit, in a tremulous voice. "Just the thought of having deadly weapons hanging over our heads... *over our children's heads*. It is contrary to everything I was raised to believe in."

"The only purpose of this weapon ... " said Armatrading, in a tone that tried to be both patient and firm, but came off as patronizing. "... is to defend this planet against incoming hostile ships, missiles, warheads, and other forms of ballistic attack."

"What about the debris?" said another woman. "Wouldn't it rain down on our cities and destroy us?"

Armatrading was about to explain how unlikely this was, statistically speaking, as well as describing the relative difference in the amount of damage between a piece of debris and the thermonuclear warheads and other weapons used on Medea, but another woman spoke before she could continue.

"The very minute we place 'death stars' in orbit around our planet, the enemy has already destroyed us. Two thousand years of pacifism will have ended." Her tone was anguished, and she seemed on the verge of hysterical tears.

"Perhaps, it would be better if we just signed the treaty, and offered our unconditional surrender," said one woman, one of the older members. "If we don't give them a reason to fight us, then, no one would have to die."

"If we resorted to arming ourselves, we would be no better than those who come to conquer us," a stout, hatchet faced woman pronounced. "The moment we abandon our principles of pacifism, our way of life is lost."

Somebody already said that, Miller thought. He stifled a yawn, instinctively knowing that the 'committee instinct' had taken hold, and wondered how much time would pass before anything new or useful was said.

"Do you have any alternatives to putting war machines in the skies above our planet?" asked another woman. The tone of her voice was sincere, at least.

Armatrading continued brightly. "We could also help you construct shields for your population centers. Unfortunately, they would take several months to build, and years before all of your cities could be protected." She advanced the slide.

"Live under alien rule, or live inside a military camp, a fortress," hatchet-face said bitterly. "Which would be worse?"

"Even if the cities are protected, the countryside and our wilderness areas would be vulnerable," someone else observed.

"The shields themselves might damage the environment," another woman put in. "We can not save ourselves at the expense of the environment. It goes against our principles."

"Again, we are forced to choose between our Pacifist Tradition, and possible annihilation," a woman said, her voice full of sorrow.

If these were the women in charge of Planetary Defense, Miller wondered, what did the Justice Circle do all day, sit around debating ways not to arrest criminals?

"I think we should look to the Middle Way," another woman said. Her face was pudgy, but not uncomely. Her hair fell in rivulets of red and gold curls and her head lolled slightly when she talked. "Just because they take over our world doesn't mean they control our hearts and minds. We can mount a passive resistance against them, and preserve both our culture and our pacifism."

"Yes, yes, a middle way," a thoughtful, bookish-looking woman said. "Do you recall learning in school of the Matriards of New Livonia, and how they protected their province against the Marauders of Kevvish?"

"That was a work of fiction," Solay said darkly.

One of the other women became suddenly animated. "I loved that book. That's a very good idea. We could plant giant thorn-trees around all of our cities, the way the Matriards did. I can have a dozen copies brought from the central library, and we can study their techniques." She did not use the same tone as Miller would have in offering the suggestion.

Another woman remembered. "At night, they built bonfires from dried Lylah leaves. Breathing in the smoke from burning Lylah produces euphoria, lethargy and confusion. The wind blew the smoke over the camp of the marauders, causing them to fall asleep. They sent out spies and took their weapons from them. When they could not fight, they were forced to go home."

"We could line the roads to every city with ryejack weed," a young woman suggested. She was normally a part of the Circle of Agriculture, where debate over the best means of

eliminating ryejack from the crop areas had been raging for decades.

Armatrading turned to Miller, and offered by way of explanation. "Ryejack is a kind of plant. When a creature passes near, it shoots out clouds of pollen. It is extremely allergenic. It makes your eyes burn. Your lungs begin to itch so fiercely you want to tear your chest open to get at them."

"That seems ... excessively cruel," said one older woman.

Not as cruel as what the Aurelians have in mind, Miller kept to himself.

Pudgy face made her assertion again. "We can mount a passive resistance. Let them take our cities. We will ignore them, and go on about our lives. We will refuse to serve them. We will refuse to share food with them, or carry out their orders. We will remain pacifist, and still refuse to submit to their rule. Civil disobedience is the third way."

"The resin of the Brugg Tree can be boiled into a liquid adhesive. If we spread it in front of the enemy..."

"I object to the term 'enemy,'" said hatchet-face, raising her finger.

"... in front of our antagonists. Their feet would become stuck in the resin. They would be trapped, and unable to march on us."

Pudgy face looked extremely concerned at this. "We would need an awful lot of resin. I don't know that we could produce enough from our forests without causing ecological damage."

"The spores of miuli produce euphoria and hallucinations," added the bookish woman, whose eyes were hidden behind circles of glass that made her look like some wise bird. "If we could gather enough spores, and release them in the air toward the enemy..."

"...antagonists!"

Lt. Cmdr. Miller was about to launch into a fierce explanation of the effects of orbital thermonuclear weapons on resins and hallucinogenic spores, when Tamarind touched his shoulder. Miller turned, and the warrior-monk shook his head slightly.

Goneril Lear came alone, back to the sphere, the world-ship of the Aurelians. As it loomed closer and closer and finally swallowed the Aves that had conveyed her, she could not help but wonder *How could we ever defeat such a thing?* Deep inside, she knew, but that would only be a last resort, and she did not know if she could give the command.

Some naked humans met her at the dock and escorted her into a grand hall where water cascaded down the walls and collected in stone pools. Coronado was soaking in a pool of hot, aromatic water in a great hall lined with flowers. Flower petals floated in the pool and wafted around in the air. A quintet of attendants, naked and female, tended to her. Their skin was a medley of tan and brown hues. When Coronado stood, they poured cool water on her from golden pitchers and offered her fruit from golden trays. It was like looking at an idyllist's tableau, Lear thought, the kind of art the first colonists on her world had created to distract them from their bleak world.

"Join me," said Coronado. Her voice echoed and sang in the chamber. Lear could not tell if it was meant as a command or an invitation. A man and a woman appeared at her side, smiling. She gathered they were here to take her clothes.

"There is no need for modesty here," Coronado continued. "There is no shame among

Aurelians. We accept what we are, as should you."

Awkwardly, Lear removed her boots, her jacket, and the rest of her uniform until she stood naked. The artificial sunlight warmed her. The flooring felt soft and giving beneath her feet. She walked toward the pool and dipped a foot into the water. It was very hot indeed.

"Cooler," Coronado commanded, and her attendants began emptying pitchers into the pool. Lear sat on the edge, immersed only up to her knees.

Coronado turned in her direction, but seemed to have some difficulty focusing on her, as though Lear were some insect skipping in and out of her field of view. "The Hanged Man has devoted many hours contemplating this ... our situation; your ship, my fleet, both arriving at this same small planet at the same time. If you had come a few years before, you would have known nothing of us. If you came a few years later, you would find Bodicéa in the midst of integration into the Aurelian Union."

"How many worlds are in your union?" Lear asked.

"Many. We have been in space far longer than you. We are in many ways superior, and yet ... "

"Yet?"

Coronado smiled elegantly. "And yet you are well-met. We like you Executive Commander."

"We?"

"The Echelon. We have seen you and Commander Keeler together and we are amazed that it is he who commands your ship and not you. How did that come to be?"

"It is no mystery. He was selected by the Odyssey Project to command *Pegasus*, and I was selected to be Executive Officer."

"By what criteria was he given authority over you. You are clearly his superior in intellect and temperament. Are your cultures rigidly patriarchal? Do you have some kind of caste arrangement? How is it he has command?"

"Commander Keeler was quite accomplished on his world. His family has a prominent role in his planet's history."

"An aristocracy!" Coronado growled.

"Commander Keeler is eminently capable of commanding *Pegasus*."

"And you are more capable. If the commander died, would you have command?"

An image came into her mind, and Lear knew what Coronado suggested had already been arranged. "I would, that is true. Why do you ask?"

"Because you are a woman of intellect and temperament. We could work with you, but we are very ... concerned, yes, very concerned that he could do something reckless, or intemperate, that would echo throughout the ages as a moment when an opportunity for peace and cooperation was cast aside in favor of fear and prejudice."

"I share Commander Keeler's reservations about your intentions."

"On what basis?"

"We know you were at Medea," Lear said tartly. "You may deceive the Bodicéans, but we have seen your work first-hand. We found a body in the ruins there, one of your ..., what do call them, 'Swords.'"

Coronado managed to look almost convincingly troubled. "Aurelians are the height of

human advancement and enlightenment. We try to bring our enlightenment to other worlds. As you have surely seen, not all worlds are ready to give up their superstitions, their foundless loyalty to the old ways they have known. Some worlds would prefer to destroy themselves, rather than become a part of the Aurelian Body. It only takes a few extremist fanatics, armed with weapons of mass destruction, to destroy a world."

"Were you at Medea?" Lear tried hard to peer into Coronado's mind. The answer was ambiguous, she was, and yet she was not.

"I am merely raising a hypothetical. If that planet Medea suffered such a cruel fate, my heart mourns for it. We did not reach them in time, show them the way of perfect peace. Please try the wine."

A gesture brought one of the human servants to Lear's elbow, bearing a large glass. Lear tried the wine, except that it did not taste like wine. It was like someone had figured out a way to bottle moonlight as it dappled on a crystal lake.

Coronado continued. "Look around you. Could a violent species have produced such beauty, such wonders? Violence is not in our nature. To be Aurelian is to be pure of mind, and perfect in body."

"What of the spirit?"

Coronado smiled condescendingly. "Really, Goneril, a woman of your intellect, embracing such childishness. I do not mean to be insulting, but surely, some part of you must be at least skeptical of the faith you place in magical beings."

"The debate was settled millennia ago."

"Our conversation attests that it was not. No matter, we need not concern ourselves with this distraction. There are serious issues at hand here. You, and your ship, are preparing to prevent us, or to attempt to prevent us, from integrating the world called Bodicéa into our Union, quite against the will of her people, who may wish to join us."

"If Bodicéa does not wish to be integrated, we will stand with them."

"Brave words. You must realize you can not defeat Aurelia. However, conflict between us would be destructive and unnecessary for both sides and in the end the planet would be lost anyway. The intellectual consensus must be to not fight."

Lear said nothing. "Playing it close," Coronado said. "Betraying nothing. Perhaps you think you do have the firepower, or the tactical knowledge to eke out a victory against us, against overwhelming odds. Perhaps, you think perishing nobly in battle is an honorable way to die; a common belief among superstitious primitives."

"You insult us," Lear said.

"Not at all. I am actually surprised a culture as advanced as yours still clings to such things. I actually have respect for your culture, and your achievements, one achievement in particular."

"What would that be?"

Coronado held up a tiny gold triangle, representing *Pegasus*, and a larger gold sphere representing the Aurelian World-Ship. She released them, and let them hover above the pool. "An imbalance exists between us. Aurelia has superior forces, superior intellect, superior strength, and vastly more resources than your ship or your worlds. You do however possess something we do not. Do you know what that is?"

"We can navigate hyperspace. You can not." Lear said confidently.

Coronado reacted with surprise that was almost certainly feigned. "You are correct! We know of hyperspace. We know how to enter it, but we do not know how to control our re-entry point. We do not even have a propulsion system that functions in Hyperspace. How is it that you arrived at such knowledge before we did?"

Lear let the shadow of a smile cross her lips in a way she hoped looked enigmatic. Accustomed to the water now, she slid into the pool. It made her feel somehow less naked.

Coronado seemed to approve, and gave her a brief nod as she sipped away at a cup of pink liquid. "Did you develop hyperspace technology on your own, or was it something you encountered in the course of your exploration of space?"

"What difference would it make?" Lear asked.

"We know the ancient humans," she said ancient humans with a kind of disgust, "possessed hyperspace technology. It was how they were able to metastasize themselves throughout this poor, unfortunate galaxy. If you encountered an ancient artifact, perhaps, the wreck of an ancient Commonwealth starship, and gleaned this knowledge from it, then you did not actually create the technology. The technology would have to be considered part of the legacy of all humankind, do you not agree?"

Lear waited a long time before responding. "Perhaps, but you are no longer human."

"True, and on the other side, if you developed this technology on your own, then it is your possession, and you may decide to share it with us, or not to share."

"A very interesting perspective," Lear admitted.

"In any case, the fact that you possess this technology and we do not creates an unacceptable imbalance. You are a highly intelligent woman. Certainly more worthy of command than that strange, degenerate man who pretends to command your ship. By now, you have deduced that we are very interested in this technology. Do you know what I am going to propose?"

"That you will spare this world in return for our hyperspace navigation technology."

Coronado's laugh roared through the chamber. "Oh, no, no, no. Nothing so trivial as that. What we would offer to you would be an almost infinitely greater gift. We are willing to propose and exchange, an exchange that would be an extraordinary gift to your people, and your worlds."

"The absorption of our worlds into the Aurelian Body, presumably, that would be your goal already."

"Think beyond that. Yours are the first worlds we have discovered who travel among the stars. You could be our partners, our allies. The gift of hyperspace navigation would be like... a wedding gift."

"And what would your dowry be?" Lear asked.

Coronado maintained her beneficent smile. "Anything of ours is yours, just ask. Any technology, our knowledge of the galaxy... a place reserved for you worlds within the Aurelian Union."

"Sparing Bodicéa?"

Coronado smiled. "A most interesting suggestion."

That's why you thought of it, Lear said to herself, sipping the wine.

The Aves *Basil* returned to *Pegasus* from the planet Bodicéa promptly at 1800 hours ship time.

Keeler received Flight Captain Jones and Specialist American in his quarters, meeting them at the entrance with a bottle of well-chilled Sudloon Merlot. "Welcome back."

"Good to be back, commander," answered Jones, more or less automatically. Like all the commander's visitors, they could not keep their eyes on him with all the room's distracting contents. No one had quarters anything like the Commander's. The walls were hung with Forrester tapestries from ancient monasteries, paintings too muddy and faded to be anything but originals, and holo-posters by the 94th century master, Mr. Synch. The furnishings were definitely not Odyssey-issue, enormous leather couches so soft a baby's ass was like sandpaper in comparison. A great fireplace dominated one side, they could swear they had seen it before. (A reproduction of the one used in the classic holiday holo-fiction, *White Solstice*, which was made at one of the Keelers' country retreats.)

"Please, have a seat. I've arranged for some snackies, I hope you like caviar from Lake Swisher in Boreala, if not, I've got a nice spread of snack cakes from Jolly Addison." Jolly Addison ran a baked goods shop on The Mall. Her cream- and fruit-filled cakes had developed quite a following among the crew, were too rich for the immediate tastes of American and Jones. They politely accepted smears of caviar on the little bread-puffs he had laid out. They were still dressed in local finery, such as it was, something like sweat suits with billowy pirate sleeves and stitching designs on the lapels.

"Love to sink my claws into those vestments," came a voice.

The women turned to see a largish gray tabby cat with a white bib emerge from the sleep-chamber. He was staring them up with thoughtful green eyes.

"Ignore him," said Keeler, setting into a patchwork lounge chair. "Tell me what you learned about the people of this world."

Jones looked at American. American looked at Jones. Jones looked at American again.

"Well,...?" Keeler prompted.

"Where should we start?" asked Jones.

"From the beginning."

This made it more like a mission report. Jones could handle that. "After depositing an away party on Mab, I traveled 1700 kilometers southwest, landed *Basil* outside a city called Callista, on the interior of the southern continent. It was shortly before mid-day."

"What was the city like?"

"It was very... well-planned."

American agreed. "You could tell the city had been very deliberately planned. The streets were laid out like spokes from the center. It made it hard to double-back once you were lost, and we got lost a lot. The buildings were close, like they didn't want a single meter of space to go to waste."

"Did you blend in?" Keeler asked.

Jones shook her head. "Neg, our costumes marked us as Assistants to the Outer Circle. We could barely walk a hundred meters before someone would come up to us, wanting to know if we could get the Circle to intervene in some matter."

"Everyone thought we were there to take appeals, which I guess is what assistants do."

Queequeg jumped up onto the couch between the two women and rolled on his back, spreading his legs apart. "Scratch my belly."

Almost unconsciously, Jones began scratching his ample kitty midriff. Queequeg lay back, stretched, and closed his eyes. "We tried to find a central shopping area, but they don't really have them as such. They have shops where they make food and furniture and clothing, and people work there, and sometimes the people making clothes go and get food from the people making food."

"We eventually got lunch from one place by agreeing to plead a case to the Outer Circle on behalf of the cooperative who ran the food outlet."

"How was lunch?"

"You've had legumes and rice-grain before, haven't you commander?"

"Of course."

"Imagine beans and rice seasoned with oranges and peppermint and sprinkled with leaves and roots and that's pretty much what lunch was like."

"Tell me more about this pleading."

"The women at the food cooperative wanted to be moved to a larger dwelling. They live communally, you see. A family unit can be four, six, ten women and all their children. This cooperative had recently taken in a woman and her two daughters from another unit. The local Community Circle wouldn't approve them for a transfer, so they wanted the Outer Circle, which is a planetary authority, to compel the Community circle to find them a larger dwelling."

American added. "We had to write out the plea on long sheets of ... I think it used to be called 'paper.'"

"You learned to write in Bodicéan?" Keeler said, surprised.

"We... engaged a scribe."

"A scribe, you say. How very interesting."

"Now, do the ears!" Queequeg demanded. "And how 'bout some o' that caviar if you're not going to eat it. Hungry cat here."

"We had to arrange for lunch for the scribe ... and ... something else she wanted."

American blushed and looked at the floor.

"You're not going to tell us, are you?" said Queequeg.

"Queequeg!"

"Well, they aren't."

"It's not important, so, what were your impressions of the ... of the ordinary people. How do they live? Are they happy?"

"The city we were in was... it was nice enough," said American. "There were garden parks, fountains. It was very clean."

Keeler set down his merlot. "I sense that something about it bothered you. What was it?"

Jones wrapped both hands around her beverage and frowned. "I couldn't get my mind around it until the return flight to *Pegasus*. I spent five years traveling around Sapphire with my husband. When Phil... Whenever Lt. Cmdr. Miller and I traveled to a new city, we always

went to a pub, and we'd meet people, and someone always offered to let us stay in their home. Always, it happened in every city. Of all the women we talked to in Callista, no one offered to let us spend the night with them. When I told some of them that we had traveled from a distant city, and wondered where we might stay for the night, no one offered to take us in. They all offered directions to the local shelters for travelers, but nobody would take us into their home."

"Not even the scribe?" Queequeg asked.

"Queequeg!"

The cat flattened his ears and stretched out again. He over-stretched his balance, and fell behind the couch. Feline pride obligated him to lie there, as though he had intended this all along.

"Do the Bodicéans have any idea what's going on?"

"When we were down there, the major story on the news kiosks was an extension of the Public Donation. They have these news kiosks in every work place, and every public square. Once an hour, two women from the Circle of Information appear and tell then what the government is doing."

"People don't pay much attention to it. Come of them were a little angry because the public donation was being expanded."

"What's a Public Donation?"

"Every Bodicéan woman is required to turn over half of everything she earns to the community she lives in. The community gives half of that to the provincial government. The provinces all give half of that to the Inner Circle, who use it to distribute resources equally across the planet. The Outer Circle voted that once a year, every Bodicéan should take ten percent of what remains and donate it directly to the Inner Circle."

Keeler was shocked. *The government took half of everyone's income?* "Public donation," he spat. "They make it sound so nice."

"They were unhappy because they said their city always donates more than it receives in benefits from the planetary government."

Keeler chuckled. "Looks like the Aurelians will arrive just in time to put down a tax-revolt."

"Actually, no one was speaking against the tax," Shayne American put in. "Not when they thought we were listening, anyway."

"They support it?"

"Nay, they don't support it, but they were afraid of the Monitors."

"Monitors?"

"They're like an internal security force. They are usually very large women working in pairs. They were dark black and blue robes with brass insignia. They're supposed to keep order, but they've been very active lately. A few women asked us why there were so many more monitors on the streets, and why so many woman were being detained."

Solay's security forces, Keeler thought.

"We saw them in action," Jones reported. "It was rather frightening. A whole squad of them, eight in all, all wearing heavy armor, stormed into a print shop. They came out with four women and two girls."

"That's when Jones did something stupid," Shayne American grumbled.

Keeler smiled. "What did you do?"

"All the women were looking at me, and I knew they expected me to intervene. I went up to the guards, introduced myself as a representative of the Outer Circle, and demanded an explanation. The lead monitor..."

"An enormous, terrifying womanoid," American added, almost under her breath.

"... was just deferential enough to me to tell me it was a matter of security. I demanded the names of her and each of the women under her, which she provided. She would not tell me what the women were being charged with, so, we asked the women who were in the area if they knew anything about the women. They wouldn't say anything until the Monitors left. We were leaving to, when a woman gestured to me, and told me privately that the women and the girls from the print shop had just broken off from their collective group and had been critical of both the Inner and Outer Circles. Their print shop had published leaflets critical of some of the Circles' policies."

"They arrest people for criticizing the government?"

"Not normally, but they do have a law that says you can be arrested if you knowingly make false accusations against the government or against any member of the Circle. Apparently, it's a generous technicality."

"Is Solay cracking down on anyone who disagrees with the government?" Keeler asked.

Jones and American shook their heads. "Neg, only on people who are talking about us."

"Really?"

"The four women had published a weekly journal. The journal was about four pages front and back, about this big," she indicated a space with her hands about the size of a wedding invitation. Anyway, they had written about the 'false signal,' the government had received a few weeks ago, and sightings of strange lights over the Isle of Mab and Serenopolis. They thought the government might have made contact with the Commonwealth, and were withholding the information."

"Do you know what happened to the women?"

"They were taken to a detention facility. We tried to get in to see them, but the Monitors began asking us too many questions about our identification. We did not want to arouse suspicion, so we returned to the ship."

Keeler got a contemplative look on his face, but it quickly passed. "Thank you, you did very well. File complete reports when you've had a chance to settle in. Don't leave out any detail."

"Does that help, commander?" Jones asked.

Keeler sighed. "Not really. I'm kind of back where I started. I was hoping you would either come back and tell me that this planet is wonderful and peaceful and by all means save it, but instead, it still sounds like a planet populated by basically good people, ruled over by a government I don't care for. If it weren't for the Aurelians, I'd move on and not give them any more thought. Let the Rep... let the home worlds deal with them, but unfortunately, I'm here and I have to make the call."

"Would you like my opinion?" American asked.

"And mine?" Jones added.

"Sure, lay it on me."

The women looked at each other. American went first. "I say fight for them. If you really think the Aurelians are out to destroy them, then you have to fight for them. They are humans. Their leaders can not possibly understand the danger they're in. We do. We have the means and the opportunity, and that gives us the obligation."

Keeler looked at Jones.

"I agree, we have to fight for them. Not because of who they are, but just because their world is unique. If the Aurelians destroy it, there will never be another place like it."

"Thanks," Keeler said half-heartedly.

"God put us here for a reason, commander," American added.

The women left. Keeler fingered a Jolly Addision cake, then put it down again and reached for a glass of Maram Blended Whisky.

"Want to know what I think?" came a voice from behind the couch.

"I am sure I don't."

Two paws appeared at the top of the couch. With a heave, Queequeg brought himself up. "Why would you risk this ship and our whole mission over those ungrateful females?"

"You're a cat, that's what I would expect you to say."

"Let me ask you this, boss. How many colonies are on our actual itinerary."

"One hundred sixteen," Keeler answered.

Queequeg looked shocked that the commander knew the answer. "Supposing we do end up paying call on all one hundred eleven. Statistically speaking, at least forty of them, probably more, are going to be dead. You were lucky. Your world survived, but a lot of human worlds didn't. Medea didn't. If the Bodicéans want to stare oblivion in the face and say, 'Come and get us,' then I think the universe has selected them for extinction, based on stupidity. If you talk to the Old Man, he'll tell you the same thing."

Keeler downed his shot, which went straight to his gut like a burning meteor. "I am going to talk to the Old Man, after Lear gets back, and I will ask him."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The pace of activity in the War Room had quickened, urgency electrified the air. Four tactical personnel on full-time watch monitored every move of the Aurelian fleet, still holding position behind the orbital margin of the sixth planet, as it had for six local days. Additional personnel at other displays kept tabs on the Aves, Shrieks, and probes that were off-*Pegasus*.

Lear had returned from her mission, and met with Keeler, Miller, Honeywell, and Tamarind. She provided them with an accounting of her meeting with Coronado, leaving out the parts dealing with hot baths, wine, and nudity; a secret she would take to her grave.

"The good news is, Coronado is willing to negotiate with us."

"Is she?" Keeler asked dubiously.

"I was sent with a message from her. They know we are preparing to defend the planet, and they have invited to begin peace talks aboard the Aurelian World-Ship."

"Right," Keeler said skeptically.

"And they will hold off on any action against Bodicéa while Peace Talks are going on."

"Was she thinking about bombing them while she made the offer?"

"Nay, she was thinking about us, and all the ways our technology might be useful to her people, but I believe her desire to negotiate is genuine."

"They would keep us busy while they prepared their assault," Honeywell suggested.

"With our senior officers on board the world-ship, we would hesitate to use our big guns," Miller suggested.

"Coronado suggested that the negotiations could take place at a place of our choosing. She suggested the base on the outer moon of Bodicéa. The terms under which she is willing to negotiate, suggest we may have something more valuable to the Aurelians than the planet Bodicéa."

"What would that be?" Keeler, thinking it probably wasn't the recipe for Janeberry pie.

"They have offered to leave the system, in exchange for the technology we use to navigate hyperspace."

"Oh, is that all?" Keeler said, turning to Honeywell. "You can relax gentlemen, our janeberry pie recipes are safe, as are the first-born children of my first officer." He didn't add, *I never liked that kid anyway.*

"I think the path of negotiation is worth pursuing."

Miller snapped angrily. "We don't know how many systems they've destroyed using conventional drive. If we gave them access to hyperspace... not only would we forfeit our only tactical advantage, we'd be sentencing billions to annihilation. I can't believe you are even considering it!" Miller almost shouted. "We've seen what the Aurelians did to Medea."

"Coronado strongly suggested that the Medeans annihilated themselves rather than allow themselves to be integrated into the Aurelian body."

"Really?"

"She implied that they were a violent, war-like people who did not want to accept the enlightenment the Aurelians offered. So, they turned their weapons on themselves."

"I refuse to accept that," Miller objected. "Humans do not exterminate themselves. The Aurelians came. The Medeans resisted. The Aurelians wiped them out."

"The evidence could be interpreted to support Coronado's version of events," Lear said calmly.

"I didn't see any evidence that the Medeans possessed orbital wepaonry." Miller said, waving toward his report on the cratering patterns found on the Medean surface. "Can we even trust them at all?"

"Did you detect any deception?" Keeler asked Lear.

Lear nodded her head. "Coronado believes that the Medeans were responsible for their own holocaust. I couldn't tell whether the Aurelians launched the final attack or not."

"Maybe they ran out of patience with the negotiations," Honeywell suggested.

Lear frowned. "We all know that technology alone is insufficient to navigate hyperspace. Even if we provided them with the technology, they might not..."

"We can't take that risk. I'll destroy *Pegasus* and the World-Ship before I let them get anywhere near Hyperspace technology."

Keeler looked a little taken aback by the fury of Miller's argument. "Don't give yourself an aneurysm, lieutenant. I agree. Surrendering access to hyperspace is not on the table."

Miller relaxed. Tamarind looked on, unperturbed as usual. Keeler raised a hand for calm. "I agree, hyperspace travel is our primary advantage over them. I am not going to hand it over."

"I only bring it up as a tool to get them to the negotiating table. That's the only way I would look at it. It's a negotiating chit," Lear insisted.

"What did you call me?"

"If we can keep them discussing the issue, it gives the Bodicéans time to construct a defense."

Miller shook his head. "Haven't you heard? The Bodicéans aren't constructing any defenses."

Lear looked surprised. She had proceeded to the War Room immediately after departing her ship. She had not received a briefing on Miller's presentation to the Bodicéan Circle. "Didn't you meet with them?"

"Za, I spent half a day sitting in a stuffy room with a group of nominally hygienic women who basically agreed that any attempt to defend themselves would mean compromising their principles of pacifism. They would rather live on their knees."

"You were unable to persuade them to construct any defenses at all?"

"Neg, they are planning non-lethal, non-violent defenses." He displayed the report for Lear's review. "As you can see, their most critical assets will be protected by sturdy macrame and papier maché projects, probably made by Miss Harmony's 3rd Gradient Art Class."

Lear scanned the reports. "These defenses will never stop the Aurelians."

"Not unless the Aurelians hate craft fairs as much as I do."

Keeler looked at the reports. "They might stop the Lake of the Loons Gardening Club, but they're not invading."

"And last I heard, they didn't have orbital thermonuclear devices."

"If they did, it would sure take out the ground-monster problem in New Cleveland." Keeler put in.

"Could we be serious, gentlemen," Lear insisted, sharply enough to make them sit bolt upright. "I will have to meet with Ciel again. She has to be persuaded to defend her planet, or, at the very least, permit us to do so."

"Good luck," Miller told her. "The way I see it, a third of the Bodicéans are ready to join the Aurelians, a third of them of them, don't want anything to do with either one of us, and the other third thinks we are agents of the Aurelians."

Keeler summarized. "Which makes zero thirds that would have anything to do with us."

"You should also know that Solay is using the crisis as an excuse to use the indigenous security forces to crack down on political opposition," Miller continued, or so Jubal and Tobias had informed him.

Keeler sighed. "Now I remember why all the politicians on my planet were skinned and eaten 4,000 years ago."

"Solay is our best ally," Lear insisted. "If I can get through to her, she would listen to reason. She has no more desire to live under the Aurelians than to ally with us. She is a patriot."

"Or an opportunist," Miller countered.

Keeler's communication link chose that uncomfortable moment to chirp. True to form, it played the Armpit Avengers Fight Song. Keeler snapped it. "Go!" he ordered, then regretted it. It sounded too imperious.

"Commander, this is Doctor Reagan in Hospital One. Could you come down here?"

"Uh... not right now. I'm sort of busy... planning a war."

"Maybe you mis-heard me. Aye sayed, could you come down to Hospital One, Right Now?"

Keeler sighed. "Ten minutes, Keeler out."

"If I may advise you, commander," said Tamarind at last. "I would send an immediate dispatch to the Aurelians. You should tell them that any weapon launched in the direction of *Pegasus* will be destroyed. You should tell them that any unauthorized ship that approaches *Pegasus* will be treated as hostile."

"Immediately?"

"The Aurelians approached this system with an attack plan. They are going to carry out that plan according to their existing schedule. The diplomatic feints are distractions to keep us from realizing that the attack is imminent."

"I don't agree," said Lear. "If we keep them in negotiations, we can buy enough time to find a way to save Bodicéa."

Keeler addressed her. "I think you should return to the surface. Get in touch with Ciel, and find out with the status of the treaty is in the Circle. Try to persuade her to let us protect them while they decide, then stall them on ratification."

Ciel sighed. "I don't know that I have any influence with Ciel."

"You have more than any of us. I'll have an Aves ready to launch in two hours. Communicate with Ciel and tell her you're coming. Do you know where she is?"

"She's in Serenopolis."

"Go to her," Keeler ordered. "Lt. Cmdr. Miller, continue our defensive preparation."

"Za, commander."

"As soon as Ex Commander's Lear's ship is underway, I want your battle-plan in front of me. I know I'm probably just going to approve it, but I want to see it anyway."

"I would also advise you to begin evacuating our personnel from the surface," Tamarind said. "It's automatic with Going to Battle Situation Two, but we may not have time to get everyone if they strike too soon."

They rose from the table as one, business concluded. Keeler tapped his wrist. "Hospital One. I am en route."

Tamarind stood by the hatch with his arms crossed. If they ever made a statue of him, this would have been a good pose. "Lieutenant Alkema, you must return to the surface as well."

"Why?"

"I promised Ciel's daughter that you would visit her again."

Alkema rolled his eyes. "Thank you for making my life awkward."

"It was necessary."

"Do you have any idea what it's like to have a pubescent girl infatuated with you?"

"Aye, I do."

"Really?"

"Do you remember N-TEC?"

"Non-Threatening Eye Candy? The teen-boy vocalizing ensemble? Za, my older sister had a major Jones for them."

"Za, I was Jarad, the shy one."

"Wow," Alkema said. "You can admit to that?"

"A warrior has no use for vanity. I used to receive messages from tens of thousands of young infatuated girls." He smiled awkwardly, which may have been the only way he knew how to smile, as it was his rarest expression. "I gave her my word. It was wrong of me to pledge your honor, but it was necessary."

Alkema sighed. "I guess if you can admit to being the shy one, I can pay her a visit."

A strange expression crossed Avril Lear's face. She began muttering to herself. "Ciel has a daughter. I have a son. I was able to make a connection with her before based on our religion."

Thousands of kilometers below, in the city of Serenopolis, it was night. Ciel sat at her desk, poring over reports from her own circle, and from *Pegasus*. Astronomers on her world had detected the faint line of objects, of ships, that made up the Aurelian fleet. The sensors on *Pegasus* could see them even more precisely, as the Aurelians positioned themselves just outside the orbit of Celestine, the sixth planet.

The proposed treaty had been presented to the Inner Circle for consideration. It had taken the better part of three days to decide what to do with us. The Circle Covenant had not contemplated the issue of treaties. With the planet unified, and the rest of the Commonwealth fallen, it was presumed there was no one left with who to make a treaty. So, would approval of the treaty require a simple majority as would be the case for most laws, or did it equate to a "High Resolution," requiring the concurrence of nine of the twelve. Some argued that, given the implications for planetary culture, nothing less than a unanimous vote should be the standard.

Reviewing historical precedent, it was discovered that two-thirds was the standard for treaty acceptance in the High Circles of the several provinces and nation's that had come together to form the planetary government, and that a two-thirds vote had been required for a territory to join the planetary union. So it was decided, eight of the twelve of the inner circle must vote for approval.

Now, it stood at six in favor, three against, and three undecided. She, herself, was in the latter category. She liked what she had seen of the Aurelians, but she had not seen enough. Had it been up to her, they would have waited a year, at least, and studied the Aurelian

culture in detail. She was thinking of introducing a counter-resolution, a treaty of friendship and cooperation in place of absolutely joining the Aurelian Union. If necessary, she would make the same offer to the Pegasans, as Executive Commander Lear's people had come to be called.

Below, she heard the entrance bell chime. Several people answered, and she heard muffled voices in the foyer. A few moments later, she heard footsteps mounting the short run of stairs to her study. She set aside the extremely secret documents, and turned her attention to the landing. Only one woman was permitted to disturb her, her trusted aide Hippolyta, a woman a little older than she, strong and matronly. "Mistress, Senior Advocate Solay and her aides are here."

Ciel sighed and rubbed her temples. "What reason did she give you for coming."

"She comes as a representative of the Security Circle, on a matter of planetary security." She pronounced the word 'planetary' curiously. In all her years, nothing had ever been a matter of 'planetary' security.

"Send her in, then wait outside. Seal the door."

Hippolyta left, passing Solay on the way down. Solay was wearing black and black, as usual. "'Planetary security?'" Ciel asked. "That seems indiscreet."

"Do you not trust your own first aide?" Solay asked.

"What do you want, Solay? What brings you to Serenopolis?"

"An airship," Solay answered, quite to the surprise of Ciel. "As you know, the Security Circle has been gravely concerned with the possibility that either of the powers currently in orbit around our planet have placed agents among our people, and we have taken appropriate steps to protect our sisters and mothers across the world."

"Solay, in the last two days, your Security Circle has arrested or detained more the 3,000 people. The Outer Circle is demanding an explanation."

Solay answered in a deadly serious tone. "This is the most dangerous time in our planet's history. Two alien forces are about to battle for the right to consume our culture. The threat is so grave, that we must temporarily embrace certain policies that would not be necessary under normal circumstances. We can not afford to be distracted by dissidents."

"When the current crisis has passed," Solay continued, "every one shall be released. Their custody is for the protection of society."

"So, why does this bring you to my city."

"I have something for you," Solay said. She reached inside the folds of her gown and withdrew a scroll of paper. She placed the paper in front of Ciel who unrolled and read it.

"An Arrest warrant for Tobias? You're mad."

"The Monitors in the city of Serenopolis saw him enter the Men's Compound with two unidentified men. They then proceeded to the quarters occupied by Jubal, the notorious patriarchist, who is also believed to be Tobias's father. Jubal has been a dangerous dissident for years. His writings have called for male representation in the Outer Circle, not coincidentally, a position embraced by radical elements of your own party, Ciel."

"I have known Tobias for more than seven years. He is no radical."

"The evidence is more than enough to detain him for questioning ... unless you would invoke your special powers to exempt him the security measures every other citizen is bound by."

Ciel looked toward Solay, knowing she was trapped. Anything she did on behalf of Tobias would tip the balance in the Inner Circle.

"Hippolyta," she called. "Send for Tobias."

She turned back to Solay. "If your charges have merit, you may conduct the questioning here, in my presence."

Tobias appeared at the head of the stairs, wearing a black kimono with a checkerboard pattern on the cuffs, hem, and collar. He had just come from a salt bath. His hair was wet and slicked back from his forehead. He looked at Solay and nearly scowled.

"Sit," Ciel invited.

"I prefer to stand."

Solay approached him. "Have you been to the Men's Compound lately?"

"Yes, I was there some days ago. I visited my father."

"How do you know he is your father. It's rather unusual for a child to know the sperm donor who provided his genetic material."

"He told me, and he took me under his wing when I moved to the compound."

"Ah, yes, many of the men at the compound take young boys 'under their wing.'"

Tobias face flashed red with fury. If he could have exploded Solay's head by force of concentration, there would be brains splattered on the walls.

"Enough," Ciel said. "Tobias is no traitor. Visiting the compound is no crime."

"Who was with you?" Solay persisted.

"I will tell you, but not here." Tobias spoke. "I freely surrender myself for interrogation. You can take me to the detention center on Hirondele Street. I will go willingly ... on one condition."

Solay ignored him and addressed Ciel. "Perhaps, he is a better citizen than I thought."

"The condition is as follows. I demand to be treated no differently than the other male prisoners Solay has rounded up."

Ciel stared down Solay. "The dissidents are being treated according to the protocols of detention. Their rights are being honored, are they not?"

"The monitors are sworn to uphold the innate rights of prisoners."

"Male prisoners do not have innate rights," Tobias reminded her.

"Are they being fed?" Ciel persisted. "Are they being given water? Hygienic facilities? Rest? Medical Attention?"

"I am quite sure the monitors are taking good care of them."

"Are you certain?"

Solay looked angry and put-upon. "Believe it or not, Ciel, I have not personally inspected every detention station on Jean D'Arc continent..."

Ciel held up her hand. "No, Tobias is part of my ... part of my household. I would no more permit you to question him than I would permit you to interrogate Hippolyta, or Pieta. He will remain here, in my house. You may place a monitor outside to assure he does not leave until the end of the crisis, but you are not to subject him to interrogation."

"As is your prerogative to extend your Circular Privilege around your ... 'family.'" Solay looked as though she were suppressing a smile, and Ciel knew she had possibly signed her

political death certificate.

Ciel called to her assistant. "Lyta, when is the next airship scheduled to depart for Concordia?"

"At seven hours and seventy minutes in the morning."

"I will be on it. You should also be on it, Solay. I am going to cast my vote for closure on the Aurelian Treaty. You will want to be there. My vote will make seven, and the treaty will be voted on by zero hour of the following day."

Keeler arrived at Hospital One. *Pegasus* had four hospitals. Only One and Four were currently operational. They were designed after the Health Centers on the Home Worlds, warm, comfortable, brightly colored chambers with abundant living plants to enhance the healing. Daisy Reagan, the Ship's ancient Chief Physician was standing next to a woman in her thirties, who had recently been crying.

"You called for me, doctor?"

"Ah thought this would concern you," she drawled in her ancient and frightening rasp. *Damb*, Keeler thought. *I am so glad I didn't grow up in her family. Those dried up lips would probably have torn the flesh from my cheeks.* "Those people that came back from the *Hector*. They ain't right."

"What do you mean?"

Dr. Reagan turned around. "Rebecca Lowell, this here is Commander Keeler."

She looked at him with red-rimmed eyes and took his hand weakly. Keeler didn't remember seeing her on the World-Ship. Daisy Reagan explained. "Rebecca here is the wife of Flight Lieutenant Adrian Lowell, the pilot o' the *Hector*. Tell him what you told me dear."

"I don't know. It seems ... mad."

"Just tell the commander, dear. It's all right."

She shook her head, and when she spoke, it sounded as though it was all she could do to keep from crying. "It isn't him." Lowell whispered.

Keeler got a sick and frightening feeling in his stomach. "What do you mean?"

"He's not the same. He looks the same, and he feels the same, and he almost acts the same, but he's not the same. They did something to him. I don't know what they did, but we can't ... connect anymore."

"You can't connect..."

"When we have intercourse, I can't feel his mind. I can't feel his mind in my mind. It was ... physical and empty," she began weeping. Keeler put a hand on her shoulder. He could not imagine words would be of any comfort.

"She ain't the only one," Daisy Reagan told him. "I got the same from Grace Jones Sister, and the other guy's wife. They've all come down with the same complaint."

They left Mrs. Lowell in the exam room with a sympathetic counselor and repaired quietly to Reagan's consulting room.

"What could the Aurelians have done?" Keeler asked. "Could their minds have been affected somehow? Could they have been given instructions to spy on us, or even sabotage the ship. Are they still in contact with the Aurelian World-Ship?"

"I won't know unless I can give them a thorough examination."

"Medical Technician Partridge examined them on when we left."

"He musta missed something," Daisy was shaking her hand, as though to get something off of it. "They were ordered to report here for full examinations and I ain't seen any of 'em."

"I think it's time they all saw the doctor," the commander touched his wrist communicator. "Keeler to Lt. Commander Miller."

"Miller here."

"Lt. Commander, I want you to have the crew from *Hector* rounded up and brought to Hospital One for full medical exams."

"Something wrong commander?"

"Possibly very, very wrong."

Matthew Driver lay on his bed in his quarters. His quarters were about what one would expect of an unmarried twenty-seven year old Aves pilot. That is to say, they were non-descript and uncluttered. The walls were blue and sported a holoposter of his ship and his graduating class at the Aeronautical Academy. Holo-pictures of his mother, his father, his sister and her husband were arranged neatly on a shelf.

Matthew was dressed only in a pair of thick, soft sleeping bottoms. His torso was bare, showing sparse dark hair around the aureoles of his chest, and a trail leading down past his navel. His shoulders and chest had a pleasing roundness. He was a physically fit specimen, and had kept his bed to himself alone much too long. He was wondering just how much longer that might be.

He was startled awake from a dream in which a woman had laid one soft hand on his chest and he had reached to grab it and was awakened to the sound of his personal communicator. He snapped to consciousness hearing the voice of Eliza Jane Change.

"Matthew, are you there?"

"Yeah," he replied blearily. "I'm here, I'm here." He rolled over and saw her face peering at him from the oval communication panel.

"Matthew, I would really like to talk to you. Is now a good time?"

She was overlaid by another signal on an adjacent channel. "Flight Lieutenant Driver, report to the Landing Bay."

"It isn't," he replied, with heartsinking regret. "I have to go. Let's talk when I get back."

She gave him a curt nod. "Affirmative."

Matthew forced himself out of bed, at the back of his mind thinking, this was the first time he could remember not want to go flying. The first time he could not wait for a mission to be over.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Aboard *Prudence*, a dispirited pilot guided a dispirited crew on a nearly hopeless mission.

Matthew Driver sat in the pilot's seat, thinking of Eliza Jane Change. Four others sat below in the primary cabin.

"Why am I here?" Trajan asked, sulking on his landing couch.

His mother sighed, and explained patiently. "The only time I achieve any kind of breakthrough with Ciel is when I show her we have something in common. She only agreed to talk to us after we discussed our faith in Vesta. She has a daughter, not much younger than you. I have to show her that I have a son that I love as much as she loves her daughter."

"So, I'm a visual aid," Trajan sighed. "Why not bring Marcus? Pieta is closer to his age anyway."

Lear continued, patiently. "Then, I am going to offer her a non-aggression treaty with the planet Republic. The treaty will contain a mutual defense clause, pledging Republic to the defense of Bodicéa in the event of hostile attack. If she agrees, that will give us the necessary opening to defense Bodicéa from the Aurelians."

"Brilliant," said Armatrading.

"Only if I can persuade her to accept it."

Trajan sighed and looked resentfully bored in the masterful way of thirteen-year-old boys dragged along against their will to things their mothers thought were important. He turned instead to Alkema, who was staring out through the viewport, also looking resentful and petulant. Trajan then articulated the question that was ringing through Alkema's very mind, "What are you doing here?"

David Alkema managed a wan smile. "I guess we have something in common, I am also here because of Pieta. It's funny when you think about it. A little girl, back on our own planet she'd be playing quoits with her friends and talking about boys ... like you. Here, she holds the fate of a planet in her hands."

"But she doesn't like me," Trajan corrected. "She likes *you*."

Alkema bristled. "I know... it's not as though I did anything to encourage her."

"Why are you going to visit her, then? You must like her, too." The tone of his voice was teasing, mocking. There was a primal part of Alkema that wanted to smack him.

"I am doing this only as a favor to Tamarind."

"Don't you like girls?"

"I like women."

"What if she wants to kiss you?" Trajan persisted.

"Then I wouldn't want to be a certain Sumacian Warrior when he goes back to his quarters and finds out the waste overflow recyclers from the ship's Zoology have been rerouted there."

"Can you do that?"

"I will make it my mission to find a way to do that."

Trajan stood up, bored with the game. "I'm going to the command module."

Goneril Lear followed him with her eyes. "Until not long ago, he thought he wanted to be a pilot."

"He's changed his mind?" Alkema asked.

"I changed his mind," Lear said. *I'll change Ciel's, too.*

Keeler exited the transport pod at Deck Minus Three and proceeded down a long white corridor lit by neon-like tubes of blue light that lined the floor and ceiling. He walked purposefully, all the while mentally cursing the universe for lurching him from one crisis to another.

He passed a cargo hold, it was numbered 018. He touched the panel next to the hatch, which recognized him and opened wide. Bright spotlights came on at the top of the chamber.

Inside was the ship they had recovered from the moon-base. It looked unnatural, its gleaming silver body reflecting the light in odd, deviant ways.

They hadn't figured out how to open it yet.

They hadn't even managed to scan whatever lay beneath the mirror-like surface of its metallic skin. It was as much a mystery as it had been the day they recovered it.

Damb, he thought. *This could have been a fine planet.* He didn't care for green oceans or golden skies, but all in all, this had been a very pleasant environment for humans to settle, to build a world and a culture. A place of beauty with a tragic history; it was almost poetic, in a way, for anyone who appreciated the flavor of irony.

Suddenly, he was the caretaker of that green and gold world. It was his to protect, a job he found disdainful. Nevertheless, he had an intuition that told him this was going to be over soon. Regardless of what the entities awaiting him in the chamber at the end of the corridor had to say, he would soon be committing the lives and treasure of his ship to the defense of this world.

He just wanted to know, if they could tell him, the scale of the fight to which he was committing them.

A sense came over him that he was not alone in the passageway. He paused, checked his grip on his walking stick and turned around.

A few paces back, he saw Specialist Cree Bladerunner. Evidently, the young specialist had been pacing him, matching him step for step to cover the sound of his footsteps. How had he known to come here?

"Specialist Bladerunner," Keeler said firmly. "You were ordered to report to Hospital One for a medical examination."

Bladerunner drew a hand-cannon from behind his back. "Aurelia triumphs!" He leveled it at Keeler's head and fired.

He then fired again.

Then, he fired a third time, just to be sure.

Keeler's walking stick – in reality, an ancient battle-staff from one of old Earth's powerful alien enemies – sprang into action almost before he did. In an instant that made a lightning strike ponderous by comparison, it had imposed itself between the assailant and its master. It drew the bolts of ion-charged plasma to itself.

The three bolts of energy circled the tip of the staff in the formation of an equilateral triangle. The staff held them, circling. Keeler knew the merest twitch of his wrist would send them back to Bladerunner, and cut him down as surely as a scythe cut down wheatgrain.

Bladerunner was momentarily mesmerized by the circling balls of light. He stared. He could have cut down Keeler with another shot from the hand cannon, but the surprise of the moment stayed his hand.

Keeler gave the staff a slight thrust and sent the three bolts shooting past Bladerunner down the long passageway to the far wall, where they impacted and exploded. Keeler meanwhile, cold-cocked Bladerunner with the other end of the staff.

Another parry relieved Bladerunner of his hand-cannon, another thrust took away his consciousness. The thin body of the young man fell to the floor of the corridor. Keeler backed up against the wall and held the walking-stick before him in an alert crouch. *Bring it on*, he thought, through the adrenaline.

A few seconds of quiet immobility assured him that no further attacks were forthcoming. He spoke into his communicator. "Keeler to Guardian Core."

"Guardian Core, Lieutenant Spazz, go ahead, Commander."

"Specialist Bladerunner is unconscious in Passageway 5 alpha of Deck Minus 3. Please send a pair of guardians to bring him to Hospital One."

"Right Away, Commander."

"He may be injured. Respond quickly."

"Right Away, commander."

"Keeler out." He knelt carefully over the body and carefully picked away the hand cannon. With equal care, he dragged the unconscious Bladerunner into the corridor and sealed the hatch behind him. When he had arranged Bladerunner's form in a position that would prevent further injury, he straightened his uniform, brushed the hair from his eyes, and continued on.

He carefully, protectively picked his way down the remaining few meters of the corridor, until he arrived at the entrance of a cargo bay that had once held the unassembled components of an Aves.

"Entrance. Commander Keeler. Access Code: Mighty-Lovegod-five-two-seven delta."

"Continue." Came a voice.

Keeler rolled his eyes. "Cats are marvelous. Cats are great. I'm not worthy of what the cat just ate."

The hatch slid open. On the inside, a gray tom cat and the ghost of his ancestor were waiting. "You changed the access code again," he said to Queequeg.

"I'm feeling unappreciated," the cat explained.

"How's it hanging?" said the Dead Man, one of those ancient, rather tasteless greeting he was fond of.

"A member of my crew just tried to kill me."

"Fah," said the old man. "Takes me back. I remember when my crew used to try to kill me."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"The Adversary, during the Crusades, developed many techniques for gaining control of the minds and bodies of our people... possession. Yes, that was what it was called. More than once, I found a junior officer, even a trusted aide-de-camp, had fallen under the thrall of the Adversary. Once, I had to fight him to the death in my ship's own anti-matter reaction chamber. I'll never forget him waving his shattered hand in a claw-like gesture of defiance as I ..."

"This place has changed," Keeler remarked. Indeed, it had. Apparently, Caliph was no longer fond of blue-black light and shimmering geometrical shapes. Instead, she had opted for

pink walls, pretty yellow flowers, and holoposters of young men with immaculately mismanaged hair. The essence of her consciousness was still contained in a great cylindrical, helical structure in the center of the chamber. It was pulsing with yellow light, like sunlight.

"Did she enjoy her trip?"

"We haven't spoken since she got back from the Aurelian world-ship."

"She made it back safely, then?"

They both looked at Queequeg, who managed a shrug to the degree his arrangement of shoulder bones allowed it. "As closely as I can tell, she's fine. Although she has been acting kind of loopy, lately."

"Loopy?"

"The entity is experimenting with different levels of consciousness," Dead Keeler explained. "The outer manifestations may be seen in this chamber."

"Shall I rouse her?" Queequeg asked. "You can see for yourself."

"Wait!" Living Keeler said. He turned to the ghostly figure of his ancestor. "I have to ask you something first. You know what it is?"

"Surely, I won't know until you tell me."

"For a thousand years, even though we had the technology for inter-stellar flight, you Dead Guys kept us confined to the limit of our Star System. Sumacian Legend says that Sapphire was to preserve a military tradition, because when the Adversary returned, we would be called again to preserve the good of humanity. This is why on a planet with no enemies, we have four million trained Sumacian warriors in active service at any time."

The Old man told him nothing. Keeler had not expected him to.

"We are in space now. So, somehow, the Dead Guys have learned that the Adversary has returned. I must ask you, Ancestor, if all this is true, are the Aurelians the enemy we were held back in order to fight?"

"What difference does it make?" the Old Man demanded. "Will you not fight to save this planet if the Aurelians are not the Adversary? If they are, will allow a tactical defeat here in hopes of meeting them under more favorable terms."

"You are a thousand times the tactician I will ever be," Keeler told the old man. "I only wish to know. I must know everything about this situation."

"Neg, you don't. You can't possibly know everything you need to know about this situation."

"Why not?"

"Because you are not ready."

Cheese Kyrine, the old man was off on one of his enigmatic Shao-Lin Master kicks. "O.K. The prophecy also states that when the Adversary returned, we would be the only humans to recognize it. We can read the Aurelians thoughts. The others can't. I have to know if the Aurelians are the Adversary..."

"You think *she* can tell you *that*? What are you looking for? Do you think there's a data point that reads. 'We are the Adversary, the Dark Forces of Evil from the Great Crusades. Boo!'"

"That's why you're here. You would recognize the Adversary again if you saw them."

"Not necessarily."

"The accounts of the Adversary said that they were contemptuous of humanity. That applies to the Aurelians. They reveled in amoral superiority. That certainly applies to the Aurelians. They were cunning, deceptive, and they lay waste to everything in their past. Aurelians, Aurelians, Aurelians."

"All poodles are dogs, but not all dogs are poodles," said the Old Man.

"All dogs are losers, but not all losers..."

"Queequeg!"

Queequeg purred and turned on the "Who me?" look.

"I am planning how best to commit this ship's resources in the event I have to defend that planet..."

"That is simple. When you meet the Adversary, you must hold back nothing." The ghostly light in the old man's eyes shone like candle flames. "You do not compromise with evil. You do not make treaties with evil. You do not peacefully coexist with evil. In whatever manifestation you find it, you must fight it, resist it, and defeat it."

"Do you believe the Aurelians are the Adversary?" Keeler persisted. "Is the Odyssey Project the start of the Tenth Crusade?"

"Those may be two different things!"

"You allowed your consciousness to stay alive for millennia so you would recognize the Adversary when they returned. You guided and sustained the Sumacians. You approved and redesigned the Odyssey Project ships to fight the Adversary. This is what everything has led up to. We have to know what she learned on the Aurelian world-ship."

"Then, you must ask her..."

The lighting in the room changed to orange and aqua. White spots began to swirl around the walls. "This is her new manifestation," the Dead Guy explained.

"Wait until she talks," said the cat.

"I am pretty," came a voice. These same words were projected all over the walls in an elegant, curly-cue script.

"I have a pretty, pretty mind," Caliph continued. Her voice was girlish, and punctuated with giggles and squeaks.

"She sounds like a nine year old girl," Keeler said.

"Or a nine year old boy who's a little light in the loafers," Queequeg suggested.

"She is experimenting with different expressions of consciousness," the Dead Guy said calmly. "As I had explained previously for anyone who was *paying attention*."

Keeler sighed. "Caliph, this is Commander William Keeler... Did you achieve interface with the braincore of the Aurelian World-ship."

The colors changed to a dark purple. "They don't call him a braincore. They call him the Hanged Man. It's a dumb, dumb name.... And he's a dumb, dumb central processing Nexus."

Steady. Steady. "Did you achieve interface with the central processing nexus of the Aurelian world ship?"

The colors went to purple and greens. The spots on the wall became smaller and more numerous. "Yes, it was easy, easy, easy..."

"What did you learn?"

The spots on the walls became an immense flow of ones and zeroes, flowing and coalescing around diagrams like whitewater making eddies around stones in a fast-flowing river. "I learned lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots."

"To be specific, she accumulated at least 9.89 times ten to the eleventh power data points," Queequeg explained. "That's how much additional data was in the pod when I downloaded it from *Winnie*."

"He was dumb!" Caliph insisted. "Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. And Ugly. Ugly. Ugly."

"What did you learn about the Aurelians?"

"Boss," Queequeg interrupted. "She learned 9.89 times ten to the eleventh power data points about the Aurelians. You are going to have to be more specific."

Keeler rubbed his chin. He was still addressing the glowing column in the center of the room, but he had a sense that Caliph was all around him. "What did the Aurelians do to 12 822 Equuleus three?"

"Bad, bad things."

The spots went away. The walls became a display of weapons falling to the surface of Medea, annihilating cities. The cities were blasted. Then, the Swords came, massed in the thousands, the moved across the landscape, laying waste to the smaller settlements, herding the people into cities. The people fought back, but their weapons were inadequate. Finally, there was an image of bright purple clouds spinning like pinwheels over the planet, annihilating all life. The pathogen.

"Who deployed it, the Aurelians or the Medeans?" Keeler asked.

"Don't ask me. I'm just a girl," Caliph said, giggling crazily.

O.K., she's acting like a psychotic nine-year old girl. "Do you know what they plan to do to ... Bodicéa?"

The light all but disappeared from the room. "Bad, bad things."

Keeler looked at the streams and flows of ones and zeroes swirling all around the room. "Queequeg, can you make any kind of ... meaningful sense out of this."

The cat perked his ears forward alertly, pretending to study the data. "This is a litter-load of information, Boss."

"Can you?"

"It will take a long time."

"Of course, why shouldn't it?" Keeler's communicator chirped. "Keeler here."

"Commander, this is Specialist Lagos of the Guardian Patrol. We found Specialist Bladerunner. He appears to have been attacked."

"I know, I attacked him."

A pause. "Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm fine. Bladerunner tried to kill me. I knocked him unconscious. Get him to Hospital. I'll catch up with you there. Keeler out."

He looked up and addressed the cat. "I want you to seek out any information they have about this system and the Medean system."

"No," said the dead guy. "Search for tactical files. Find out their battle plans, and their defenses."

"Right, right, of course," Keeler said. "That should be the first priority." He tapped his communicator. "Keeler to Phil Miller."

"Miller, War Room."

"Phil, I'm in the Caliph Chamber. We're downloading all the information Caliph rounded up when she interfaced with the braincore of the Aurelian Ship. We'll be providing tactical updates as we process the datapoints."

"Neat," Miller came back, unemotively. "I'll send you down a pizza and some ales."

"Acknowledged, Keeler out." Keeler looked around the chamber. "There's no place to sit around here, is there."

"You're staying?" The Old Man said, delightedly.

"I have no where else I need to be," said the commander, settling down to the floor.

"Excellent," the Dead Guy chortled delightedly. "If you are preparing to engage the Adversary, you will need the benefit of my tactical experience. I have a thousand stories to tell you."

Tamarind stared at the tactical display, envisioning in his mind how the forthcoming battle would play out. The Sumacians had a term for this, the Battle-Trance. It was a discipline to foretell the pattern, the ebb and flow of battle. The challenge was to separate visualization from real prophecy. The best among them, those with a touch of precognition, could predict the coming battle with high accuracy.

The Aurelian ships were many and large. *Pegasus's* Aves were smaller and outnumbered nine-to-one, but they were faster and more maneuverable, they packed great firepower. In his mind, they went into motion, and he saw them, not as holographic symbols, but as the ship's they represented, fighting fiercely, bravely, and in the end...

He broke away with a shudder, and crossed to Miller. "The battle is almost upon us. We promised Tobias we would give him safe passage to our ship. I will go to the surface and collect him."

Miller was taken aback. "I need you here."

Tamarind shook his head. "I am trained in hand-to-hand combat, in leading ground forces. You and Lt. Honeywell can ably conduct a battle between ships in space without me."

"I can't spare any Aves right now," Miller told him. "Every available Aves is primed to defend our ship and we need every one. Except *Prudence*, which is on the surface with Commander Lear."

Tamarind fixed Miller with a forceful gaze and tone. "We promised him we would take him on board in return for his help. He fulfilled his half of the deal."

"Za, but it was a dead end."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It does not matter. We made a pledge to him. *I* made a pledge to him, and I will fulfill it. I'll go alone. No one else needs to be taken away from his duty. Ships do not win battles. Warriors win battles."

Miller sighed. He checked the flight schedule. "*Basil* is going to make one last run to get the last of our people off the planet. You can swing by Serenopolis on the way out."

"I should really go alone."

"You have *Basil*, take it or leave it."

Tamarind nodded. "As you wish." He crossed the room, something about the way he walked, not really any different than the way anyone else walked, yet somehow, he made everyone in the room want to follow him in lockstep. He paused at the hatch, and a sudden weariness made his shoulders slump, just for a moment. He turned and called out. "Lt. Commander Miller, always remember it was me who did this."

Without saying anything further, or giving anyone else a chance to respond, he disappeared through the hatch and the doors seemed to close extra swift behind him.

Egomaniac, thought Miller.

Prudence set down in the designated landing area outside the city of Concordia. There was a kind of a streetcar that took the crew from the landing area to the Council House of the Inner Circle. The windows were covered with thick blue curtains made of a velvet-like material, which effectively sealed in the subtropical heat of the Bodicéan capital. The forty-minute trip to the Council House was like a ride in a slow, mobile sauna.

They were allowed to see nothing until the car stopped in a sub-basement of the Council House. They would never know if the city they had passed through was magnificent, filled with the finest examples of Bodicéan architecture, art and landscaping, or whether it was a workaday city, functional and utilitarian, with warrens of offices for adminicrats and petty bureautates.

To be honest about it, they all had other things on their minds.

They were kept in waiting in a chamber at the Council House of the Inner Circle for the rest of the day, where the air had the exact qualities of a church in summertime. They were kept waiting in a small, windowless chamber, and no one offered them food or water.

"I wish I had stayed with my ship," Driver said.

"They wouldn't have let you," Alkema told him. "They can't have men walking through the streets like they owned the place. The mere sight of one of us might set off a widespread panic."

"I could have gone back to *Pegasus*, sent someone else to get you guys," Driver complained. He was not a happy camper.

"What, and miss out on the opportunity to spend several hours in the most boring room in the entire galaxy?" Alkema countered. He was at his worst, here. No one to play off. He missed the commander. Lear sat in a corner with her aide, dictating the terms of a new treaty into their vocal computers.

Trajan sat between Driver and Alkema. "I wish I had brought a game," he said, another time. Flight Lt. Driver had saved his life while *Pegasus* had been visiting EdenWorld. Alkema detected a hint of hero-worship in the attitude of Trajan toward Matthew, but Matthew was distracted, completely unaware of it.

"What's on your mind?" Alkema asked Driver.

"There's ... a personal situation on *Pegasus* I have been... trying to resolve." The admission seemed to embarrass him. "I can't resolve it while I am sitting down here."

"It's a woman, isn't it?"

Matthew bristled. "Yea, it is a woman."

"Anyone I know."

Matthew looked at him, his eyes were dark and liquid. He realized Trajan was also hanging on every word of this. "Lt. Navigator Eliza Jane Change."

Alkema seemed blown away by this. "Neg! No kidding? Eliza Jane Change? Whoa. Whew." He shook his head as though trying to make sense of it.

"Why her?" Trajan asked.

"I've been asking myself the same thing," Matthew confessed.

"Friend, I don't mean this to be harsh, but Lt. Navigator Change... she's exceedingly hot, she's hot as the surface of the sun, but she's just as untouchable. Nobody can get close to her. It's not like she's from another planet, she's not even from a planet. She's also a navigator, and all navigators, I don't know why, are weird." Alkema then backed off. "However, I'm sure she's a fine woman."

Matthew was uncomfortable, and wished he hadn't revealed anything. "I know she's difficult, and I have been asking myself why I even bother trying... I have told her over and over again that I want our relationship to be serious, maybe even ... marriage at some point. She won't say yea, she won't say nay, she won't even say maybe. I can't stand it."

"Well, friend, there are a lot of other women on the ship. When we get back, we'll both work on them. Between the two of us, they don't have a chance."

"But you already have a girlfriend," said Trajan. "Pieta."

Alkema really wanted to hit him.

"Sometimes, I think I want to give up on women entirely," Driver concluded.

"Don't say that. If you don't find a suitable woman on *Pegasus*, then, who knows? The next colony might be the colony of lost swimsuit models who love sports and can squirt ale out of their breasts."

"The next colony will probably be as fallen down as the last three. Even if it is intact, we stay there for, what, eighty-four Sapphirean days? Suppose I do meet a wonderful woman? I am supposed to ask her to leave behind her life and family to join me on *Pegasus*."

"I don't want to sound prejudiced," Trajan put in, "but, I will only marry another Republicker."

Alkema and Driver looked at him, both envied his innocence.

There was a commotion in the hallway outside the room as though a large number of people were out there. The five of the landing party stood in anticipation.

The large double doors swung open to reveal a phalanx of Circle Monitors, large women in black tunics carrying big ceremonial swords. They stood and held the door for several minutes before Ciel finally met them. She looked tired, very, very tired.

Lear moved to the front, making one of the monitor's tighten the grip on her sword. "First Advocate Ciel, you are well-met again."

Ciel looked back at her through eyes that were rimmed with dark, sleepless circles. "You may soon disagree with my being, 'well-met.'"

Lear looked confused. "I don't understand."

"I just sent a signal to the Aurelian Fleet," she told them. "The Inner Circle has voted to accept the Aurelian Treaty."

"Nay!" Lear sounded as though the wind had been knocked out of her.

"The treated passed the Inner Circle on a vote of eighty-four points to thirty-six. We are preparing to reveal the presence of the Aurelians to the Outer Circle. When they have been informed, we will address our people, and let them know ... what has been decided on their behalf."

"Let me offer you a second treaty, a friendship treaty with my Republic, which pledges our friendship and cooperation."

Ciel held up a hand and looked at her sadly. "It's now zero hour in Concordia, the 12th day of Floréal. You and all of your people have until zero hour on the 13th day of Floréal to evacuate the planet."

"What?" Ciel said. "Was that part of the treaty?"

"No, it was demanded made by the party of opposition in return for support of the Treaty. Your presence here, your hostility to the Aurelians, make conflict inevitable. Without you, the Aurelians have no reason to make war."

Lear would not give up. "Ciel, please, let us talk."

"I must address the Outer Circle. Then, I am going to go to my apartments. Perhaps, we can meet in the morning. I will need rest." She turned to go, muttering something too quiet to be heard.

Lear moved forward to beg Ciel to wait, but a Monitor imposed her big brawny body between Lear and the leader. Ciel departed, followed by her guards. They were left alone again. The moment was weighing heavily upon them.

Does this mean I don't have to see Pieta again? David thought.

I'm stuck here all night, Matthew thought.

I'm stuck here all night and I'll probably have to see that dumb Pieta girl in the morning, Trajan thought.

"I hope they put us up somewhere for the night," Lear said. She turned to Armatrading. "We have ... one day to convince Ciel to join a friendship treaty with Republic."

Far, far away, seventy-six million kilometers away, the world-ship received the message. There was a short period of silence, then six hundred sixty-six gravity engines fired, sending waves of graviton-based energy toward the planet Bodicéa.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Bodicéan City of Rhiannon, on the northeast corner of the northern continent was protected by an ancient greystone seawall. It rose over the city for nearly two hundred meters, and was one of the engineering marvels of the planet.

Rhiannon lay below the level of the sea. It had been low to the sea when it was founded, back in the days of the Patriarchy, and in the thousands of years that had passed, had gradually sunk lower and lower, until the seawall became a necessity. It had stood for

centuries, wrapping the city to the north and east, and the women of Rhiannon give it little notice. It was a part of the landscape.

Today, though, the sea was raging. The moon in the morning sky was bright, the air only a little cooler than normal, but waves battered the seawall in a way Cirin, the old seawatcher had not seen since the hurricane of twenty years past. Water crashed against the seawall, shaking the watchtowers along its length, splashing over the top and raining down the side. The streets of the city closest to the wall were beginning to flood.

When Cirin saw the crack begin to open, a few meters from the base of her tower, she climbed the curving stone staircase to the bell tower at the top of the tower, and pulled with all her strength on the cord. The sound was drowned out in the tower by the roaring sea, but it tolled over the city, warning the people to flee to higher ground.

In Serenopolis, a perfect cloudless day had given way to a rich emerald night. Its women retreated from the business of the day and withdrew to their dormitories and collectives, Gathering around circles of quiet light, they prepared and consumed meals, gossiped, read, went over lessons with their daughters, and settled in for the night.

On the edge of Serenopolis, in the most fashionable sector of all, inside Ciel's ancient home, Pieta was enduring an unquiet night. She was accustomed to falling asleep to the distant but audible sussurus of the ocean. On this night, though, the sea was churning, thrusting against the cliffside and spitting fountains of salt-green foam almost to the top, as though a hurricane storm were raging.

She lifted the comforted and padded in bare feet to the hallway. "Mater? ... Nana?"

The hall was dark, and the sound of the sea drowned out her footsteps. She saw a light on in her mother's study, the door was cracked open a little. She picked up the pace and ran the short distance. "Mater."

She pushed through the door and was disappointed to see Tobias, sitting on a chaise, his short bare legs folded underneath him, staring out the window at the sea. He turned up to see her. "Daughter?"

"Is Mater here?"

"She's in Concordia," Tobias answered.

"When will she be back?"

"I don't know." From what he understood, there were small earthquakes and raging tides across the planet.

Pieta walked past him, to the window ledge. She looked outside, in the direction of the sea. "This is a very bad night," she said.

Three thousand kilometers away, in Concordia, Ciel was trying to make sense of the reports coming into the chambers of the Inner Circle. Oceans were raging across the planet, every coastal city was being pounded. There were earthquakes in nine of the planet's provinces, the most severe of which had split open a great crack down the middle of the city of Lourdes, and leveled every building.

"I don't understand it," she said, fighting exhaustion. She had not slept in two days.

"The Woman from *Pegasus* claims she knows why this is happening," her aide, Alexia, told her. Alexia was very tall for a Bodicéan, which made her almost as tall as a Republicker

woman.

Ciel looked up, rubbed her eyes blearily. "I suppose she will only tell me in the context of a personal audience."

Alexia bowed her head.

"Send her in," Ciel sighed.

Alexia parted the double doors to Ciel's office, and Goneril Lear entered, Trajan trailing at her heels. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"Given the lateness of the hour, and my own exhaustion, please spare me the pleasantries. My aide tells me you have an explanation for the disturbances around my world. First, how did you even know..."

"*Pegasus* has monitored seismic activity across the planet. Your oceans are in a state of extreme tidal flux, all of which is because the Aurelians, the moment they received word of the treaty, activated their ship's gravity engines and began moving in. The collected force of their propulsion systems was like... having hundreds of moons appear on one side of the planet, all pulling."

Lear pulled Trajan forward, until he was standing before Ciel's desk. "This is my son, Trajan. He is a little older than your daughter, Pieta..."

A sudden commotion rose in the hall outside. First there was a pounding, then, a shouting. Finally, came a loud series of pops; weapons fire from firearms based on the principle of solid projectiles fired by chemical explosions.

"What's going on?" Ciel demanded.

"I shall find out," Alexia said, she went to the door.

No sooner did she open it than two more shots were heard. Blood burst from her neck and chest. She fell to the floor. Ciel screamed. Lear pulled Trajan down to the floor and threw her body over his.

Four women in body armor and hoods burst into the room, carrying large heavy weapons, pointing them at Ciel and Lear. "The chamber is secured, My Lady," yelled the largest among them.

Another woman entered the room, similar attired in body armor, but carrying no weapons, only an expression of supreme satisfaction: Solay.

"What is the meaning of this?" Ciel asked, voice quaking, whether more in anger or fear, no one could tell.

"Aurelia triumphs," Solay shouted. The other women echoed her call.

"Aurelia?" Ciel repeated.

"Come on, you really should have figure it out," Solay taunted. She crossed to Lear and gave her a hard kick in the ribs. "Get up!"

Lear rose slowly, trying to shelter Trajan as best she could, while keeping a stern steely lock on Solay's eyes. "What about us?"

"I haven't decided whether to let you die when the Aurelians claim this city, or to keep you alive as hostages against the interference of your people. Coronado will tell me, when I inform her that you are safely in the custody of the Bodicéan Proto-Echelon."

She took Lear by arms and embraced her, whispering in her ear, "Welcome to the Echelon. Coronado believes there still may be hope for you."

Lear pulled away. Solay was utterly calm as she choreographed events. "Take the woman and her boy to the Tower of Justine with the others. I will escort our lady Ciel personally to the Chamber of the Outer Circle, where the rest of our Government shall be brought and held for the arrival of our Aurelian hosts."

They were hustled into the entrance corridor, where Armatrading, Driver, and Alkema stood with hands on their heads, weapons trained on them. Armatrading was standing stoically, but tears were streaming down her face. Lear was relieved that they were alive, but wondered how long any of them would stay that way.

"A glorious era is dawning," Solay told all of them. "A glorious era for all of us."

Four hundred thousand kilometers and more above, *Pegasus* was rocking like a ship on the high seas.

"Dampers to full," Shayne American called out, holding tight to her post.

"What's going on?" Lt. Commander Miller demanded.

Miller bent over the tactical display. "I am reading massive displacement waves. The signature is identical to the Aurelian fleet." He called down to Keeler. "War Room to Commander Keeler. The Aurelians have activated their gravity engines. They're moving toward the planet."

At that same instant, another transmission came in, from PC-1. "Commander," came the voice of Specialist McCormick. "We are receiving an incoming transmission from the Aurelians."

"Put it through," Keeler ordered.

Coronado appeared on monitors in PC-1, the War Room, and in Caliph's Chamber.

"Dear friends on board *Pegasus*. I have just received word that the people of Bodicéa have chosen to join the Aurelian Union. They are now part of our body. Your presence here is no longer required. You are instructed to either depart the system immediately, or you may also join the Aurelian Union by turning over your ship to us. We promise to accelerate consideration of your petition. If you choose to leave, we will not pursue you. We hope you will respect the enlightened decision made by the people of Bodicéa, and will not interfere with their peaceful integration into our body."

"Message ends, commander," said McCormick.

"Retransmit our message. If they move within the orbit of the sixth planet, we will treat them as hostile."

Miller added, "If they are moving, it means our forces have already engaged them."

"Then, I suppose, we are at Battle Situation One," Keeler stated, matter-of-factly. "All crew to battle-stations, put a hold on tonight's Wally-ball tournament."

Several displays in PC-1 activated, displaying the notice "Battle Situation 1: Attack Imminent." Eliza Change was in command there, and she sent out the order throughout the ship. "All personnel, *Pegasus* is at Battle Situation One. Enemy attack is imminent. All battle crew, report to stations. Peripheral personnel, report to your designated shelter areas. This is not a drill. *Pegasus* is at Battle Situation One."

Throughout the command tower and Flight Decks, the crew scrambled toward their battle

stations. In the missile hatcheries and point defense stations at the bow of the great ship, weapons were primed for use. Guardians guided the civilian crew to the hardened shelter areas deep within the hull.

"Sixteen Aves ready for launch. Sixteen more in final preparation," American reported. "Manned and unmanned Shrieks ready for launch."

The ship rolled again, more gently. The dampening systems had adapted.

Honeywell leaned over to Miller. "Commander, suggest we implement battle plan beta, set out an additional line of defense between Pegasus and the planet."

"Agreed. Flight Control, this is Lt. Commander Miller. Launch all ships."

"Missile hatcheries and point defenses on-line," American reported. "HellBlazer and Doom Patrol Flight Groups report engaging Aurelian attack forces."

Keeler looked at the Dead Guy. "It's started."

Tripwire Force consisted of sixteen Aves from HellBlazer and Doom Patrol Flight Groups were positioned at the south pole of the sixth planet, escorted by forty-eight autonomous Shrieks. They had been given orders to engage the Aurelians as soon as they moved within the orbit of the sixth planet. When the first Aurelian ships moved past the orbital margin, they sprang.

Flight Captain Ponyboy James led them from his Aves, which also was named *James*. "Break off by quarters, attack from behind, all their guns are forward, disable their weapons and propulsion systems."

They flashed over the surface of the planet. 12 255 Vulpeculus VI had been an airless gray and rocky world, but the impact of 60,000 Aurelian projectiles had kicked up enough dust to obscure the whole of the surface under a flat, iron-coloured cloud. The cloud had given them cover before, now they rose above in four separate flights and moved on the sixty-six Aurelian ships that led the invasion. The Shrieks followed them, to provide a line of defense between the Aves and the next wave of Aurelian ships.

As they closed on the ships, they were subjected to a tremendous buffeting, like kayaks in a whitewater rapid.

"The gravity wakes of these things are unbelievable," said Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse, in the Aves *Kate*.

"Hold tight, stay the course," James ordered. "With this much gravitational distortion, we're going to have to get pubic hair close to ensure a lock."

The sixteen small ships bore down on the sixty-six big ones.

James drove hard toward the lead Aurelian ship. "Everybody, choose a dance partner, we're going in. Weapons, prepare to lock. We're closing."

"Positive lock, optimal range," reported James's Weapons Officer.

"Fire missiles."

"Missiles away."

Thirty-two hammerhead missiles shot forth. The Aves peeled up and away as the missiles broke free. Space held its nonexistent breath.

Seconds later, thirty-two bright flashes split the darkness. A few seconds after, there was

one massive explosion, followed by a chorus of other bright flashes, and several more enormous explosions.

"Whoa, Pony, you nailed his reactor core...", said the weapons officer of the Aves Olive. The weapons officer of the Aves *James* reported ten ships disabled and six completely destroyed.

"That leaves fifty more," Ponyboy said. "Shall we dance? Tripwire one and two, break right on my wing. Tripwire three and four, break left. Let's hurt them."

"Uh, Pony," said his Weapons Officer, "Look behind us."

Flt. Lieutenant James looked at the aft sensor feed. "Kum Bah Yah!"

The other six hundred ships of the Aurelian fleet were moving forward, and flashes of light showed they were firing weapons. The Shrieks moved to intercept, but it was obvious it wouldn't be enough.

"Stay tight on the attack, watch your six and prepare to jig," James ordered. He turned to the weapons officer. "Are we still transmitting to *Pegasus*?"

"Continuous feed, but they're six light minutes behind us."

"Commence second attack run!" Ponyboy ordered. The sixteen ships moved in on their secondary targets and unleashed double-braces of Hammerheads. The gravitational wakes that made them have to fire at point-blank also protected them by diverting the missiles that broke through the line of Shrieks.

An Aurelian missile found its mark on one of the autonomous Shrieks, hitting one of its metal butterfly wing and ripping it cleanly away. The craft recognized itself as terminally wounded, and directed itself, kamikaze style, head on into one of the Aurelian ships, smashing against its bow.

"Enemy fire intensifying," James's Weapons Officer reported.

"Our orders were to stand and fight," James repeated. "Until we hear otherwise..."

Suddenly, from behind the ships came a burst of explosions, lighting up space behind them like a massive interplanetary lightning storm, like a fireworks display from Valhalla itself, like a thousand points of light detonating. "Kum Bah Yah, what in the hell was that?"

Miller studied the tactical display. "The ships at the edge of the Aurelian Fleet are spreading out along all axes, they're going to try to out-flank us in three dimensions. Project tactical projection."

The display in the center of the room showed battle-groups comprising about 60 of the Aurelian ships moving to surround *Pegasus*.

"Clever," Miller conceded. "Time to formation."

"Forty minutes."

"Forty minutes to devise a defense," he repeated.

"The most obvious defense is to move *Pegasus*. Their sensors can't find us in real time any more than ours can find them," Shane American pointed out.

"Good. Miller to Bridge. Prepare to alter position." He tapped into the display, trying to choose an optimal point for repositioning.

"While we're busy with the pack, it frees their other ships to attack the surface," Shane American pointed out.

"Okay, then we'll move away from the orbital plane... fourteen degrees, and 45 light seconds." The tiny gold holographic *Pegasus* moved to a new point on the display. "Bridge, execute new position."

An alarm began to sound. "Commander, we have incoming fire." Vectors appeared, hundreds of them.

"Course projections," Miller asked. Dotted lines appeared between the incoming targets and their projected points of impact. Most of them were headed for the planet, but at least a hundred were aimed at *Pegasus*. Beside each target was a projected time to intercept. The first of them would reach *Pegasus* in just nine minutes.

"Smack," Miller spat. "Status of Range and Point Defenses."

"All systems armed and ready. Incoming targets being tracked." Shayne American shook her head. "There's no way we can defend *Pegasus* and the planet."

"What do we have on those incoming? What are they? Missiles or energy weapons?"

"Two of our Aves were in a position to scan. If they reported anything... we should know in a couple of minutes."

"Miller to Main Bridge, prepare for evasive maneuvers," but staring at the display, he knew there was no way to maneuver *Pegasus* and still defend the planet.

"Alter course heading 158 by 18 by 3, maximum speed."

Shane American looked at him like he was nuts. "You are going to take *Pegasus* right into the projectiles."

"Za, and order the Aves to defend the planet. Do we have any more Aves ready to launch."

"Second Doom Patrol is standing by. 20 Shrieks are in hot ready."

"Launch. They'll have to defend Bodicéa."

"New course projections laid in ... Intercept of targets in ... two minutes, twelve seconds."

"Lock on point and range defenses."

"Range defenses locked in forty-five seconds."

"Launch when targets are in range. Hammerhead missiles." The atmosphere in the War Room was dry, hot, and electric, the second before a storm in the desert. "Status of *Basil*," Miller asked, since they had a few seconds."

"*Basil* reported atmospheric penetration nine minutes ago. *Basil* should be closing on Serenopolis, now." No one had asked, but American added anyway.

"*Prudence* is still on the ground in Concordia. We have been out of contact with them for over four hours, and we recently lost contact with their locator implants."

Miller cursed.

"Shall I inform *Basil*? It's the only ship inside the planet's atmosphere?"

"Neg, *Basil* isn't equipped for a rescue mission. Have them make a flyover on Concordia and see if they can lock onto them. If necessary, we'll divert a team of Marines to get them out."

"What are the going to do to us?" Bridget Armatrading demanded. Unfortunately, none of the people she demanded it from was in any position to tell her. The five from the *Prudence* landing party had been taken to the top floor of a tower near the Bodicéan Government Complex, a window-less room with a single entrance, guarded on the outside by at least four monitors. Solay had taken Ciel somewhere else. The Tower of Justine was a detention tower where political dissidents had been taken over the past few days since Solay had begun her purge. The intermittent sound of screams in the courtyard, blood-curdling and then suddenly cut short, indicated that the purge had proceeded to its inevitable conclusion.

Everyone but Alkema had been given an electrical shock to the jaw, disabling their communication implants. It could only be surmised that the Aurelians had learned about them from the crew of *Hector*, as well as an effective, but not painless, method of deactivating them. They had also been stripped of their jackets, and all the nice communication and defensive gear that was integrated into them.

Goneril Lear sat against the wall in a corner, shell-shocked, with Trajan Lear in her arms. It was hard to tell who was comforting whom. The shock of Solay's betrayal, her own failure to avert the attack that was now imminent tormented her much less than the knowledge that she had brought her own child into this place of danger.

Trajan seemed oddly becalmed. He was as frightened as anyone, but he had stared down the hollow face of desperation and despair once already in his young life. Whatever happened, he was prepared to meet it. A sentiment Matthew Driver also understood. Matthew might have given some thought to the prospect of dying without winning the heart of Eliza Jane Change, but he had stared down that vision of Despair already also. He would have been surprised to learn how much alike were the thoughts he and the Executive Commander's son were sharing.

Armatrading though, was a wreck. Either Solay would have them all executed, or they would all die in the Aurelian attack on Bodicéa. Her soul was not at peace, and so she sobbed in a corner by herself. Nobody had the impulse to comfort her.

David Alkema was having none of it. He quietly paced the wall, slowly working his way around the room. Feeling the stones and more importantly, the seams between the stones. The Bodicéans were obsessed with the use of natural materials in their architecture. The interior and exterior walls of the tower were fashioned from quarried stone, painstaking cut into interlocking trapezoidal and parallelogram shapes.

Suddenly, he paused, and traced his hands backward over the place they had just come. His eyes grew studious, and he pressed his ear against the spot in the wall. "Here," he said, indicating the rock and addressing Matthew. Matthew crossed the room and felt the rock David had indicated. He felt the wisps of air escaping around the edges. "There's an air shaft on the other side," Alkema whispered. A tower like this with no windows, of course there had to be air shafts.

Alkema went on. "The Bodicéans didn't use any mortar when they put this building up, there's no re-bar support to these stone either. If we can get that stone out, and if the air shaft is big enough... at least for Trajan to get through, we have a chance of getting out of here."

Matthew pressed against the stone. "It seems well-set. If we only had a crow-bar."

"Or a battering ram," said Alkema. He jerked his head toward Lear, or, actually, the stone bench Lear was sitting on. It was sealed to the floor, but Alkema had a theory about that as

well. "This prison was built by women, for women. Our upper body strength is better. Between the three of us, you me and Trajan, we can rip that bench loose, and knock out this stone."

"The Guard will hear us."

"Not if Armatrading really gets into it."

At that moment, Armatrading stopped crying.

"Okay, what part of really getting into it didn't you understand?" Alkema asked. He picked up Armatrading by the shoulders and guided her toward the front of the room.

"Well?"

"I can't cry, now." Armatrading whimpered.

"Somehow, I didn't think you would."

"Hey!" Goneril Lear yelled from across the room. "Hey! Hey! Listen, I am the diplomatic representative of the Government of the Planet Republic. You will release me immediately or I will complain to my Government and they will enact swift and certain retribution."

"Give her something to pound against the door with," Trajan suggested.

"Good idea!" Alkema searched the room, everything but the bench was tied down. Alkema quickly removed both of his boots and handed them to Lear and Armatrading."

"Hey! Hey! Who's out there? Do you think you can take on five hundred Marines with handcannons, because that's what you're bringing down on yourselves. I would not want to bring that down. Do you hear me. Hey! Hey! Is anyone listening to me! Hey! Hey!"

Armatrading joined Lear, screaming and pounding, repeating what Lear said, a little behind and out of synch. Matthew, David, and Trajan moved on the bench. They heaved and lifted. The first heft brought nothing. The second brought a little cracking. The third and fourth cracked it further. Finally, on the fifth it broke free. The seat was not that heavy. Alkema and Driver lined it up against the stone wall, moved back and made a run at it. Then, another run, and another.

"It's loosening," Alkema declared, then revised his estimate. "It's only loosening a little. If we keep smacking the wall the guards are bound to hear us."

"Keep battering!" Lear called back, then turned back to pounding on the door.

"This looks like moonstone, its been polished to interlock with the other stones. If we moisten it around the edges, it'll give way easier."

Matthew shook his head. "How do you propose to do that. We don't have any water."

"Let's put it this way, once again, you, I, and Trajan are the best equipped for this job."

The women stopped shouting and pounding, just for a second, then turned away while the men opened the front of their pants and moistened the stone.

They took up the stone bench again.

"Yuck, I think I got some on me," Trajan said.

"That should be the least of your worries," Alkema told him. "Ready, one, two, ... heave."

The bench swung back. The bench swung forward and connected with the stone. Its sides now slickened, it slid into the space behind and fell. It hit bottom with a smash. Matthew and David used the battering ram to bash a few more of the stones into the hole. It was big enough now for any of them to get through. Alkema handed off the stone to Matthew and Trajan.

"Jam the door with that, in case they heard anything." He put his head into the hole and looked around.

"This is a surprisingly large space," Alkema told them a second later. "I think we can all make it, but it's at least thirty meters to the ground."

"Followed by a twenty kilometer hike through the city," Armatrading said. "We'll be back here in an hour, or dead."

"We go up," Driver said firmly.

"Up?" Alkema questioned.

"Up," Driver repeated. "How far is it?"

"About four meters but there's no where to go."

"There will be," Matthew promised. He began to climb into the hole.

"The Aurelian World-Ship is firing off these." Specialist American displayed a tactical scan of what had scared Ponyboy James and the rest of Tripwire Force, a massive launch of thousands of incoming projectiles. Each one consisted of a warhead shaped like a mace - a sphere with pointed spikes protruding from it - attached to, what looked to Commander Keeler's non-technical eyes, like a flexible tail of ionized plasma energy that propelled and steered it. In shape and motion, they were not unlike spermatozoa wearing spiked helmets.

"A spiky warhead with a creamy plasma center," as Miller described it. "It fits the description of the orbital bombardment pattern detected on Medea; forty to sixty kiloton yield, I estimate."

"But why?" asked American. "The Aurelians agreed to the treaty. Why attack them?"

"Because the Aurelians believe you have to destroy a society before you can rebuild it in your own image," said Commander Keeler, still in War Room One.

"If our telemetry estimates are correct, at least a hundred of them are targeted on *Pegasus*. Quicksilver Angels are moving to intercept. Point defenses armed and ready."

"Take them out of my sky," Dead Keeler shouted.

"How's that gain, commander?" Miller asked.

"I said, do whatever you have to do to protect this ship," Live Keeler ordered calmly. "What is the status of the other flight groups?"

"Hellblazers and Doom Patrol are engaging the enemy attack ships. Inflicting heavy damage. Two Aves have been damaged and are returning to *Pegasus*. Two more flights from those squadrons are ready to launch at your command."

Keeler sighed. "Launch fighters."

"How goes the data extraction?"

"Slow, there is an amazing amount of crap," Keeler told them. "For every point of tactical data Caliph acquired, she picked up two or three hundred points related to ..., um, sex."

"Sex?"

"The Aurelian pornographic database is surprisingly large... or unsurprisingly large... but we think we've isolated the tactical code. We're also looking at navigational data to determine where the ship has been."

"We can spare some data analysts to help you down there."

"Neg, we're all right. We'll continue sending data to the War Room."

"Right, Miller out."

Living Keeler turned to Dead Keeler. "Where were we?"

"I was just about to tell you about the time my ship was boarded by hobgoblins."

"Oh, za, that's right. How could I forget?"

"We were burning and adrift off the Fairchild Nebula following a sneaky attack by the Eleventh Legion of the Heresy. The little buggers must have come aboard when they dumped their garbage before entering hyperspace, which was standard procedure for the dark forces. Anyway,... we wrote a song about it. Want to here it? Here it goes. 'Hobgoblins! Hobgoblins! What can you do with those Hobgoblins. They're over here. They're over there. Those danged Hobgoblins are everywhere!'"

Suddenly, Queequeg arched his back, every hair on end, flattened his ears, and hissed at the data display.

This made Living Keeler nearly jump out of his skin and Dead Keeler nearly jump out of his ectoplasm.

Living Keeler approached the cat first. "I think Queequeg is trying to tell us something. What is it, boy? Did Timmy fall into the viaduct?"

"Why a duck, why not a chicken," Dead Keeler said. When Keeler gave him a funny look, he added. "Old joke, sorry."

"What is it?"

Queequeg calmed himself, his ears perked up until he looked unperturbed. "I found something."

"What?"

"Something unexpected and frightening, I reckon," said the Dead Guy.

The cat gestured with his paw in the air. An image appeared, projected above the wall. A beautiful blue planet with four continents, two of which looked like birds, one taking wing, one just about to land.

"Sapphire..." Keeler whispered, incredulously.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The most profound moments of silence are those that result when screaming "Oh, shit!" would simply not do them justice.

When the holograph of Sapphire was displayed in Caliph's chamber, such a moment was created, but its half-life was short. It barely had a moment to register before the commander began shouting. "How do they know about Sapphire?"

No one who had an answer for him would dare speak, except for Caliph.

"They know about lots and lots and lots and lots of worlds. They're going to digest all of

them and make everyone into Aurelians." The words "No Fun" were projected all over the walls.

"Could they have gotten that data from *Hector*?" Keeler asked Queequeg.

"Negative. No one cracked into *Hector*'s braincore. I double-checked." The cat was adamant. "None of the data-points from the World Ship correlates to anything in *Hector*'s brain-core."

"What about the crew... their memories?"

"Possible, but not too likely. That isn't a memory, that's a map."

Keeler felt his heart plunge from his chest to his testicles. "That can only mean, they've been to our world."

The Dead Guy put in. "They know of our world at least."

"Maybe they sent probes... Maybe?" Living Keeler suggested. Keeler looked around the room, realized they were standing in the mind of the only probe known to have reached the Sapphire system from outside. "Caliph?"

"Put that thought right back where it came from," the Dead Guy said quickly. "Caliph is far beyond them."

Swirling dots appeared again. "Wheee-e-e-e-e-e! I am *far, far, far* beyond them."

"We would have detected a probe," Queequeg insisted. "Our system defenses, I mean, back on Sapphire."

"I am sure if you think about it, you can come up with a way to infiltrate our system undetected," the Dead Guy said, bitterly and testily. "That is not what matters. That they have been to our world is something to fear. It does not matter how. PSDS Intelligence will figure it out when we send this data to them."

Keeler looked at the Sapphire image. "Where did you find this? Is it in a list of worlds they know about? Are there others?"

Queequeg pawed away that interface, and displayed the directories where he had found the image. Several other planets and star charts flashed by rapidly. "I found that data point in a directory that I think stores all the original the original data that was provided to the sphere at the time of its construction. *This* world-ship hasn't been to Sapphire, but when it was built, this data point was put into its central library."

"What about Republic?"

"Who cares?"

"Queequeg!"

"Well, ... I don't."

The Dead Guy asked a more productive question. "Can you plot the origin of the world-ship?"

"I think so. The Sapphire data-point had the suffix 0000. I think every data point with that suffix was part of the original matrix. If I isolate those, and I then I trace the subsequent navigational data-points, I can find the system where the ship was constructed."

"What will that tell us?"

"It might give us the location of the Aurelian home-system?"

"Aurelian home-system?" Keeler asked.

"Za, the planet all the Aurelians come from, but that's not important right now."

"This is no longer about Bodicéa," Dead Keeler said ... there was no other way to describe it ... *gravely*. "They know about our world. They will come for us. If they are the new incarnation of the Adversary, they have to destroy us. We were set against them. They have to come for us."

"So, we find the location of their world and then what? Tell Sapphire?"

"We must send a data transmission to Sapphire, let them know every thing we know about the Aurelians, and pray it isn't too late. It's been thirty-two years since we left, by the Sapphirean calendar. They could have done a lot of damage. Presumably, if they have tachyon transmitting capacity, they have already told their home-world about us. We must go to their home-system, learn everything we can, and if necessary... destroy their world."

"Destroy their world?" The Old Man nodded solemnly, so Keeler must have heard him correctly. "That isn't what you expect to hear from the good guys."

"When you meet the Adversary, you must hold back nothing," the Old Man repeated.

"Right, of course," Keeler said.

Caliph interrupted. "I think some people are trying to hurt me. I don't like them."

The commander turned to Queequeg. "Is she clean?"

"None of the flags I put in has been set off. She wasn't compromised."

Keeler went to a control column mounted just in front of the cylinder that contained her intelligence. He laid his hand on it, bringing down the barrier that separated Caliph from *Pegasus's* braincore. "Caliph," he said calmly. "Defend yourself."

In the War Room, Shayne American tried to make sense of what her systems were telling her. "Braincore processing has just dropped sixty per cent," she reported.

"What?" said Miller, stunned. Without the braincore, there was no way to coordinate *Pegasus's* defensive systems, or even operate them.

"Autonomous defenses are unaffected," American reported. "If anything, processing speed has just quadrupled."

On the Main Display, war scenarios were cycling through in a blur of holographic maneuvers, weapons, and exploding ships.

At the front of the great ship, a cloud of Hammerheads fired off the rails and into the night.

"We're out of range," Honeywell barked.

Miller checked his own displays. "She knows what she's doing," he said calmly, and a little resignedly.

"Found it!" Queequeg said. He displayed a star map on the ceiling of the chamber. "It's a system we don't have a designation for, sixty-two light years from here. That's where the world-ship was constructed."

The Old Man looked at Keeler, and his form seemed to diminish to a shadow with fiercely burning lights in place of his eyes. "Now, what are you going to do?"

"I can't leave this fight. They'll destroy Bodicéa."

"So, you'll fight until your stores are exhausted and have nothing left to bring to bear against the Aurelians in the viper's nest that is their home. Leaving this ship, and our home-world, wide open for the next attack."

"You were the one who was telling me I needed to stand and fight yesterday!"

"Yesterday was before we knew that they had knowledge of our homeworld. Our first priority must be the defense of Sapphire, of humanity for that matter. Not to mention, there is a very real possibility that the battle here will destroy *Pegasus*, and that, above all, must not happen."

Conveniently for the dead man's argument, the tactical display showed another explosion, below and aft of *Pegasus*. It was too far away for the effect to be felt, but the Aurelians were getting closer.

"Wheee-e-e-e-e!" said Caliph. "I got another one! Yea-a-a-a-a!"

She showed them the same data that was being displayed in the War Room.

There were three Aurelian ships closing to within their own weapons range. The lead ship was ablaze and burning, its weapons would be useless. *Pegasus* sent out a brace of missiles to destroy it before it could ram her hull. The other two ships fired a volley of small energy pulses. Their power had diminished to negligibility by the time they reached *Pegasus*, but the ship's were closing.

In another battle sector, one of the violently twisting spikeheads was taken out by an Aves, but the energy released in its death spasm flipped the ship on its back. A read-out immediately recorded damage and injury to the crew.

"More of them are getting through," the Dead Man said. "They're driving us away from the planet. We can no longer protect the Bodicéans anyway."

"Are you saying we're losing?"

"So far, we've been lucky. You have very, very good pilots, as good as any we had in the Crusades, better even. Also, the Aurelian ships were designed for assault, they have limited self-defense capability. Thanks to these, we haven't lost anyone. However, those spikeheads coming from the World-Ship will keep coming. Their reserves could be ... far vaster than ours. The only way to defeat them is to use the Nemesis spikeheads."

Keeler had to force himself not to use that option.

"You won't do that, will you?"

"If we use the Nemesis spikehead, we may ignite a supernova that would destroy Bodicéa and the Aurelians."

"You don't know that for sure."

"It probably would," Queequeg told them. Caliph had shown him enough of the world-ship's energy core to know. "Probably."

"They're dead anyway," Dead Keeler told him.

"Not by my hand. I am here to save Bodicéa, not to kill billions."

"Even if they are the Adversary, returned?"

Keeler shook his head. "I don't know and you won't tell me."

The Old Man was approaching the fevered climax of his argument. "You can stay until you have destroyed or disabled all of the attack ships, but the World-Ship will not be denied its

victory. It will lay waste to Bodicéa. The shape of the battle is clear. They can fight us to exhaustion, it will solve nothing. Or, you can fire off a Nemesis missile and kill them all, but you won't, not unless you are convinced..."

"... and because there are many more humans on the world-ship than Aurelians," Living Keeler added.

"You're being petulant. If this were the Tenth Crusade, I would have you beaten like a red-headed step-child."

"Why would you beat a red-headed step-child," Queequeg asked?

The tactical screen showed an Aves running hard against the two nearest Aurelian ships, firing the last of its missiles to stop their approach and finally making a run with its pulse cannon. Their energy beams swept and both struck the ship. Its starboard wing exploded.

Tactical readout showed the crew was alive, moderately injured, and in need of a tow back to the ship.

"There is one other choice," the Ghost told him.

His ancestor knew what he was thinking. "Run."

"Damn right, run. If there's no chance of winning, and a big chance of winding up dead, running is definitely an option. We didn't win the Crusades by dying every chance we got." Dead Keeler laid a ghostly, insubstantial hand on the commander's shoulder. "We've put up a great fight, but we can not save this world. We have to save Sapphire. If we take this fight home to Aurelia, we might be able to stop them from taking many more worlds."

Keeler sighed and remembered a quote he had learned a long time before.

"Evil believes it will always win because good is stupid."

The airshaft was large enough for an adult human, but still a narrow space, and the sides were very smooth and almost devoid of hand-holds, not to mention festooned with leaves, debris, and the small, disgusting, and probably poisonous, insects that dwelt there. Climbing was achieved by bracing hands on one wall and feet on the opposite wall, wedging one's self in between and working slowly up.

Matthew was furthest up. He worked his way a little way up the last few centimeters, braced himself, and directed his legs toward the openings that let air in. They looked large enough for any of them to squeeze through, although a large Marine would have been screwed. He gripped the ledge with his hands and swung his legs through the opening. When his hold was secure, he pulled his body up and out. He braced himself tightly and reached down to the next person in the airshaft, which was Trajan.

The boy reached up and took his hand. "I have him, Commander," Matthew called down to Lear. He pulled Trajan to the top and drew him through. Together, they pulled Armatrading through the opening. She scraped her hand on the ledge, but for once did not complain about it.

"I don't know why we're going to the roof," Alkema repeated, as he emerged from the airshaft. "I know it's a long hike, but the ground was still our best shot. There's no where to go from up here."

His first survey of the roof seemed to confirm his hypothesis. There were no other buildings close enough to jump to nearby. There was no way to easily climb to the roof, where there

were assuredly more guards.

"I think I know what Flight Lieutenant Driver was thinking," Ex. Commander Lear said. "*Pegasus* must be looking for us. On the roof, their probes, their scans might be able to detect us, even without our implants."

"Perhaps, we can find some means of signaling them," Alkema suggested. With what was an open question. There did not appear to be any loose objects on the roof. It was covered in a kind of scaly tile, with no properties that were evidently useful to their situation. It also seemed a little dangerous. There was no guardrail or even a lip, and the roof was slightly slick with moisture. All around them the lights of the city twinkled dimly.

A shooting star flew overhead, a brilliant trailing flash in the midnight sky. In the distance, it exploded.

"What was that?" Armatrading demanded.

Alkema looked around. "I don't know... there's another one... and another..." He looked high into the sky, where in the distance, somewhere between the moons and the stars, little streamers were curling and dodging, and sometimes exploding.

Lear looked up gravely. "It looks... like some kind of battle."

"*Pegasus* and the Aurelians," Alkema said.

"Which means the Aurelians must have attacked," Lear said. They could hear her unspoken predicate, *I should have been there*.

Matthew picked his way to the top of the dome. He balanced himself and called out as loud as he could. "*Prudence!*"

He turned around, aimed his voice to the northwest where they had landed some hours earlier. "*Prudence!!*"

"Be quiet! They'll hear you!" Armatrading yelled.

Alkema called to him. "The ship can't hear you, it's twenty kilometers away."

Matthew turned around, and they saw that his command mask had re-appeared on his face. "Nay, she isn't. *Prudence!!!*"

The air above the tower shimmered, and *Prudence* emerged from behind her holoflage shields. She made her appearance silently, but the wind seemed to whisper a welcome to her.

"Kumba Yah!" Trajan exclaimed.

"How did she keep up with us when our locator implants were deactivated?" Alkema persisted.

"She knew where I was," Driver assured them. He undid his sleeve and showed Alkema his right forearm. Scarcely visible on its surface was a thin ridge of black plastic and metal. "Before we left *Prudence*, I had the molecular knitters implant an interface strip in my arm. I told the Bodicéans it was a medical implant." He showed where the molecular knitters had even placed a medical symbol at the end.

"Good thinking."

Matthew shrugged. "I hate being separated from my ship."

Prudence dropped down low and opened her ventral hatch. "I think she wants us to get on board."

Pegasus's range defenses were beginning to strain as the Aurelian focused their assault on her.

The hammerhead missiles were now meeting the Aurelian spikeheads only a few thousands of kilometers away. More and more were evading the screen of Aves and Shrieks. More assault ships were closing, and more and more, the Aves had to focus on them.

A spikehead came within striking distance, The phalanx guns on *Pegasus's* starboard blade locked on and fired. Ten thousand deadly points of light converged on the spikehead, spits of pure anti-proton generated by the close-in weaponry. Short-lived but lethal, they cut the spikehead to pieces. It died, but in death, like some great hell-beast, it released a spasm of energy that lit up the sky, spread across *Pegasus's* topside and shook the great pathfinder ship from bow to stern.

"What was that?" Keeler demanded. From Caliph's chamber, the effect was more of a shaking, and a roll of thunder. Explosions in space were soundless, of course, but the energy created some kind of resonance within *Pegasus's* infrastructure that sent frightening soundwaves though her decks. In some spaces it howled and moaned, in others it growled and rumbled, and the hull shivered.

Miller reported almost casually. "One of their spikeheads almost made it through. Minor damage to the secondary command tower."

He heard American's voice in the background. "Aurelian Assault Ship now within weapons range."

Miller turned away and ordered, "Open fire."

Keeler again looked at the tactical display. *Pegasus* the starboard weapon arrays on *Pegasus's* forward prow lashed out at the interloper. The Aurelian ship pounded away. *Pegasus's* defensive shielding lit up in purple and silver as it fought off. The tactical display showed that what was getting through was inflicting nasty, albeit so far cosmetic, damage. Then, the Aurelian ship could take no more. Its forward section exploded. *Pegasus* continued cutting away at it until it disintegrated.

We really are at war, Keeler thought. *For the first time in thousands of years, we are at war.*

"Status of our Aves," Keeler requested.

"Nine down... two of them damaged enough to require recovery."

"Casualties?"

"Fifteen injured crew, mostly on the Aves."

Keeler looked at the Old Man. Maybe he was wrong, maybe he was right. He didn't have time to figure it out. He had to act on instinct. It was all he had.

This was a hard order. He had to force it out. "Lt. Commander Miller, recall all Aves."

"Commander?"

"Stand them down."

"Without Aves, we won't be able to stop the ... the spikeheads, or the assault ships. We can't do it with range weapons alone."

"Stand them down and prepare to leave orbit. Navigator Change, are you on this channel?"

"Affirmative, Commander,"

"Plot a course that will permit us to reacquire all outstanding flight groups as we leave the system."

Miller was dumbfounded. "We're leaving the fight?"

Keeler could not bring himself to look Miller in the eye, not even over a commlink. "We're leaving this fight ... and we're going to take it to the Aurelian homeworld."

"The Aurelian home-world?" Miller seemed as taken away by it as Keeler had been.

"When I discovered the image of Sapphire in the Aurelian data-blast, the whole scope of the battle shifted," Keeler explained. "Instead of a major battle to save one world, Bodicéa, I realized that our own worlds, our families, our nations, were at risk. We can not save Bodicéa, but maybe we can save ourselves." That sounded selfish. "And the rest of the galaxy," he added.

"We found the point of origin for the world-ship," Keeler went on. "We're going to take the fight home to them, but we'll need to be at full capacity to do it."

Miller was quiet for a moment. In the background, something exploded. "I understand, Commander," he said finally.

"But we're not going down without a fight. How many ships have we damaged so far?"

"One hundred eleven."

"That leaves about five hundred fifty. Prepare to launch as many hammerheads as we can as pass over the Aurelian fleet. Let Caliph plot the trajectory. I imagine they'll need to be fired at exactly the right millisecond."

Miller had a suggestion of his own. "We will also launch a brace of Hammerjacks against the world-ship. That will keep them busy for years."

Keeler wasn't sure what a Hammerjack was, but he was sure if Miller ordered it, it could do real damage. "Do that, then, and order our uninhabited Shrieks to continue attacking until they're destroyed."

"All of them?"

"We'll make more. Use them to cover the ships with our people on board. Then, have them keep fighting after we're gone."

"We still have people on the surface," Shayne American reminded both of them. "If we go to ramp speed, they may not be able to catch us."

"Recall them from the planet immediately, and tell them we're leaving. I'm going to PC-1," Keeler out.

Miller turned to American. His face was ashen white. "Well, you heard the order, Specialist. Send the Recall command."

American turned, and went and touched the call pad. "*Pegasus* to all Flight Groups. Assemble and return to the ship. Command Authentication Code: Silver-three-two-seven-omega."

"I can't believe he's pulling us out," Miller muttered.

I can't believe he's taking us to that thing's homeworld, American thought, but she had far too much good sense to say it out loud. "All ships sign in. Damaged ships first. Flight control will prioritize you. Maintain defenses. *Pegasus* out."

Efficiently, she touched another control. "Tactical Command to Flight Operations. We are turning Aves command and control to your sector. Please acknowledge."

"Flight Operations to Tactical Command. Hand-off acknowledged."

American turned her attention to the Shrieks. "I'm setting them to autonomous mode. Their first priority will be to screen the Aves against the Aurelians. Once *Pegasus* has left the system, they will continue to attack the Aurelian Assault Ships. They will self-destruct to prevent capture."

"Task some to protect the planet," Miller said, weakly. Noblesse oblige, he supposed. If Keeler were quitting, there must be no hope. "Status of *Prudence* and *Basil*."

"*Prudence* checked in with PC-1 five minutes ago. They are preparing to leave the system."

"*Basil*?"

Something split the sky open over Serenopolis with a cleaving light, as though all along, the stars had been nothing but pinpricks in a great black shell of night that had at last shattered and revealed, for an instant, the hellish light that lay behind it.

Then, it was gone, shrieking across the bay and tearing up a wake on the churning waters as it passed.

"Tobias, what was that?" Pieta whispered. They stood on the balcony behind Ciel's townhouse. Tobias looked high, high into the sky, at the little swirls and puffs of light, as stormy winds tore from the cloudless sky to chill and frighten them.

"What was it?" Pieta whispered again, urgently, a little less like a mistress commanding her man-servant and a little more like a scared little girl.

"I wish I knew," Tobias answered. "I only know it's something great and terrible, a sign that something horrible is being born somewhere, a monster that consumes entire world."

Pieta looked at him hard. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Tobias knew no answer he could give her would make sense. This was all far over his head. He had learned a little from Ciel, and more from Tamarind and Miller, but it was all so far above him. Aliens, world domination, legends, battles, perhaps it was the liberation that had been whispered about in secret for all these years, but he had never really expected to see.

He shook his head, and looked at his daughter. There was only one imperative, one that had always been denied to him before. Now, Ciel, she to whom he had always submitted, was far away, and he was the protector. His daughter was in danger, and her protection was his only priority. "We're going," Tobias said firmly, in a voice of resolve he didn't think himself capable of.

"Where are we going?"

"We're leaving the city," he told her. "It isn't safe."

"Let me get my..."

"You'll take nothing. We're going... now."

She raised her shoulders and threw back her head. "You can't make me go anywhere."

"I'm your father."

"So!"

"You will come with me." Tobias said, and he grabbed her hard.

"Let me go!" she shrieked.

"I will strike you if you do not come with me," Tobias told her, and thought he might just mean it.

So did Pieta. She looked at him, open-mouthed with shock.

"We're going." He said and pulled her with him down the stairs at the side of the balcony deck, down to the ground, across the land at the back of the house toward the raging sea.

When he had dragged her clear of the house, he held up the small device, the size and shape of a writing utensil, and twisted it as Tamarind had shown him. "I'm here," he yelled into the wind of the unquiet night. "I'm here. Come and take me!"

A light fell from the sky and bore down on his position. Its speed was great, and it was bright enough to make a spot of daylight immediately below.

Pieta screamed.

Basil dropped from the sky to the ground, making the most of the narrow space between the house and the cliff's edge. The hatch was opening even before the ship had settled. A tall, lean spartan figure stood in the light of the hatch, extending a hand.

Tobias ran, Pieta coming with him. He shoved her toward the ship first. Tamarind lifted her the rest of the way in.

"Go!" Tamarind shouted when the hatch was sealed behind them.

Flight Captain Jones did not have to be told twice. With a flash, *Basil* was climbing into the morning sky.

"What is happening?" Tobias demanded.

Tamarind handed steaming mugs of hot chocolate to both of them. "Your wife approved the treaty with the Aurelians. That was the signal for the Aurelians to commence the attack on your planet. *Pegasus* is defending your world, but she is preparing to withdraw."

"Withdraw? Why?"

"That explanation is complicated, and we have little time, and many hazards." Tamarind led Tobias to a seat next to Pieta and helped him strap in. There were nine people from *Pegasus* already in their seats, four men and five women. They had been the last to leave the Isle of Mab. Pieta had never been in a room with so many men at the same time, and it felt uncomfortable. She looked around for Lieutenant David Alkema, but didn't see him. She realized she might be going to see him, and this calmed her a little.

Tamarind opened the viewport next to their seats, and they watched the curve of the planet fall away below. They saw streaks of light hurtling downward.

"The Aurelians are firing some kind of weapons of mass destruction against your planet."

"Why?"

"To wipe your civilization clean, so they can replace it. In a way, we are responsible. We could have attacked them pre-emptively and prevented this, but, we underestimated them. We are sorry."

"It's all right," Tobias cast his eyes over his world, for the last time, he thought.

Suddenly, the ship pitched downward too hard for the on-board systems to compensate.

Tamarind looked upward, as though he knew what had happened.

The War Room on-board *Pegasus* saw everything.

Basil had just cleared the atmosphere when an Aurelian spikehead, that had appeared to be passing underneath the ship en route to one of the Bodicéan cities, suddenly skipped off some thermal inversion and shot upward. It caught *Basil* from underneath, seeming to wrap its tail around *Basil*, just for a moment, its too solid spikehead smashing against the lower hull before returning to its course.

Its brief dance was enough though, to overload and short out *Basil's* entire power system. They watched the Aves flip on its back and begin falling toward the surface.

American shouted. "They've lost power. They're going down."

The tactical display showed *Basil* twisting and writhing as it fell. The tag showed it was receiving no data from the ship. There was no way to tell if the crew was alive or dead.

Then, its image disappeared entirely as *Pegasus's* sensors lost their lock.

Miller looked at the screen. "Prepare a rescue mission. Commander Keeler, *Basil* is down. We have to delay departure from the system. We have to..."

"Phil," American said gently. "Those images are six minutes old. *Basil* is already down. They're gone."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Prudence cleared the atmosphere and climbed back into space. Lights were bursting across the surface of Bodicéa, like flashbulbs. Beneath each flash, a city of 200,000 people ceased to exist. Concordia, Serenopolis, and Apollonia had already been blasted to dust, and many more would join them before the sun arose. *Prudence* had no time to mourn their destruction. They had gotten the word. *Pegasus* was running, ramping up to transition speed, and it would take everything they had to catch her.

"*Pegasus* is currently 4 light minutes from us, commencing a lateral attack run... over the entire Aurelian fleet." Alkema displayed the course data from *Pegasus*. The Aurelian fleet was by now spread out in a deep parabolic arc, closing in on Bodicéa. *Pegasus* was going to run along this curve and above at forty light seconds vertical separation.

Matthew did some quick calculations. *Pegasus* was already moving faster than *Prudence*. He would have to red-line the gravity engines to close the distance. He ran some mathematical calculations through *Prudence* and displayed the results as the relative courses of his Aves and *Pegasus* over time and space. The two lines representing this data did not quite converge,

Alkema looked over the data and understated the obvious. "We can't catch up."

"You got this up to .90 *c* when you were running from the Aurelians before," Lear insisted. "*Pegasus* needs five full days to achieve .55*c*. You should be able to catch her."

"*Pegasus* had a head start," Alkema reminded her. "And it took almost three days for *Prudence* to get up to that speed when he was running from the Aurelians before. In three days, *Pegasus* will be out of the system. We'll be behind her, but we can't catch them before they transition."

"We can catch *Pegasus*, but it won't be easy," Matthew explained. "At ramp speed, *Pegasus*

puts out a strong short range gravitational wake. The closer we get to the ship, the more we'll be fighting the current. It gets stronger as we approach the ship, but that isn't our biggest problem."

"What is our biggest problem?"

Driver projected the tactical display on the canopy. "Those are the problem."

The sky between *Prudence* and *Pegasus* was filled with the Aurelian spikeheads, dodging and weaving, spewing violent energy in every direction. *Prudence* would be like a bird flying through a hailstorm, except that any piece of hail that struck the bird would explode and blow it to pieces.

"*Prudence* will need every joule to catch up and dock," Alkema swung around in his seat and activated a command console. "I'm going to shut down all unnecessary systems. I'll also shut down life support to the main cabin. We'll bring up Armatrading and the Executive Commander's son to the main cabin."

Lear gave the order. "Do it!" She spoke into the ship's comm.system. "Bridget, bring Trajan up to the command module."

Matthew ran a few alternate course projections, trying to find an optimum combination of time-to-intercept *Pegasus* while avoiding the worst of the spikeheads. He soon confirmed his suspicions that there were no ideal alternatives, and his best bet was a straight run.

When Armatrading and Trajan Lear were secure in the command module, Alkema sealed off the main cabin. "Cutting life support... now!"

The power reserves climbed and there was a sense the engine was pushing a little harder. The indicators showed a five percent gain in speed. The two lines on the navigation display nudged a little closer together.

"That's helping, but I don't think it will help enough. We have to get our speed up," Matthew said. "I'm going to try something."

Alkema whispered to Trajan. "When you hear a pilot say that, strap in and pray."

Matthew brought up the displays for the two Shrieks *Prudence* wore at the edge of her wings. He touched them and over-rode the automatic separation controls. "Secure your stations, strap into your landing couches."

"You're not..." Alkema began, intending to finish with "*going to activate the ion drives on the Shrieks while they're still connected to the wings. Granted, it will give us an extra power boost, but we'll lose steering control and possibly tear the wings off. Are you sure you want to do that.*" Before he could finish, Matthew hit the ion-drives. The sudden acceleration kicked Alkema into the seat so hard his breath was knocked from him, which kept him from articulating his second choice of expression, which would have been, "*Arrrgh!*"

Pillars of bright blue shot out from the rear of the ship, pushing it forward, gaining another twenty percent of speed, but stressing the wings in the process far beyond their standard design load.

In the command module, bright red displays alerted the pilot to this condition. "She can take it," Matthew reassured everyone. He was more interested in the other display, where two graphing lines that had stubbornly refused to converge before now came together. They could intercept *Pegasus* in forty-one minutes at this speed.

But first, they would have to survive the storm of spikeheads they would reach seven minutes first.

"*Pegasus* hailing *Aves Basil, Basil*, if you are able, please respond on any channel," Specialist Shayne American repeated for the forty-fifth time.

Basil had been at 95,000 meters when the spikehead had struck it. Telemetry and communication had ceased instantaneously and not been restored.

The War Chamber had become almost as silent. Screens and holo-displays showed Shrieks and Hammerheads methodically pounding away at the Aurelian Fleet (and being pounded in return) and *Aves* lined up behind the ship, jockeying for approach positions and dodging the occasional spikehead. Aurelian assault ships were still closing in on *Pegasus*, not yet realizing that she had quit the battle. Many more ships were moving toward the planet. On every front, the Aurelian spikeheads were moving in, with deadly purpose, and were already wreaking havoc on the surface of the planet.

The real change in battle, the real change in tempo, tone, and attitude had come when *Basil* was destroyed. No other fact of the battle could command their attention against the fact that the enemy, for the first time, had spilled their blood in combat.

Only a few hours ago, Tamarind had stood in this very room. Only a few days ago, American had shared the command module with Flight Captain Jones, and together, they had walked on the streets of a city that no longer existed, nor did any of the citizens they had spoken to.

Lt. Commander Miller looked as though he had been kicked hard in the gut by the All-Oz Armpit Avenger Place-kicker. He was leaning against the command podium from which he had been orchestrating *Pegasus's* defense of itself and of Bodicéa. When *Basil* had gone down, he had followed every attempt to raise her.

The ship had gone silent eleven and a half minutes ago. It should have hit the ground by now. If they had been capable of sending out a distress call they would have. 95,000 meters to fall, without any power. When the ship hit to ground there would be nothing but a crater and perhaps a handful of pulverized debris. Even if they had survived the initial detonation, the impact would have killed them all. No lifepods had been detected.

With grave reluctance, Miller called off the search. "Cease and desist, Specialist."

"Acknowledged, sir," calmly and efficiently, Shayne American switched from scanning for *Basil* to monitoring the rest of the battle.

"Status of the other ... *Aves*."

"Four on final approach. *Prudence* just broke atmosphere."

"Can they catch up with us?"

"At their present speed..." She was about to say they couldn't, then, *Prudence* accelerated. She had to double-check because their acceleration curb far exceeded the *Aves* profile.

"Specialist," Miller prompted, testily.

"They'll catch us on the opposite side of the fleet," she finished. She showed him the schematic. *Pegasus* was positioning herself for an attack run. She would leave the Aurelians their prize, but would rain nucleonic death from above as she parted.

Miller studied *Prudence's* course with concern. "To catch us, they'll have to cut right through the middle of the assault fleet."

"Are you suggesting we wait for them?"

As if in answer, an Aurelian spikehead broke through the screen of Shrieks and Hammerheads and bore straight on for the command tower. The phalanx guns took over at short range and pulverized the beast, but *Pegasus* was already going too fast to avoid the debris field. Waves of force and wreckage slammed against the command tower, hard enough to knock all the standing officers off their feet in the upper decks PC-1.

The War Room was heavily shielded, but still felt the effects of the blast. The deck shook, the command consoles rocked.

"Primary shields 1, 4, 7, and 5 down to 13 per cent," American called out over the alarms that had activated. "Damage to nineteen decks..."

As she was speaking, another Aurelian spikehead avoided the line entirely with a lateral attack and bore down on the weakened area of the starboard blade. The Aves *James* broke from its approach and blasted the spikehead to bits.

For a moment, the telemetry tag on *James* flickered, than was restored. Flying through the debris of the spikehead had temporarily blocked it.

To Miller, it was an omen. "We can't slow down, there's too many ships and spikeheads closing in on us. Full speed ahead. Arm Hammerheads and Hammerjacks, fire in braces as we pass over the fleet."

American put her own mourning aside, and gave the necessary orders.

"Thirteen seconds to the Aurelian fleet."

"Twelve seconds to the edge of the Aurelian fleet," Alkema said out loud, speaking of the other edge. The survivors braced for the onslaught, except for the pilot, who wasn't listening.

Alkema had been right. Steering *Prudence* at this speed, with the Shriek engines rocketing her forward, was almost impossible. The Shrieks were not designed to be used in this way and the additional power was almost uncontrollable. Matthew had turned directional control function over to *Prudence* itself, laying in the optimal course and letting artificial intelligence handle the challenges of staying on it, constant adjustments to power and trim, thousands of times each second.

With his ship minding its own course, Matthew Driver concerned himself with making sure none of those violently dancing balls of light and death hit his ship. He would bob and weave, and trust the ship to take him back on course when the danger was passed.

At nearly .49c, the challenge was immense, and required almost total interface with *Prudence*. Her sensors became his eyes, and he had to direct her by flexing his thoughts. His brain locked into her braincore, his mind linked with her mind. They became as one.

He looked ahead, into that stormcloud of Aurelian death machines, saw where each one moving, saw almost a pattern-ness to the random deflections of their courses. He could almost see a brightly lit golden line through the center of them, a safe passage through the valley of the shadow of death.

"Four seconds," Alkema read off. "Three... two ... one ... entry."

For a moment, it was as though nothing had changed. The ship continued its smooth silent course.

Then, a blazing spikehead shot over the Aves, only a few thousand meters away. Its blinding white light washed all color out of the command module, made the people inside pale as ghosts for a second.

Then two more flashed by, not so close, but close enough to be seen. Then, two more after that were followed by four more, then eight more.

"Jesus and Vesta," Armatrading cried out.

Alkema looked at the path. At this rate, it would take them another thirty-nine seconds to clear the danger zone.

Prudence whispered in Matthew's mind. *They've spotted us, Honey. We're too fast for them to lock onto, but they can get in our way.*

"Time to clear the path," Matthew said out loud, the only acknowledgement he had made to the others in the Command Module.

He flexed his mind, and *Prudence's* forward pulse cannons blazed. The weaponry was similar to *Pegasus* phalanx guns, not quite as powerful, but enough to disintegrate any spikeheads they caught at short range, or knock them off their course at longer ranges.

He fired off the Hammerheads in braces, every five seconds, until the ship's small supply was exhausted. The Hammerheads drove on toward any spikehead that tried to block the path, connecting with them, deflecting them, destroying them.

The pulse cannons kept firing, demolishing spikeheads just in time for *Prudence* to dodge a little bit, catch the trailing edge of the shockwave and debris field and pummel on forward. The command module bucked and shook as crash gear hugged its occupants tightly.

To Trajan Lear, it felt like he was riding a roller-coaster that was being blown up at the same time. He should have been terrified, but what he actually felt felt a little short of that emotion, and a little closer to that one called "exhilaration."

Armatrading knew if she survived this ride, she was going to throw up copiously.

Light seconds ahead of *Prudence*, *Pegasus* was giving the Aurelians better than she had got. *Pegasus* accelerated, flashed over the Aurelian fleet one last time, and released from its missile hatcheries a last assault. Wave after wave broke from her bow and fell away from the Mother-Ship, then kick-started their ion-drives and bore down on the Aurelian fleet.

The spikeheads threw themselves up as a screen against the Hammerheads. It was a pretty even match. Whenever they impacted one another, the resulting explosion annihilated both warheads and anything within 10,000 meters.

A little more than half the Hammerheads were making it through the screen, descending on the Aurelian Assault ships with deadly consequences. Sometimes, they hit the propulsion systems aft, destroying them and making the ships dead in the water. Sometimes, they smashed against the forward weapon arrays, destroying the entire front quarter of the ship and devastating the rest with the power feedback. A few times, they hit amidships, opening great gashes in the sides, spilling out the cargo of weapons and mercenaries to a cold death in space. Two of the Aurelian ships split in half, quite spectacularly. Then, the two halves crumpled into one another, releasing more light, energy, and death.

A few seconds into her run, *Pegasus* passed over the World-Ship, where she dropped a very special load of missiles.

They were called Hammerjacks. They were cousins to the Hammerhead missiles that made up the bulk of *Pegasus*'s offensive weaponry. However, where the Hammerheads were a blunt but effective tool for destroying things with massive explosions, the Hammerjacks were more *subtle*.

Hammerjacks were designed to burrow into the surface of a planet (or a very large spaceship, the Aurelian world-ship probably counted as either) and unleash armies of small, self-replicating machines to infest the ship's systems and essentially consume it from the inside. Hammerjacks could also be used to gather intelligence, or, they could lie dormant for years, then detonate on command. A Hammerjack warhead had a total yield only one-third the yield of a Hammerhead, but since it detonated from inside the organism, it was just as deadly if not more so.

Hammerheads killed fast. Hammerjacks killed slowly. Their primary use was intended, for example, in a hostage-type situation, where the enemy would be told that his ship would be eaten from the inside out unless he surrendered. Mass use against an enemy in combat was considered an extreme use of the weapon, too abhorrent for consideration in the course of a normal battle. The Republic Ministry of Armaments had over 1,400,000 data points describing the precise circumstances under which they could be used. The Sapphirean PSDS policy was simpler. It was to only use Hammerjacks against an enemy that was pure evil.

"Hammerjacks away," American reported after the last brace had been delivered. They bore down on the world ship, dodging and weaving between the spikeheads and the point defense system.

Lt. Commander Miller watched them fall, and kept to himself a thought far too clichéd to speak out loud. *Take that, you bastards!*

With a final run through the center of the line, *Prudence* emerged from the angry storm and closed in on its home-ship, scorched, abraded, and pock-marked from the assault, but far more intact than she had any right to be.

Matthew Driver relaxed, just a little bit, and just long enough to tell the others, "73 seconds to *Pegasus* intercept."

Pegasus was clear of the fleet and was rising out of the system. Her speed was only a few thousandths slower than *Prudence*.

Matthew quickly ran some landing scenarios. Then activated his comm-system. "*Pegasus*, this the Aves *Prudence* on approach bearing 179 degrees at 90 light seconds. We are coming in hot and fast. If possible, convey a landing course and prepare a gravity shunt."

Several seconds later, *Pegasus* acknowledged them. "*Prudence*, this is *Pegasus* flight control. You are cleared for landing hatch seven. Please state your complement and condition."

"*Pegasus*, this is *Prudence*. We have five souls on board. All are well." He left out the fact that Armatrading had vomited herself into unconsciousness shortly before clearing the spikehead field. "Estimated time to intercept you ... thirty-two seconds. Mark."

"We have you *Prudence*, welcome home."

Goneril Lear reached out and laid her hand on Trajan's shoulder. "We're going to make it."

Alkema looked at Matthew, knowing that their safe arrival on *Pegasus* was not quite a foregone conclusion. At this speed, it would be a very tight landing, with a possibility of

impacting the stern of the Pathfinder ship, or possibly crashing into the landing bay in a roiling ball of flame and debris. That was also not the only problem.

Some of the spikeheads that had given up on *Pegasus* were looking for new targets. "The... spikeheads..." Alkema said, amidst the speed and instant death flying on either side of him, getting each word out was an effort, "are...chasing... us."

One of the Aurelian spikeheads had indeed broken away from the pack and was pursuing *Prudence*. Perhaps, it was smart enough to realize that tailing the shuttlecraft was a way of breaching the defenses of the mother-ship. More likely, it had just locked onto a target and was refusing to let go.

Matthew readied the tail guns and poured on the speed, and soon his ship was being buffeted, like a ship at sea bounding against the waves. They were beginning to feel the effect of *Pegasus*'s gravity engines, pushing them aside.

The stern of *Pegasus* was growing larger rapidly.

"*Prudence* to *Pegasus*. Shunt gravity across our landing vector now. We're coming in hot."

"That spikehead will follow us right into the landing bay," Alkema warned.

"Nay, it won't" Matthew said calmly. "Its closing speed on us is greater than our closing speed on *Pegasus*. Meaning: it will destroy us three seconds before we can reach *Pegasus*."

"Did I mention its been fun knowing you?" Alkema said. It suddenly occurred to him that he was only here because of the crush of a pre-pubescent girl. Before he could get too angry about that, though, he realized the girl and her entire family were probably dead by now.

Matthew's hand hovered a control surface. He watched the distance to *Pegasus* close in hundredths of a second... until they were 14... 13... 12... 11 ... seconds away.

He hit the Shriek release hard. The two Shrieks decoupled explosively from the Aves and flew backwards, directly into the spikehead. All three exploded. The shockwave pushed *Prudence* hard toward the landing bay. Matthew struggled to hold it steady into the open docking hatch.

His left wing scraped the side of entrance hatch seven, making a gouge four centimeters deep. The ship broke through four arresting fields before coming to rest, its landing struts completely collapsed. It lay on the main deck meters away from three undamaged Aves, looking almost like a murder victim found in a gutter.

The crew inside her command module realized they were alive and began offering thanks to Matthew and to God above before unstrapping themselves and preparing to exit through the main hatch.

As he rose from his landing couch, Trajan looked at his mother and said for the final time. "I am going to Flight Core, whether you permit me to, or not."

Executive Commander Lear nodded. If, after all this, he was convinced that the life of a flight jockey was what he wanted, then Vesta and the whole Army of Light could not persuade him otherwise.

A few days later, *Pegasus* reached transition speed and vanished into the anti-night of Hyperspace.

Nights and nights went by, and the crew of the pathfinder ship went about the task of repairing the damage inflicted on their ship, and on their souls, by the ferocious battle they left behind them.

The Wally-ball tournament was rescheduled for four days after entering hyperspace. Flight Core won, 21-17, but the game was sparsely attended and there was little enthusiasm.

Talk in the corridors, in the food courts, and round the bar at Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-N-Jam was subdued. What talk there was consisted of dissections of their defeat at 10 255 Vulpeculus, the loss of their comrades, and apprehension over what awaited them at the Aurelian home system. The dark mood took account of all these things.

In the time of transit, they had the opportunity to make their ship and their selves battle-ready, and to take care of other matters.

Keeler stared across at the four people in his office, flanked on either side by Marine Buttercup and a Guardian-Inspector named Churchill (who was also known as Centurion Bellisarius, but not to Keeler). He looked at the people one by one, then back to the desktop display of the personnel whose names and faces corresponded to the people who stood before him.

"Flight Lieutenant Adrian Lowell ... Planetology Specialist Grace Jones ... Astrophysics Specialist Ahmed Zoetrope ... and Specialist Cree BladeRunner... those are indeed not your real names. Our aural scans show none of you are who you claim to be, which leads me to ask, then, who are you? Where are the people you're pretending to be, and what are you doing on my ship?"

"Watching you lose," said not-Flight Lieutenant Lowell, with a smirking grin. "Watching you run from the system before the Echelon destroyed your pathetic ship."

"Is that all you were sent here to do, just gloat over us?" Keeler said, almost as though musing over the question. "Were you sent here to spy, perhaps? Were you sent here to sabotage our ship, learn our secrets? Oh, wait, I forgot." He pointed to Bladerunner. "You were sent here to kill me. Were your comrades also here as part of that plan, or were they here for some other purpose?"

The four phony crewmen looked back at him, and laughed again.

Inspector Churchill offered, "We have tried to interrogate them, Commander. They haven't responded with any useful information. We could take them down and let our Truth-Machines have a go at them," Churchill offered.

Keeler nodded in acknowledgement, if not quite ready to approve the plan, but definitely considering it. He turned to his Chief Physician. "Dr. Reagan, have you determined who these people are. Are they clones? Are they some kind of biological and/oroid."

His ancient physician stood, creaks coming from her knees. "Nope, that's what we thought at first, but them bodies is exactly the same as the bodies of our people. They kept the bodies, switched out the minds."

I wonder if we could do that, Keeler thought to himself. He did not want to know if his people had that technology, and he hoped even if they did, they wouldn't use it.

Reagan activated medical displays on all four persons and explained her thesis. "Medical Technician Partridge gave 'em phys'cals on the trip back from the worl' ship. He made sure they were healthy and free of disease, but he didn't have the equipment to resonance map

their auras ... the field o' energy created by the soul."

"Souls... how can an advanced race believe in such twaddle?" said the one who wore Cree Bladerunner's face. The others seemed to think this was funny. When they laughed, they sounded like indifferent, bullying adolescents called into the headmaster's office.

She put up a display. "This res'nance map was made o' Specialist Cree Bladerunner when he came on board." The image was of a smiling Cree Bladerunner, surrounded by bright white and yellow light.

"This here is the res'nance map of that fella over there I took yesterday." The figure of Cree Bladerunner was not smiling this time, and was surrounded by blue, purple, and black.

"Your conclusion, Doctor Reagan?"

"I was getting' to it. I'll tell you when, I'm ready, g'dam'ya." Keeler cringed, expecting her to hit him with a stick. She farted, and turned back to the display, squinting closely. "This aura here, it ain't just not his, it ain't Sapphirean, and it ain't Republicker."

"Aurelian?"

"Ain't never seen an Aurelian aura, but this is the aura of a dark, dark soul."

Keeler waited, to see if she were pausing, or if she had finished. Not-Cree Bladerunner rolled his eyes and shifted on his feet.

Lear spoke before he could. "Do you have an explanation, physician?"

"Za."

Silence.

"What is your theory, Doctor," Keeler prompted.

Reagan belched and put up another holographic display. "There is microscopic scarring just beyond the hairline of the skull and in the eye sockets. There is evidence of micro-cellular stitching along the brain stem. This, when you combine it with the differences in the electrical signature of the brain indicates that the eyes, top of the skull, and sections of the brain related to cognition and higher thought have been removed and replaced."

"So, what you're saying is, someone transplanted the minds of other people into the heads of our people."

"I mighta said that, if you'da let me finish, ya ..."

Keeler glared hard at them. "Where are the people you stole your bodies from? Are they dead?"

"Why should that piss you off," Not-Bladerunner sneered. "Aren't you supposed to go to some happy mystical land when you die? We'd be happy to send you to meet your ... god."

Churchill leaned into Keeler. "They refused to answer that question under interrogation either, Commander."

"How soon can we bring them before the Truth Machines?" Keeler asked.

"Give me fourteen hours, Commander."

Keeler nodded. Churchill passed him the data form to approve the use of Truth Machines. Keeler signed it and passed it back to him, with a question. "Do we have a brig on this ship?"

"A what, sir?"

"A place of confinement for prisoners."

"Nay, sir. Until now, we have never needed one."

Although he knew this was true, Keeler got the slight and inexplicable feeling that Inspector

Churchill was holding out on him. Keeler stared down Churchill. "Very well then, make one. Make it in the UnderDecks. Make it in the darkest, coldest, ugliest corner of this ship. Make sure they're monitored twenty-eight hours a day, with Security Inspectors or and/oroids outside at all times, and most important, make sure they can never, ever get out."

"We could put them in stasis," suggested Alkema.

"Neg, I want them lucid." Keeler leaned into the face of Not-Cree Bladerunner. "At least for a while. Oz has spoken."

Not Cree Bladerunner looked back with an expression every bit as hard. "Aurelia triumphant."

"Get them out of my sight," Keeler ordered. He looked away as they were led out.

Later on, he was scheduled for a meeting with his tactical core, to discuss their arrival at the Aurelian Home system. In preparation, he brought up a display showing how much Pegasus had expended trying to hold off the Aurelian assault.

Hammerhead missiles	---	27% depletion
Hammerjack missiles	---	5% depletion
Shrieks	---	142 lost
Aves	---	9 damaged, 3 severely damaged
Pegasus	---	Minor to moderate damage to 45 sections
Casualties	---	35 officers and crew with injuries severe enough to warrant medical attention

1 Aves lost with a crew of eleven.

The exequies for the crew of *Basil* had been beautiful and moving. The lives of eleven of Pegasus's crew had been honored with life-affirming music and profound words from the commander, from their families and friends, and from the ship's religious functionaries. Tears has been shed copiously. The crew had taken strength in sharing their pain collectively, except for one, who had always withdrawn to himself to deal with the really hard emotions.

When he was sixteen years old, Lt. Commander Miller had left his family behind in Graceland to go to the University. He had not felt a really profound sense of separation, and in the years that had followed, he had rarely visited his family. They had not really understood his art, and he had little interest in agriculture. The last time the whole family had been together had been at his wedding. It had been the first time they had met the woman who was to be his wife.

In the years that followed, he had come to see almost as little of her. In the Odyssey Project, they had come together again, but they had been living separate lives for years, wasted years, broken years.

He couldn't bring himself to cry, nor to properly mourn for her. In a way, she had been gone for a long time, had long since broken whatever bond they had held.

Also, he had been one of those people who, when grief shows up at his door, turns up the music and pretends he can't hear the knock.

Nevertheless, emotions churned inside him. He pictured them looking much like the view from one of the forward observation deck. Hyperspace, such as it could be seen, was a phantasmagoria, like the ghosts of the demonic pantheon of some dark alien race, re-enacting the atrocities that had condemned them to Hell. The beasts themselves could not be seen, but they cast terrible shadows in colors human eyes were not meant to see.

He stood and watched the shadow-fires of hyperspace. The view suited his mood so perfectly, he could almost fall into it and be lost for all time. He had been standing there, staring into the abyss for several hours, when he heard voices, not far off, and realized he was not alone. Not wanting to talk to anyone, he ducked into an alcove, and tried not to listen.

He recognized the voices.

Matthew Driver: It seems like this conversation keeps getting interrupted.

Eliza Jane Change: No one is here to interrupt now.

Silence.

Matthew: So, where does it go from here, Eliza? I've thought about a lot. I can go on as friends, but I can't go on as maybe friends and maybe something else. So, I need to know, and I need to know right now, friends or something else.

Eliza: All right, we'll try something else.

Matthew: What?

Eliza: You want to try a romantic, intimate relationship. All right, we'll try it.

Matthew: After all that, you just... that's it?

Eliza: You would never be convinced we wouldn't work if we didn't try. I would never be convinced it would work if we didn't try. So, just kiss me or something, and let's get started with this thing.

Miller tried to figure out how he felt about the two of them. The unrequited infatuation of Driver for Change had entertained the crew for sometime. He was, perhaps, privileged to witness its evolution to the next stage. Yet, he could not help but think how could any seed of love planted here, in the heart of such darkness, be anything other than doomed.

Commander Keeler met with his command and tactical staff every day during transition, trying to hash out the best approach for dealing with every possible scenario. These meetings had soon evolved to a likeness akin to tedium.

"Our mission is to approach and investigate this system, learn everything we can about the Aurelians, relay what we discover to the home-systems. If necessary...", he paused, but only briefly. "If necessary, we will take action to eliminate the Aurelians as a threat to Sapphire and Republic." There, the line had been crossed. There was no turning back.

"Does 'take action' include the use of Nemesis missiles?" Lt. Honeywell asked.

Keeler did not quite have an answer for that, but Lear bailed him out. "We have to very carefully consider the use of weapons of annihilation. If they know of Sapphire, and Republic, they may be capable of unleashing their pathogen on our home worlds."

"Has there been any progress toward an anti-agent?" Keeler asked.

Specialist Mastermind, the same who had initially discovered the pathogen, gave the brief version of the good news and the bad news. "In order to be effective in the complete

destruction of an eco-system, such as we saw on Medea, the pathogen has to be dispersed across the planet. Its effect is primarily localized. As for an anti-agent, we have discovered a kind of molecular off-switch that renders the pathogen impotent. We have yet to develop way of flipping the switch or an effective delivery mechanism."

"Well, at least you're trying," Keeler deadpanned. He slid a data-pad in her direction. "See if this information will help."

She picked up the pad. "Where did you get this?"

"I could tell you, but I would have to kill you. Next issue."

"What can we expect upon arrival in the Aurelian System," Lear wanted to know.

Lt. Commander Miller was on leave again, mourning the loss of his wife, so it was thought. Lt. Honeywell was Acting Tactical Chief. It was his duty to tell the ship's command staff that according to the most thorough possible analysis of the data Caliph had gleaned from the World-Ship, and review of the battle of Bodicéa, Tactical Section could state with confidence that they had absolutely no idea what to expect on approach to the Aurelian home-system.

As Honeywell explained, "The Aurelians are an aggressive culture. The natural expectation is that the home-system will be the center of their empire, and, as such, heavily defended with their finest warriors and most capable weaponry. However, it is also possible that just the opposite is true. If the Aurelians have yet to encounter another culture capable of mounting an offense, the home-system may be only lightly defended."

Honeywell pointed to the star map projected on the wall of the chamber. "Although this data has given us the position of the Aurelian System, it has not given us a location for the precise planet, or other structure, the Aurelians might inhabit."

"What do you mean by 'other structure?'" Lear asked.

Honeywell's tongue flicked thoughtfully over the corner of his upper lip. "The Aurelians have made several comments that suggest that they were not bound to terrestrial bodies --- planets --- the way that we are. 'We build worlds,' was one such comment. The construction of the World-Ship suggests that they are capable of feats of Macro-engineering."

He projected an image above the center of the Conference Table. "One possibility is a ring-system. Built around the orbit of a stable sun, it would provide a land area equivalent to millions of inhabitable planets." He paused long enough to let them take it in, then switched to a different image, in which the sun was surrounded by a kind of lattice-work sphere. "This spherical structure is based on a modeling study undertaken by the University of Sapphire at New Tenochtitlan. The structure provides a surface area equal to hundreds of millions of inhabitable worlds. The open structure traps much of the sun's energy, while allowing solar wind and other energy to escape, avoiding the build-up of deadly radiation."

"I thought this was a tactical review, not Mornings with Mr. Science," Keeler said.

Honeywell grunted agreeably. "I bring these up only to point out that either of these structures would be invulnerable to Pegasus's weaponry, including Nemesis bombs."

"How likely is it that we would encounter either type of structure?" Lear asked.

"Not very," Honeywell conceded. "However, we may encounter something almost as challenging, maybe, a whole constellation of world-ships. Even if we encounter a force with firepower equal to what they used against 10 255 Vulpeculus, we are going to have great difficulty hanging in without using Nemesis missiles."

Keeler realized everyone was looking at him expectantly. "When the time comes, we'll do

whatever we have to do."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"Transition in sixty seconds," Eliza Jane Change reported, not adding, not needing to add, *just wait and see how close I'm gonna put this ship to the system. In fact, if we weren't trying to be stealthy, I'd put this ship inside the system.*

Not that it would have mattered. There was tension on the Primary Command Deck, thick enough to make a winter coat out of, electric enough to keep milk-beasts in their pasture-lands, but it was not over the accuracy of Lt. Navigator Change's calculations.

"All stations secure," Lear reported from Keeler's left. The damaged condition of *Pegasus's* outer hull called for special attention to the ship's structural integrity.

"Tactical Situation Two," Lt. Cmdr. Miller reported from the right. "Defensive systems on hot stand-by."

"We can always outrun them," Keeler mumbled.

"We can outrun the ships they were building 200 years ago," Miller corrected, the idea having just now occurred to him.

"That's the spirit." Keeler leaned forward, his fingers forming a tent in front of his nose, the way actors posed when they wanted to appear thoughtful.

"Forty seconds to transition."

Lear soberly repeated the plan. "Helm, prepare to maintain maximum space coming out of transition. If we come under fire, put us back into hyperspace as quickly as possible."

"Acknowledged," Change said confidently. "Prepare for transition in 10... 9... 8... 7... 6..."

Lt. Alkema grabbed the oh-shit handles at his station and quietly whispered in unison. "...5...4...3...2...1..."

"Transition."

There was an instant of transformation, barely imperceptible, after which it was though every thing on the ship had disappeared and been replaced by an exact replica.

"We have re-entered normal space," Change reported. Her voice was matter-of-fact, even though she, and everyone else knew, that passing between universes was never totally safe. She displayed several star charts and tables around her station. "Confirming position, zero-point-four light days outside unidentified system."

"Is it the system we were aiming for?" Commander Keeler asked.

"Affirmative."

"Then, we'll think of a name for it later." Keeler shifted in his command seat, eyes locked on the screen ahead of him. It showed black space, stars, and a fierce red sun at center stage. No Aurelian warships, yet.

"Let's get to work."

For the next two and a half ship days, *Pegasus's* best astro-cartographers, planetologists, and tactical specialists analyzed a stream of data from sensors and probes. They mapped the star system. They looked for world ships. They looked for assault ships. They looked for defensive emplacements, for ring structures, for inhabited worlds.

They found that the primary star of this system was a red giant that had swollen to its current state approximately 140 to 160 million years previously. A secondary star orbited outside the plane of the system, a red dwarf. They came up empty on the world-ships, assault ships, defensive emplacements and ring structures. The question of planets remained a definite maybe until day three.

When they found the small, warm, moist world, it fell to Lt. Geologist Kennecott to do her bit as Master of Ceremonies, and introduce it to the ship's officers. "We detect one inhabitable world. It is approximately two-thirds the size of Sapphire and orbits the star at a distance of only eighteen million kilometers; so close, the sun will fill most of the sky from the surface. The climate seems to be warm, equatorial type climate, relatively unvaried across the planet. The planet is half ocean, half landmass. These are the latest images from the four orbital probes. Three meter resolution."

The planet was displayed as a sphere, one meter in diameter. The first detail that struck the crew was the color, a sharp contrast in monochrome. The seas were black, the lands were white. Solar illumination made the planet red all over.

The next thing that struck them were the fissures. All across the face of the planet were long slashes and gouges, as though the world had gotten a bad haircut from a gang of mad celestial hairdressers.

"What are those?" Keeler asked.

"They do not appear to be natural features," Kennecott answered. "They appear to be areas where strips of the planet's outer crust were removed. They range from three hundred to fifteen hundred kilometers long, and are uniformly ten kilometers wide. They cover 26% of the planet's surface."

"What do they do?"

"We have no idea. It appears..."

Eliza Jane Change spoke up. "They're clean extraction lines."

Lt. Kennecott stopped. "Excuse me?"

Change explained, her tone unfortunately like that of an impatient algebra teacher explaining for the tenth time why x must equal x . "The normal process for mining materials from an asteroid is to blast it apart and separate out the useful minerals from the dross ... the waste material. However, for mining operations on the outer moons, which are larger, more regular in shape, and in stable orbits, the mining ships extract a swath of crust to get at the material underneath. It requires several large ships, two or four to fire cutting beams at the surface and at least four to pull the material into orbit.

"The technique was only used a few times in the Republic system to extract hydrocarbons from two of the Collossus moons before the technique was banned. It is incredibly destructive. The thought that someone would use it on an inhabitable world..."

Another reason to dislike these Aurelians, Keeler thought.

"There are several other points of interest," Kennecott rotated the sphere then magnified a

portion of the eastern hemisphere. It was pitted, as though blasted with a shotgun."

"The Aurelian signature," Keeler said grimly. No way could this have been the Aurelian home-world. More likely, it was just another conquest.

"There is evidence that the gravitational forces around one of the outer gas giants have been altered within the last two centuries, as though one of their moons had been removed." She displayed the data. "The mass of the missing moon would have corresponded closely to the world-ship we encountered."

"They must build a new ship every time they take over a world," Miller said, even more grimly than usual. "I guess you could call it 'Living off the Land.'"

"Getting back to the planet," Lear said. "Is there any indication of survivors, of any human life at all?"

"Affirmative." Kennecott rotated the planet and zoomed in on a spot fairly remote from the scarring. There was a collection of overlapping domes covering an area of almost 1,400 square kilometers. "There's people living in these domes. A few hundred, a thousand at the most."

"Survivors?" Lear asked.

"Or a garrison," Miller suggested more grimly.

"We will have to ask them," Keeler said curtly. "Ready a couple of ships, let's pay them a visit."

Pegasus held orbit on the nightside of the planet, shielding itself from the sun. The ship could take the radiation, but the repair crews patching and removing debris from the secondary command tower preferred not being cremated alive. ("Wimps!" the commander said.) The *Aves Zilla* and *Amy*, having come through the Battle of 10 255 Vulpeculus without a scratch, descended to the surface of the still nameless planet. The two ships contained a combined landing party of twenty-one, led by Keeler and Miller. Twelve marines would guard the party.

The ships swung around to the sunny side. Fiery red light filled the command modules and Flight Lieutenants Arumbaruzubala and Toto covered their eyes with shades. Miller was in *Amy's* second seat, but left his face bare, and squinted into the firelight until Arumbaruzubala made the canopy opaque.

Susan swung into the atmosphere in a shallow diving arc. *Zilla* followed. They came down from a red-on-red sky and settled onto a gently rolling plain just one kilometer from the domes, landing just a few meters from each other. Trailing them were eight Shrieks that came down and hovered in the air protectively over the two ships. The side-hatches of the two ships came open and six Marines ran out of each. When they determined the landing zone was safe, they signaled inside.

Keeler and Alkema, in full, danger-zone landing gear, the kind with extra personal defensive shielding, exited *Zilla*. Lt. Cmdr. Miller and Marine Lt. Honeywell came out of *Amy*.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" Keeler asked Miller.

"Don't ask me stupid questions," Miller answered. "Sir."

"I think he's up to this," Keeler said to Alkema. Alkema used his tracker to project a terrain map into the air. "The domes are a kilometer north-northeast of here."

Keeler heard Honeywell's voice in his earpiece. "Zeta-squad, move forward, take point, 150 meters ahead of the main landing body."

Moving behind the protective screen of big men with big guns, they crested the first hill. From the summit, they could look down into the wide plain. The domes huddled in the distance, sleek and broad, burnished from the swollen red sun. There was also a lake nearby, its waters colored bloody by the light from the sky.

"Check out the view to the south," Alkema said.

To the south stretched a vast expanse of what looked like clear Marjani coral. Miller had once seen something like it in Carpentaria after an ice storm, when the trees were coated with ice and gave the appearance of a magical crystalline forest. Here, though, the day was warm, and the cut-crystal trees were pulsing slightly and swaying in a breeze as warm as a lover's breath. The forest picked up the ambient light and refracted a million shades of pink, fuchsia, crimson, even lavender.

"Would you look at that?" Honeywell whispered.

When the wind blew through it, the branches chimed with a kind of musical hum.

"Crystal trees?" Keeler asked.

"It's not a forest," Alkema said in a kind of awe, with his sensor glove toward the forest. "Those aren't trees."

"What are they?"

"They are ... part... of a single massive organism. Those are just the parts that protrude above the ground, part of a combination pulmonary and photosynthesis system. We're standing on the rest of it."

Miller and Honeywell instinctively looked to the ground.

"Most of the organism is underground. Those ... organs... convert light into energy. It's feeding."

"Is it dangerous?" Honeywell asked.

"I don't think so, I don't think it can move." He commented on his readings. "I can see why the Aurelians would have wanted it. One of those things could provide a far more efficient air purification system than any artificial construction. The concentration of oxygen in the atmosphere is 80% richer within a kilometer of the creature."

"Just don't start any campfires near it," Keeler muttered. "Remember what Blazey the Griffey says, 'Only you can prevent alien macroorganism fires.' We'll have Agro-Botany study it. Maybe we can adapt it to *Pegasus*. This way. The human settlement is just beyond that ridge." He adjusted the pack on his back and motioned forward.

"Commander!" Miller yelled out, but his pulse cannon was firing before the words left his mouth.

A horde of thirty to forty Aurelian Swords came charging over the hills. The crew had never seen them in action before. For such heavy, thick-skinned creatures, they moved with surprising quickness, skittering over the land, almost like crabs, but with a better sense of direction.

"Take them out," Honeywell ordered. His Marines lined up and began firing long-range pulse cannons. The Swords could usually sustain a single blast across this distance, but repeated hits weakened them quickly, and Honeywell's men were very good.

Then, there was a rushing noise in the air above as the Shrieks came charging in. They made frighteningly short work of the Swords, chasing them down and blasting at them with high-yield, short-range pulse cannons. They blew little charred bits of Sword high into the air and cratered the ground with the few blasts that missed. They attacked from above and dove down to strafe them almost straight on.

"It would have been nice to have had a few left intact for study," Keeler said, not quite feeling the ugliness of his words until he was done saying them. He shook his head hard, trying to shake off the terribleness. "Let's keep going, one more hill and we're there."

"Great Coogilly Moogilly," Keeler whispered as they crested the last hill.

Before them was an enormous dome, perhaps forty kilometers across. It was white, and its surface was dimpled with thousands of concave indentations.

"You know what that reminds me of, now that we get close to it?" Keeler said to Alkema.

"What, sir?"

"The moonbase back on Bodicéa." He began walking down the hill. A short march brought them to the cluster of domes. The Marines remained attentive, but if there were any Swords left, the Shrieks were keeping them at bay.

The domes went all the way to the ground, with no evidence of entry points. Alkema speculated that whoever or whatever was kept inside was intended to be permanently isolated from the planetary environment.

"So, how do we get in?" Keeler asked, it being the Commander's prerogative to ask the obvious.

Honeywell drew out his largest cannon. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Direct application of brute force," Keeler looked a little downcast. Was it too early to feel war-weary.

"It does seem to be the only thing that's consistently effective against the Aurelians," Lt. Commander Miller offered.

"Agreed, this is no time for subtlety. Lieutenant, have at it."

"Put on your re-breathers, just in case the atmosphere inside is hazardous," Miller reminded them.

With the rest of the landing party at a safe distance, Honeywell blasted away, one hard blast of a full-force Molecular Disintegrator Ray, what the Sapphireans called a Pulverizer. A section of the dome disappeared, leaving behind a great raggedy hole.

Miller and Keeler exchanged glances that said, 'Za, that was pretty effective' and, 'Za, it sure was.' Led by the inseparable Honeywell and Buttercup, the party made their way inside, leaving a pair of Marines outside the hole to stand watch.

The inside of the dome was familiar and beautiful. Keeler, Lear, and Alkema had seen the interior of an Aurelian world-ship before and were acquainted with the aesthetic sense. The Aurelians may have been hell-bent on the extermination and enslavement of humanity, but they also liked pretty things. The colored tiles on the ceiling, the sweetly scented breezes wafting through the flowers and trees, and even the music wafting through the air were all Aurelian masterpieces.

"There doesn't appear to be any interior structure," Alkema whispered. "It's all open space. All these domes cover a giant, climate-controlled garden."

"Why are you whispering, lieutenant," Keeler said loudly enough to make the Marines almost drop their guns. His candor did nothing to reduce the tension in the air. The Marines were on extra-high alert.

This was the essence of the Aurelians, Keeler thought, simultaneously beautiful and terrifying.

"Someone's coming," Alkema said in a near-whisper, then corrected himself and said it louder. "Someone's coming."

Honeywell backed him up. "Multiple targets closing on us."

The Marines brought their weapons to ready.

"Swords?" Keeler asked.

"Not Swords," Alkema answered. "Humans..."

First, the leaves began to rustle. Then, men and women began emerging from behind foliage and statuary, not one of whom could have been less than a hundred years old. They moved slowly, some with the aid of walkers and canes. Their skin was wrinkled and puckered, in most cases spotted with large and small brown lesions, which were especially obvious because they were all completely naked.

The elderly naked people approached them without any fear or trepidation, full of curiosity about their visitors.

One ancient woman, wrinkled like a piece of meat left in the desert sun, reduced to a few strands of spider-silk like hair across her head, her ancient mouth was puckered and toothless approached Marine Buttercup making small, choked, cooing noises in the back of her throat.

"Commander," Honeywell leveled his hand cannon.

"Hold," Keeler ordered calmly. "Hold!"

The Old Woman placed her hands on Buttercup's enormous shoulders, traced his bulging biceps and magnificent pectorals with her cragged and withering hands. In a moment, she was tugging at the front of his pants.

She was whispering something huskily, in something close enough to Aurelian for the Lingotron™ to make an immediate translation.

Two words. "Do me!"

Buttercup looked a little at a loss.

She repeated her command, calling out loudly, "Come on, Big Man, do me! Give Old Annelie a little brown sugar, come on, love."

"Didn't you bring any girls?" An old man, a wrinkled bag of skin and bones called out.

"That one's kinda pretty," said another old man, fixing David Alkema with a leering stare from his good eye, the other hidden behind a rotting meringue of cataracts. Very slowly, another indicator of his unhealthy interest in the young lieutenant was rising.

A very fat woman was bounding through a flower-bed, mounds of flesh undulating and flopping. Her fleshy arms were spread out as she reached towards a big blond Marine on the edge of the group.

"Fresh men!" She called. "Fresh, hot, young men."

"No girls," the first old man snarled, and spit into a bed of soft orange blossoms. "Why didn't you bring any girls?" he demanded, directing a shout of stinking breath toward Honeywell.

"I'm the leader, here," Keeler told him.

"Then bring us some girls," the old man barked. "We ain't had any new bodies here in ... in... in I don't know how long. Fine lookin' young men, but no women."

"Commander," said the Blond Marine. The fat old woman was trying to plant unwanted deep soul kisses on him. "Little help."

"Commander!" Honeywell barked. Almost all the Marines were surrounded, or being pawed by, naked, geriatric women behaving so lewdly as to guarantee lowering the fertility rate among the whole company for years to come.

"Permission for my men to defend themselves," Honeywell requested.

"Non-Lethal means," Keeler ordered.

Honeywell had two words for this. "Buzz-Knucks."

Gratefully, the Marines deployed the stun pads on their gloves. With quick chops to the shoulders, several old ladies crumpled to the ground. The woman who had first assaulted Buttercup looked up dreamily as the shocks hit. "How did you ever know I was into that?" she giggled, then collapsed.

"They'll be all right," Keeler reassured the others.

"Who cares," said one of the old man, bald but with a fringe of gray and white around the ears. He was larger than the others and seemed more solid. He was openly fondling his own half-erect penis, unconsciously, the way a man might scratch the back of his head. "What are you doing here? Who are you? Did you bring any women or just those... nice big boys with the vibrator hands?"

"We are searching for the homeworld of the Aurelians. We thought this was it."

"You thought... you thought ... oh, ho ho ho ho ... you thought this was Aurelia?" The whole assembling began tittering, then guffawing. Flabs and flaps of old skin quivered and rolled.

"So, you are not Aurelians?"

The old man laughed again, struggling hard with the concept, but seeming to at last be convinced.

"We traced one of the Aurelian ships to this location. It was built here... perhaps two hundred or so years ago?" Alkema asked. "Eighty or so years, by your planet's orbital period."

"Yes, yes, oh, the Aurelians came here. A long time ago, they came here," said one old woman. She hadn't been on any of the Marines, and thus had retained her right to consciousness.

"They were so big and strong," one withered man gushed, clapping his stringy arms together. "... and so marvelously sensual. Oh, the things they did with oils."

A pudgy woman, topped with billowing white hair cooed, "They took care of us, they did. Gave us everything we could have dreamed of."

"Where are the Aurelians now?" Keeler asked.

"They built a world-ship, and they took the best among us when they left. We were left to live out our lives here... in the garden dome they built for us."

"Real nice of them," said a skinny old woman. "They didn't have to you know."

"They treated us so well," another old woman sighed.

"You are all that are left of your people?" Keeler asked. The denizens looked at him a little confusedly, and he realized that any forthcoming explanations were likely to be very sketchy.

A little while later, they were all sitting beside enormous, multi-tiered fountains, whose waters splashed and fell. The fountains were arranged, set back at different distances and heights, creating a nearly musical arrangement of sounds.

Getting information out of the old people was exceedingly difficult. The only thing that maintained their attention for any length of time was thoughts of sexual practices they could try on Alkema and the Marines. It was eventually learned that a long time ago, this had been a human colony. They knew little of its history, having been born in the third generation after the Aurelians had arrived.

"Before the Aurelians, this world was called Hearth." Keeler looked up toward the red, red sky. Hearth was a quite appropriate name, he thought.

"The Aurelians, such wonderful people," said one old and nearly hairless woman, her wrinkled eyes widening in adolescent wonder.

"The Aurelians were very good to us."

"They liberated us."

"From whom?" Keeler asked.

"From the repression of the former existing order," an old man all but shrieked. Of all of them, he was the wildest looking, crazy twists of hair and beard sprouting all around his face and body.

"What was the planet like before the Aurelians got here," Keeler rephrased. "How did you govern yourselves?"

"We were ruled by the Tetrarchy of the Four Hemispheres." The sturdy man from earlier spoke. He was the calmest of the lot, and seemed to prefer his food to the sex.

On cue, others among the elderly mob voiced their own opinions, with enthusiasm that was almost zealous. Several enthusiastic denunciations of the previous order followed.

"The Tetrarchy oppressed people from expressing their sexuality fully, but the Aurelians freed us to enjoy all the sensual pleasures our bodies could offer."

"And they brought the Øpra."

"The Tetrarchy held all the power and wealth of the planet and the hands of a few greedy families, but the Aurelians shared all the worlds wealth among all the people."

"And they brought the Øpra."

"The Tetrarchy forced people to embrace ridiculous superstitions. The Aurelians outlawed that, and freed us from religious oppression."

"And life was so hard. It was a struggle for most people to have enough food. We lived in holes in the ground to protect against the solar flares, hiding away food supplies in tunnels for years when the sunstorms raged. It was a horrible, horrible way of life."

"Thank the Aurelians for freeing us from having to live like that."

"Indeed," Keeler said. Underground cities? Well, if you lived this close to the sun, you would want to be shielded. He wondered what the cities looked like, how they were socially structured. Miller wondered how the planet maintained an atmosphere if such flares were

regular and strong enough. Alkema wondered when they had stopped wearing clothes.

"The Aurelians were wonderful."

"They left you here to die," said Alkema.

"Oh, we have lived two, three times the natural span of our years. We have lived lives of comfort, and fulfillment, and happiness."

"And Øpra!"

"Okay," Keeler had to ask, finally. "What is this Øpra?"

"Try some, Leelaynah, bring him some Øpra."

An old woman came forth with a basket of what looked like pink flower petals on the table. "Would you like some Øpra."

"Øpra?" Keeler repeated. He reached to the bowl and scooped out a small handful. The petals were heavier than he would have expected.

The old man and the old woman began laughing. "Ooooh, look at that. If I took that much Øpra, I could fly around the world."

Keeler rolled the Øpra in his hand. "This isn't a snack item, is it?"

The old people laughed as he replaced the stuff on the table, except for a single wedge he placed in a pocket of his jacket for later examination. He really wanted to find out what this stuff did. From his present company, he guessed it had something to do with keeping the mind in a state of delusional adolescence while the body aged, and aged, and dried up like an autumn leaf.

"I am grateful for every day I have left that I was able to live under the enlightenment of the Aurelian Union, said one sour-looking old man.

One woman gripped her breasts and raised them from where they naturally hung, about the level of her navel, up and away from her body, as though offering them to the gods. "The Aurelians taught us to celebrate the sensuality our bodies afford us," she said dreamily.

An ancient, pale woman shivered, shaking her naked withered breasts like the dried vines blowing in a wind. "Oh, we had such wonderful orgies." The words were a little hard to discern, as she had lost most of her teeth.

Alkema looked unimpressed. "But when you die, there are no more of you. The history of this world..."

"Will be as it should have been," said one old man. "These worlds were not for humans to exploit. Our ancestors destroyed thousands upon thousands of eco-systems, altered the true histories of so many planets."

"The Aurelians have the right way. They build their world-ships, and leave the natural planets alone."

"The Aurelians are the future of the human species. They're stronger. They're smarter. They're better than we are."

"Our only duty is to make way for them."

Every chin was raised with pride. They spoke with gratification of their forthcoming extinction. Keeler had heard of this, humans who hated themselves for being human. On Sapphire and Republic alike, it was a rare form of mental illness, although very few cases had been recorded since the colonial era. He shook his head, sadly.

"You can't mean that," Alkema was arguing. "You're facing extinction."

"Dave," Keeler said slowly. "They've been raised to believe that extinction is an appropriate destiny, for themselves and us as well."

Alkema was not finished. "Don't you at least resent being left behind?"

"We have lived lives of comfort and fulfillment. If they had taken us, we would died anyway." The old man shrugged. "No, we do not resent them. We are grateful for the paradise they left us."

They left orbit the day after meeting with the Hearthian survivors.

"It is indeed a shame we can't stay longer," Keeler said sadly as the planet diminished to a disk, and then a dot, and then a point behind them lost in the corona of its angry red star. He was gathered in an observation deck with his officers.

"They didn't use the pathogen," Miller had been turning this point round in his head.

"They didn't need to," Keeler countered, once again. "The people of Hearth gladly accepted their extinction. The Aurelians only had to convince them it was their destiny."

"With a little help from this," Lear held a sample of the Øpra. The Medical Core had examined it carefully. It was a hallucinogen that produced mild euphoria and an intense aphrodisiac. It also had life extending properties and made the mind very pliant and suggestible.

"They used the Pathogen on Medea because the Medeans put up a resistance" Miller said. "The Hearthians went down easily."

"Well, we still can't rule out the Medeans using it on themselves." Seeing the looks from Miller and Keeler, she quickly appended the remark. "Although it is unlikely in the extreme."

"So, what will they do about Bodicéa?" Miller asked.

"We'll know in a few weeks," Keeler said. "We're going back."

They looked at him as though he had sampled the Øpra himself, but Keeler had made up his mind. The decision to go back to Bodicéa had been an easy one. There had been a feeling throughout the ship, a consensus, that to go on without checking back one last time would be like quitting a novel before reading the last chapter. Less prosaically, they had seen the start of an Aurelian conquest, and they had seen its ultimate result on two worlds. What they had not seen was what happened in between. This was probably important.

They stood on the Primary Command Deck, preparing for departure. "The final report is ready for transmission to the Home Systems," Lear said. "Do you wish to add anything."

"Za, Record Now."

Keeler was not usually one to stand on ceremony, but this was perhaps the most important transmission he would ever make. He used the formal Sapphirean heading.

"Hi, everybody. I'm Commander William Keeler of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. You may remember me from such previous TPT reports as 'EdenWorld: Screwed Up Bizarro Planet,' and 'Bodicéa: Bombed By Bodacious Bad-Asses.' The report contained in this transmission is the third we have sent on the study of the race known as the Aurelians. We haven't learned much about their origins beyond what we have included previously. Apparently, they believe

themselves to be a more advanced, more evolved species of human than we are. They are larger, stronger, arguably smarter than we are. They regard humans like us as an inferior life form. They take us into their ships by the hundreds of millions, as slaves of some kind, we imagine.

"This record contains our observations on the world formerly known as Hearth. In addition to an unfortunately limited discussion of native life forms and what we have pieced together of Hearth's colonial history, it also contains additional tactical data on the Aurelians, and what ultimately becomes of the worlds they conquer.

"These reports contain all the tactical data we have. We must have faith that they are not undefeatable. We are en route back to 10 255 Vulpeculus, from where we shall transmit further analysis. Study this data carefully. Fear No Evil. God is Near. End."

When he had finished, he looked back toward the viewport. There was no sign of Hearth, and its sun had diminished to a very bright red star.

"At least Hearth solved one of our problems," Miller said quietly.

"Za-a-a-a," Keeler nodded, and it was hard to suppress a very slight smile. "I wonder how our friends are doing."

She was an ancient specimen. Her hair was sparse, the texture of a scrubbing brush, her breasts had shriveled and withered and suggested that any milk that might be squeezed would emerge yellow and sour. Part of her face had fallen in, clearly showing the hollows where teeth had once been.

She sucked a wedge of Øpra and lay her down on the lap that had once belonged to Cree Bladerunner, extended a brown tongue that looked like a teabag, with half the wedge of opra still on it, wagging it seductively. These gestures were accompanied by a kind of throaty cooing that devolved quickly into a wheeze and finally into a coughing fit.

He who wore Cree Bladerunner's skin reached for another wedge of Øpra, and grabbed a handful.

Across from him, the person wearing the body that had once been Ahmed Zoetrope looked at the naked old woman staring back at him.

"Come on, Honey, give Sweet Annelie a little love sugar."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Journal Entry

By my estimation, the date is December 27, 10135 A.S

Returning to a system was something Pegasus had never been intended to do.

But anything is easy to find once you know the way, Lt. Navigator Change put us less than one tenth of a light day from the rim of the system.

From there, we crept (if one-tenth the speed of light can be called creeping) into the system and hid our ship in a low orbit of the seventh planet. The commander wanted us to learn everything we could about the Aurelians, because they were the enemy now. In ancient times, humans would have

dissected them, studied their brains and entrails. The commander's approach was not nearly so intimate. He wanted to study them, observe their activities from a distance, hiding behind a blind and documenting their movements like that mental female who went off in the Arcadian wilderness to study gongos.

From afar, our sensors gave us some idea of what the Aurelians were doing, but we had known all along the only way we could do this was to send out Aves, heavily armed, hidden behind holoflage shields.

Edward got the call to make the first probe into the heart of the former Bodicéa system. Her pilot insisted. A piece of Aurelian shrapnel had gouged her dorsal hull in the earlier battle. Freshly repaired, *Edward* was ready. It launched with a crew of fourteen, including six Marines.

They first flew to 10 255 Vulpeculus Six, to confirm what their sensors had given them some inkling of. When *Pegasus* had first come to this system, the sixth planet had been a great ball of rock, small for a planet, too large for an asteroid. Before they had left, it had been shortly after the Aurelians had begun bombarding its surface with thousands of missiles.

These missiles had contained self-replicating machines, designed to chew up the resources of a planet, create more machines, and reshape the planet into a form that pleased the Aurelians. They swarmed across the surface of the lifeless world like insects, termites or worker bees transforming a dead tree into a nest.

Now, upon their return, they saw that nearly a quarter of the globe had been carved away, transformed into almost a wireframe design. Inside, layers and layers were being gouged out and shaped. The planet cast strange, enormous shadows over the invisible ship as it passed its far side. It had become a skeleton, like the body of seafarer lost on the ocean floor, his body picked clean by micro-organisms.

From the shape of the skeleton, and the completed parts, the form and purpose of the machines was clear. Soon, the Aurelians would have another world-ship.

Edward came out into the blinding, faintly coppery glare of Bodicéa's home sun. Some of the material from the sixth planet's mantle was being kicked out into space, ingot shaped hunks a kilometer or more long. A trail of them stretched between the sixth planet and the fifth.

They followed the trail of the ingots inward toward the next planet, Bodicéa. Almost like an illustrated diagram, the hunks of metal became more shaped, more finished. By the time they reached Bodicéa, they had taken the form of a ring of completed assault ships orbiting above the equator.

They were also building another invasion fleet.

Honeywell called Miller over to this sensor station. "Commander, something to show you." He switched the feed.

A few million kilometers off his ship's curve, a blasted wreck twisted and rolled, an Aurelian Destroyer. "One of our trophies," Honeywell told the Lt. Commander. .

"Only one?" Miller grumbled.

"There's a lot debris out here, actually. Most of it is unrecognizable, and a lot of it has dispersed since we've been gone."

"How many years have passed?" Miller asked.

"Eight local years, sixteen Sapphirean, fourteen and a half Republic or something like that," Honeywell answered.

Miller turned his attention back to his own station, as Bodicéa grew larger and more detailed.

Her atmosphere was more teal than before. Dust, smoke, and water vapor concentrations were nine times higher than at *Pegasus's* first visit. Across her two great continents were a number of craters and spots.

"Looks like they're rebuilding," said one of the techs. He zoomed in on a construction underway in the middle of a great savanna in the eastern peninsula of the northern continent. A huge circle was being excavated.

"Any sign they've detected us?"

"Negative, commander. The holoflage shields are holding."

Edward passed underneath the fleet of Assault ships and the parade of shadows they cast as the sun came around again. The Aurelians paid them no mind. They kept remarkably level, as though the invasion ships were a natural planetary ring system.

All of a sudden, the ship seemed to dip. Miller and Honeywell reached for the "oh-shit" handles and steadied themselves. "Ironhorse!" Miller called up to the command module.

Ironhorse's voice, deep, firm, unperturbed, came back as though he had begun to speak before opening his comm link. "... just increased by 3,400 kilograms."

"What increased by 3,400 kilograms?"

"Our mass, Commander. Our mass just went up 3,500 kilograms or something. Like something just latched on to the top of our hull."

"Honeywell," Miller demanded.

"Already on it, sir. It looks like something locked onto the auxiliary dorsal hatch."

"What is it? How did it get this close without us detecting it?"

"It was in stealth mode," Honeywell told him. "It's one of our Shrieks." He showed Miller the monitor. On the back of the ship, a third butterfly shape was nestled just behind the command module.

"I have compensated for the additional mass," came Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse's voice. "Stabilized."

"Where did it come from?"

"It's one of ours. It's one of the ships we left behind."

"They should have all been destroyed."

"It's sending out... an extremely low frequency message. If we weren't in direct contact with its hull, we would never detect it."

"What is it?"

"It's a message...I think. It's... it's not making any sense." Strange characters were scrolling across the screen, lining up in rows, clustering in packs.

"Aurelian?" Honeywell asked, before realizing that made no sense at all.

A Marine, large and strong, came forward. He was thirty-ish, with a younger face, red-brown hair falling in gentle crests around his face. "I know the language," he said, with seeming reluctance.

Miller turned to face him, "Marine..."

"Modano," he said quietly. He took the station adjacent to Honeywell.

"What language is that?" Honeywell asked.

"It's an Arcadian dialect." He moved as though to shield the display from anyone else's view. "They are coordinates on the surface of the planet."

Miller studied the actions with interest. He knew that Sumac had devised a secret language, known only to his followers, that had never been seen by outsiders. The Marine finished quickly, then blanked the display. "Surface coordinates to the planet."

A technician called up another display, a map of the world. Marine Modano put in the coordinates. They highlighted a spot on the northern hemisphere. He then overlaid the map with a geographical relief hologram. "A little box canyon, deep in the wilderness."

"Scan the area," Miller ordered, and then ordered Ironhorse to bring the ship down closer, so an active scan would be more difficult for the Aurelians to detect. The ship descended into the atmosphere.

"No structures. No life forms apart from native plant and animal life," the technician said.

"Same on my scans," Miller added. "I say we go in anyway."

"Could be a trap," Honeywell said.

"It's definitely a trap," Miller told him. "Let's just see what's in it."

Flight Lt. Ironhorse, was undeterred by the thick overgrowth the narrowness of the canyon walls, or the intense cross-winds that buffeted the ship on descent. He drove his Aves down so hard and so fast even Miller was scared. "Easy, Killer."

Ironhorse answered him with his deep resonant baritone, as though Miller might have been thousands of kilometers away. "We will be over the coordinates in eight seconds."

Miller hit the ground maps. The terrain was covered with old growth forest and thick underbrush. Local climate was just shy of subtropical, hot, humid summers and mild winters. It was a warm day in late spring, and it might rain later.

"Do we have a landing zone?"

"There's a clearing... exactly where the coordinates indicated."

Miller had an urge to tell Ironhorse how much he hated this, but knew the Ironhorse was in no mood to listen. Ironhorse had possibly loved his wife even more than he did.

As they descended toward the surface, Miller double-checked and confirmed his suspicions. There was no way *Basil* could have glided to this valley from its last known position without power. Was this a trap, or was there hope for something he had not let himself hope for. He did not know which was more likely. Nothing short of a miracle could have saved *Basil*, but the Aurelians could have learned enough from the assimilated crew of *Hector*, or secret information from Sapphire, to set this up. Then, what if the crew of *Basil* could have ejected, survived, and then somehow sent the Shriek to contact them. They could be alive, but then, this could still be a trap. Why would the Aurelians go to such trouble? Then,

there was the message, in Sumacian, which they could not possibly have known, unless Tamarind had survived the crash and the Aurelians had extracted it from his brain. For every thought that gave him hope of survivors, another thought darkened his hope. He was leaning toward survivors, but keeping his hope subdued.

The clearing was just large enough to accommodate an Aves if the pilot was very, very good. The wingtip Shrieks on *Amy* had to brush aside the boughs and branches of several large coniferous trees, and the nose crunched against a waist-high rock formation.

A pair of Marines stood on either side of the side-hatch as it slid open on a dense glade. They swung out pointing weapons and trackers. They painted the trees and underbrush with their trackers. "Commander," Honeywell called. "There are people out there. I am reading two figures... human... just inside the tree-line."

Miller moved forward, his own pulse cannon and tracker covering the space ahead of him. A Marine pointed toward a break in the trees, Miller directed his tracker toward the spot. The outline of two figures were plain. They were human, but they were carrying Aurelian-type weapons. They began moving out from the bushes.

Miller felt sweat trickle between his shoulder blades. Every muscle, every sense was tense. Alive or dead, whoever was in those bushes knew. In a second, someone would either be shooting at him, or welcoming him. In the dense humid air, not even a breeze whispered.

Miller and both Marines snapped their pulse cannons to ready. He heard the Marine next to him draw in a sharp breath, about to bark out a command, a demand for identification. He raised his arm in a gesture to keep silent, while his hand cannon draw a targeting reticle on each of the figures.

The humans stepped into daylight. They were both male, smaller than Sapphireans. The younger one had the smooth, feminine features of a million other Bodicéan males. The older one looked familiar, a face had seen only a few months earlier, and sixteen years ago.

Miller stepped forward, "Tobias."

Tobias kept his weapon leveled. "Is it really you?!" He demanded, his voice still had that high-pitched, keening quality he remembered, but sounded toughened. "If this is another Aurelian trick, I'll blow your dambled head off."

Miller moved forward. "It's me Tobias... Lieutenant Commander Phil Miller of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*."

"We've heard that before!" Tobias called, coming closer still. "Aurelians are really, really good at faking identity. You've come here before, Miller. You sent a fake of my own daughter to betray me. You've built simulated Aves."

This was not the Tobias Miller remembered. The Tobias he had left on Bodicéa had been a toe-sucking sissy-boy. This was almost like coming home to find a pit bull where a poodle was supposed to be. "How can I prove that I am the real Lt. Commander Miller?"

"What team won the Planetary Quoits Championship in 10 082?"

"Who cares?" Miller answered.

"Who is the most over-rated Sapphirean artist of the last century?"

"Kirby Brainhammer."

Tobias stepped forward slightly. "What is the wingspan of a Migratory Arctic Swallow?"

Miller took a step forward. "Borealan or Carpentarian?"

Tobias flushed with relief. "By Tamarind, it really is you?"

By Tamarind? Miller thought to himself.

"Just as he prophesied, you have returned." He leaned to the man in front of him, whispered something in his ear that sent him running back through the forest. "Quickly, this way, back to the camp. "

Without waiting for them, Tobias turned and began marching. Miller, Ironhorse, and a pair of Marines followed. The others stayed behind to guard the ship.

The underbrush was dense, and the stench of the trees and the rotting duff on the forest floor was as powerful as nerve gas. Tobias led them forward, eyes trained on a seemingly invisible path, that navigated through the only spaces between the trees large enough for a group of men to pass.

"So, ..." Miller began, but found himself unable of knowing where to continue the thought.

Tobias picked it up for him. "We were told *Pegasus* was destroyed in the battle for our planet. He told us not to believe it. He told us you would return."

"He being Tamarind?"

"He is Tamarind, yes."

"How many on the people of *Basil* survived the crash? How many are still alive?"

Tobias nearly missed a step on the muddy ground. "All of them," he confided quietly.

This hit Miller like a slap in the face, like falling out of bed into a pool of ice water and having a shark thrown in afterwards. He had not dared hope for this, but at the same time... "Did she blame me?" he asked.

"Who, your wife?"

"Za?"

"Blame you for what?"

"For sending her ship to rescue you... instead of bringing her back to *Pegasus*."

"She blames the Aurelians," Tobias said, almost angrily, as though he resented being asked the question. "Your wife was always a woman of practicality. She accepted her circumstances better than most of us. She was ... strong."

"Why do you speak of her in the past tense?"

Tobias did not turn and look at him. In the years that passed, he had gotten much older than Miller, become hardened, no doubt, in the battle to survive, and yet he retained a child-like petulance.

"Is she alive?" Miller demanded.

"She is, but she is not the wife you left behind here."

They passed over a steep gulley with water at the bottom of it. The bridge looked like nothing more than a pair of fallen trees until you examined it closely. On the other side, there was a small clearing, and beyond that, obscured by a ring of trees, was a cave. Two men stood guard outside, a short Aurelian, and a tall man, who must have been from *Pegasus*. Miller approached and addressed the tall one. "You are one of the survivors from *Basil*."

The guard showed little emotion, although it was roiling inside him so strongly Miller could sense it. "Aye, Technician Second Class Yak Hewlett," he answered.

Miller nodded. "It's good to see you. We have a Medical Technician back at the ship. He can check you out."

"Respectfully, sir, I am in no need of medical attention. He is waiting for you in the cave, sir. Please do not keep him waiting."

Miller was taken aback. He had not had time to envision how he would feel reuniting with lost shipmates would work out, but he never would have guessed '*creepy*.'

Silence followed. Miller could hear birds in the trees, and insects buzzing around the first blossoms of spring.

Tobias gestured toward the cave. "This way... now."

"I want to see my wife."

"You will," Tobias told him, "but you will see him first."

Miller turned toward the cave. The main cavern was quite deep inside, down a long passageway lit by luminescent globes salvaged from *Basil*, and jury-rigged Aurelian devices. They walked along a narrow ledge above the stream that had carved out these caverns, and cooled them still. Finally, they came to a bridge, across from what had to be the Command Center.

Tamarind's set-up impressed them all. The equipment was improvised, salvaged bits of Aves and Shriek connected to what had to be Aurelian processors, display devices, and communication links. Ten men and women sat at their stations, all dressed in black jumpsuits, hair cut short, weapons at their sides.

They did not recognize Tamarind until he stood. His neat brush-cut hair had gone all white. His face, still placid, had the lines of a man more than sixteen years older, and the top part of one of his ears was missing. He smiled when they approached. "Lt. Commander Miller, welcome to Defiance Cell Two."

"Nice place," Miller answered. "I like what you've done to it."

Tamarind gestured up and around himself. "The valley is protected by a number of holoflage transmitters we salvaged from the Shrieks, and in some cases, constructed from Aurelian components we have been able to recover after various actions. This entire canyon is bathed in low-intensity holoflage waves. It helps our life signs blend in with native animal life. Everything here is constructed of native plants or hidden deep in the caves. It is a secure redoubt," Tamarind said.

"Tobias said the Aurelians have infiltrated it before."

"They have come in, but they have never made it out alive," Tamarind reassured him. "This is but one cell of the Defiance. There are twelve others hidden across the planet. Destroy one and another will take its place. Do you want to know what happened after *Pegasus* left the battle?"

"We didn't know you were alive," Miller said, defensively.

This did not seem to matter to Tamarind. "Half a billion people died in the initial assault, so we estimate. The Aurelians did not come right away. They held off. While they did, the dust and smoke from the destruction they had wrought rose into the sky. It cooled the planet. There were some crop failures, but the worst was the fall of the civilization. Another two hundred million died before the first Aurelian ships appeared in the sky."

"Why did they hold off?"

"They wanted to arrive as heroes ... the saviors of a dying world and a devastated people."

Coronado projected her face into the sky over all the surviving population centers, and told the population that the planet had been the victim of a freak meteor storm. The Aurelians, who happened to be nearby as this catastrophe occurred, said they had come to help. The Bodicéans, having had the legs of their civilization kicked out from under them, embraced their new saviors with open arms."

"How did you survive?"

"We regained control of our ship, glided to a landing. We hid out in one of the surviving cities for a time, until the Aurelians came. Then, it was no longer safe. We fled to a camp in the north country. The people of our city were less fortunate. They knew the truth of the Aurelians from us. After we fled, the Aurelians had them all killed."

Miller shook his head. "Bastards."

"We stayed in the north country for three years, organizing a movement of Defiance. We were betrayed, our camp destroyed, half of us killed, my mistake... before fleeing here. This cell is far more defensible."

"How many of you are there, in your Defiance?"

"11,000 in total. A little less than 6,000 men, a little more than 5,000 women."

"Aurelians notwithstanding." Miller exhaled. "11,000 is a lot of people, but *Pegasus* can accommodate all of you, relocate you to a safer..."

Tamarind held up a hand and closed his eyes, cutting him off. "We are staying."

"I admire your courage, but 11,000 is not nearly enough people to defeat Aurelia. If you are expecting support from the home-systems, there is no guarantee that they will come to your aid."

"To defeat the Aurelians, we need only to hold out long enough to outlast them. We have numbers enough for that. The Aurelians sustain themselves by sucking the life from worlds and then moving on. They do not seek a permanent occupation. When they leave, we will rebuild."

Tamarind then asked him. "Don't you wish to see your wife?"

"If our business is done."

"It is, for now," he turned to one of the men who flanked him. "Take him to the shelter of Captain Jones." The guard saluted and gestured for Miller to follow.

As Miller turned to leave the cave, Tamarind spoke after him. "Please send Lt. Honeywell from the ship. We have learned a lot about the Aurelians that you will find interesting and useful... also terrifying."

His escort led him outside again, and into the trees. They walked in silence, crossing a deep ravine by means of a huge fallen tree. Miller sensed he was ever under surveillance by troops hidden among the brush. This and the heat made the hairs on his neck prickle and erect themselves.

They came to a halt a couple of kilometers later. Like everything else, her shelter blended perfectly into the landscape, but unlike the others it was recognizable, if you looked hard enough, as something else. Beneath sheets of camouflage netting, if you looked at it just right, you could see the much-battered form of what had at one time been an Aves called *Basil*.

The escort went to the hatch and slid it open, manually, just enough to call in. "Captain Jones, he's here." He paused, then turned to Miller. "She will see you."

A strange feeling rose in Miller's chest, like his heart was simultaneously lighter, heavier, and ready to explode. There was no name for the emotion he was feeling, and he allowed himself a moment of hubris to think that no one had ever felt this way before. That ancient human playwright and poet, Spear-Shaker, or whatever his name was, had not had to deal with the effects of time dilation and faster-than-light travel on relationships.

He slipped in through the hatch.

The interior of the ship had been thoroughly stripped of instruments and equipment. The landing couches and tables rearranged into a near parody of a living room. Spartan accommodation, Miller thought, but they were in keeping with the existence of a resistance force in occupied territory.

Then, there was Jones.

She stood in the foredeck, the only person in the compound not dressed in black, but in some variant of Bodicéan civilian apparel. Her arms were crossed, and he could not tell whether she was happy to see him or not. Sixteen years had passed. She was now nearly as old as Commander Keeler. Not old, not even truly middle-aged, but the lines on her face and on her hands, the streaks of whitish gray in her blond hair, these were the hallmarks of a maturity that was beyond him.

"You look beautiful," he said, nearly breathless.

She uneasily smiled. "Thank you."

He held out his arms. Slowly, like a stray cat approaching a piece of proffered meat, she moved toward him, and finally allowed herself to be taken into his embrace. He kissed her neck, took in her scent, which was the same as he remembered. He felt her tears against his skin.

Then, his mind connected. He felt her, and he knew it was her, because she was the only one he had ever been able to touch with his mind.

He held her for a few moments longer, then slowly, they came apart again. He looked into her eyes, and saw that tears were still in them. The line of her mouth was set hard.

"How did you survive the crash?" he asked her.

She looked blank for a second. For him, the crash was a couple of months ago, for her sixteen years, and she had to dredge it up past other things, more important things, that were in her mind.

"The warhead took out our entire power network. We lost everything, including propulsion. We were falling from the sky. Finally, at 5,000 meters, seconds from impact, Tamarind pulled himself into the second seat. I don't know how he did it. The ship was in a steep dive. Fighting the centripetal forces would have been too much for any other man. Somehow, he made it to the command module, got in the co-pilot's seat. I didn't think it would do any good. Our power was gone, but just as he took the controls, an auxiliary fuel cell came back on-line. It was just enough power to stabilize our descent. Between the two of us, we were able to crash-land the ship in a remote area of the planet. Damage was extensive. There were injuries."

"Tamarind nursed the single fuel cell back to life. He used it to set up a communication link with our Shrieks. A handful had survived the attack. He carefully hid away most of them, and brought one of them to our location. We salvaged its fuel cells and everything else we could to get *Basil* up and working again. The Aurelians stayed away at first, and then were too busy with the invasion to think about us. There were hundreds of landing ships coming, all the

time. They blotted out the sun. The world-ship moved into a close orbit, and eclipsed the sun for a time."

"When we had restored enough power to *Basil*, we flew into one of the planet's wilderness areas. Deep, deep woods, ancient trees, it was a place Tamarind had chosen. Somehow, he had become our leader. There were just twelve of us, and him, but we knew our hope for survival lay in following him.

"Of course the Aurelians did find us, and then we had to leave..." She broke off, there was something more important. "There's something I have to tell you."

"Whatever it is, I ..."

She held up a hand, and wiped her eyes with the other. "Don't finish that. Don't say it. You don't understand."

There was nothing for him to do but stare at her. She called to the back of the ship. "Sam! Max! you can come out now."

He turned to see two boys, the older was probably twelve, the younger nine or ten, emerging cautiously from the rear of the ship. They went to Jones, putting themselves close to her while keeping watchful, suspicious eyes on him.

He could feel her answer in his mind before she spoke. "Phil, these are my sons, Sam and Max. Sam and Max, this is Phil Miller."

Miller got the wet-slap feeling again, multiplied by a factor of a million.

He looked at the kids. Their hair was reddish and too long, but they were clean. They looked healthy and well-fed, but had an inappropriate fear in their eyes from living too long under siege. When he saw in their sea-ice eyes and the firm, delicate line that ran from their ears to the bottoms of their chins, he knew that these were not war orphans she had adopted. These were progeny, sprung from her loins.

He looked at the kids, and saw in them a lifetime he had missed.

He looked at the kids, realizing he had no idea what to do with this information.

The younger boy came forward, and addressed him with a kind of rebel confidence. "You're Lt. Commander Miller, Chief Tactical Officer of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*?"

"Za, I am that guy, and you are..."

"Sam," the boy extended his hand. Miller grasped it as the boy continued, "You're the man who used to be married to our mom, a long time ago."

"Not so very long," Miller answered automatically. The boy had a firm, warm grip. Not like Tobias, it brought back the memory of shaking hands with Jones's father.

"I never really believed we would ever meet you," the boy continued.

"He said we would," the older boy said quietly.

"Who?" Miller asked.

"Tamarind," Jones answered. "Would you two mind going out for a while. I think this man and I need to talk."

The boys pulled away from her and went toward the hatch, the older more slowly than the younger. He spared his mother a protective last glance before leaving.

"Don't forget your guns," she told them. No one in the Defiance went out disarmed. The boys grabbed Odyssey-Issue pulse cannons from a locker near the hatch. No Aurelian weapons for them. *Nothing but the best for my kids*, Miller thought.

"Is he their father?" Miller asked when they had gone, feeling like he had invented a new emotion just for the occasion; two parts anger, six parts regret, five parts jealousy, shake well and serve with a twist of disbelief. "Is it Tamarind?" Didn't you always like the moody, rebellious type?

"Tamarind is celibate," she answered. "It's rather curious, but do you know of all the women who have given birth in this cell, none of them have ever borne a female?"

"Who is their father?" Miller repeated. He could not have cared less about other women.

Jones took a deep breath and answered him. "Tobias."

Of all of the men she could have chosen. "Tobias?" he repeated in disbelief. "Tobias?"

"What was I to do, Phil?" she answered him, obviously sucking on her own version of the same emotional cocktail he was. "You were gone, and you were never coming back for all we knew. You can't begin to imagine what we've been through down here. Eight years... eight years fighting for our lives. We've been attacked, captured, tortured, brutalized. We almost starved to death the Winter Max was born. Our old camp was burned by incendiary bombs. Half the cell died before we could escape and it took us almost a year to lose the Aurelians and come to this valley.

"We were holding out in the ruins of an old Bodicéan power station. We only had enough power and ammunition for two days, but somehow, Tamarind made it last for three weeks until help arrived. It was so cold. That's when it began." She paused, and drew in a deep breath. "Tobias saw that I was cold. He told me to come under the blanket with him and Pieta. When he held me, it was the first time in days I hadn't felt cold."

"I don't want to hear this story. I can't hear this story right now!" Miller cut her off with a voice that didn't sound like his. *Pegasus* had been gone forty-seven days, and sixteen years had passed on this planet. A year every three days, basically. So, she had waited how long, on his time-scale, before bringing that Tobias into her bed. In the time it took him to walk from his quarters to the bridge, how many days had passed? How many times had she made love to him in the time it took him to eat a meal or evacuate his bowels? In one night's sleep in his quarters, the seeds that had been planted in his wife's belly had grown into babies and been launched screaming into this horrible and defeated world that had gone down without a fight.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself standing across from her, against a constantly shifting background of nights chasing days at a furious pace, staring into her face the lines formed and her hair lost its luster, the same lines he was staring into now. The footprints of time.

And the collected weight of all those years hit him, knocked him down, and it would be a long time before it would let him up again.

"I divorce you," he told her.

"You're too late," she told him.

Knowing that there were survivors, the boss became obsessed with visiting the planet himself. The Tactical guys tried to talk him out of it, Bodicéa being still a war zone, or, at least, occupied territory. He stood his ground, rambled on and on about his need to put his feet on the ground, see for himself the reality of the situation at ground zero, walk the paths his men had walked and all that litter. Against the advice of everyone but his first officer, the boss arrived a day later on the Aves Zilla, with Lt. Alkema at his side, of course.

The survivors of the *Basil*, along with some wives, husbands, and children who had appeared in the intervening years, stood in the landing area. Their posture was perfect, their faces were stoic, but tears were leaking from their eyes as the commander's Aves came to a landing.

Keeler stood at the hatch, looking out over them, and shouted. "Heroes!"

They all but jumped. No one in the Defiance shouted unless lives were at stake.

Keeler continued, only a little less loudly. "You were told *Pegasus* was destroyed in the battle for this planet. Rumors of our destruction have since proven greatly exaggerated."

In his original speech, he had written, "Rumors of our cowardly retreat, however, were incredibly accurate," but he had taken that out.

Keeler shouted again. "Heroes! All of you. Princes of Sapphire, Kings of Republic. The children of our planets will sing songs in your honor."

With that he stepped from his ship, Alkema behind him, and approached Tamarind. He approached him properly, not as a former subordinate, but as someone who commanded and army twice as big as his crew, who were willing to live and die by his command. He stood at the head of the survivors, a young boy with a shaved head at his side.

"It is good to see you, again, Commander," Tamarind said pleasantly. "I hope you are pleased with our work?"

Keeler nodded. "Indeed. Did you think we had abandoned you?"

Tamarind shook his head. "I knew you too well to believe that."

"If we had known there were survivors..."

"Your command decision was correct."

"We could have done more."

"You did enough, *Pegasus* made the difference, you know. You destroyed more than half the invasion fleet. They didn't have enough ships or enough troopers to take over the whole planet. They have the cities, but everything else is ours."

"Deep wilderness," Miller said. "Eighty-five per cent of the land area."

Keeler looked at his second officer. Miller looked as though he hadn't slept since landing, and like someone had kicked him hard in the teeth and elsewhere.

"Come to the cave, there are some things you need to see."

"Skinner!" Keeler ordered. "Check out these people."

The silver haired medical technician sauntered forward, one eyebrow raised.

"Commander, nothing would give me more pleasure than ascertaining the wellness of these hearty freedom-fighters."

Tamarind led them back into his cave. "You should know, Commander, not all of your personnel will be returning to *Pegasus*. Yak Hewlett, Tigh Duk Sum, Cherish Bangladesh, and Ving Scientist intend to remain here, and continue fighting Aurelians. Some others are not yet decided. I have urged those with family connections to return."

"What about Flight Captain Jones?" Keeler asked.

"She is still deciding. Watch out for that stalagmite."

Keeler glanced downward. A sharp spit of stone had nearly emasculated him. How

Tamarind had known this without turning around, he didn't want to know.

"And you?" Keeler asked.

"I think you know what the answer to that is."

Keeler nodded.

"In the fullness of time, I will give my life for this world, but for now, there is only the fight." By then they had arrived at his command center. "Chamonix, show the commander intelligence file Coronado 227/89."

It had been waiting for him. He it showed a tall, dark skinned man standing on a balcony, surrounded by adoring human syophants. In a deep, resonant voice, he was praising Bodicéans for their hard work at restoring their planet and for the warm welcome they had given the Aurelians. He announced that food supplies would be increased in the following quarter, and the Aurelians were setting up ecologically-responsible nurseries for the production of new medicinal herbs.

"Coronado," Tamarind said.

"Coronado's... changed," Keeler said. "Something's different about him... wait, wait, don't tell me."

"He's a man, now," Miller put in, irritated.

"Za, that's it," Keeler said.

"He exchanged bodies two years ago," Tamarind explained. "A planet of women required a female conqueror. Now that they are established, he has reverted to his true form. Let me show you something else... I warn you, this next image is very disturbing. Chamonix, Intelligence File Eostre, 911/66 X"

Coronado froze and faded in mid-speech. The next image showed two naked Aurelian females lounging beside a large and bubbling pool of water. They whispered to one another and laughed, as though gossiping.

"One of the micro-drones caught this scene, three years ago, at the Aurelian Sub-Center for the Southern continent," the technician at the console explained. He was a Bodicéan male, and his voice was quaking as he watched.

Presently a pair of young girls, Keeler guessed they were just on the left side of pubescence, were brought in by human servants. They were naked and unselfconscious. The Aurelians hugged then, stroked their hair, and fondled the buds of their breasts and private parts.

"I've seen enough," Keeler said.

"Nay," said Tamarind, "You haven't."

For several minutes, the large, adult Aurelians continued to molest the young girls. All four seemed to be enjoying themselves, becoming ever more flushed and aroused. Then, the Aurelians reached down and picked up what at first, Keeler thought were bracelets, or shackles of some kind. They wrapped them each around one wrist.

The shot zoomed in, and Keeler could see small, spider-like legs on the bottom of the wristlets seemingly dig into the Aurelians wrists. He also saw a long needle emerging from the top.

The Aurelians bent the girls over, onto their laps, and then plunged the stiletto into the backs of their skulls. The girls bodies jerked up briefly, and their arms spasmed. It was all-too-brief. They were dead.

The Aurelians withdrew the needles and collapsed as though spent. Some human servants entered and removed the bodies of the young girls. The two Aurelians lay back on their chaises and began rubbing each other lasciviously.

"End." Tamarind ordered.

"What the hell was that?" Keeler demanded.

Tamarind shook his head. "We don't know why they do it either. We have deduced that they extract pituitary, pineal and other fluids from the brains of children, but we do not understand why. However, it is something which all of the Echelon Aurelians engage in, which suggests that it is necessary to sustain their survival."

"We have got to stop these people," Keeler said. "What do you need? Whatever we can spare is at your disposal."

"Weapons, of course, medical supplies... some landing gear would go far, but we're otherwise pretty well set up."

He leaned in and spoke quietly to Keeler. "The Aurelians are stripping the planet, aren't they?"

"They're building one of their world-ships in orbit... and what looks like another invasion fleet."

"For the next world. When they finish, they'll take a chosen elite from the planet, strip everything worth taking from it, and leave it an empty husk... or worse."

"The pathogen."

"Aye," said Tamarind darkly. "The Pathogen."

"We've found an off-switch," Keeler explained briefly what Specialist Mastermind had explained to him, about genetic markers and protein sequences.

"Perhaps some and/oroids to supplement our scientists would help us find a better way to eradicate it. It doesn't matter really. They're locusts, you know. They'll keep going until they've laid waste to every human world."

"Do you know where they will go next?" Keeler asked.

Tamarind half smiled. "To the nearest human colony. Of course, they don't know where that is. We have preserved knowledge of the Commonwealth. They do not. They will send out scout ships until they find another ripe human colony."

"We could spare you some Aves, some Shrieks."

"We will use the Shrieks. The Aves... we do not need. Joppler, bring up a feed from Redoubt 9."

The young Bodicéan at the console pulled up the view of what looked like a remote desert location. Hidden under camouflage nets were eight strange looking spacecraft.

"Aurelian transports," Tamarind explained. "I have discussed with Lieutenant Commander Miller one of our other requirements."

Miller leaned and spoke into the commander's ear. "Twenty Nemesis warheads."

Keeler's eyes widened. "Twenty?"

Tamarind nodded serenely, "Aye."

"And which twenty planets are you proposing to blowup with them?"

"The warheads are necessary to ensure our survival. Hopefully, they will never need to be

used."

"Hopefully? ... So, let's see if I have this right. You want me to turn over twenty of the most destructive weapons humanity has ever devised into your personal custody, and trust you to..." he looked into Tamarind the Sumacian's eyes and sighed. "You've already decided that I am going to, so I might as well say okay now and save you the trouble of altering history."

Tamarind smiled. "Before long, Aurelian Intelligence will capture one of our outposts. Our people will fight until there are none left standing to guard it. There, they will find irrefutable proof that the Defiance possesses twenty Nemesis warheads, secreted throughout the system in stealth mode. They will also realize that if they ever attempt to wipe out all life from Bodicéa, the Defiance will destroy the World-Ship. This way, the Defiance and the Aurelians each have a gun to the other's head. It is an ancient military strategy known as Mutually Assured Destruction. A crude, brutal, and primitive strategic policy, but highly effective."

"It will give Ex-Commander Lear fits," Miller added.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place," Keeler came back. "Authorize whoever it is who does those kind of things ..."

"That would be me," said Miller.

"All right, then, you... go ahead and give him twenty Big Dam missiles in hide-and-seek mode."

"Thank you, Commander." He paused. "Years ... perhaps centuries, from now, when our children contemplate where the defeat of Aurelia began, they will know it began here, on Bodicéa, with we three, here."

Keeler could not envision defeating the Aurelians, could not even imagine fighting them, at this point, did not want to undermine

Miller leaned in to Tamarind. "I have something else I'd like to try. Perhaps later, we can discuss it. Sort of a... guiding light to inspire your people."

They gathered in the glade, those of our crew who were going back to the ship. Jones was not the only with children. Erick Martian had also sired a child, and would be taking his wife, a former Aurelian slave-girl, to Pegasus with us. I bet the Centurions will be keeping a close watch on her.

They were climbing on board, saying their good-byes. Flight Captain Jones was discussing the matter of *Basil* with Tactical Lieutenant Alkema. "It's a hopeless wreck."

"Not really," Alkema answered. "Life support and hull integrity are hopeless, however, a couple spare fuel cells and some navigation modules from *Zilla* and *Edward* and she should make it back to *Pegasus*. It will be a long flight, and nobody will be able to stay on-board, maybe an and/oroid, but otherwise, all auto, but the ship can make it. Once she's there, well, repair core has had a lot of practice fixing broken Aves, lately. She will be spaceworthy again."

Jones nodded. "Do it, it would mean a lot to me." As she finished, Sam and Max approached, each carrying a very small pack of belongings from *Basil*. "Are you guys ready?" their mother asked.

They stared dubiously at the Aves *Zilla*.

Jones continued. "We're going back in Commander Keeler's ship. He's going to take us

away from here."

A look of pure terror crossed young Sam's face. "Where will he take us?"

"To the big starship I told you about it."

"We can't go in his ship. The Aurelians will shoot us down."

Jones brushed his hair. "We'll be perfectly safe. Keeler knows how to hide his ship, so, the Aurelians will never see it."

Sam shook his head, tears welled up in his eyes. "No, No, No, the Aurelians will shoot us down. They'll capture us and do terrible things. I won't go with you. I want to stay here."

Jones knelt on the ground and held him close as he began sobbing, whispering to him. "Commander Keeler is going to take us far, far away... where the Aurelians will never find us. Never, ever, ever."

"What about Pater?"

"He is going to stay and fight the Aurelians."

"We should stay, too," said Max, trying to sound brave. Jones could sense, though, that what he really wanted to hear is "Neg."

"We're going to *Pegasus*," she said, in a strong, motherly voice similar to her command voice, but different. "Now, get on-board. I'll be with you in a few minutes. I have to talk to someone."

She saw her boys to the access ramp, than walked over to Lt. Commander Miller, who stood apart from the others, pretending to inventory the medical supplies and plasma grenades Keeler had brought with him. He would not return on *Zilla* or *Edward*, but await another Aves which was now en route with pulse cannons, communications gear, extra Shrieks, personal shields, and other things Tamarind had requested, and a very special warhead he planned to use.

"I am returning to *Pegasus*," Jones reported.

"What about Tobias?" he asked, without turning to face her.

"Tobias is going to stay here and fight for his world."

"What about Sam and Max?"

"They are coming with me."

Miller stood up, still facing away from her. "They'll grow up without a father."

"They will grow up in freedom. That's more important, Tobias wants the best future for his sons, as any good father would, and that future is on *Pegasus*." She put a hand on his shoulder. "Tobias thinks you would make an excellent surrogate father."

He turned, angrily. "What about you? Do you require a surrogate husband, or did you have one already?"

She matched his intensity. "Phil, put aside your self-centered macho beastshit for just one phucking second and think about Sam and Max for a second. Just think for one minute about all the trauma they've been through... shot at, starved, captured... and now losing their father? Divorce me, if you want. Hang me out to dry, it doesn't matter. I don't care, but just getting those boys to normal is going to be a lot of work. I can do it better with you than without you."

Miller didn't answer her, his features twitched, then he stalked off into the brush. Jones, walking away as though this had not affected her approached the Commander and Alkema.

"All aboard?" Keeler asked.

"One more," Jones told him. "She was on deep patrol when you landed. Here she comes."

Tobias came into the glade, accompanied by a striking, raven haired woman in jungle camouflage with fulsome hips and ripe round breasts. With a pulse rifle slung over her shoulder, she looked like the cover illustration from an Arcadian warrior princess fictive that had eased a much younger Commander Keeler into the onset of puberty.

"Oing," said Keeler. In his college days, "Oing!" had been a way of acknowledging the presence of a very attractive female. Translated roughly, it meant, "We are now the presence of a woman so well-made I am rendered incoherent."

"Pieta?" Alkema said, as though the wind were knocked from him.

"Tactical Lieutenant Alkema," she said. "You are just as I remembered you ... and you returned, as Tamarind promised."

Two months ago, she had been a little girl, now she was a woman, the kind of woman you see in dreams you don't want to wake up from.

"Oing," said Alkema.

Tobias looked at Alkema with deep, piercing, all-demanding eyes. "You will take care of my daughter, won't you?"

Alkema considered this. If his math was right, Pieta was technically older than he was. "I ... will, sir."

"She knows six ways to kill a man with her bare hands," Tobias added.

"That's two less than most of the other women on the ship," Alkema told him.

"I will be living in Mother Jones quarters," Pieta said. "Then, I will find a place of my own, and then, perhaps..." She gave Alkema a small wink and a smile.

Alkema stood there, struck dumb by the conflict between the parts of him that was saying she's beautiful, she's fully grown, and she still likes you, and the part that picture her two months ago as a little girl with cake crumbs around her mouth.

"I'll show you to your seat," he said, and she smiled. When she did, he thought he just might be able to get used to the idea of being with an older woman who used to be a younger girl.

Apparently content, Tobias handed Keeler a pair of data-pads. "Take these. They are encoded in the secret language of Sumac. They contain everything we have learned in the past sixteen years about the Aurelians. Transmit their contents to Sapphire. The Order will know what to do."

"I guess this is farewell," Keeler said.

"You guess correctly," Tobias answered.

"What do I win?" the Commander came back with. Tobias looked at him curiously.

"If you guys are going to win this war," Keeler told him. "You're going to have to lighten up."

"I am fighting for the rights of all the men on this planet, for dignity, for freedom, for the right to make their own choices. I will not ever 'lighten up' until the Aurelians are gone and the Matriarchy is overthrown."

Keeler paused before mounting the ramp. "Look, mate, suppose you succeed in driving out the Aurelians, and you also achieve your goal of equality. What then?"

"Then, I'll be content."

"Wrong! You'll become so obsessed, so fixated, on the struggle itself that you won't even recognize it when you win. The struggle will become so much a part of your mindset that you'll never be able to leave it behind. You'll keep pushing for more and more victories, until your side becomes just as oppressive as the Aurelians or the Matriarchy."

Tobias blinked at him uncomprehendingly.

Keeler sighed. "Look, I was a professor of history once, and history shows us that every revolution... eventually and invariably ... becomes as oppressive as the system it was intended to overthrow. Sapphire is a happy little planet because we broke the cycle and came up with a better way. So, you have a choice to make, become a bitter, angry soldier in a battle that will never end to your satisfaction, or get some perspective and lighten up a little bit."

Tobias mulled this as *Zilla* lifted, fading to invisibility as she rose, then shot into the sky.

Pegasus did not linger long in the 10 255 Vulpeculus system. We set up a few automated listening posts to spy on the Aurelians, unloaded several hundred tons of armaments, and took care of other matters.

Matt Driver stood in the Squadron Room of the Quicksilver Angels, the rest of the Flight Group stood there also, in dress uniform, as Executive Commander Lear read a prepared statement.

"Flight Lieutenant Matthew Driver, in acknowledgement of your conspicuous heroism at 10 255 Vulpeculus Five, you are hereby awarded the Highest Honor of the Republic Space Command, the White Star-Cross." Executive Commander Lear herself attached the pendant to Driver's Formal Uniform. He grinned, blushed, and thanked her.

The Flight Group was still cheering him when Commander Keeler took the podium and said, "The Planet Sapphire also would like to acknowledge your heroism."

Driver and the rest of the group hushed. No one in history had ever been honored with military awards from both worlds. Lt. Alkema approached bearing a platinum and gold medallion attached to a yellow, red, and black ribbon. On the face of the medal was the outline of an animal, canine in appearance, head and haunches down, hindquarters high. "The Medal of Canis Major, first forged in honor of the Victory at 67 Canis Major in the Third Crusade, reserved for warriors demonstrating extreme resourcefulness in battle. Your quick-thinking saved your ship and all aboard her, and by destroying the Aurelian warhead before it could detonate against Pegasus's stern, you may have saved countless others."

"Uh," Matthew said, "It was my ship that originally drew the warhead to Pegasus in the first place."

Keeler waved him off. "A mere technicality. The point is, you saved the ship, and you are hereby entered into the Ancient Order of the puking dogs; the first Republicer ever so honored."

"Thank you, commander. I don't know what to say."

"Save it for the hazing," Keeler muttered. Before he could go on to make a pithy remark about scrotum shaving, the Flight Group was cheering again.

Keeler turned to them. "Shut up, I'm not finished yet."

The pilots fell awkwardly silent. "As you are all aware, Flight Captain Jones has resigned as Flight Captain of the Burning Skies. She has nominated Flight Lieutenant Driver as her replacement. Do you accept, Flight Lieutenant Driver?"

This took Matthew by surprise. "Aye. I accept."

Lear nodded. "Thank you, Captain, and Congratulations."

"Za, congratulations," the Commander said. "Now, you flyboys have a reputation for being a hard-drinking lot. So, bring it on. Underneath this Commander's dress uniform, I'm buck naked!!"

All in all, I think we learned a lot on the planet Bodicéa. I think we learned that Executive Commander Lear will suck up to any civilization no matter how screwed up it is. I think we learned that big, well-armed ships can beat the discharge out of us, and we learned that the Sumacians, apart from being a bunch of mystical jerks who like to play soldier, are really...

My journal entry was interrupted by Lt. Commander Miller. "Hoy, Kitty Cat."

"Hoy," I answered him. "What brings you to my hidey-hole?" At the time, I was on Deck Six, near the rear spar of the ship. Hardly anyone goes there, it's right above the aft heat-exchangers, which makes it perfect for those of us inclined to warm, dark, enclosed spaces.

"I need to boost the gain on the aft telemetry receivers. I'm losing signal on one of the probes we left behind, and I really need to ... check on something before we go."

"Knock yourself out," I told him, blanking my input screen with a wave of my paw.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

It was none of his damb business. Nothing a cat does is anyone else's damb business unless the cat says it is. What kind of idiot was he? I chose to deflect his insolent inquiry with a question of my own.

"So, what are you going to do about those two young of yours," I asked him.

He sighed and looked thoughtful. "They are good boys, strong, smart, good-looking. They're probably better than the ones I could have sired anyway."

He scratched me behind my ears and went on. "Do you know why she named them Saw and Max? Because those were the names I wanted to use on my own son." He shook his head. "It's like she knew I was coming back, but if she knew that, why didn't she just wait for me."

"Did it ever occur to you that she named them Sam and Max precisely because she didn't believe you were coming back?"

From the look on his face, I knew it hadn't. Sensing I was winning, he changed tactics. "If I remember anything about your species, the males don't even care for their own young, and are openly hostile to kittens fathered by other males. Don't stalking cat males eat the young of other males?"

"First of all, there's no genetic link between stalking cats and my species, and second, you're not part of my species. *You* are morally obligated to raise those whelps."

"Whelps?"

"You heard me."

"Fine," he tightened up on the sensor screen he was showing me. "I think we'll just catch this before *Pegasus* leaves transmission range. I programmed the Hammerjacks to do this, I intended it as a memorial." He brought up the image. "If I had known they were going to live, I'd have programmed something more inspirational like, I don't know, 'Aurelia Stinks,' or 'Coronado Smells His Own Rectal Emissions.'"

I flicked my tail. "Very mature."

"Here it comes."

The satellite showed us a view of the Aurelian world-ship as it passed into daylight in its orbit above Bodicéa. One quadrant of the great sphere had a message carved in it, in characters 400 km long, reading *Remember Basil*.

"Nice," I said.

"Za, those Hammerjacks will be wreaking havoc on the world-ship for decades."

"Until they compromise the core and the whole ship explodes in a supernova."

"Can't happen until they leave the system."

"Okay, so what happens when they get done self-replicating and need a new target, then what."

"If they haven't infiltrated the new world-ship already, they will soon."

"Can they be stopped?"

Miller paused. "Sure, easy, just transmit the shutdown code, or hit them with the anti-jacks."

"So, there's no chance that they'll ever reach the planet or... ha, ha... one of our own ships?"

"Those guys are programmed to attack Aurelian world-ships and destroyers. They have no interest in anything else. If they land on a planet, or on any other ship, they'll auto-shutdown. They're perfectly safe. Nothing can go wrong with them."

CODA

A transit had passed since *Pegasus*, left. A transit was defined as the time it took Bodicéa's inner moon to cross the path of the outer moon. This happened every 31 days, the same as the menstrual cycle of Bodicéan women, so it happened.

Tamarind had been in a Holy Trance for three days, and in this time, had come as close as any human could come to conversation with the Creator-Sustainer. Although humanity's spiritual evolution had paced itself with its physical and intellectual evolution, God was still far and far beyond human comprehension. The Creator-Sustainer had created every atom of matter in the universe and knew the life of every creature on every world around every star. The psychology and intellect of His Being was too much for any human mind to hold. To know God was to stand on the edge of supernova and know light.

Occasionally, the Creator-Sustainer allowed glimpses of His Being, and these became religions.

Tamarind, bowed in supplication, eyes closed, listened hard into the void, sometimes chanting, sometimes emptying his mind of all distraction. His discipline served him well, but no one could aspire to be God's messenger. One is chosen, or else one lies.

Tamarind was listening for instructions, as he usually did. He fasted and meditated whenever confronted with difficult choices. This time, however, he was asking something even more important and unlikely from his God. He was asking for forgiveness.

At the appointed hour, Tobias and Chaykil, his most trusted lieutenants, entered his meditation chamber. Chaykil had been a child when the Aurelians invaded. His city had been spared the Decimation. In the fifth year of the reign of Coronado the Aurelian, Chaykil had been taken to the Aurelian Social Engineering Center for his district, and selected for a life of service to the Echelon. His shuttle, however, was ambushed by a flight of Shrieks, returning from a raid on an Aurelian Communication Outpost. It crashed in the deep forest, and only he had survived. He had been taken into to the Defiance, and had grown tall, over two meters, in height, and strong. He had shaved his head in the manner of a Sumacian Initiate, and kept it that way.

Chaykil and Tobias lit the incense, and a sharp odor like cinnamon and sea-salt filled the chamber. Tobias slowly crossed the void, and returned to them. His eyes fluttered open. "It is time," Tobias reported.

Tamarind nodded and said nothing. The three passed from the meditation chamber and into the night. They passed a few guards along the way, who saluted and bowed before Tamarind. Finally, they came to the tallest and oldest tree in the camp, and began climbing up the side to the observation post in the top-most branches.

The two moons were full that night. The inner moon hung large in the sky, the outer one smaller, 45 degrees to the left and higher; like a pair of mismatched Christmas ornaments. The three of them stared at the moons. There were two watchmen on the tower, but they kept their eyes on the forest.

"Is it safe to watch?" Tobias asked.

"Za," Tamarind answered. "I am told we do not need to look away."

Suddenly, there came a brilliant flash on the outer moon. It light up the forest like lightning, and burned a brief after-image into the eyes of Tamarind, Chaykil, and Tobias. The watchmen looked up toward the sky, weapons at ready, in time to see bright yellow incandescent light spread across the surface of the outer moon until it glowed like a light bulb, even brighter than its nearer twin.

"I set up the war-head with a quantum resonance charge," Miller had explained to Tamarind. "After destroying the base, the explosion ignited a kind of fusion chain-reaction on the moon's atmosphere." If this had been an art experiment, he would have smiled. "I set the moon on fire. It will burn for centuries."

"How many Aurelians were on the Lunar Base?"

"Eighteen hundred and fifty," Chaykil answered without emotion.

"Record it in the scribes," Tamarind ordered. He intended to record every life that was ended in this war.

Tobias broke into a grim smile. "This will inspire millions to our cause. They'll know that the Defiance is real, that we stood up to Aurelia. They will fight with us, and the burning moon will be our symbol."

Tamarind sat stoically for a moment. Then, his cheek quivered, he began to snort, and soon

was laughing uncontrollably. He had one of those peculiar laughs, laughing on the inhale, producing a sound like a choking goose, but it was a heartfelt belly-laugh. Tears came to his eyes, but finally, he was able to speak.

“For Sumac’s sake, lighten up, Brother Tobias.”