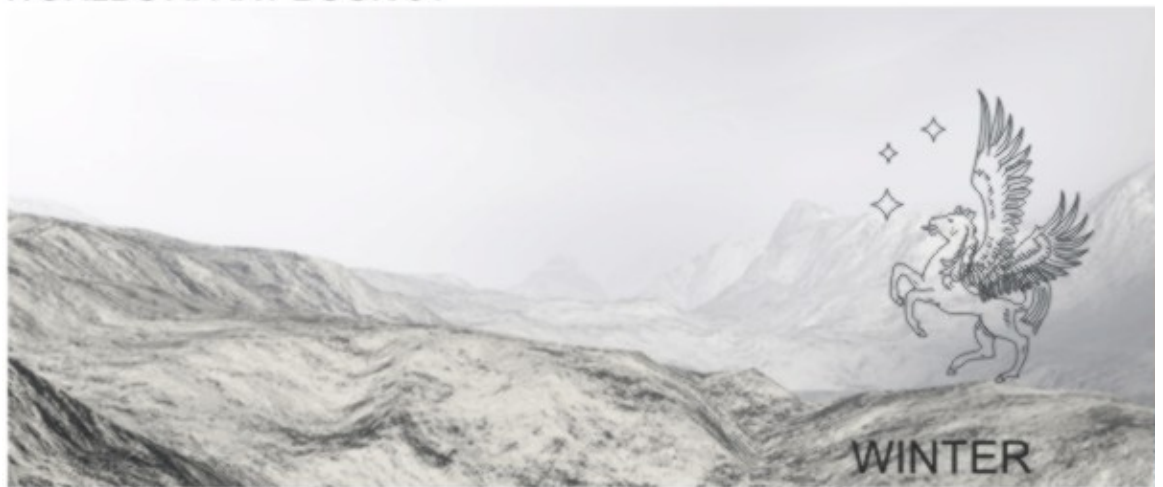


WORLDS APART BOOK 04



JAMES WITTENBACH



Worlds Apart Book Four:
Winter

World Without End



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Desperado-Everlong Press

www.worlds-apart.net

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wittenbach, James

Worlds Apart Book 04: EdenWorld

I. Title

ISBN 0- 0-9763384-0-8

Chapter One

Three hundred and eight days have passed since *Pegasus* departed the Bodicéa system for the last time.

Pegasus – Captain's Quarters

"What is this?" Prime Commander William Randolph Keeler demanded, waving a sleek, titanium-alloy datapad in the nose of a large gray tabby cat.

Queequeg pretended never to have seen it before. "It looks like a personal datapad of some kind. A fairly standard one, although the engraving on the side reflects a highly refined sense of taste. Clearly, this belonged to an individual of great distinction, probably ahead of his time, misunderstood and unappreciated by his contemporaries, but one whose genius history will judge as ... "

"Allow me to acquaint ... or reacquaint ... you with its contents." Keeler cleared his throat and read. "'I think the main reason he will not prosecute is because he does not want to risk offending the Republic half of the crew. The captain may profess to despise politics, but this does not mean that he does not understand them.'" He glowered momentarily, then thundered, "Accuse me of understanding politics, would you?"

Queequeg flicked his brushy tail. "Oh, you meant *that* datapad..."

With a wave of his hand, Keeler raised the lighting in his quarters and then settled into a large overstuffed chair. William Randolph Keeler was a large, stout, round-faced man, who doubtless would have worn a well-trimmed and distinguished gray beard had not the follicles for facial hair gone dormant at some earlier point in human evolution. He waved the datapad at his cat. "So, you've been keeping an unauthorized log of our voyage."

"I would think as a historian, you'd want to incorporate the view of an every-cat into your observations, so future generations can see our voyage from my perspective."

"What's that, a half-meter above the deck?"

"My species has been with yours for ten thousand years," Queequeg began to explain, purring. "We have always been by your side, judging you, and giving you the unbearable feeling that whatever you achieved, it would never be quite enough earn our respect. A few centuries ago, you raised us up so we could communicate at your level, and you were finally able to hear that silent judgment we had been casting on you all those millennia."

"The biggest mistake my species ever made," Keeler commented.

"Opening that wormhole that swallowed Alexandria IV was pretty bone-headed. The collected wisdom of 10,000 worlds sucked away into the nether realms. Then, there was the time you thought you thought you could genetically engineer people not to be evil," Queequeg rolled his eyes. "That was a shining moment for human intellect."

"Enough!" Keeler roared. If Queequeg started listing examples of human stupidity, this could go on all night. Instead, he turned to the book "You wrote this first entry after we visited Meridian, over two years ago."

"What a stinkhole," said the cat.

"Indeed. And to think, after we left that planet, we thought that having an alien virus genetically re-engineer your planet into a facsimile of its own world was the worst thing that could happen to you. What do these little symbols mean?" Keeler asked, pointing to some orange and blue hieroglyphs at the bottom of the entry.

The cat leaned over and laid a paw on the datapad. "Those are my shorthand classifications for the effect of the mission on the ship, the crew, and the planet we visited. If you hold the cursor over them, a legend will come up."

Keeler removed the pad from the cat's reach. "Ah, za, I can see it now. Your summary of Meridian: Ship threatened. Crew threatened. Planet screwed."

"I try to keep things concise for the benefit of future generations."

"So, if I skip ahead to EdenWorld ... I see you decided: Ship okay, crew mostly okay, planet screwed. Mostly okay?"

"Well, aside from you getting your hand nearly incinerated, and some people dying, most of the crew came through that uninjured... only the psychological injuries were long-lasting."

Keeler read. "*'EdenWorld, I think, will remain in our memories as a monument to frivolity, to excess, to decadence. We do not need to pass judgment on this rotting shell of a world. History has already made that determination for us.'* And just who are you to make that determination, Ranking Cat?"

"Hey, look, it was you small-eared, big-brained mammals that decided to play God and create all those freaks on that planet. To those of us who still walk on four legs, it's no surprise that your creations ended up enslaving and eating you."

Keeler flipped ahead. "Medea. Ship okay. Crew okay. Planet... hmmm, you have the screwed symbol repeated three times."

"Medea was screwed three times over."

"I would concede your point, except that we planted the seeds of a unique civilization in the ashes of that world. In another few centuries..."

"You'll be lucky if those and/oroids you left don't rise up and crush you like rodents... *rodents!* You know, some species would have looked at EdenWorld and decided not to play God on the very next world they encountered, but you hairless idiots..."

Keeler flipped ahead. "I think you're wrong, but if you aren't, at least it will make life interesting for our grandchildren. On to Bodicéa. Ship threatened. Crew threatened. Planet screwed. You know, I am beginning to note a depressing pattern here."

"Don't look at me, Big Brain. I would have hit the Aurelians with a full Nemesis strike and blown them all to Kingdom Come ."

"Along with most of the inner Bodicéa system." Keeler continued, "Let's see what you wrote about Coriolus. *'Why do the Aurelians get to all the nice planets first?'*"

"I may have wrote it, but it was you who first said it."

"Oh, yeah, I remember that now." He thought sadly of Coriolus, a deep blue world surrounded by swirls of paper-white clouds and a thousand Aurelian ships stripping its natural resources and enslaving, exterminating, and sucking the brains from its inhabitants. *Pegasus* weapons were so depleted from their first engagement that the crew could not risk a strike against them. However, Thanks to Commander Redfire, the Aurelians would have an unpleasant surprise for them to find when they fired their gravity engines to leave orbit. The surprise would be short-lived, but then, so would the Aurelians.

"Ship Not Threatened. Crew Not Threatened. Planet Screwed. Why 'Not Threatened,' as opposed to 'Okay?'"

"The effect of seeing one world after another falling to the Aurelians depressed the psyche of the entire crew," Queequeg explained. "There was even talk of turning the ship around and returning to Sapphire and Republic to defend the homeworlds."

"Where was there talk of turning the ship around?"

"Various places," Queequeg said, trying to come off casual. "Certain areas within the structure of this ship. I'm not on trial here!"

"I never heard any such talk."

"You need to get out more."

"In any case, because we are not turning back. Oz has spoken." He advanced again. "Templar colony was a wash. No inhabitable planets in the system. Which brings us to Fiddler's Green."

"We never seem to have much luck with Green planets," Queequeg observed.

"Aside from existing outside the boundaries of normal human cause and effect logic, I don't remember anything especially wrong with Fiddler's Green. Ah, here's a good one. Independence Colony: *'After twenty-two months in space, at last, an intact world with a thriving, advanced human population.'* Ship good. Crew good. Planet good. Well, I think good is an understatement. The Indies were almost on a par with our own home worlds. They were free. They had technology, space-faring capability. Their records showed us the

way to twenty-seven nearby colonies we had no previous knowledge of, including the system we have just entered. All you can say is that they were 'good'."

"All that is true, but also, they were boring."

"Oh, pardon me. So now, a planet can only be interesting if its inhabitants try to kill us. Is that what you're saying?" Keeler looked at one of the images in the journal, the city of Presidio Capitat where they had met the planetary leadership and signed the Friendship Treaty. A civil engineer told them they took an existing island and filled in the land until it was perfectly round. When the city filled up, they built spars extending into the sea and filled in another ring around. "Very impressive engineering," Keeler muttered.

"One good hurricane and its flotsam," said Queequeg.

"You mean jetsam," Keeler corrected.

Queequeg held up a paw. "Whatever the difference is, don't explain it to me."

Keeler couldn't suppress a grin. "It was wonderful that nobody on Independence tried to kill us."

"And how can you be sure of that? What happened to you when you returned to *Pegasus* was mighty peculiar."

"That had nothing to do with the planet, or the people."

"Are you sure?"

"I most certainly am not!" Keeler set the book aside and glanced at another display that relayed the latest on the ship's heading. *Pegasus* had just passed the orbital margin of the outermost of the nine planets in the system 14 001 Horologium. The third planet had a nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere, habitable for humans. Was this the colony called 'Winter,' alluded to in the Commonwealth Archives of Independence Colony?

They would know soon.

Quarters of Magnus and Kayliegh Morgan, Deck 29

A good spread was laid across the dining table in the quarters of Magnus and Kayliegh Morgan. Vegetable stew and sea-kelp soup accompanied a main course of protein cakes, soy lent quiche, brown rice and pongee mushrooms, washed down with great lashings of ginger brew. "You eat at the Food Court far too much," Kayliegh scolded her brother, Matthew, a captain of one of *Pegasus's* four flight groups.

"I cannot argue with that. It's good to be eating home-made food." Matthew and Kayliegh were twins. They shared the same height and build, which made her a little tall and strong for a woman and he a little short for a man. Her honey-brown hair was lighter than his, which was nearly black, but they possessed identical brown, quick-witted eyes and the light and creamy complexions common among Republicers descended from Earth's lighter-skinned races.

"Married life suits me well and pleasingly," said Magnus Morgan, a little out of nowhere, but he was a scientist and allowed to approach social interaction from unexpected tangents. He lifted his glass in salute to his wife. He had just turned thirty, making him older than Matthew and Kayliegh by two years. He had a face of ordinary handsomeness dimmed only by a nose that was slightly too large and teeth that were slightly too far apart. "I've married Kayliegh twice already and I would do it again if necessary."

The fourth chair at the table was occupied by the ship's navigator, Eliza Jane Change, whom Matthew had been pursuing romantically, with varying levels of failure since the ship had launched. Eliza, an exotic beauty with gleaming black hair and almond-shaped eyes, ignored their pro-marriage homily as best she could and wished the Morgans had served wine with dinner. Unfortunately, they belonged to some Old Earth Fundamentalist religion that forbade the consumption of alcohol.

Change realized she was expected to say something positive about marriage or dinner at this point. If she couldn't think of anything positive, she was obliged to change the subject, but not in so obvious a way as to imply that she had nothing positive to say. "Have you tried the new restaurant on the Food Deck?" she asked. "It's called, 'Aye, Si.' It features food from Independence Colony."

"I can't say that I have," Kayliegh answered. "Is it any good?"

"How would I know?" Eliza replied. "That's why I was asking you."

They laughed without the slightest bit of uncomfortableness and she knew they had believed she was joking. She dug into another protein cake. Matthew had assured her that his religion did not forbid the use of salt, pepper, oregano, mélange or any other spice, so Kayliegh's aversion to flavor must have been a personal pathology.

From the desirableness of marriage, the conversation turned to Independence, and how the excitement of finding an advanced, intact human world, with friendly inhabitants, had infected the ship with a certain philia for the colony and its culture. Indy music, Indy food, Indy art, and even Indy slang had enjoyed a sudden and intense popularity on board *Pegasus*. "A lot of people feel like this was the Turning Point in our voyage," Kayliegh observed. "After the Aurelians, and the other colonies."

"I hope people won't be too let down if the next world we meet doesn't measure up," Matthew Driver said.

Eliza sipped her ginger brew. Born and raised aboard spaceships, as far as she was concerned, one ball of dirt was very like another.

Magnus launched into a little speech. "We, the Pathfinders, we were meant to do the tough work, rediscovering these lost colonies. It was our fate, when you think about it, to bear the burden of finding out which colonies thrived and which ones... uh, didn't. However, thanks to us, the Phase Two ships will help the stronger colonies reach out and raise up the weaker ones. Less stress because they will, mostly, know what to expect, but not as interesting."

"You have a point," Matthew Driver told him.

"I think, though, Phase Three will be a lot more interesting than either Phase One or Phase Two, unfortunately, I probably won't be around to see it."

"What's Phase Three?" Matthew asked. "I only remember Phases One and Two."

Magnus smiled knowingly. "Phase Three wasn't laid out by the Odyssey Charter, but it will naturally follow. In Phase One, ships like this one, enormous, well-armed, ready for anything, find the other human worlds and whatever else the galaxy has to offer. Phase Two ships will be smaller. They will follow up on the other colonies, and those colonies will begin building their own ships, the strongest among them anyway. Phase Two will strengthen the ties among worlds, and will explore, but only as a secondary function, and only to known or probable colony sites.

"In Phase Three, we will begin building ships of pure exploration, to look into uncharted star systems, and explore unknown phenomena. These ships won't be merely about building the human community or making the galaxy a better place for humans to live. These ships will be about pure science. I only wish I could be around to be on one."

"If the Aurelians don't destroy us before we get to Phase Three," Eliza interjected, spoiling the moment quite deliberately.

"We'll defeat the Aurelians," said Matthew Driver, with absolute certainty.

"Or, learn to live with them, somehow," Kayliegh suggested.

"I don't think we will have that choice," Matthew argued grimly.

Magnus Morgan looked at his wife. "We don't need to have this argument again, not right now anyway, this was supposed to be an occasion of joy." He took her hand in his own. They smiled at each other with the committed glow of two people absolutely in love with each other.

"I was about to say," Magnus Morgan continued. "I will probably not be around for Phase Three, but I have hope that my children will be."

Matthew was caught off guard for a moment before an irrepressible grin curled across his lips. "You're having a baby?"

Kayliegh glowed. "I am into my first quarter."

Matthew was overjoyed, almost as though the child would be his own. "That's wonderful. What did you decide to have?"

"We went back and forth on the girl/boy question, and finally gave up and decided to have twins."

"Twins?"

"Aye, one of each. It took almost a quarter of concentration and meditation, but I did it. I am carrying your niece and your nephew." She lay a hand on her stomach. "That's just great. Isn't it great, Eliza?"

Eliza nodded and sipped her ginger brew. "Where would we be without people like you to propagate the species?"

Amenities Nexus – Deck 23

Tactical Commander Phil Redfire and Flight Commandant Halo Jordan shared a mutual aversion to cooking. The former husband and wife sat in comfortably padded chairs around a large table in one of the less-quiet corners of the Amenities Nexus, an area just forward of *Pegasus's* command towers, with food shops presenting a full array of Sapphorean, Republicker – and now, Independence – cuisine.

Redfire and Jordan were joined by the two sons, Max and Sam, she had borne during the sixteen years (or eight, because one of Bodicéa's years was two of Sapphire's) she had been left behind on the planet Bodicéa. While stranded, she had become the paramour of another man, and this had caused Redfire to invoke divorce under Sapphorean law.

The havoc interstellar travel played with physical laws was nothing compared to the havoc it played on personal lives.

The divorce had eased the extremes in the sine curve of their relationship, no more passionate sexual congress followed by arguments heated to stellar interior temperatures. Instead, they had a kind of cordiality, an entente. The Marriage Dissolutionist had required that Phil do his best to mentor his wife's sons. Max was growing up athletic, strong, handsome, and bold. Sam possessed an artistic temperament, a creative streak as wide as a gulf, and a talent for mischief. Jordan had given the boys names she and Redfire had once agreed on for the sons they never had. She even, somehow, had produced boys whose hair was light red, like Commander Redfire's although both she and their sire were blond. But Redfire could not look at them without remembering that the boys were the fruit of another man's seed, sown in his wife's fertile and willing loins.

As it happened, no two of them were eating the same thing. Jordan had a plate of Arcadian-style cuisine, warm vegetables, a light pasta, and birdflesh served under a caramelized berry sauce. Redfire was eating his customary rice cakes and whole grain vegetable sandwich. Max, almost fourteen in Sapphorean years, was eating a small Thessalian pizza and a large Baden Baden style deep-dish pizza. Sam, twelve, had recently decided to only eat foods that began with the letter 'B.' His plate held beans, butter, bread, bacon, beets, and berries and he was eagerly relaying what he had learned in school that day. "We learned about Sumac."

"Oh, really?" said Jordan, a piece of vegetable poised on her fork. "What did you learn about him?"

"We learned that he was a prophet, and he started the Sumacian Warriors, and he built the Unreal City."

"Did you tell them about Tamarind?" Jordan asked. Tamarind was the Warrior-Prophet who led the resistance on Bodicéa.

Sam's eyebrows knit together. "Neg, I didn't think about Tamarind."

"We should do a report together on the things Tamarind did on Bodicéa," Jordan suggested.

"Maybe I can make a holo-poster of Tamarind," Sam said.

"Maybe you can." Jordan had proven to be an unexpectedly good mother. Better than Redfire would have expected. She almost made up for his myriad inadequacies as a father.

"Maybe I could help," Redfire put in. "I haven't worked in photonics for a long time, but I used to be pretty good."

"Mom says you were good at destroying things," Max said, challenging him.

"There is a difference between destruction for its own sake and creative destruction," Redfire explained. "Creative destruction is an elemental force in the universe. The iron in our very blood was formed in the hearts of exploding stars."

Sam asked if this meant Redfire would help him and Redfire agreed. Max looked unimpressed. "May I

be excused?" Max asked after consuming two-thirds of one pizza and one-half of the other in the space of the brief dinner conversation.

"Where are you going?" Jordan asked.

Max was already standing. "I think I'll go back to the habitation deck, clean my room, and study calculus."

"Where are you really going?" Jordan asked.

Max grinned deviously. "On my way *back* to my room, I am *probably* going to go back to *Basil* and run a practice simulation. My exam is tomorrow."

"You may go, then. Make sure you secure the ship when you're finished."

"May I go," Sam asked.

"Neg!" said Max.

"Za, you may," Jordan said. "After you have finished some of your beans and berries."

Sam grimly dug into his plate.

"And don't bother your brother during his simulation," Jordan added.

"I never bother him," he said, presenting his plate to show that he had eaten enough.

Max turned as he left the table. "He will, you know."

"Consider it an extra challenge you won't have to put up with during the exam," Jordan told him. She watched as the two boys crossed the mall.

"Are you sure it's wise to do a report on Tamarind?" Redfire asked when the boys were out of earshot. "Their lives on Bodicéa were traumatic, from what you've told me."

"The war was a real part of their lives. It's healthier for them to deal with it directly... than to deny it."

Redfire nodded, rubbed his chin. "I wasn't there. I guess you know what's best. They are your kids."

"Do you ever think of them as yours?" she asked.

Redfire bristled. "I can't, but I know they need a strong male figure in their lives..."

Jordan was composed, as always. "Growing up, they had Tamarind, Tobias, and a camp full of disciplined, dedicated warriors. On this ship, they have you."

"You could do better," Redfire said, and that was all that he said. No need to rehash the failings of their marriage.

Main Bridge/Primary Command

Tactical Lieutenant David Alkema was feeling fine.

Not very often, and not nearly as frequently as he would have liked, he was in command of *Pegasus*. It was the pre-dawn watch, from 0000 to 0700 hours, the one set aside for junior officers to practice command. His turn only came about every four weeks or so, and his main duty was to alert the real command staff if anything happened, but it didn't matter. For those hours, the 4200 meters and 400 decks of *Pegasus*, one of the most powerful, certainly most beautiful ships ever crafted, was in his charge.

Alkema was the ship's youngest officer, a handsome man with full, ruddy cheeks and thickets of curly black hair. For the first four hours and seventy-six minutes of his watch, he had done little but observe the smooth course of his ship – *his* ship – into the 14 001 Horologium system. Far ahead of the ship, probes plowed through space, like heralds, looking for life, for the money planet on which *Pegasus* would call and, perhaps, find some remnant, some forgotten side street of what had once been the Human Galactic Community.

"Probe One is picking up something," the telemetry officer, a Republicer named Thelonius Diderax Electric reported.

"Probe One shouldn't be in range of the inner planets for another sixteen hours," Alkema stated. He was sure the telemetry officer knew this, but had observed that command officers often pointed out the obvious.

Electric continued. "Long range scan, sir. It's detecting something ... metallic, possibly in orbit of the

third planet."

"Display," Alkema ordered. A holographic image of the planet arose, a fuzzy white snowball. In the foreground was a tiny, blurry gray dot. "That's it?"

"Probe one thinks it is about 16,600 kilometers above the surface, primarily composed of heavy alloys and composites." Electric shrugged. "It could be a satellite, maybe a ship, or a piece of debris."

"Order Probe One to track to it, but don't get too close," Alkema said, feeling a surge inside of him. He gave an order. People did it. He wondered if the thrill would ever wear off.

He could hardly wait to see his girlfriend.

Hangar Bay, Dock 19 (*The Next Morning*)

The Aves *Basil* had been built at the CloudBuster Avian artifice on the Sapphirean moon of Hyperion, as were most of the Aves in *Pegasus's* Flight Groups. The Aves were the resident shuttlecraft *Pegasus* carried, eighty-four active at any time, forty-four more on stand-by, nearly a hundred spares stored in the cargo areas of the UnderDecks. All had been built during the last two years of *Pegasus's* construction, but *Basil* had become quite older than any of the other ships. Like its captain, Jordan, *Basil* had been stranded on the planet Bodicéa for eight years, call it sixteen.

Aves were designed for far longer than 20 years of service, but they were also designed for regular maintenance and periodic complete refurbishment from bow to stern. There had been little of the former and none of the latter on Bodicéa. Furthermore, the ship had been under near constant assault by the Aurelians during its entire stay. Its condition upon recovery was almost unsalvageable. Two Aves, outfitted with heavy-lift recovery systems, had had to tow it back to *Pegasus*.

It had taken nearly eight months to re-outfit *Basil* to its new role as a training ship. Her pilot, Flight Commandant Jordan, now had sixteen flight cadets, the first class, being trained for duty. Eleven of these were adult crewmen from different Specialty Cores looking to advance their skills. The remainder were the fourteen to sixteen year old children of adult crew members, training for primary assignment with Flight Core.

One of them was Trajan Lear.

In the months since leaving Bodicéa, Trajan had endured a growth spurt that added height without bulk, making him lean as a sliver. He was growing out his white-gold hair into an almost angelic ringlet of curls, encircling gray-blue eyes far too serious and calculating for one so young and privileged.

He sat in a simulation pod on *Basil's* Main Deck. Flight Commandant Jordan stood over him. "This is an advanced test mission," she explained to him. "Your assignment is to deploy a satellite microprobe around the fourth moon of a planet."

A slight pout came to Trajan's lips. "Why not a combat drill?"

"My experience has been that aspiring pilots tend to run plenty of combat drills on their own time. However, non-aggressive missions will make up the bulk of your flight duties, and can often be just as challenging if not more so." She spoke from experience.

Trajan sighed and a pouting expression settled on his lips. This expression was part of the reason that he had a reputation for being spoiled. The fact that he really was spoiled was the rest of the reason. The canopy on the pod closed. The holographic generators kicked in. Suddenly, he was in the cockpit of his own ship, in the Primary Landing Bay of *Pegasus*. In his mind, the name of his Aves was *Prudence*, the ship that had saved his young life more than once.

The control surfaces of Aves were customizable to the preference of each pilot. Trajan preferred the primary side-stick approach with a primary level neural interface surrounding his right eye.

"Aves *Basil* to *Pegasus* Flight Core. Systems check complete. Standing by for launch clearance."

"*Pegasus* Flight Core to Aves *Basil*. Confirm Course profile."

Trajan checked the map of his course, beginning at *Pegasus*, weaving through the rings of a gaseous planet to a moon on the far side. "Course profile confirmed, *Pegasus* Flight Control."

"*Pegasus* Flight Core to Aves *Basil*. Commencing Launch sequence." The pod simulated his ship being lowered to the launch rails as he continued the standard back-and-forth with Flight Core. Finally, he

came to the command, "Launch when Ready."

The kick backwards as the ship pretended to fire down the launch rails felt real enough, as did the sudden emergence into a velvety black night speckled with bright white stars. In this simulation, *Pegasus* was some distance from the planet, and Flight Commandant Jordan made him endure every minute of the two-and-a-half-hour journey.

Finally, he came to the planet, a great purple and blue pearl lit by the faint light of a distant sun. He swung around, just above the ring system. The ice crystals in the rings, marching round and round the planet like a great orderly snowstorm, made a pale and ghostly reflection of his ship.

When the fourth moon emerged, it was not shaped like a sphere, as he had expected, but more like a tortoise, very much like a tortoise in fact, as though the simulation designers were trying to be humorous. Its orbit was also peculiar, highly elliptical. He had to recalculate the trajectory of the micro-satellite. This was a quick operation. He passed over the rough brown and rust colored surface of the moon and released the satellite from the rear hatchery.

He was just about to confirm orbital insertion when the lights in the Flight Deck flickered and failed, replaced by emergency lighting. "Failure in primary engine core," his ship reported.

He ran a diagnostic of his flight system. The ship's primary reactor and gravity engine were off-line. He activated his ion thrusters and was kicked back into his seat by the simulated acceleration.

It was insufficient. His ship began to fall toward the purple planet. He attempted to re-initialize the gravity engine. "Initialization failed," said the ship. "Atmospheric entry in forty-three seconds."

He checked his charts. No way was he that close to the planet. Then, he saw that he wasn't, but he was that close to the largest moon, which had an atmosphere of sulfuric and hydrochloric acid. His chances of surviving a crash landing would be nil.

He fired the ion thrusters to improve his orbital position. With the primary reactor off-line, he would not be able to sustain an orbit for every long. He began to re-initialize the primary reactor core. This time, he followed it through to the point of failure. He saw it soon enough. No containment around the reactor core, but the secondary reactor was still on-line. He would have to use such power as he had to make a stable orbit, and save the tertiary reactor for life support.

An idea went off in his brain. He could fire a brace of missiles from the rear of the ship. Without the gravity engine to counteract the force of the launch, the kickback would give him a little more altitude. He had the ship calculate the additional force. It was not as much as he had hoped. However, it occurred to him that *detonating* one of the missiles might push him completely away from the moon.

Then again, it could also destroy the ship, and knowing Flight Commandant Jordan, it probably would.

Then, he got a better idea, or at least one he thought he could get away with. He swung his ship around and feathered his ion thrusters, aiming his ship toward the tortoise moon. He might have just enough power to make it.

The tortoise moon came up with excruciating slowness. Keeping his ship on course became a struggle. Every little nip and tuck he could manage with the ion thrusters was countervailed by the bigger, nastier moon.

Just when he thought he would never make it, he broke free, and started drifting downward. The surface of the tortoise moon was pitted and cratered, covered with thick rust-colored dust. Now, the challenge was to slow down enough for a soft landing, and not crack his ship to pieces.

His power-levels continued to drop until he dared not fire the thrusters again, lest he lose communication and life support.

Then he remembered, communication. He tapped his comm-link. "*Pegasus*, this is Aves Pru ... Aves Basil. Preparing to crash land on the fourth moon of the outer planet. Activating beacon. Repeat..."

Then, suddenly, there was a jolt as his ship hit the surface. A rust-orange sandstorm exploded around his canopy. He was down. The simulation vanished, and the pod began to open. Flight Commandant Jordan was standing there with a scoring pad. The first words out of her mouth were, "Do you know what you did wrong?"

"I fired thrusters before considering my situation. I didn't follow the first diagnostic to isolate the problem."

"You also could have run a diagnostic during the trip out. You could have saved the primary reactor if you had discovered the containment failure before you reached the planet. You also never hailed *Pegasus* until you were almost down. You should have sent a distress call immediately. If you had lost communication on landing, which you did, you never would have been able to hail *Pegasus*, and they wouldn't have sent out a rescue party before you ran out of life support."

"What about the automatic distress beacon?"

"Not in *my* simulation." She tapped more observations into her datapad. "Also, you should have taken the larger moon into account when calculating your trajectory."

"I was too busy correcting the orbit of the micro-satellite."

Jordan nodded. "You were supposed to be. It was a test of situational awareness. A few cadets remembered to check their charts when they adjusted their course..."

But, I wasn't one of them, Trajan thought.

She tapped in a few more remarks. "I do give you credit, however, for completing the mission objective, also for thinking of crash landing your ship on the inner moon, knowing you could hold out there longer than you could in orbit around the other moon. Not every cadet considered that strategy. One of my cadets actually detonated a missile to lift himself into higher orbit."

"Did it work?" Trajan asked.

Flight Commandant half-smiled, enigmatically, and handed him the scoring pad. He checked his score. 73.3%. He was in eleventh place. He looked to the top score.

Max Jordan. 99.7%

Why was he not surprised?

Chapter Two

Pegasus – Telemetry Laboratory Conference Room

"I can see why it's called Winter," Kayliegh Morgan told the Prime Commander, the Tyro-Commanders, and a smattering of Section Chiefs meeting in her Geological survey laboratory. "Its mean surface temperature is 15 degrees below Sapphire's and 4 degrees below Republic's."

The object of their discussion was displayed as a holographic sphere two meters in diameter projected in the center of the room. Layers of white and gray clouds raced through its skies, occasionally showing glimpses of bruise-blue oceans and rocky, sea-tossed shores. Other displays showed the thirteen largish landmasses scattered across its crust. Most of these looked weathered, surrounded by the crinkling jags and inlets of fjords.

Keeler stated the obvious. "So, we're talking about a planetary scale deep freeze."

Morgan answered him. "Not quite. It is a very cold damp climate, but not entirely glacial. Most of the surface area is ice-free, and there is vegetation on more than 45% of the land area. We have even detected native animal life, mostly in the seas, but some of it terrestrial." Her knowledgeable, easy-going manner had made her the go-to scientist for presenting data to the command staff when *Pegasus* arrived at new worlds. "Also, because the planet's orbit is nearly circular, and its axis is constant, there is no seasonal variation. Every day is like late Winter in Sapphire's northern continent of Boreala. No summer. No Spring. No Autumn."

"Sounds nasty," Keeler said.

"Bleak may be the better word. The level of atmospheric activity is relatively low. It snows heavily from time to time, but driving wind and white-out conditions are rare except at high latitudes and elevation."

Keeler quietly marveled at Morgan, rattling off this information like an informaton and/oroid at the

New Cleveland Museum of Science for Children. *If only I were twenty years younger and interested in Climatology.*

"Also, the planet rotates every nine-point-one-seven hours. There are only four hours of daylight at the middle latitudes, nights, likewise, are only four hours long."

"So, if I meet a woman from this planet and I tell her I can go all night, she is not going to be impressed." Keeler put in.

Morgan blushed, to her credit and Keeler's satisfaction. "The rapid rotation makes for a very powerful magnetic field. It's played havoc with our instruments, but there are definitely some structures down there."

She activated a display and held it over the large sphere. The clouds parted, revealing a mountainous spit of land in the northern hemisphere. Interference had produced a densification effect, making the surface murky and blurred, but if you squinted the right way, you could sort of make out a large structure surrounded by several smaller ones. It might have been a village. It looked abandoned, although that might have been the low resolution of the image. "Is anyone home?" Keeler asked.

"We haven't made contact yet."

Keeler turned to Executive TyroCommander Lear. "How long before we make orbit?"

"We are two hours away from our orbital objective," Lear reported. She nodded toward the display. The planet shrank to the size of a baby's fist and, far out from it, a little golden origami pendant representing *Pegasus* closed in. Lear explained the deceleration regime as the little ship swung around the planet three times, gradually reducing its orbit to settle in 70,000 km above the cloudtops.

"What of the object detected in orbit?" Keeler asked.

Redfire gestured toward the planet. It returned to its previous size, then vanished, leaving a blurred shape. "This is all we have, based on the latest pass by Probe Three. These probes weren't properly equipped to resolve and scan an orbital object of this size. It is the only object in orbit around the planet... except for our probes."

That probably ruled out the possibility it had originated on the surface. "Could it also be a probe? Perhaps from another colony?"

"I'll have to go in for a closer look," Redfire said, with just a hint of anticipation. "I have a mission plan to rendezvous with it shortly after we make orbit."

"Whatever your plan is, I approve it," Keeler told him. "All right, is there any other business?"

"Would you like to review the other planets in the system?" Morgan asked. "There are five other major planets in the system. The planet thought to be Winter shared a close orbit with a considerably larger world whose surface was covered with lava flows and iron oxide dust. At closest approach, it forms a huge red disk in Winter's sky nearly four times larger than the largest Sapphiorean moon."

To the captain, however, a world without people was just a big boring rock. "Maybe later," Keeler said, standing. "Anyone who wants to can stay, but I have... uh, command... things to do." Thinking, *That's right, I am going to eat my command lunch, take a soak in my command sauna-bath, and then take a nice long command nap.*

Executive Commander Lear's Family Suite

About the time *Pegasus* was making her final orbital adjustments, Matthew Driver was summoned to the quarters of Executive Commander Goneril Lear. He had never seen the inside of her chambers before. They were large, functionally furnished, and overlooked the ship's recreational sports fields. She had chosen a two-tone gray on blue pattern for the walls complemented by furniture in the identical shade of gray. Throughout the room were large white troughs filled with plant life.

Lear met him at the door and greeted him with a "Hello, Flight Captain," that fell a little short of implying she was genuinely glad to see him. She was as out-of-uniform as he had ever seen her, wearing a three piece off-white outfit, with only with three silver command stripes on the right shoulder to betray her rank.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" he asked her.

"I wish I could say it was purely social," Lear began, commencing a form of Republicker cordiality known to Sapphireans as 'The Courtesy Lie.' "You are the finest pilot on this ship."

"Thank you." She led him into her study, where a simple white desk awaited. On the walls behind her, twenty or more service plaques from the Space Command were arrayed. She gestured toward a white chair and Matthew took it.

She made a tent with her fingertips and addressed him. "I am afraid the reason I called you up here straddles the line between duty and a personal request."

Matthew nodded. "I understand."

"You know my son," she said. "You saved his life when he was twelve and fell onto the canopy of your shuttle."

Matthew winced. Inside Flight Core, your ship was your Aves. Spacecraft or ship also acceptable, but shuttle was considered demeaning, as though it implied the ships did nothing but carry people back and forth.

"You saved him again, and me, when you evacuated us from the planet Bodicéa during the Aurelian attack."

"I remember," said Matthew.

"When my son turned fourteen, I allowed him to begin training to serve in Flight Core. It was not the path I would have chosen for him, but he was very determined. I think you had something to do with that. Two quarters from now, he will turn sixteen. At that time, he will be eligible to join Flight Core as a Flight Lieutenant (Minor). I have monitored his progress in the training closely."

She hesitated, as though having to steel herself to deliver the next statement. "My son is ... an adequate pilot. Unfortunately, adequate is not good enough for Flight Core."

Matthew knew this. Certification as a Flight Lieutenant required a ninety per cent proficiency assessment. "You realize he can repeat the course until he passes without penalty," Driver told her, citing the official line. "Traditionally, training only begins at sixteen, with certification at eighteen. Only one pilot in five scores 90 or better on his first attempt. No one would fault him, given his youth."

Lear looked darkly back at him. "That would be true of any other pilot, but not Trajan Lear. It is precisely because he carries our family name that he must succeed on the first attempt. More is expected of him by the entire crew. He can not, he must not, be allowed to become an object of derision."

"Commander, with all due respect, the reason Flight Core sets such a high bar is because the missions we fly can be dangerous, and because the rest of the crew puts their faith in us, puts their lives in our hands. We've lost several good pilots on our voyage already. Surely, you would not want your son to face that unless he were entirely prepared."

Even she could sense Matthew's discomfort. "I am not asking that the rules be changed on his account. I am just asking you to help him measure up to those standards."

"Help him? How?" Part of him was praying, she would not ask him to take Trajan into his Flight Group regardless of the score.

"I want you to take him on as an apprentice. He'll fly missions with you. You'll oversee his simulations when you can. You will give him the benefit of your renowned skill."

Matthew almost felt relieved, then remember what he would be agreeing to. It was nothing less than personal responsibility for the success or failure of the Executive Commander's son. "I can train him," Matthew told her. "However, I can't guarantee that he will succeed on the first try."

"You are the best pilot in our ship's company, and my son admires you. If he does not pass the exam, then I will not hold it against you. If he does pass, you will have *my* gratitude." Lear added, as though this were a commodity of the highest value. Doubtless, she thought it was. The Space Command bureaucracy was a battleground of high stakes office-politics, where favors and allegiances were exchanged, hoarded, traded and bartered. *Pegasus* was different, and Lear outwardly knew this, but twenty years of conditioning were hard to shake.

"If he passes because of my assistance, won't that also harm his reputation?" Matthew asked. "Won't people say he only succeeded because of my help?" It sounded grossly immodest, but there it was.

"Apprentice relationships are an honored tradition on Republic. Furthermore, I have no doubt that Flight Cadet Jordan benefits from having Flight Commandant Jordan as his mother as well as his mentor. I would have you take on Trajan as though he were your younger brother. He looks up to you. I think you're the reason he chose Flight Core."

"I'll take on your son as my apprentice," Matthew said, caring for none of it. He was thinking that, someday, he might have sons by Eliza, and want to train them to fly Aves, if they wanted to. It might even be an opportunity to show a certain Chief Navigator what a great father he would be.

Main Bridge/Primary Command

"At 2740 hours, ship-time last night, we received a transmission from the planet," Shayne American reported. "It was in response to a greeting we sent on waveband alpha 626. Its point of origin was the tertiary island-continent in the northern hemisphere."

Keeler yawned. It was only 0620 hours as she was telling him this, and he was not quite awake yet. Specialist American was one of *Pegasus's* bridge officers, dark-skinned with close cropped, white hair and sharp, angular features. "We were unable to respond at the time, and by the time we were able to decode the transmission and put it through Lingotron, we lost contact. We're ready to try again."

American, Keeler, Lear, and a few other less important people were seated around a conference table in a compartment below Primary Command. This compartment had been optimized for communication functions. Maps showed the location of the signal was near a large bay on the western side of a raggedy-edged sub-continent near the equator. Lear took over the explaining. "We moved a probe into position to act as a communication relay and boost the signal. It has been sending a signal along the same waveband, informing whoever is down there that we are ready to receive now."

"Go to it," Keeler ordered.

"Beginning transmission now..." American reported. "Friendship message sent." She paused a few moments. "Reply received. Coming up now."

A rectangle of light appeared above the conference table. There was heavy interference in the message, but behind the snow the face of a dark skinned, heavy-set man of about middle age with neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper hair. He spoke in a commanding baritone, with perfect elocution that made even the simplest phrase ring like poetry. "I am Tyronius, Lord of Habi Zod Estate, and I am a *glorious* man. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

At Independence, Keeler had answered with, "We represent the Perseus Arm Amalgamated Charities. Five thousand years ago, one of your colonists pledged five Commonwealth Intercreds to the Widows and Orphans of the Third Crusade Fund. With compound interest, the pledge now equals the entire economic output of your planet. We're here to collect. Can we put also you on our mailing list?" Executive Commander Lear's face had turned purple and huge veins had nearly exploded from her forehead. He had ridden the high for a week.

Even if he had wanted to be a smart-ass this time, there was no defying that voice. "I am Commander William Keeler of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, representing the former Commonwealth colonies of Sapphire and Republic..."

Tyronius interrupted. "Former Commonwealth? Then, the Commonwealth has fallen."

"Uh,... we think so. Our home-worlds lost contact with the Commonwealth 1,500 years ago. No world in this quadrant, so far, has heard from the Commonwealth in all that time," Keeler explained.

"We chose to sever contact with the Commonwealth 3,000 of our years ago," Tyronius said. "This planet has a limited carrying capacity, and we did not want new colonists to overwhelm its resources."

The explanation was so smooth, so practiced, Keeler could not help but feel it was a lie.

"We have been left alone ever since," Tyronius concluded.

"Is this the colony called 'Winter?'" Keeler asked.

"What else would it be named?" Tyronius answered, grimly. "Your instruments are capable of analyzing our surface climate, are they not?"

Grumpy old man, Keeler thought. This was why the Retirement Monasteries were in Arcadia, and not Boreala.

Lear spoke up. "Lord Tyronius, I am Executive Commander Goneril Lear. We have no intention of colonizing your world, or of straining your resources. We have only come seeking knowledge of the Commonwealth."

For some reason, Lord Tyronius seemed to find this bit of information hilarious. A broad smile crossed his face, showing large too-white teeth. He threw his head back and laughed richly. A moment passed and he recovered himself. "I have not laughed so hard in a very, *very* long time. You wish to learn of the Commonwealth. After so many centuries, the Commonwealth, the Crusades, the Manifest Destiny, these things are but legends to you, ancient tales told thousands of times over, lost, distorted, exaggerated beyond recognition. Apocrypha. You have come here to learn the truth of the Commonwealth, well, you have certainly come to the right planet."

"Lord Tyronius, this is Tactical Commander Redfire, Chief Tactical Officer. Are you aware that there is another ship in orbit of your planet?"

"Is there? No, I was not aware of that."

"So, it isn't one of your own, one of your own people's."

"I doubt it. The benighted denizens of this dank purgatory have interests that extend to the horizon, and no further."

"Have you received visitors from other worlds before?" Keeler asked.

"Since we severed our ties with the Commonwealth, no ships have called on us before yours and... this other."

"Have you been visited by others, from the other ship."

"We have not."

"You sound certain."

Tyronius face betrayed amusement at this. "There are 144,211 people on this planet and we all know each other. We would know instantly if there were strangers among us."

Keeler was amazed that Tyronius could pull such an accurate figure out of the air. On Sapphire, he would have been pressed to tell a visitor how many people were on the Keeler estate within a margin of error of fifty.

Tyronius bellowed. "Do you have the capability of leaving your ship and descending to the surface? I should like to continue this conversation with you in person."

"We do," Keeler affirmed.

"Shuttlecraft or Teleport?"

"Shuttlecraft ... did the Commonwealth have teleport technology..."

"Not in my era, but I thought you might. You are welcome to come to the Estate of Habi Zod and enjoy the fullest measure of my hospitality. I will receive you here in eight hours. Does that measurement of time have any meaning for you?"

Keeler answered. "It does, hopefully it means the same for us as it does for you. I'd hate to drop in while you were in the bath."

Tyronius nodded. "Until then. Transmission out."

"Jolly fellow," Keeler concluded. "Reminds me of any number of my relatives we aren't supposed to mention. Let's prepare a ship."

"Mine is already prepared," Redfire countered.

Recreational Garden Park, Deck 11

Forward of the Habitation areas the designers of *Pegasus* had integrated a stretch of greensward almost a kilometer long and more than 400 meters wide, divided into gardens and playing fields. Through tricks of ambient noise, breezes, air composition, and a holographic sky, it tricked the senses into feeling like an outdoor environment. By day, the sky mimicked the afternoon sun over Sapphire, by night, it was

open to the stars.

Under a warm hologram sun, people were running and playing across the fields. A game of wally ball in one field, a game of groundball in another. Hoverbikes dashed over the rocks and hills. In one field, some of the crew played a variation of an old Sapphirean game. Tactical Lt. David Alkema lofted a large yellow ball skyward and punched it hard. "Stalking cats and Carnosaurs have no fear/This Calvin Ball is for Trajan Lear."

Trajan Lear looked mildly surprised, then ran underneath the ball to catch it, mouth agape. He leapt high to intercept the ball, rolled, rather clumsily, in mid-air, and shot it out again toward his brother, Marcus Lear. Marcus was dark, shorter but stockier and more athletic, and unable to stop the ball from being intercepted by Max Jordan.

A year and change younger than Trajan (as time was measured on *Pegasus*), he was shorter (but a little taller than Trajan had been at that age), but much more athletically built. Trajan spared his rival a fierce look, then dove for the tackle. Grinning wildly, Max jiggled and rolled, and shot the ball toward his brother Sam, as Sam rounded sixteenth base and made for the goal.

Alkema ran toward Sam. Sam dodged.

"Out of bounds!" called Pieta, the only female player, a gorgeous young woman, strongly built, with long, shining black hair with red highlights. "You didn't cross into the opposite zone. Goals aren't reversed!"

Sam looked momentarily confused, then called, "Time Travel wicket!" Then, "Wicket Travel Time!" He began furiously running backwards across the playing field.

"Reversed aren't goals. Zone opposite the into cross didn't you," called Pieta, as Sam threw the ball back at Max. All previous throws would have to be reversed. Trajan would then have to recover the ball and throw it back to Alkema.

Max Jordan leaped into the air and intercepted the ball with an over-sized Lacrosse stick. "Time Wicket Immunity/I act with impunity." In turn, he fired the ball toward the goal being guarded by Marcus Lear.

Marcus was Trajan's younger brother, nearly thirteen, his hair dark, but streaked. He dove for the ball, caught it and rolled.

"Girl ball!" called Alkema.

"Girl ball!" agreed Max.

"Girl ball!" Pieta called. Marcus had no choice but to pass it to her, and no male could interfere. Times like this, it would have been useful to have more than one female in their circle.

Pieta spiked the ball over the 'alternate reality' net. Trajan and Max dove for it together and collapsed in a pile on the grass.

"Physician!" Trajan called.

"Intoxicated Nurse!" Max called.

And so the play continued for much of the rest of the afternoon, ending only when all had to split, and meet their respective families for dinner. The boys went one way, Pieta and David walked the other, down a long garden path, surrounded by fragrant flowers. Pieta sighed and laid her head on David's shoulder. "This has been an almost perfect day,"

"It has been," Alkema sighed. "At our current course and speed, we'll make Winter orbit in less than two days, and I don't want to go."

"Can't you tell the captain you need some respite," Pieta asked. "On Bodicéa, no one was required to work when they needed respite." She meant before the war, of course, when she had been a little girl. She had been barely pubescent when they had met, and had developed a little girl crush on him. Then, he and *Pegasus* had left the system, and returned (in a few months of his personal time) to find her a grown woman

"Commander Keeler is lost without me. Remember Independence, I barely saw you for a month. Every day, I briefed him on customs, protocol, geography, history... I kept him awake during the receptions, I helped him keep the names of the planetary leaders straight."

He exhaled. "Every day I did that was another perfect day in the vivaria. I am not going to miss them this time."

In the nearby Independence Vivarium (filled with plants and birds from the planet Independence), another group of people were playing an Independence game called Happy Fun Ball. David and the boys had tried it, but found it unnecessarily complicated.

Orbital Space

Within an hour after the conversation with Lord Tyronius ended, *Prudence* left *Pegasus* rear landing bay, flipped over and dove toward the ship far beneath, the one that had gotten to Winter first.

The design of the ship. The primary hull consisted of two cylinders 214 meters in length joined side-by-side. A clump of eight shorter, thicker cylinders clustered around the center. Where it caught the starlight, the ship gleamed like polished, unpainted metal. Otherwise, it looked like nothing but a great can in space.

Technician Pyramus Otto, a dark, pudgy Republicer with unmanageable hair going prematurely gray, processed a full-spectrum scan as *Prudence* flashed down the length of the other vessel. "The long cylindrical structures are an ion-based gravimetric propulsion system," he told them.

"Gravity drive for long distances, ion propulsion for short range and maneuvering," Redfire guessed.

"There's also a tachyon communication antenna running the length of the engines," Otto told them.

Redfire tapped at the central array. "Functional areas?"

"Several chambers inside. Oxygen nitrogen atmosphere." Otto's voice was cutting and nasal, grating to listen to. "Most of the cylinders store food, water, and fuel. There's only a couple thousand meters of work space for the crew."

Redfire did not like the sound of that. He couldn't imagine crossing interstellar distances in such a cramped space. "Scan for hydrogen hexafluoride."

Otto did as he was told. "Trace amounts."

Aurelians breathed hydrogen hexafluoride in trace amounts.

"Life signs?"

"Nothing above the mono-cellular level."

"Most people would have just said 'negative.'"

Otto shrugged. "To each his own."

"See if you can find an airlock."

Otto squinted at him. "You mean... are we docking, sir?"

"Only if you can find me an airlock."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, sir. I mean, we have barely begun scanning this ship, and it could be dangerous."

Redfire turned to Anaconda Taurus. "Do you detect any weapons, Marine?"

"Negative," she answered him. Anaconda Taurus was a small, hard-bodied, honey-skinned beauty. She and Redfire were veterans of several away missions, but, despite Jordan's suspicions, the two of them had never been intimate.

Redfire turned to Jersey Partridge, the Medical Technician. "Do you detect any harmful pathogens?"

"I've detected a few free-ranging bacteria and some spores and molds, all of which appear to benign." Partridge was wire-haired, thin, and easy to underestimate. His expression was usually stunned and vague, but he was a first rate medical technician. He had also accompanied Redfire on several away missions. The three, Redfire, Partridge, and Taurus, were practically a unit.

Redfire turned back to Otto, the inter-changeable – some would say expendable – mission technician. "In answer to your question, za. We will dock, and I will see where that ship came from."

Prudence pulled up to an airlock and locked her ventral hatch onto it. In the skilled hands of Matthew Driver, the maneuver was so smooth, only the words, "docking engaged" and a graphic display told them the ship was in place.

Redfire was the first out of his landing couch. "Let's go, crew of four!"

"Anything you say, leader of none," said Marine Anaconda Taurus.

Redfire reached the ventral hatch first. They would have to drop in feet first.

"The internal chambers are pressurized. Heating is minimal. I am showing an internal temperature of only two degrees centigrade," Otto reported, his tone hinting that these were all great reasons *not* to go inside.

"Jackets and gloves," Redfire ordered.

"Should we wear face-masks, too?" Otto persisted. "I'd feel a lot better if we wore face masks."

"Suit yourself," Redfire ordered. "I'm opening the hatch."

The hatch cycled, then opened with a hiss. There was a sensation of suction as *Prudence's* atmosphere rushed into the less-pressurized alien craft. In a matter of seconds they equalized.

"Negative gravity on the alien ship," Otto reported.

"So, I noticed," Redfire said as he drifted into the cylinder. The ship was in free-fall. Very cool, he thought. The inside of the vessel was dark. He turned his handlights on and strapped them to his wrists. He had not been in a zero gravity environment since his Odyssey Project training. It came back to him readily enough. Push off against one wall, stop against another. Redfire drifted into the ship, followed by Taurus and Stanza. Partridge stayed on board to monitor their life signs.

Making handholds, they pulled themselves along the interior of the vessel. Lights glowed faintly, the equipment continued to cycle and maintain itself. There was no sign of the crew, or markings, at first, to betray its ownership.

"Pretty stripped down," Taurus commented. "Like a mining pod."

"Ever been in a mining pod," Redfire asked.

"Neg, but I understand they are pretty austere."

They drifted down a long, tubular, passageway with ribbed walls colored lavender-gray. When they reached the end, they confronted a circular hatchway, the connection between one cylinder and another.

"Oh, look at this," Otto said. "A heavy sealed door. They probably have some incredibly complex alien locking mechanism. We should go back to *Pegasus* for back up."

Redfire barked an order. "Otto, as they say on Independence, seal your pastry orifice." In the center of which was a circular panel. As they approached, the panel came to life. Tiny gold sigils danced across its silvery face. Redfire recognized them immediately. "Aurelian."

"Aurelian!" Otto squeaked, gasped in the thin air. "Aurelians! I'm standing in an Aurelian ship!"

"Not any more," said Redfire, raising his pulse weapon. "It's ours now. Put a Lingotron on that screen right now."

"Right, right," Otto's hands were shaking as he unfolded a Lingotron plane over the screen. Lingotron knew Aurelian, and the sigils morphed into the standard alphabet of Republic and Sapphire, in the common language.

This is Central Control.

You will submit to identity scan and provide access code prior to entry.

"How are we going to get in?" Otto asked. "Are they going to kill us? Vesta, I don't want to die on an Aurelian ship."

Redfire took out a heavily modified datapad, cables and datacubes were affixed to its face. "What is that?" Taurus asked.

"New gizmo from Technical Core," Redfire answered. "Based on data we recovered from the Aurelian BrainCore, which they call 'The Hanged Man.' The device reads their language, finds their access codes and their identity records, and replaces them. We say the new code, and the door opens up like a Panrovian after two ales."

Taurus punched his arm. "I'm a Panrovian." Ignoring her, Redfire clipped the device to the oval panel. It glowed brightly as it went to work.

Otto stammered, "Why haven't I heard of this device? I'm in Technical Core."

"The developer did it on his own. This is its first field test," Redfire explained. "I think it's finished." The datapad displayed a message:

Enter New Access Code

Redfire sighed. "Eyes glow in darkness. Stroking brings a pleasant sound. Cats are magnificent."

"Haiku?" Otto asked.

"Gesundheit," Redfire muttered. "The developer is fond of haiku, and quite egomaniacal." Four blue bars of light appeared in the passageway, and quickly moved across them.

Identity Confirmed

"Well done, Commander," said Taurus.

"There are two things I can't stand," Redfire explained, "being locked out of places, and being locked into places. Either way, it's good to know how to open doors."

The hatch irised open, showing a large central chamber. Redfire and Taurus pushed in, guns first. Lights came on as they passed into the central cylinder. It began to rotate, slowly, providing a little bit of pseudo-gravity. They were able to walk on the rounded deck, although the spinning was a little disorienting at first.

"Nobody here," Taurus reported. "Nobody alive... or dead and interesting."

"This must be the control nexus," Redfire said. The space was round, with long structural supports wrapped around the walls, ceilings, and floors. Blue and red light glowed from underneath the supports. In the center, four pedestals rose, facing off.

"I don't think much controlling goes on here," said Taurus. She directed her lamp in toward a large, upright sarcophagus at the edge of the bridge. Redfire gingerly approached it, making some effort to stay upright in the micro-gravity.

Partridge broke in from *Prudence*. "Commander, I am detecting cryonic compounds and Brownian suspension radiation inside the chamber. I'm almost positive that those are stasis chambers... the kind you'd use for long spaceflight over inter-stellar distances. Aurelians did not have the ability to navigate in hyperspace. They were limited to light-speed travel, and would have to hibernate in a ship as small as this.

Technician Otto counted off the chambers. "1... 2 ... 3... 4."

"Four Aurelians." Redfire frowned. How much trouble could four Aurelians cause against a crew of nearly seven thousand and a planet of who knows? "If they're not here, they must be on the surface."

Chapter Three

Lieutenant David Alkema's Quarters, Deck 34

"Lt. Alkema, please report to Assembly for Mission Briefing."

David Alkema lay in bed, took a deep breath, and tried to relax, as he waited for Specialist American's voice to repeat on his comm-link.

"Lt. Alkema, please report to Assembly for Mission Briefing."

To make it look right, he would have to wait for one more repetition. He took another deep breath and slowly emptied his lungs until he almost choked.

"Lt. Alkema, please report to Assembly for Mission Briefing."

He lifted a shot-glass to his mouth and forced himself to swallow a rough slimy gob of organic matter that climbed down his throat like a fat, ill-tempered grub with muddy little feet.

"Lt. Alkema, please report to Assembly for Mission Briefing."

Now, he hit the response button, "Lt. Alkema, here."

American looked appropriately shocked. "Lieutenant, you look like..."

"Like what?" *Unprocessed effluent* he hoped she would say, but American was a Republicker and would not say unprocessed effluent if she has a mouth full of it, at least not while on duty.

"You look unwell, Lieutenant," she finished.

"Thank you, and I feel just ..." The gob kicked in with full force. His stomach tried to climb out his gullet and his bowels felt ready to ooze out in the other direction. He trembled, and his head became fevered. He suddenly came over all flushed. "Just tell the Prime Commander..." A hacking cough kicked in right on cue. "Tell the Prime Commander I will be late for the Mission Briefing."

"Lieutenant, I don't think you should be going on any mission."

"Do you think so?" He focused hard. *Think of the virus. Think of the virus*, trying to put the thought into her mind.

"You might have picked up that Independence retro-virus. The one that was going around Presidio Capitat when you were there."

"Do you really think so?" *Remember, I put in a lot of overtime on Independence.*

"You worked yourself to the bone on Independence. You opened yourself up to Vesta-knows-what. You shouldn't take any chances."

A lot of other people in the crew got sick.

"That virus has already laid down sixteen people in Geological Survey," she continued.

Alkema answered with a prolonged fit of coughing and retching. When he looked up, his face was ashen, and his eyes were rimmed in red. *Damb, this gob really works.*

"You better see Doctor Reagan," American told him.

"Okay, if you insist ... " Cough. Hack. "Maybe, you're right. I hate to miss a mission and let the captain down."

"With all due respect, lieutenant, in your current state, you would be a liability on this mission."

Alkema sighed, mournfully, with a hint of a cough at the end. "All right. Why don't you call Specialist Gotobed to cover for me?"

"You just promise me you're going to get yourself well, and see Dr. Reagan."

Alkema sighed heavily. "If I must. Alkema out."

He deactivated the comm-link and lay back in bed.

Maybe he had not had to swallow the whole gelatinous gob. He didn't even know what it was made of. Eddie Roebuck had told him it was an old New Halifax hangover remedy. It purged the body of toxins and rehydrated the blood and tissues. It made you feel like a living hell for half an hour, then you were

supposed to feel all right again.

Unless, of course, you took it without having gotten drunk the night before, in which case, you just felt like a living hell for half an hour. What happened next was open to speculation, as only a fool would swallow it without being hung-over, *or someone who had damb well earned some downtime.*

His throat was raw, he was fevered, and his bladder ready to explode. Every muscle in his body ached as water was force-fed into them. This was the price, he thought, the Karmic pain he would have to endure in exchange for a few days of freedom away from this mission.

As David Alkema crawled toward the euphemism in his hygiene pod, he hoped the universe appreciated his efforts to keep it in balance.

Winter

The Aves *Zilla* descended into the heavy cloud bank above 14001 Horologium III, "Winter." Prime Commander Keeler sat across from Specialist Christina Gotobed, their landing couches facing each other across a low padded table. Several recent orbital surveillance images were projected above it.

Gotobed explained. "So far, Geological Survey has identified 14,000 inhabitation compounds similar to the one where will be touching down, in addition to several small settlements of less than a thousand inhabitants each, but no large cities."

Keeler nodded, and gestured with the glass of port he held in one hand. "As I understand planetology, that's a common pattern for arctic climates."

"But only because on most worlds with an arctic zone, there is an alternative temperate zone where most of the population lives. This planet has no temperate region. It's entirely arctic or sub-arctic. It would make more sense for people to live in cities and combine resources, especially heating fuel."

Keeler squinted at her. "What planet are you from?" He expected her to say Republic, despite her lack of accent. Republic had always defended its dense, collectivist culture on the basis of environmental necessity, Republic being a marginally inhabitable planet at best. They likewise dismissed the freedom and individualism at the heart of Sapphirean culture, claiming it resulted solely from the salutary climate. Keeler thought it was a load of beast excrement.

She surprised him. "Sapphire, I grew up in Corvallis."

Keeler feigned lack of surprise. Quietly, in a mostly non-sexual way, he was appraising her. She was an attractive woman, with long, nut-brown hair gathered into an efficient woven braid in back. Her eyes were large and blue, fiercely intelligent between magnificently arched eyebrows. She had a strong, almost martial bearing, and was all the more attractive for it.

"Any idea what we can expect down there?" he asked.

"Cultural Survey has nothing to go on besides the transmission from Lord Tyronius."

"Care to hazard a guess."

She looked at him starkly. "I guess it will be cold, sir."

Keeler leaned back in his seat and, with a wave of his walking stick, chased the surveillance images away. "All right then. How long until we land?"

"Forty minutes."

"Time enough for a quick game of some kind. What do you say to a quick round of Bongo?"

She bristled. "Commander, let's stay focused on the mission."

"... or maybe I spy... za, that would be a larf. I spy, with my little eye, something that begins with ... 's.'"

"A specialist with no time for idiot games," she responded, with all seriousness. "Sir."

Keeler frowned. "You're not very good at this game."

"Neg, I'm not, but I am damb good Mission Specialist, and that's what you should focus on."

"Games are a great way of learning how someone else's mind operates, how they strategize, how they act. But you apparently prefer a more pedestrian approach. So, why don't you tell me about yourself?"

Her shoulders stiffened. "I'm trained in diplomacy, security, and intelligence analysis. I was on the

secondary mission to Independence and was stand-by diplomatic attaché to Bodicéa.”

“So, do you just wait around until there is a mission and then wait around to see if someone comes down with an alien virus so you can be a diplomatic second banana?”

She responded in a prickly tone. “When I am not on an active mission, I work in the mission archives, cataloguing and analyzing socio-cultural data from the planets we visit. It's not very interesting, but it is an essential mission function.”

Actually, that sounded to the captain like a pretty good gig. “Where were you educated?”

“The University of Sapphire at New Cleveland,” she told him, laying it down like a line in the sand, daring him to cross it.

Nonplussed, the captain surged ever forward. “Really? Were you in any of my classes?”

“Commonwealth and Colonial History 101.”

“Oh?”

“You gave me an 85. It was the lowest score of my entire university career.”

“I did that?”

“Other than your class, my college scores were all perfect.”

“Well, it's still a passing score.”

“You said my work was competent, but uninspired. Then, you said your bowels must have been cranky that day and told me I could wax your hover-car for extra credit.”

Keeler chuckled and blushed. “Ah, the good days. So, what did you major in?”

“Arcadian Literature and Finance Administration.”

“Oh, the old Lit and Ad. What have you done since then?”

“I had hoped to go into law, but because of your grade, my apprenticeship with the Supremes was rejected. Instead, I took a position with Partridge and Qureshi, I became an advisor on legal issues to the Oz delegation, and later a liaison to the Justice Ambassador on Republic.”

“Sounds much more interesting than living in a one-room studio in the Hall of Justice. Are you married?”

She leaned in toward him. “I'll make a deal with you, Prime Commander. You are allowed to ask me exactly five personal questions. I will answer them. Other than that, we will confine to exchanges relevant to the mission.”

The captain answered testily. “If you don't like small talk, why didn't you say so?”

“That was one, and I just did.”

He shuddered.

Pegasus, Amenities Nexus

There is no City of Love on Republic. (Not even the adminicrats of the Bureau of Geographical Nomenclature (Ministry of Public Works) were that cheesy. There was, however, a restaurant called ‘City of Love’ on *Pegasus*, the kind of intimate, fine dining establishment reserved for special occasions.

Its style was intended to be a romantic interpretation of Republic architectural and design tastes, which tended to be simultaneously austere and monumental. In the case of ‘City of Love,’ this meant high ceilings, visible structural supports, and heavy geometric chairs and tables. Soft blue and lavender lighting colored the walls. The long, high windows showed a holographic view of an imagined ‘City of Love’ on Republic, a city whose towers glowed in reds and violets and were far prettier than anything the Ministry of Architecture would ever have approved.

There were few patrons this evening. A middle-aged couple from Technical Core were celebrating an anniversary with their two grown children. A woman scientist from biological survey dined alone. And, at a corner table, Matthew Driver and Eliza Jane Change shared a huge plate of truffles, soft meats, roasted vegetables, and that rarest of Republic delicacies, marjaniw.

“It tastes... salty,” Eliza said.

"That's from the sea-water," Matthew informed her. "This is the real thing, from Republic. I've been saving my allotment. Kayliegh and Magnus consumed theirs at their wedding."

"I thought the oceans on your planet were toxic."

"Aye, but you'd have to eat at least a kilogram of marjani to get a toxic reaction." He leaned in close to her, the better to see her face in the small light of the hologram candle. "If we *were* on Republic, and we had been going together for a year, like we have, do you know what the next stage would be?" He always got awkward when the talk became personal.

Eliza pushed slightly back from the table. "Coming from Republic, I guess there's some kind of process and procedure for whatever the next stage is."

"Nothing as rigid as that," he assured her. "But, most people have the Ministry of Health run a genetic compatibility series. It's mostly a formality, because hardly anyone is ever genetically incompatible. Then, if we want, we can get a counselor from the Ministry of Family Services to help determine if we have any personality issues, and find ways to work them out."

"Sounds lovely," she deadpanned.

"I know it seems kind of bureaucratic to an outsider, but, really, it's just a way to make sure that people who... are thinking of spending a life together to help make sure they're making a good choice and that their commitment will last."

She asked with unmasked dread, "What are you suggesting?"

Before he could answer, they were joined by a third. Eddie Roebuck, proprietor of a far less formal establishment known as 'Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-n-Jam (Mark I),' intruded into their alcove. "Hah! Glad I caught up with you beauties. Stay right here!"

He grabbed a chair from the table where the woman was dining alone and wedged it between Matthew and Eliza. "Truth!

"Shouldn't you be at the Slam-n-Jam," Matthew said.

"Beauty, the 'Slam-n-Jam' is dead. It is an ex-Slam-n-Jam. It's as dead as Ex-Commander Lear's sense of humor. It's as extinct as the Borealan Broxxc. Medea has more action than the Slam-n-Jam!"

Matthew tried again. "Eddie, Eliza and I were having a private dinner."

"You should have come to the Slam-n-Jam. It doesn't get any more private." Eddie grabbed a handful of meat and truffles. "See, I missed out on the whole Independence thing. Everybody wants Independence food. Everybody wants Independence beverage. I totally missed it. If I can't get more people to come in, I'm going to have to close down and...get ... a ... job. Also, Puck's going crazy."

"Puck is a mechanoid," Eliza corrected. "He doesn't go crazy."

"He's been pouring ale in people's laps, then he points at them and makes euphemism noises. He dipped his head in batter and stuck it in the flash-fryer. The other night, he insisted he was a woman and wanted to be called Beverly."

Matthew tried to remain patient, but irritation was poking through. "When a mechanoid behaves erratically, you wipe its programming, and re-initialize."

"It took me a year to get his programming right the first time!" Eddie chewed a mouthful of meat and leaned back in his chair. He was not going anywhere, and Matthew's line of conversation would have to be completed another time.

For this, Eliza was privately grateful.

Winter

Zilla dropped from a slate gray cloud deck and fell gently. Spits and spats of thick heavy snow splattered against her canopy and wing-blades. For all the snow and clouds, the atmosphere was surprisingly docile. Winds aloft were gentle, and broke smoothly across the ship, making for a steady descent.

Far below, an ocean the color of a deep bruise rose and fell, creating crowds of foamy whitecaps. The tips of a few icebergs drifted gently in the current. The sea showed no tendency toward violence until it neared the rocky shore, where it pounded against the shoreline in a way that was at least as picturesque

as it was destructive.

Zilla was only a thousand meters high, and traveling less than half the speed of sound when it crossed the seacoast. The ship slowed still further until she was little more than drifting, circling like an osprey looking for a place to set down. Landing struts unfolded from four points on the fuselage and disappeared into huge drifts of snow as the ship settled to the surface.

The side hatch opened and a half dozen explorers emerged, blinking in the snow-blinding landscape of white-on-white. They wore winter weather gear; standard landing gear but heavier, with more heating and insulation.

And it was barely adequate against the damp, penetrating cold of the planet Winter. Keeler shivered as he emerged from his ship, and shuffled a few steps through the knee-deep snow. He saw his shadow on the ground, shifting like a time-lapse photograph, and looked up into the sun, a pale white disk behind a hazy gray veil of clouds. He held up his hand and covered it, only to see it slowly emerge again, running scared across the morning sky. Through chattering teeth, he asked Flight Lieutenant Blade Toto. "What do you think, Toto?"

Toto was slight, young, with penetrating brown eyes. His arms were crossed around himself, trying to hold in warmth. When he talked, it was with a husky, country twang. "Well, sir, it sure is cold."

"Indeed. Have you ever been to Hannibal? It's a Ski Resort in Boreala. Lots of Stone and timber lodges, pools of hot mineral water, bars with drink lists as large as encyclopedias."

"I've never been there, sir."

"Neither have I, but this place completely doesn't remind me of it."

Gotobed was scanning the structure. "We're 47.1 meters away from the compound, Commander."

"You mean that?" Keeler pointed toward four stories of polished and weathered rock, rising in the form of a pyramid with the top lopped off and capped with a design of odd geometric forms. Tall, pink windows marked a great hall that protruded from the front and continued around the far corner.

Gotobed grunted. She had to lift her voice a bit, above the crunching of boots in the snow. "No life signs from the interior. I don't know if Lord Tyronius is about."

"I think that's him over there," Keeler said, pointing to a stately figure in black robes, standing on a rock near the entrance to the keep, letting the slight wind rustle through his cloaks and long, flowing hair.

"Does he live here alone?" Gotobed asked.

"Mighty big house," said Toto.

Keeler shivered and began walking toward him. "I only hope he asks us in."

The man waited as they walked over, flowing wraps and hair making him look like some vengeful prophet of the frozen wastes. He gave them a good, long looking-over, giving Keeler, who tried to meet his gaze, the distinct impression he was being judged.

"Greetings," Keeler began. Tyronius held up a hand for silence. He cocked his head, came down from the rock, and moved around them studiously.

"You must be Lord..."

The hand shot up again.

Keeler shut his pastry orifice. The Lord continued until he had made a complete circle around the entire landing party, then stopped, facing Keeler.

"Cold enough for you?" Keeler ventured.

Tyronius fixed him with a hard stare. Then, a crooked smile broke across his face, and his hearty baritone cut the moist, frigid air. "By the thunder-gods of Ancient Rome, when did humans become so universally tall? What a roundball team I could have made of you. Roundball! Do humans still play roundball?"

Tyronius broke into a hearty laugh. "Welcome to Winter, my children, a planet of extraordinary, terrible, and wonderful things. Come with me. Get out of the cold. You'll find my house is warm, and I have plenty of mead."

Gotobed tapped Keeler's shoulder with her heated landing glove. "According to the Lingotron, the

language he is speaking is only a 0.1 degree deviation from baseline English, one of the three languages of the Commonwealth."

"So, the native language of this planet is almost identical to what the original colonists spoke."

"The population is small and isolated. That might have helped to preserve it."

Keeler surveyed the semi-frozen landscape. "I bet they have a lot more words for snow and rocks than we do."

Chapter Four

Winter

The Entrance Hall to Lord Tyronius's keep was as large as a ballroom and immaculately maintained. The walls and floor were polished stone, something like marble, but with a pattern like shards of broken black mirror, as though it would slice the feet of anyone who walked on it. High above was an elaborate chandelier, dragon claws holding a constellation of white lighting globes. Immense stone staircases led upward to the other parts of the structure.

It was warm inside, and curiously humid. Tyronius unwrapped his cloaks and shook the snow from them. He was stocky and muscular. Keeler judged him to be somewhat older than himself, but wouldn't have wanted to get in a wrestling match with him.

"Reminds me a little of my own dear home, back on Sapphire," Keeler distorted. In size alone, there was perhaps a passing resemblance, but Keeler guessed that this structure was much older (although it wouldn't have been had the original Keeler compound not been destroyed during the Overzealous Barbecue Incident of 6783). In style, it bore as much resemblance to the Keeler compound as a fortress did to a cathedral.

"Sapphire?" Tyronius mused. "I have never heard of that world."

"Its official designation is 10 527 *Pegasus IV*."

"That means even less to me, *con permiso*." He pulled open a large door, beyond which could be seen an army of wooden casks and a veritable library of bottles, the sight of which warmed Keeler's heart as effectively as any fire. Tyronius quickly vanished among them, and could be heard humming an odd, martial tune as we went.

Gotobed reported to Keeler. "I am reading a number of heartbeats and other life signs in an adjacent structure, but they aren't human."

"People?"

"Neg, my guess would be livestock."

"So, you're saying he lives alone here."

"I am saying he is the only human in the structure, besides us I mean."

"Must get awful lonely, place this big," said Toto.

Tyronius re-appeared, carrying two dark bottles. "Some wine from my hydroponic vineyards, to celebrate our meeting. Follow me up to my balcony, and we will watch the snow fall, which you will find is a popular past-time on this world. In fact, you'll find it's really the only past-time on this world. You'll have to take your own glasses. I only have two hands, you know."

The glasses were arrayed near the entrance to the wine room. They were beautiful, stylish, and apparently hand blown, with a design like jackfrost etched into the bowls. They each took one and followed Tyronius up the stairs to an observation room, where comfortable lounge chairs and couches were arranged facing a huge window that curved in over them. Beyond the window, they could see the mountains and the sea. The sun emerged from the clouds briefly, and for a moment, its light on the snow was dazzling, and it caught the prisms cut in the glass and washed them all in rainbow colors. All too soon, though, the clouds ganged up on the sun again, and showed it how it was unwelcome their neighborhood.

"How is the wine," Tyronius asked when they had all settled into couches.

"Exquisite," Keeler answered, and, as Gotobed had assured him poison-free. Given their experiences on other worlds, this was a promising start.

"I make it myself," Tyronius answered. "Shiraz grapes, fourteenth generation from a strain original brought from the planet Sestina, a lovely place, have you ever been?"

"Not yet," Keeler told him.

"More is the pity. So, tell me, how fares Commonwealth? Had any apocalyptic wars lately?"

"Well, we've been cut off the Commonwealth for most of the last two millennia," Keeler answered. "Part of our mission is to figure out what happened to it."

"Ah, then, you can understand our confusion. Around the same time as you lost contact, perhaps a few centuries before, our First Parliament decided to sever ties with Commonwealth. We requested to be left alone, and we assumed they had been honoring our request the whole time. I suppose I should have known better."

"Why did you ask that the Commonwealth not return here?" Keeler asked.

Tyronius thought this over for a second, sniffed his wine again. "Well, the truth is, we found something here that we decided humanity was not ready for."

"Ah," Keeler said. His heart sank a bit. When part of humanity was lucky enough to stumble across something they did not want to share with the rest of humanity, it seldom bode well. *Mighty big of you to spare us the burden*, he thought.

"Do you want to know what it is?" Tyronius asked.

"Do you think we're ready for it now?" Keeler asked back.

"No," Lord Tyronius answered. "But I am going to tell you anyway. Tell me, Commander, how long does a man live on your world?"

"140 years, sometimes more. You can make it to 200, but it's usually not worth it."

"Your bowels start acting up after 160," Gotobed put in.

Keeler glared at her. *Score one for you*, he thought.

"Six score years and twenty. Double what humanity was given originally, and still a fair sight more than in my day. You probably consider that a rich, long life."

"It's what we're given. How we fill those years determines how rich they are."

Tyronius smiled and laughed. "You really are precious. I'd like to carve out your tiny little heart in keep it in a jar on my reading desk. Just kidding! Just kidding! I assume you brought men-at-arms to protect that brief, flickering candle you call life from ending prematurely."

"You mentioned a secret of some kind," Keeler said, forcing himself to remain calm and steady. He was beginning to suspect that Tyronius was a little bit deranged, and he was dammed glad that there, in fact, were three people carrying pulse-weapons in his party and that his faithful alien quarter-staff was by his side.

Tyronius gestured toward a large mural on the back wall, a landscape whose lushness contracted sharply with what lay beyond the observation window. "We came to this planet during the Eighth Crusade. We, most of us, were living on a colony called New Hibernia. New Hibernia was a place of... green pastures, blue-black oceans, and gentle rolling hills stretching off to the horizon. The mural, you see, is painted from memory of what my own estate on that world looked like."

Tyronius stared at the mural and recited, with the practiced passion of a professional narrator. "It was a New Hibernian General, General Colfax, who defeated the Phantom Horde at the Battle of Cygnus. The Tyrant Anthrax Ghoulishadow, leader of the Horde, swore revenge, and unleashed a plague on our world, called Bacia. Bacia attacked the lungs and circulatory system, people, men, women, children, choked to death on their own blood. A greater horror you should pray, if humans still have a use for God, that you never lay eyes on."

Keeler winced. What the Aurelians did to the Bodiceans, the Coriolans, and countless others, was at least as bad.

Tyronius continued. "Those of us who survived were evacuated to the frontier aboard a small fleet of colonizer vessels. Our destination was a colony called Fiddler's Green, but we never made it. We learned the Horde was anticipating our arrival, and had positioned a fleet to intercept and destroy us. We diverted to this system, on which one inhabitable planet had been charted, but dismissed as impossibly harsh. We thought the Horde would never look for us here. Our plan was simply to hide here until the Horde went somewhere else. Eventually, they did, and fought apocalyptically with the combined Fleets of General Hermione and Admiral Castellar in the Battle of Andromeda, a battle not so much won as fought until neither side had the means to continue."

"We, meanwhile, many of us, had found good reason to remain on this world. The climate was harsh, but not as bad as the Survey Party had indicated. Twice each year, the fourth planet, which we call Cardinal, passes within 400,000 kilometers of us. It is slightly larger than Winter, and the tidal forces unleashed open up deep vents in the ocean floor. Heat from the interior of the planet warms the ocean, and prevents the whole planet from becoming glaciated. It also permits pockets of vegetation and animal life to survive on the land, as well as abundant sea-life.

"We have been able to harness this into geo-thermal energy for heat and power, which sustains our settlements, our greenhouses, heats our homes. When you consider our surroundings and small numbers, what we have built here is quite impressive."

"... and this discovery of which you spoke," Keeler interjected, trying to draw Tyronius back to the original point of departure. "The one that humanity was not ready for." He had already come up with several guesses of his own. A lost civilization under the ice caps, containing wondrously advanced technology? The last message of God to His Creation?

"Patience!" Tyronius thundered. "Good Heavens, man, where were you educated? Not in the Ivory League, that's for sure.

"After a few years, we realized something about this planet. None of the plants or animals that were native to the planet aged or died. They were born fully formed, and they only died through predation or accident. So, it was also with us. None of us who had come to settle on this world were aging. Twenty, thirty, and forty years went by, and we all were exactly as we had been on the day we landed. And it remains so, today. You see, Commander, we are not the descendants of the original colonists. We are the original colonists."

Keeler realized he was grinning idiotically and that his glass of wine was about to permanently stain a carpet that was probably older than his planet's civilization. In the arsenal of the Sumacian monks was a weapon known as the Mind Bomb. The mental shockwave after it detonates makes it impossible for anyone in a two thousand-meter radius to think for half an hour. What Lord Tyronius had just said shocked the mind almost as effectively.

"So, you became immortal and lived to tell about it?" Keeler said finally.

Tyronius broke into a hearty laugh. "Became immortal and lived to tell about it, now that's a witty one. Here's to you, captain." He gave a gesture of toasting, raised the snifter to his lips, and took a gulp so large it made his eyes roll.

"I'm curious," Gotobed asked. "The human mind doesn't seem equipped to hold thousands of years of memories. How do you live so long without going mad."

"The mind does not retain that much," Tyronius answered, clearly warming to the question. "Have you ever sat down, spent an afternoon trying to remember everything that had happened in your life? I have. Sure, some events stand out, but whole days, weeks, months go by without a single event worth retaining. String all your memories together, you might have a few months of memories out of decades of living."

Gotobed nodded.

"And of course, most of here are, indeed, quite mad. In any case, we decided to tell the Commonwealth not to come to our world, and to sever relations with us. We thought if humans knew of a world where immortality was possible, it might destroy our culture... and by that I mean, all of human culture."

Yeah, right, Keeler thought. *You just didn't want to mortal riff-raff to come into your private little world.*

Somewhere in the distance, bells began to sound. Tyronius set down his wine. "Ah, my other guests have arrived. Please wait here, they will be most eager to meet you."

He leaned in confidentially close to Keeler. "If I were you, dear Commander, I would tell your men-at-arms to lock and load now. My friends may want to kill you."

Pegasus -- Lear Family Quarters, Trajan's Suite

Trajan Lear lay in bed, staring at the holoposter of the Olympian Darien Postcarrier. It had been there since the ship had launched, almost three years ago now. He was thinking that, on Republic, fifty-six years had gone by. The Olympian would be into his eighties by now. Maybe it was time to change the

poster. Besides, he was just a kid then, and tastes changed over time. He no longer liked the triskadekathlon, he now preferred air hockey. Achilles Tenderloin would make a good replacement.

That his mother had not stayed around to awaken him and send him off to school with a hug and a hearty breakfast meant she must be in command of the ship. He was old enough to see to his own needs anyway. In fact, he had laid in bed now almost as long as he possibly could without being late. So, he ought to rise, shower, and ...

His comm link activated. Even before picking it up, he knew who it was. "Answer. Trajan Lear here."

David Alkema appeared. "Trajan, Beauty. What's happening?"

Trajan sighed. "Very little."

"Is your mother around?"

"She's in Primary Command." *Unfortunately, she's not staying*, he thought. "Where are you?"

"I'm taking the day off. Now, get dressed and come on over."

"I can't. I have school."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Then, sharper, "Now, come on over, or meet me in the airlock at the top of the Command Tower in half an hour."

"Thank you, but I can't. I'll call you after school. End Link."

Trajan leaned back in bed.

A second later the comm-link sounded again. Trajan scowled. "Answer."

"Beauty, I'm sick of this. Don't make me just sit here on my day off. Get over here."

"Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Be a man," Trajan said. "Grab a lunch, get dressed and and get over here." Alkema glanced away. "Hold on, I have another link. It's Max Jordan."

Trajan frowned and growled on the inside. "Leave me out of it."

"Hold on a second."

"I have to go."

"Trajan, If you're not over here in fifteen minutes, you can find yourself a new best friend." Alkema switched off.

Trajan lay in bed for some seconds. When he had first met David Alkema almost five quarters ago, he had suspected that Alkema was solely interested in endearing himself to Trajan's mother. Since that time, Alkema, and the woman, Pieta, had become his closest, and only real friends on the ship. He didn't think he had gone more than one triurnal period without playing at sports in the recreation decks, sitting in Alkema's suite watching comedies, or wasting time together. In fact, Goneril Lear had come to regard David Alkema as a negative and inappropriate influence on her son, which made Trajan all the more eager to spend time with him.

But Alkema had never asked him to skip school before. Trajan sat up, bolt upright. *He'll keep calling me. He thought. He'll keep calling me until I come over. He'll make me feel guilty. This is ridiculous. I'll go. I'll go. I'll go.* He punched his bed-pillows really, really hard, and then buried his head under them.

A moment later, he was out of bed and stalking around the room in his underwear. *I am not going to let him do this to me. Not this time. I can't miss school. I can't go. I won't go.*

Alkema linked back. "Hey, beauty, guess what?"

Trajan rolled his eyes.

"Max is coming over. I told him the plan, and he wants to do it."

Trajan scowled. "What plan? Do what?"

Dave smiled, a rollicking sort of grin, he never would have shown the Commander. "Come over here and find out."

"I'm not going over there."

"Then meet us at the top of the Command Tower in forty minutes. Wear something sturdy and comfortable."

Trajan held his hands over his ears. "I can't hear you."

"Just be there. Alkema out."

Trajan rolled over. Alkema was playing him. Guilt alone probably wouldn't have been enough to overcome the serious repercussions that were sure to ensue from the direction of his mother if he were caught evading school. Guilt and friendship together still were not enough, but Alkema had played the Max Jordan card, knowing there was no way in living Hell that Trajan would let Max in on any plan that he was not in on himself.

He pulled himself out of bed, and began looking for sturdy, comfortable clothes.

Winter

Keeler swirled the wine in his glass. "This reminds me of a Shiraz from the Raw Saltdrop vineyards," he intoned, rhapsodically, trying a second variety of wine that Tyronius had offered.

"Never heard of them," said Sestina Gotobed.

"Not many have. The Raw Saltdrop vineyards are in sector Sixty-Ten, a semi-arid region on the East Coast of Oz. It's a local taste."

"Something the elites of Sapphirean society have decided to keep to themselves?"

Keeler grinned weakly. He had a soft spot for stinging social comments, and no heart to tell her he had a hundred bottles of this most private Shiraz hidden in one of *Pegasus's* cargo bays.

Blade Toto was staring out the window, marvelling that it was getting dark already. He still had not finished his first glass of wine. Lord Tyronius reappeared from the Reception Hall below, trailed by three men, and three women.

"Presenting Lord Oskkokk, Lord Thunderhead, the lovely Lady Goldenrod, the demented Lady Churchwhite, Lord Brigand, and the Deacon Blackthorn."

Lord Oskkokk was the one in the blue hood, blue cape, blue boots, blue vest, blue knickers, blue bodysuit, and blue codpiece, although they were not all the same shade of blue. The man in the gray mask, and the gray body-suit designed to look like a combination of musculature, stormclouds and lightning was Lord Thunderhead. The Lady Goldenrod was barely dressed in a flowing outfit of saffron and yellow that exposed a surprisingly large expanse of skin. She wore no mask, but displayed a broad, pretty face with dangerously wide eyes and smile. Lady Churchwhite, in contrast, was swathed in white from head to foot, wearing what looked like part bridal gown, part straight jacket. In contrast to the others, only her eyes were exposed. Brigand wore a brown leather hood and a patchwork uniform of small pieces of black, red, and tan leather stitched together in a checkerboard pattern and dotted with sharp metal studs. The Deacon Blackthorn was dressed in a simply cut suite of black-on-black, and looked rather sour. He and Goldenrod were the only ones with faces exposed.

Tyronius tried to urge them forward, although they stood apart hesitantly from the guests like little boys and girls at a forced social event, refusing to mix. "All of them, of course, come from the nearer estates. More shall arrive soon."

"Neat masks," Keeler said.

"It is the fashion," Tyronius said, with just the slightest suggestion of annoyance. "Every hundred years or so it comes round again, and everyone wears masks and costumes. Come back in another hundred years or more and you'll find all of them wearing identical white jumpsuits."

Lord Oskkokk quivered with anger, pounded the table and roared. "You told them! You told them the Great Secret! You black-salt encrusted bastard!"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did," said Tyronius.

"What were you thinking?" Oskkokk hissed. "Do you know what they will do knowing eternal life is possible on this planet?"

"If they are smart," interrupted Lord Thunderhead, "They will return to their ship and run as far and as fast as their engines will take them."

"Perhaps it would be best if they did come back in a hundred years," said Lord Oskkokk. "Or never."

"Now, none of that," Thunderhead growled. His voice was very low, raspy, and seemed to rattle the floor when he spoke.

"They have nothing they can teach us," sniffed Lord Oskkosk. "And they could not comprehend anything we could teach them. Send them away and kill something so that I can eat its liver."

Lady Goldenrod stepped forward, moving fixedly toward Commander Keeler. "Really, the rudeness of you men. Our first visitors in thousands of years and you treat them like space rats, like vile, stinking, disease-ridden space rats. I, for one, am curious to see what forms of technology and art our descendants may have developed. They may have much to offer us to enhance the quality of life on this planet."

"And what would we exchange for it?" Oskkosk argued. "This planet has only one commodity in abundance, and it can not be exported."

Tyronius shook his head as though to laugh. "Perhaps they have evolved beyond the economics of trade just as they have evolved height and strength."

"You did subvert the common resolution of the First Parliament by bringing them here," Deacon Blackthorn said. His voice and manner were dry, matter-of-fact, like a mortician.

"What were we to do?" Tyronius asked. "Ignore them and expect them to go away after crossing so many light years?"

"It's simply a matter of law," said Blackthorn.

Lady Goldenrod clapped her hands ebulliently. "Darling, our first visitors in thousands of years, and more Lords and Ladies to come. I know! I know! I know what we need to do! We need to declare Parliament Ball, right this instant, and decide what to do with them."

"Parliament Ball?" Gotobed asked.

"It's where hundreds of Lords and Ladies gather and dance and drink and carouse and decide upon important issues of law and government," Lady Goldenrod answered. "But that's not important right now."

"They are very tall," sang Lady Churchwhite. "They all have pure auras, and they are very, very large. They are like children, but not really children. They are the children we would have had, and with very large auras."

Keeler silently guessed that delirious babbling was another fashion.

Tyronius explained. "The Parliament Ball was our own concept. There were so many concepts of government and politics that seemed like good ideas at parties, but never looked the same in the light of day. We thought it might be fun to implement such ideas, so, we combined government with divertissements, and thus was born, Parliament Ball."

Keeler liked this idea. At least it showed that these Winter Immortals had an appropriate disrespect for government.

"The approach of Cardinal in Ages Past signaled the commencement of our Holiday Season," Tyronius explained. "As Cardinal filled more and more of our sky and shook the ground beneath our feet, people gathered at the Greater Estates for masked costume balls. The revelry would continue for days, weeks. Once, I remember Lady Redding tried to make her ball last from one approach to the next."

Lady Goldenrod threw her head back and laughed. "Yes, yes, oh yes, I remember. She exhausted all of her reserves and nearly froze and starved when the season passed because she had laid in no provisions."

"Too much fun?" Keeler asked.

"She didn't pay enough attention to her crops."

"Is that why you don't have the balls any more?" Keeler asked.

"No, it isn't."

"Then, why?"

"Over time, they became tedious, repetitive, and unnecessary," ThunderCloud intoned, sighing very slightly, as though this were a weighty revelation. "They became tiring; always the same faces, always the same affectation of amusement. Do you know how long it takes to become intimate friends with all of 144, 211 people, to the point where you can not stand to spend another moment with any one of them?"

Actually, Keeler imagined it would take about twenty-one times longer than it would take with 7,000 people.

"Oh, don't listen to him, he's no fun at all," said Goldenrod.

Thunderhead spoke. "There comes a point when you have seen every fashion, tried every perspective, embraced every philosophy. Concurrently, you have also thoroughly dissected, disproved, and disavowed every conceivable fashion, perspective, and philosophy. Where do you go from there, especially when you can't go anywhere?"

"I guess immortality isn't what it used to be," said Keeler.

"Immortality isn't what it used to be!" Tyronius crowed. "Another witty one, I take it back, Commander, you are a witty one, a witty one indeed."

"Blasphemy," Oskkokk roared back. "You see, you see! This is the hazard. These *people* have no comprehension of what it means to have three thousand years of wisdom. How can they possibly appreciate all the things we have learned? This is exactly why we decided to keep the Commonwealth away from our world, for their protection as well as ours. I'll have no part of this."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," Tyronius sniffed.

The sound of footsteps on the staircase had come echoing through the balcony as Oskkokk spoke, and suddenly a man appeared. He was white-haired, balding and corpulent. He wore fur pants and a knitted sweater. "Oh, dear, am I late?" he asked timidly, when he had reached the top.

"Lord Manchester," said Tyronius, a little warily. "He inhabits the village of Lighthouses at the end of the peninsula. I occasionally engage him to do work at my estate."

"I always wanted to live in a lighthouse. Part of my home was blown into the sea during the last Great Storm of the Century. I am still undertaking repairs. Dear, dear, my." He looked over the new arrivals nervously. "I have never seen these people before."

"They are my guests," Lord Tyronius enucleated. "They have come from distant worlds to call upon us, and I invited them down."

"They are very tall and handsome," said Manchester. Snow had begun to melt, forming a dirty pool that spread around his boots.

"That was the Commonwealth version of Natural Selection," ThunderCloud mused. "Genetically programming future generations for strength, height, stamina, intelligence, beauty ... enlightenment."

"There is no way to genetically engineer people for Enlightenment!" Deacon Blackthorn argued forcefully. "Enlightenment can only be won through discipline of mind and spirit! You can no more genetically engineer enlightenment than you can adjust Karma, which can only be given or taken by the Universe."

"Don't let's start," Tyronius said in a tone of voice that was almost pleading. "Not here, not now."

"We're going to have a Parliament Ball to welcome the New Humans," Goldenrod said. "Won't that be fun?"

"It will be great fun," said Lady Churchwhite detachedly. "Unless it isn't."

"Oh, dear," said Manchester. "And I am improperly attired for the occasion."

"We have not decided to convene Parliament Ball," Oskkokk argued.

"Oh, but I believe we have," Tyronius told him.

"I concur," Brigand spoke for the first time, his voice was gravelly, well-matched to his frightening leather attire. "As we have been so long without visitors, I think the Parliament Ball would be the ideal... venue for us to see and judge these New Humans. We should convene Parliament Ball and invite as many of their people as can come, a hundred, two hundred or more. Let us see them, let us hear them...and finally, let us judge them."

"Let the word go out," Tyronius agreed.

Chapter Five

Command Tower – Deck 200

At fifteen years old, everything is tricky, including finding a spacesuit that fits properly. After twenty minutes of searching through the lockers outside the airlock, Trajan Lear ended up in one that was too loose in some unfortunate places and too tight in even worse places.

He stood in the air-lock with David Alkema and Pieta, whose spacesuits fit perfectly, binding tight to the arms, legs, and shoulders like a thick outer musculature, to especially flattering effect on Pieta. The rebreather and temperature regulating equipment wrapped around the torso like a vest. None of them wore helmets yet. "Are you sure you we should be doing this?" Trajan asked.

Alkema answered him indirectly. "The hard part will be disabling the inner airlock controls so nobody knows we snuck out."

"Can you do it?"

"Me, neg, but Prime Commander Keeler can. I'll use his over-ride codes to cycle the airlock. First, I have to bypass the personnel recognition interface."

"Isn't he clever?" Pieta cooed, and gave her boyfriend a pat on the buttocks.

The outer lock cycled and in walked Max Jordan. Naturally, his spacesuit fit perfectly. A long, unkempt fetlock of deeply red hair hung over his forehead but managed to divert around his eyes. "I'm here," he announced. "What's the plan?"

"Let me show you something," Alkema told them. He opened a storage locker and displayed five oblong sleds, about two meters long and one wide. These were like the standard schlepping units used to move heavy objects and tools around the ship, except that they had been re-colored in bright metallic red, gold, and black.

Alkema explained. "After the attack at Bodicéa, there was a lot of external damage to the Command Tower, the Secondary Tower, and the dorsal hull. Some of the technicians got the idea for what we're about to do from the electromagnetic hover-sleds they used to move heavy plating and tools. These beauties hover 3.5 centimeters above the surface of the ship. The technicians saw how smooth and curvaceous the upper hull was and thus was born, hull-surfing."

"Hull-surfing?" Trajan exclaimed. Unfortunately, he had heard of it. It was the kind of thing his mother assumed she didn't have to tell him not to do.

Alkema grinned eagerly. "You start at the top of the command tower and, if you can stay on, you can make it to the forward spar in under two minutes."

"That sounds incredibly stupid. Let's do it." Max Jordan had spent the first twelve years of his life in a war zone, which probably explained his utter lack of mortal fear.

Trajan lifted his space helmet to his head and agreed, "Let's do it!" even though his heart was pounding out a all-percussion concerto and squadrons of kamikaze butterflies took wing his stomach.

When the four of them had finished taking turns checking all the seals on their suits, Alkema opened the airlock control panel, and entered the Prime Commander's command over-rides. The airlock cycled, and the four young adventurers stepped out onto the small ledge at the top of the ship.

Trajan peered down the long, long length of the command tower, past the inhabitation section overlay to the missile hatcheries, shield generators, and sensor arrays that occupied the angular prow of the great ship, nearly four kilometers away. The hull gleamed bright gold under the light of the stars, as though with its own luminescence.

Suddenly, blowing off school seemed like the least of his worries.

"Ready," said Dave to Pieta. A second later they pushed off and glided down the command tower, gathering speed as they made for the prow, then shooting off across the top of the ship's upper hull. Pieta held on to Alkema's waist. They looked almost like ice dancers, gliding in the pale starlight. Although they wavered, although they almost fell over more than once, they still managed to seem elegant and romantic,

like angels graciously liberated from the proverbial pinhead.

Trajan took a deep breath. This didn't look that hard. He weighed almost nothing out here, and as long as he could stay on the board, he was pretty sure he could make it. And if he spilled, it would be no big deal. He was sure everyone crashed on his first time out. He would get the hang of this before too long, and no one expected any more of him. If a Tech Second Class could do it, so could he.

Then, Max Jordan looked at him and said something patently unnecessary.

"Race!"

The tone said the rest. Not, "Would you care to race?" but "We are now going to race. The winner will be covered in glory and the loser will wallow in shameful defeat."

Trajan gave what he hoped was a manly and confident nod and kicked his space boots into the locks on the hover-board.

"Ready!" said Max, leaning into an aggressive crouch.

"Set!" Trajan answered him, trying to copy his posture.

"Go!" said David Alkema, through the comm-link.

Trajan pushed off, and almost immediately felt the hoverboard try to tear away from beneath his feet. He forgot all about Max in an instant. His whole mind told him to **STAY ONTO THE BOARD, KEEP HIS BALANCE, RIDE THE CURVES OF THE HULL, DAUGHTER-OF-GOD-LOOK-AT-THOSE-STARS. NOT THAT! FOCUS! RIDE THE BOARD, RIDE THE SHIP, FEEL THE WAVES UNDERNEATH. DAMB, I'M GOING FAST!**

Faster and faster he blasted down the command tower. He glanced at the hull plates flashing underneath his board. They were a blur. He cast a glance out over *Pegasus's* wide wingblades and immediately felt his balance casting away. As soon as he failed to focus on the board it was as though his mind wanted to rush away from this insanity his body was engaging in. It was a dizziness, but a dizziness as wide as space itself. He was a shooting star, blazing across frictionless space.

DAMB! THIS IS FASTER THAN I THOUGHT! HOLD ON! HOLD ON! WATCH THAT CURVE! *Is this what Achilles Tenderloin feels when he's flying toward the goal!* **DAMB!**

He shot across the clear millistrati crystal that enclosed the inhabitation decks. There was an impression of gardens and habitation complexes. These passed in a flash, and he was over golden deck plating again. The forward prow was not glassy smooth as the other sections had been. A kind of thrill passed up through his legs, a staccato vibration in harmony with irregularities in the smooth hull surface.

God! I'm going too fast! I'll be over the spar in seconds! God! God! How do I stop? Will I pitch into space. Objects in space remain in motion forever.

No problem, the hoverboard would have answered. When it ran out of deck, it simply stopped, and for a split second, left him hanging over the edge of deepest, darkest space and gave him a peak at a small gray marble of a planet, thousands of kilometers below.

He was stopped. He discovered his heart was pounding, and his breathing was almost over-taxing his suit's re-breather pack, but he felt as though the essence of life itself was flowing through his veins like a form of pure energy.

"14.4 seconds," said Max Jordan, gleefully. "I beat you by 14.4 seconds."

Trajan almost didn't care. Pieta kicked off on her board and glided around the foredeck, describing a graceful figure eight.

"Getting back up is somewhat trickier," came the voice of David Alkema in his ear. "I have an idea, though."

He was cut off by another voice. "Trajan, why are you not in school?"

Trajan's face flashed red with embarrassment. It was the sum of all fears, his mom. He was stricken with fear, and could not speak.

David Alkema spoke up. "Executive TyroCommander Lear, this is Lieutenant David Alkema, from Tactical Core."

"I know who you are," she responded icily.

Alkema ploughed on unfazed. "I requested your son's presence for an external hull inspection exercise."

"Why wasn't his instructor informed."

"My oversight completely. I will submit a retroactive attendance bypass form."

There was a long silence, then Lear continued. "Trajan, report to the Landing Bay immediately, and bring your dress uniform."

"Aye, ma'am," Trajan squeaked.

"Lear, out."

Dave patted his friend on the shoulder. "Do you want to know the bright side?"

"Nay, do not tell me there is a bright side to this."

Alkema pointed. "If you glide over the deck that way, there's an airlock directly beside the Landing Bay. I'll have someone bring your uniform."

Pieta glided by and hugged him. "Have fun, Trajan."

He turned away from them and began gliding across the hull. This time, he was not distracted by the sights of the hull, the stars over head, or thoughts of angels.

Prudence

Prudence glided into the landing bay, returning Tactical TyroCommander Redfire and his team to *Pegasus*. Redfire had already found a secure channel to Commander Keeler, and was speaking to him from his seat in the forward cabin.

"How long have they been in orbit?" Keeler wanted to know.

"Our best guess is about four years. We'll have a better idea when we decrypt their data."

"Good." They had decrypted millions of data-points from their previous encounter, and had learned much, but still did not know such basic things as where the Aurelian home-world was, what their history was, what their numbers were, and how many worlds in the quadrant they had conquered.

Redfire continued. "We have sent probes and deep patrols into the outer system to set up distant early warning posts. All Aves squadrons are on alert in the event we detect more Aurelians."

Keeler sounded grim. "We are in no condition to fend them off. We have barely half our missiles and less than half of our Accipiters. With our depleted arsenal, the only choice we may have if their fleet arrives is to run at maximum speed in the other direction."

"We still have the Nemesis."

"Don't remind me."

"With enough warning, we could hit them outside the system, maybe far enough out to save the planet even if they do go nova."

"If we have to," Keeler reluctantly agreed.

"An Aurelian conquest has four stages. They infiltrate a planet. They reconstruct the existing societal culture to make them easy to conquer. Then, they conquer them, and then, after taking everything worth having, they leave them to die. Hopefully, we caught them at stage one in this case. We probably got here years ahead of their main fleet. Have you informed the inhabitants?"

"I have asked them if they have had any visitors lately, and Lord Tyronius assured me that we're the first." He went on to explain the part about the immortality, which Redfire agreed was very, very interesting indeed, but he was still focused on the Aurelians and their potential threat to this new world.

"Any indication of where they might have landed?" Keeler asked.

"Not a clue. They could have made landfall years ago."

"What is the disposition of the Aurelian ship?"

Redfire shrugged. "It seemed pretty happy."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"So now, you're the only one who can make bad puns? We have forensic engineers on board dismantling the Aurelian technology for transport to *Pegasus*."

Keeler smiled wryly. "Lord Tyronius is convening something known as the Parliament Ball at his estate on Winter. There are already Lords and Ladies gathering from across the planet."

"Lords and Ladies?"

"Everyone down here is a Lord or a Lady. I guess you live long enough, have enough space to go around, everybody can be lord. I'm Lord Muckety-Muck of this rock and that rock. This is my wife, the Lady Schick, Lady of this tree and that puddle."

"They sound like an interesting bunch of people."

"Only if by interesting you mean eccentric to the point of insanity, and arrogant to the point of suffocation. It's like a Keeler family reunion. They want as many people from *Pegasus* as possible to attend. I want all my senior officers present."

"I really think the assessment of the Aurelian ship takes precedent."

"You can let it go for a few hours. Leave Change in charge, she has an attitude about this kind of thing. She wants a landing team like most people want a painful infection of the genitalia."

Redfire reluctantly conceded. "When will this 'Parliament Ball' be kicking off?"

"It already has. It's a continuous happening, like the Street Art Festival in New Cleveland. The sun's already come up and gone down twice since I got here and I'm as disoriented as a cat in zero gravity. They hate that, you know, Cats, I mean."

"I'll be there." Redfire assured him, almost certain he was going to regret it. "I'll bring the family."

Prudence

Four Aves had been reconfigured for mass transport to the planet, with eighty seats set up in the main cabin, the better to populate the Parliament Ball. *Prudence* was not one of them, partly because the rapid turnaround from Commander Redfire's mission did not leave enough time, but mostly to accommodate Ex-Commander Lear and a coterie of senior diplomatic personnel. She needed more privacy to plan an approach for opening diplomatic relations with the Ancients of Winter, as they were to be known.

Trajan Lear, in a stiff formal cadet uniform even less comfortable than the spacesuit had been, entered through the forward hatch. Ten or so people from the diplomatic core and cultural survey, were already jockeying for position in the forward section. "Where shall I sit?" he asked his mother.

"You will be sitting on the command deck, next to the pilot," Lear answered. "I have arranged for Flight Lieutenant Driver to mentor you."

Trajan flushed, comprehensively embarrassed. "Why did you do that?"

"I thought it would improve your piloting skills," Lear told him. "Flight Lieutenant Driver was most agreeable. I think he actually was pleased at your interest."

"Or at yours," Trajan returned petulantly.

Goneril Lear hit him with her best "Don't make a scene in public" glower. It worked as it always had. Trajan had no idea why it worked, but he knew he was absolutely incapable of defying her when she hit him with those scolding eyes. He slung his carry-pack over his shoulder and slogged his way to the lift and rose up without turning back.

Flight Lieutenant Driver was there, in his command seat, running final systems check. He turned and smiled when Trajan came up the lift. "Trajan Lear, welcome aboard. I was going to wait until you got here so we could run systems checks together, but I had to start without you."

Trajan hesitated in the entry dock, not sure where to begin. Matthew tapped the empty seat next to him. Trajan, whose stomach seemed to be rerunning highlights from the hover-board expedition, moved forward and positioned himself in the co-pilot's seat.

"You'll need an interface," Matthew reach across and drew his fingers across Trajan's cheek and forehead. The molecular nano-knitters created a face-piece that echoed Driver's own. It tickled more than it did in the simulator, made him quiver just a bit. "Do you understand how the interface works?"

Trajan nodded. "The interface enables the pilot's mind to connect to the ship's BrainCore, providing a

direct control and sensor interface. Fly-by-thought."

"Don't think of it as just as neural control interface," Driver cautioned. "It's not just processing data and acting on it. It's a much deeper link than that. You don't just fly the ship, you have to integrate your mind to the mind of the ship. You should get to a point where the data flows as naturally as hearing me talk, and piloting the ship is as natural as walking, running, or swimming."

Trajan shivered. Ever since his Passage, he had never again enjoyed swimming.

Driver continued. "The command deck lets you customize your instrumentation, but the mind-to-ship interface is a critical control element."

"It increases the reaction time of both ship and pilot and enables them to function together organically."

"Correct," Matthew reached up and touched some controls situated on the underside of the canopy. "In this case, I can also use it to monitor you."

Trajan was immediately alarmed at that. "Monitor me?"

"Your piloting skills, your reactions, to see if you're paying attention to all the things requiring a pilots attention."

"Could you read my thoughts through the link?"

"Only what you actively transmit to the ship. I won't be able to detect anything personal, if that's what you mean. Try it with me. Try reading my thoughts."

"Nay, I wouldn't... I can't."

"Go ahead, try it."

Trajan closed his eyes, and tried to connect with Matthew's mind. It was a half-hearted attempt, and he could see nothing. He was already considering how best to keep his private thoughts to himself.

A voice came into Trajan's ear. "*Pegasus* Flight Control clearing *Aves Prudence* for departure. Signal when prepared for launch."

"Do you want to respond to that?" Driver asked. "Go ahead."

Trajan answered. "*Aves Prudence* to *Pegasus* Flight Control. Completing final systems check. Will advise again when launch ready."

Winter – Habi Zod

Lord Tyronius convened the Parliament Ball in the ballroom of his estate, a piece of interior real estate as large as a groundball field. A large, ironwork dome covered it, its glass sections like petals, now etched with intricate patterns of hoarfrost. Several balconies and bridges overlooked the main floor. It could have held a thousand people, and on this evening was almost halfway there.

Nearly two hundred of the crew of *Pegasus* joined nearly three hundred of the Lords and Ladies and Villagers of Winter. A small orchestra was setting up in one corner, a massive larder of food had been opened and spread across great tables of polished red wood. By far, the wine was most popular. Lakes and oceans of purple and burgundy wine were swirling in the glasses of the guests.

Redfire and Keeler stood at the periphery of the great hall, watching the half-a-thousand guests talking, laughing and swinging. "Nothing like a good mixer," Keeler said, pouring some kind of local fruit juice into another local kind of clear alcohol.

Redfire was not drinking, but instead scanned the room with bright attentive eyes. "There could be Aurelians in this room right now."

"Lord Tyronius doesn't think so," Keeler said. "Everyone on this planet knows everyone else."

"Commander, half the people in this room are wearing masks."

"I would still know anyone in my crew even in a mask, but if it will make you feel better, you can talk to each one and see if you get that damnable Aurelian headache."

A pair of woman's hands came from behind and covered his eyes. "Guess who?"

He felt up her arms toward her shoulders. "Marine Buttercup?"

Lady Goldenrod swung around him, so that he was forced to catch her in his arm. "And just who,

pray, is Marine Buttercup."

"Someone for whom you would never be mistaken, O vision of sweetness."

She turned her eyes toward Redfire. "How embarrassing."

"What?"

"You showed up in the same outfit."

Keeler looked at the golden captain's stripes on his uniform and compared them to the silver lieutenant commander's stripes on Redfire's. "Well, almost, fortunately, Ranking Phil doesn't know slag about how to accessorize."

Specialist Gotobed, in a shoulder-less, evening dress uniform, approached on the arm of Lord Tyronius, a breathtaking vision of femininity. Her not him. A single blue jewel on a thin silver chain adorned her neck, directing attention directly into her comely bosom. She was conversing with a delightedly attentive host. "Lord Tyronius, what became of the children that came to this planet? Did they grow up?"

Tyronius got a slightly pained expression. "Ah, children. The younger set, as we called them. Very few survived the Bacia plague. Those that did grew to adulthood, or near adulthood, on the journey here. Those that were not fully adult did have their development arrested when they settled on the planet. We sent them away, into space. Some reached adulthood and returned to live out their lives. Some never returned."

"Have any been born since you arrived?"

"Alas, we are infertile. Whatever keeps us alive also prevents mitotic cell division in zygotes. By now, all of our women have exhausted their reserves of eggs."

"Now, was that level of detail really necessary?" Lady Goldenrod asked. "I mean, really?"

I could have done without the imagery, Keeler thought to himself.

In another part of the Ballroom, Trajan Lear and Matthew Driver stood next to a food table that featured several different kinds of meat encased in bread. "How did I do?" Trajan asked.

"You did fine. You need to concentrate more. I sensed several times during the descent where you were not focused on the flight."

"Do I have to be? I mean, most of the time, the ship navigates itself, and the conditions were smooth."

"Aye, true enough, and eventually it will become instinct for you. Until it does, you have to concentrate every minute. It's just something every pilot needs to force himself to do." Mathew glanced down at his cuffs, and rather awkwardly excused himself. "Eliza will be getting off her watch about now. I need to check in with her."

Trajan looked somewhat lost as Matthew moved away. He set down his wineglass on the table and scanned across a whole roomful of people he didn't want to talk to. He considered slipping off quietly to find a room for the night. Suddenly, there was a chop to his shoulder, just hard enough to hurt without being cause to fight. He spun around to find himself facing Max Jordan. "Hoy, Tray."

"Nice uniform," Trajan said to Max, trying to make a conversational joke. They were both wearing the newly designed dress uniforms of the ship's cadet training core. These consisted of black pants and a gray and blue jacket with an intricate grey and blue pattern on the sleeves worn over a gray shirt. They both considered the outfit hideous.

"I make it look good," said Max with grinning confidence. "You came down on *Prudence*?"

"Aye, I co-piloted with Flt. Lieutenant Driver."

"Balls! I co-piloted *Amy* with Flt. Commandant Jordan. She let me do the landing sequence."

"I just handled the comm-link," Trajan said, modestly, but jealously.

"Mom always let's me do the comm," Max answered, popping a bread and meat hors d'oeuvre into his mouth.

Trajan nodded. "Of course she does. Listen, can you remain here while I find a euphemism." *Or, some other place where I don't need to be reminded of my inferiority.*

Keeler, Redfire, Gotobed, Goldenrod and Tyronius were joined by the thin, dark, dour figure of Deacon Blackthorn and the leather clad Lord Brigand. "Capital ball, wouldn't you say, Blackthorn," Tyronius asked in his aristocratic baritone.

"Still quite early," Blackthorn replied grimly.

"The Deacon Blackthorn was once my physician," Tyronius told Keeler, as Blackthorn bowed slightly in the background. "We have observed something about you new humans."

"The height?"

"Well, yes, that, you are taller than we, and your musculature is larger and more dense, your metabolisms are faster, yet your hearts beat more slowly."

"If it makes you feel better, most of the more vulgar and malodorous bodily functions are still intact," Keeler told them.

"Based on the conversations I've overheard, I am willing to bet your intellectual capabilities have also been enhanced," Tyronius continued. "Technologically, though, my inspection of your ship suggests you are somewhat behind the Commonwealth, at least at its apex."

"Is there anything else?" Brigand asked. "Anything not quite so obvious?"

"We're mildly telepathic," Keeler told him. "If that's what you mean."

"Really?" said Brigand, with genuine interest.

"We had that in the Commonwealth," Blackthorn sniffed. "A small amplifier worn behind the ear..."

"We're born this way," Keeler explained. "Most of the improvements you describe are a result of evolutionary adaptation to the planet Sapphire, but telepathy is something we've never been able to pin down. It has been suggested it is a natural outgrowth of increased mental capacity, or part of the linear evolution of our species."

Tyronius and Blackthorn were laughing heartily. "What?" Keeler asked.

"They have no idea, do they?" Blackthorn said, in gasps between bursts of laughter.

"None," Tyronius answered, through laughter and with tears in his eyes. "None whatsoever, the fools!"

Brigand, finding none of this amusing, stalked off toward a drinks table, leather crunching tightly around his buttocks.

Someone pressed a huge plate covered with neat rows of chopped meats, anchovies, eggs, and vegetables into Keeler's hands. He looked up to see Lady Goldenrod. "Have you tried my Salmagundi, Commander? It's my signature dish."

Keeler regarded the plate. It looked actually quite tempting, even with a primitive quality. "Thank you."

"Keeler, Keeler, Keeler," Goldenrod mused. "I know where I have heard that name before. My uncle Lazlo served a ship in the Christian Fleet under an Admiral Keeler. I wonder if you're related."

"If you speak of Lexington Keeler, I am one of his descendants."

"Really? Oh, of course, I forget, Admiral Keeler must have passed away centuries ago, millennia!"

"You would think so."

"I know someone you absolutely must meet," Goldenrod gushed, laying her hands on his forearm.

"Really? Who would that be?"

"An old acquaintance of the admiral's. You won't find him here. He's rather anti-social, always has been. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Uh,... answer hazy, ask again later."

"Excuse me?"

"Old Sapphirean oracle joke. What do we call you people anyway?" Keeler asked. It was the sort of question that would have made Lear grind her teeth down to the nubs. "Winterians? Wintermen? Polaroids?"

"Most of us come from the Hibernia colony, and still like to be called Hibernians," Lady Goldenrod answered.

"I prefer Ancients myself," Tyronius said.

Goldenrod stretched on her toes and whispered in Keeler's ear. "If you're very good, some of us will come without being called."

There was a sudden eruption, a commotion in a room to the side of the party. A boy's voice came shouting. "Get away from me!"

"That's Max," said Redfire. He cut away from the captain, and pushed his way through the throng toward the epicenter of the commotion. Keeler trailed behind him.

There was an alcove there, another window looking out into the gloomy Winter's night. Max was red-faced, the front of his formal uniform was torn open, revealing a stretch of smooth pale skin. His expression was furious, and he was shouting madly. "Get away from me! Get away from me! Get away from me you sick disgusting ratgash pervert. Get away from me! Get away from me or I'll rip your head away and shove it so into your anus you'll be licking your own tonsils."

When they got close enough, Keeler could see that there was a chubby, pudgy, balding middle aged man in the alcove with Max. Keeler recognized him as Manchester. Redfire didn't, and wouldn't have given a damn if he had. He grabbed him by the lapels and swung him toward the wall, slamming him hard.

"What the interjection is going on here!" Tyronius thundered.

"That man attacked me," Max screamed, pointing at Manchester.

"I did not try to force anything on him," Manchester protested. "I told him he was a beautiful boy and invited him back to my chambers."

"You did what?" Redfire growled furiously, and his face became nearly as red as his hair.

"It's true. He said he want to try things with me!" Max wailed, all of his composure lost. "He was grabbing for me."

Redfire turned toward Manchester, filled with rage. "Did you?" he demanded.

"No, no, that isn't it at all," Manchester insisted.

"He said he wanted to have sex with me." Max insisted.

"I asked if him if he would like to return to my chambers... for sex. I never intended to force him. I only asked him."

Redfire battered Manchester hard against the wall, then dropped him to the floor. He kept his arms outstretched, as though he didn't want anything to do with them after they had touched such a vile creature. Jordan reached the front of the crowd and laid her arms around her son. "Take me home," he whispered. "Please take me home, now!"

"Can't you people see?" Manchester insisted weakly, desperately searching from one face to another among the Lords and Ladies for someone who would support his case. "When you live as long as we have, you see that, something like this is no big deal. Age doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is new experiences, and that was all I was offering him. It was an act of... of love when you think about it." His nose had begun to bleed, and he wiped it with the end of his shirtsleeve.

Tyronius growled at him. "Manchester, there are 183 adults here from the *Pegasus*. Why did you try to force your attentions on a child?"

"His innocence was so beautiful," Manchester half-sobbed, his lips quaking. "None of us are innocent any more. So beautiful. Innocence, it lasts a few years and then you spend thousands jaded. I wanted to taste innocence again. I never... never..."

Max shook his head. He was shivering. "I want to go back to the ship. Please take me back to the ship right now."

"We'll go," Jordan said.

"I'll go with you," Redfire offered.

"No, just you," Max insisted to Jordan. "Just you, just take me back to the ship. Please. Now."

Manchester had a look like a beaten dog . "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Deacon Blackthorn turned to Keeler, "What Lord Manchester has done is a grave offense to us, although I am uncertain whether it violates laws."

"Assault on a child?" Redfire interjected.

"We have no children on this planet, and so no laws to protect them. But I understand the need for redressing grievance, and I can order him held pending further investigation or charges. We might be able to find something in our law books."

"I'll leave that to the boy and his mother," Keeler said.

Tactical TyroCommander Redfire extended an arm Manchester to his feet. "Are you all right, sir?"

"I think so, yes, I do think so."

"You shouldn't be," and with that Redfire punched him hard in the gut. Two crewmen grabbed for him and Lord Brigand interceded, placing his big, leather clad body between them.

"Enough," Brigand barked. "No violence is permitted at the Parliament Ball."

"I never meant to harm him. I never would done anything he didn't want..." Manchester tried to say, but seeing the flare in Redfire's face deduced it was best not to complete that sentence.

Tyronius leaned to Manchester, and fiercely whispered, "Pack and leave. You are no longer welcome in my house. Be gone by sunrise."

Chapter Six:

Prudence – Ascendant

"I wanted to see more of the house, so, I started looking for a way out of the ballroom." Max Jordan was sitting in one of the four-way seats in *Prudence's* main cabin. His mother was next to him, and Medical Technician Jersey Partridge was across from him. Flight Lieutenant Driver was in the command module with Trajan Lear.

"The old man started following me, and asking me, like, if I was enjoying the party. I tried to be cordial, but he was staring at me in this really creepy way. Then, he asked if I wanted to..." Max broke off, struggling a bit. "Asked if..."

"You don't have to say it," Jordan counseled him, stroking the long hair above his forehead.

Max steeled himself. "Neg, I have to ... just now. Just right now. He asked me if I wanted to go back to his chamber and drink wine with him. I told him no. He then said... he said..."

"Max..."

"He said I was beautiful and he want to 'teach me the arts of pleasure,' or some slag like that." Max looked disgusted. "That's when he made a grab for me, and that's when I clocked him."

"Is that when your uniform was torn?" Jordan asked, stroking her son's forehead.

"Neg, he grabbed it to stop me from hitting him again. He wouldn't let go, so, I hit him again."

"Good for you," said Jersey Partridge. Partridge had been attending the Ball as a regular guest. He had left immediately to accompany Max and his mother on the trip back to *Pegasus*. *Prudence* had taken on the task, being configured for fewer passengers and having a pilot eager to leave the Ball.

"Is a medical exam really necessary?" Max pleaded. "I already told you I'm fine."

"You're still pretty agitated," Partridge told the boy. "I can give you a calmative to help you relax, if you want."

Max shook his head. "I'll get over it. I just don't want to be around people for a while." He reclined his seat until it was almost flat and stared out through the viewport.

"We'll be back on *Pegasus* in twenty minutes," said Jordan.

Max suddenly sat up. "Don't tell Sam about this," he told his mother in an urgent and pleading tone of voice.

Jordan nodded, but she knew something like this was going to be spoken of. Much of the crew would be angered and disgusted by what had happened. It would be hard to keep news of this from reaching Sam for very long.

Max leaned back in the seat, his arms folded behind his head. He closed his eyes, but Jordan could sense that this was troubling him even more deeply than he had let on. She folded a ship's blanket over him, then went with Partridge to the galley.

"He seems all right," Partridge told her. "I am detecting elevated adrenaline and some minor trauma to the knuckles of his right hand, but physically, he's fine."

"What about emotionally?"

"I've only had a little training in counseling, but I am guessing he'll be okay. There are people in Medical Core trained to deal with this kind of thing."

Jordan arched one perfect eyebrow. "This kind of thing?"

Partridge blushed. "Fourteen year old boys being propositioned by three thousand year old men is one of those things that doesn't happen on *Sapphire*," he conceded. "It's not one of the common adolescent traumas, but I think we can get him through this without too much help."

"He's been through so much already," said Jordan.

"You bet, but he is a very strong boy, and strength is the key to getting through something like this. I think giving the old wretch a bloody nose was a good start."

"I would have bloodied a lot more of him," Jordan told him, downing the shot of space whiskey. "Get me alone in a room with him and I still would."

Winter – Habi Zod – Guest Quarters

I am Oing. Oing is me. Oing is all. All is Oing.

Tactical TyroCommander Redfire sat cross-legged in the middle of his bed, bare-chested and clad only in pajama bottoms, deep in meditation, unable to sleep, unable to leave the planet until morning, unable to comfort Max, unable to enact further revenge on his assailant, and most of all, unable to pick apart and study the parts of the Aurelian ship now locked into a secure *Pegasus* cargo bay.

The "Oing Meditation" was an aspect of Sumacian custom. It as supposed to focus the mind and calm a soul distracted by violent thoughts, by strong emotion that interfered with duty. If Redfire could not sleep, he might as well focus himself for the effort that lay ahead.

His room was cold, deliberately so. He had left the window open and turned off the radiator. Part of the exercise was to create warmth in one's self, to isolate one's self against the rigors of the environment. When the mind was free, the body was delicate, so the philosophy went.

He suddenly became aware of a presence in his room. He heard nothing, felt nothing, wrapped deeply in the folds of his own mind, but some other sense told him he was not alone. He opened his eyes and broke the trance.

The room was still dark. Nothing had been disturbed. He was alone.

Had he imagined it? Had he been dreaming?

He was quite certain he had not been.

Far outside, he saw the first hints of a pale light that would, within an hour or so, swell to a bright and cold sunrise. He rose from the bed.

Someone had been here. The afterimage of the intruder's presence was strong. He felt it the way you feel the weight of a stare on your neck, or the breath of a stranger.

There was a candle on the table next to the door. He picked it up, lit it with a spark from his pulse-weapon, and stepped out into the hallway, determined to find however had disturbed his meditation.

A sunrise later, Keeler awakened in a large, opulent chamber, roused by a vigorous knocking at his chamber door. His nose told him the air in his room was chill, but he forced himself to peel away the blankets from over his head. "What... wait... don't come in... I haven't figured out where I am yet."

"It's Specialist Gotobed, Commander. You're on the planet Winter, in a place called Habi Zod which is the estate of Lord Tyronius, our host."

Keeler looked up at the high stone ceiling, that reached a peak at least seven meters over his head and was lined with gargoyles. "I dreamt I was at the summer cabin at Lake Mosquito Nursery. I was wondering when Aunt Sestina redecorated."

The bed was enormous, very comfortable, and he felt almost lost at sea in it. The covers were made of various knits, fabrics, and patterns, ranging from rough as tree bark to softer than baby's hair. The mattress was old, but had seldom been used. Somehow, it smelled like a snowfall in the heart of the deep woods.

"May I come in?"

"I'm not decent."

"When are you ever?" The door swung open and Gotobed entered. She was wearing her uniform. She always looked so military in it. Fortunately, for her, it was a becoming look.

Keeler gathered one of the blankets (midway between the tree bark and baby hair range on the comfort scale) around him and sat up in the bed. He could not remember the last time a woman who had come into his bedchamber like this. "Did you bring me breakfast," he growled.

"The others have eaten already. Lord Tyronius is about to give us a tour of the estate, and I was asked to see if you were in any condition to join us."

"I will be after an evacuation, a shower, and some food."

"You only have time for one. Choose wisely."

"At my age, the choice is kind of made for me," Keeler grumbled, making his way toward the side of the bed like a crash survivor crawling from some kind of wreckage. His dress uniform was hung on the back of a throne-sized chair at the side of his bed. "Do you mind?" Keeler said.

Gotobed turned around as Keeler reached for his pants, and then made his way to the hygiene chamber. "What did you say Tyronius was doing?"

"He is going to give us a tour of his estate. Some of the personnel from Anthropology Core requested it. He expanded it to anyone who was interested."

"Am I interested?"

"You are now."

Memories began to surface. The Parliament Ball seemed more like something he had watched, a fiction-drama, then something in which he had actually participated. After Max and Jordan had gone, the party had not broken up. Rather, the Ancients of Winter (Keeler liked that better than Hibernians. It had a ring to it) had gossiped all the more animatedly.

Manchester had been something of an outcast, had never fitted in. A strange little man whom no one had ever liked, Keeler almost felt pity for him. Imagine being a wallflower for three thousand years.

He emerged from the hygiene pod and began assembling his shirt and jacket. "What I am interested in is getting alone in a room with someone who was alive during the Commonwealth Era, setting down my recorder and not stop asking questions until my voice is completely gone."

"I think the entire crew shares in that wish, Commander."

The remark stung him in just exactly the way another woman's had very, very long ago. The last time he had known a woman with a mind and a tongue like that, he had married her.

"Imagine having lived long enough to see whole civilizations rise and fall."

"Only they haven't," said Gotobed, once again being so excitingly insightful. "There has only been one civilization on this planet, and his neither risen nor fallen in all these centuries."

"Za, which means no wars, no upheavals, no revolutions."

"The cold probably has something to do with that," Gotobed suggested. "Takes away the will to fight."

Keeler rolled his eyes. "Who taught you that nonsense? Never mind, the point is, none of the events that usually destroy historical records happened here. Somewhere on this planet, there may still exist historical records of the original Commonwealth. Perhaps, they may even point us to Earth. And if not, there are a hundred thousand people here who were *alive* in that period. If each just remembers a few bits of information."

He finished putting himself together. He had caught a quick look at his reflection in the hygiene pod's looking glass. His hair, he knew, was as wild as weeds, but he didn't think it mattered. "Shall we go."

"They're waiting." Together, they entered a long, stone block hallway lit with square blocks of light set in the walls. Most of these had some kind of design at the front. There were doors set every four meters or so. He guessed these were other rooms. "This is like a hotel," he muttered. "Did you sleep well."

"That makes two personal questions."

"Then, don't answer it. I'd rather ask a different personal question, if that's all right."

"Use it wisely. Oh, what the shank do I care, use it any way you want."

Stop flirting with me, Keeler wanted to shout at her. He found something else to ask. "If you had not been assigned to the Odyssey Project, where would you be now."

"How could I possibly know that?"

"Okay, where would you have wanted to be?"

"Commander of the Hyperion Moonbase."

"Hm," Keeler said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I figured you'd want to be in a position of authority, and I was thinking ... cocktail waitress? Ah, but our host approaches. Good morning, dear lord."

"Cocktail waitress?"

"Commander, you look well-rested."

"The party appears to be in full swing," Keeler answered.

"The Parliament Ball is not a party," Lord Tyronius hissed in offense.

"Sorry, didn't mean to rub you the wrong way, big guy. May I call you 'Big Guy?'"

"No, you may not," Tyronius sighed.

"Oh."

"We already have a Lord Big Guy. It is clear you have many questions about our way of life, here."

"More than a few, za."

"I thought we would begin with a tour of my estate," Tyronius offered. "My life and my lands are fairly typical of this world. It will be a beginning."

It was going to be a large tour group. Lear was already there, looking fresh and pressed in her dress uniform, and was speaking to much the same group, minus Thunderhead and Churchwhite, that had greeted them on the previous day. There were a dozen others from the ship's crew, mostly anthropologists.

"Where is Tactical TyroCommander Redfire?" Keeler asked Lear.

"He requested a shuttle back to *Pegasus*," Lear explained. "*Chloe* is en route from *Pegasus* now and will transport him home."

"He probably wanted to assess the tactical situation," Keeler said absently.

"He said he wanted to check on Max," Gotobed corrected.

Lear jumped on that statement like it was a loose coin. "... and I assure you, Lords and Ladies, that none of us considers the actions of one of your people to be reflective of the whole of your world."

Oskkokk sighed. "You mean the business with the boy? *That*? That was nothing. I am surprised anyone is making a deal of this at all."

"Perhaps you should," said Deacon Blackthorn. "This is a decadent world, after all."

"I trust your period of somnolence was satisfactory?" Brigand asked.

"I slept well. Too well, and too long," Keeler answered, wondering, a little perversely, how many layers of leather the Ancient had to strip off in order to sleep.

"How long is your sleep period?" Brigand asked. "Typically, I mean."

"Four hours usually does it," Keeler answered. "How much do you sleep?"

"A great deal," Brigand answered. "It used to be said that those who slept too much wasted a third of their lives." He sniffed. "How much is a third of eternity? What does it matter?"

"I think that's enough egghead talk, boring my guests, the very idea. Let us started. Come this way," said Tyronius, and he began walking toward the back of the great entrance hall. He led them through the enormous main hall, this time through the back way. "You've seen the house, I trust," he barked at them. "Yes, yes, of course you have. Don't think I haven't seen you sneaking out of the main ballroom to poke around in my chambers, or 'getting lost,' on the way back to your sleeping quarters." He opened a great rear door, permitting a blast of chill wet air inside, and the blinding light of the sun glinting off the snowpack. "Now, let me show you the rest of the grounds."

He walked into the snow. The crew of *Pegasus* put on dark eyeshades and shivered against the cold breath of Winter. Tyronius, throwing his cape dramatically over his shoulder, cut a dashing figure against the backdrop of mountains and the sea.

"I came to this rocky shore 2,400 years ago. It was at the time we were all moving away from our original landing sites. It was considered dangerously remote at the time, but that was what I wanted. Since then, I have traveled over the entire surface of this planet, from the Glaciers of Polaris Extremis to the Fjords of Australis Extremis. From the frosty desert of the Dessication to the Ice Canyons of the Back of Beyond, where the wind picks up sounds from around the planet and they echo like voices and bells. I

have never come to regret choosing to make my estate here, on the peninsula of Dancer's Jetty."

"How large is your estate?" Gotobed asked.

"I have demarcated an area of 264,000 hectares, and beyond it are open hunting lands, shared by myself and the adjacent estates. Every time someone set up a larger estate, I annexed another piece. No one was going to have a larger estate than Tyronius!"

"Have you ever fathomed why you all became immortal after settling on this planet?" Gotobed asked.

Blackthorn answered. "I devoted centuries of scientific inquiry to the question of our immortality. I have deduced that something enables our cells to reproduce without error ever creeping into the process. Something else alters our metabolism. Something else keeps our bodies from degrading in any way. In my notes, I have centuries of observations and investigations on the magnetic field, the chemistry of the oceans and atmosphere, the climate, and the various energy fields that emanate from the planet. I have studied the interactions between all these things, but the mechanism by which our lives are prolonged, apparently infinitely, continues to elude me."

"Oh, horsefeathers!" Tyronius exclaimed. "Scientific mumbo-jumbo. Do you really wish to know the secret to immortality, my dear?"

"Do you know what it is?"

"There is no other trick to being immortal except not dying," he told Gotobed, a little angrily. "Being immortal doesn't imbue you with wisdom, or nobility. It just gives you an absurdly long span of years to contemplate the futility of this existence."

"What about this us?" Gotobed asked. "What effect will being here have on us?"

Brigand, once again, flexed his muscles. He always did this as a preamble to speaking and it always made his leathers crunch together in a suggestive way. "You will probably not be here long enough for whatever has caused this phenomenon to act on your bodies. Even if it did, your physiology will eventually recover, once you have returned to space."

"And you will, most certainly, be returning to space," said Lord Oskkokk. "Tell me, Lord Tyronius, why are you so eager to give away our world's secret?"

"Because I find our vanities have grown tedious, as has most of the companionship on this planet. Some new blood would do us all good, I say."

"You sound bitter," said Keeler.

"Do I? Well, I must learn to watch my tongue. Perhaps, this is a good spot to begin an object lesson." He had led them to the front of a massive structure of stone and timber. The wood was aged and utterly, utterly black. "I harvested these trees from a stand that grew on the lee side of that mountain," Tyronius explained. "It took four hundred years for them to grow back, but I had time."

Seeing the wood, a question occurred to Keeler. "What about the other life forms on this planet?" he asked. "Trees, plants, animals, amoebas."

"My observations suggest that native life forms also have extremely long life spans," Blackthorn answered for him.

Tyronius added. "Nothing dies here, except by predation, consumption, starvation, or adversity."

"What about the animals you brought with you?" Gotobed asked.

"Terran animals also had their life expectancies prolonged. However, they have not lasted as long as we have. They were almost all dead within a thousand years. They were also rendered infertile, as were we."

"Infertile, but hardly impotent," Tyronius chuckled. "Oh, that's a witty one. Behold, gentlemen ... and ladies, my stables."

He swung the door open, and behind it was a cavernous structure, where the air was warm, humid, and heavy with the smell of meat, fur, and manure.

Tyronius explained, again, in the expository narrator tone of voice. "We adapted native life forms to our needs. There were few species suitable to our domestication. There is a kind of Tundra Oxen, a kind of caribou, a breed of seal with a very tasty flesh."

"What's a seal?" Keeler thought.

"The animals of this planet did however prove extremely resistant to domestication. So, for the first few centuries, we had to hunt them."

When all were in, Tyronius closed the door behind him. He did not break the rhythm of his speech. "Each predatory animal on this planet requires a minimum of 400 prey animals to sustain him. So, wildlife on this planet has a cycle. Predators increase in number until the population of prey animals is insufficient to support predators. The predators eat each other, and eventually starve. When the population of predators drops, the population of prey animals recovers, and the cycle begins again. However, each time this happens, the surviving predators become smarter and fiercer, and the surviving prey becomes more difficult to hunt."

Tyronius led them through a rather dark passageway, "We still hunt. It is one of the few diversions afforded us on this dreary little rock, but we have, by selectively breeding the weakest and most docile of the herds, domesticated a few breeds."

He undid the rather ingenious mechanism that secured the large, heavy wooden door to the livestock vivarium. It was something one of them had come up with in the previous three thousand years, as simple as a latch or a lever, but more refined, balanced, and secure. "There, now, come and see."

In front of them was a vast space of stables, and even small pasturelands, contained in what had been a large crevasse, deep in the rocks. Some snow managed to drift downward, but it sublimated before hitting the Earth.

"This area is heated by geothermal vents, and maintains a temperature between 5 and ten degrees centigrade. The animals can graze on the plant-life, and on the hay, alfalfa and feed crops I grow in my greenhouses."

There were some large hairy, milk-beast-like beasts moving slowly, and restively, on the patches of blue and green grass. Actually, the resemblance to milk-beasts was a stretch. These creatures had large, multi-segmented bodies, like giant mutant caterpillars. Their heads were huge and furry, equipped with insect-like pincers and tiny black eyes, four of them each, that peered out from under mops of shaggy, frost-gray hair, a pair at the front of their heads, and a pair at the rear.

Gathered in an enclosure nearby was a herd of furry, waddling, flightless bird-like things. They stared at the visitors with glowing yellow eyes, but otherwise remained motionless.

The smell was ungodly.

From around some of the nooks and crannies in the rocks, little furry yellow heads occasionally popped out and could be seen. It was impossible to see their bodies, but they gave the impression of being adorable.

"How cute!" said Gotobed. "What are those?"

"Yellow peepers."

"What a charming appellation," said Goneril Lear.

"Delicious, too," said Tyronius. "Come this way!" He led them through the pastures. The ground grew softer and more giving beneath their feet. It was covered with longish strands of black and green spotted grass. It put some of the crew in mind of Sapphire in early spring. A fresh wet breeze blew down from overhead.

Tyronius continued to lead them, almost a kilometer, to a more open stretch of ground. Several great, reinforced domes constructed of a clear crystalline material enclosed in strong metal frames. "These are the greenhouses of which I spoke." He led them through a kind of airlock and into the space beyond. "You'll find them quite impressive."

This was like a spot of jungle in the arctic. Fruit trees and vegetable plants crowded around them. The air was bussing with tiny flying things. "This may not impress you much," said Tyronius, "but this structure and these plants are a great triumph for us. None of the species of plants on this planet are edible to us, and none are flowering. There are no insects on this planet and no native birds. Therefore, there is no mechanism for pollination. We had to find a means or we would have starved." He held out a finger, and a tiny hummingbird alighted on it.

"Good day to you, Lord Tyronius," it said in a squeaky, high-pitched voice.

"Good day to you, little friend. Lord Brigand was the Genius who came up with this development. If you'd be so kind to explain."

Brigand explained. "After searching through thousands of records, we finally discovered a species of Hummingbird on Valhalla colony that could be adapted to life on this planet. They live long, they reproduce incredibly slowly, with years of fertilization and incubation, but they do reproduce, and this achievement took two centuries of genetic manipulation."

"Could those techniques be applied to humans, to make you reproduce?" Gotobed asked.

"Perhaps," Brigand answered. "If you find a woman willing to endure 60 years of pregnancy. Also, be careful as you move through the greenhouse. These fruits won't be ripe for another ten years or so."

"Less talkee, more workee," said the Hummingbird, alighting from his finger and winging his way to a cluster of other hummingbirds. Tyronius turned and, after a brief show-around, led them out the way they had come.

Outside again, the sun had already peaked, and was beginning to descend. Clouds had fled, and there was a brief expanse of grayish blue sky far above the wide canyon where Tyronius grew his crops and pastured his animals.

They came again to the barn-like structure, and Tyronius led them back through it, emerging on the other side and returning toward the estate. "Does everyone here live on his or her own estate?" Gotobed asked.

"There are a few villages, but for the most part we have chosen lives of solitude."

"I would like to see a village," Lear said confidently.

"Don't let me stop you," Tyronius said.

"Have you always lived here alone?" Gotobed asked, marveling at the very expanse of the grounds and the buildings.

"Not always, but most of the time," Tyronius answered. "I have accommodated certain others for periods of time. Lord Humboldt, who occupies an estate on Humboldt Island, across the sea from here, once offered me his lands in exchange for mine. He would have tried to buy them, but what use do we have for currency on this world. In any case, I refused, and he tried to convince the Lords and Ladies around me to join him in a Confederacy to drive me out. Some agreed, but most did not. Those who did, I think, were more curious to see what result his adventure have on our society than they were eager to take my lands.

"He brought them here, there were five allied with him, and five allied with me. We faced each other across the hills, wondering whether he would try to kill me, or I, him. We came to feel very foolish, knowing neither could move against the other. Then, ten more I had on my side that he did not know ambushed him from the rear and disarmed his men.

"The question arose of what to do with Humboldt in his men. A Parliament Ball was convened here, the last time such happened before your arrival. The issue was debated. We could exile them, or confine them, but no one wanted to take the responsibility of enforcing whatever sentence we imposed, so Humboldt and his Confederates were sent back to his island, and life went on."

There was nothing for a moment, and Keeler asked. "Is that it?"

"Yes, that's all. Incredibly dull story, isn't it? Think about it long enough, and you'll understand this Purgatory we live in. Meanwhile, let me show you the Powerhouse."

The Powerhouse was a stone tower, flat on one side, curved on the other. It gave the impression of the stern of a ship about to take the final plunge into the tundra. Tyronius opened the latch, and led them inside, where an elevator awaited.

After a ride of a minute or more, they arrived deep, deep underground. The walls had been painstaking lined with stones fitted together and mortared in place. It was actually hot in this cavern, like a steambath.

A large turbine device was positioned in the center of room. Thick, coppery-colored pipes, caked with centuries of mineral deposits and looking almost like organic, stalagmite structures, thrust deep into the

ground. Other pipes and cables, similarly encrusted, led up and out of the cave.

"This is the power source for my entire estate," he explained. "Geothermal energy converted into electricity... a primitive form of energy, but easy to produce and manage, quite adequate to my needs. What do you use?"

"On our ships? Quantum wave energy," Technician Herrald Jayhawk, a blond, freckle-faced young man from the Technical Core explained. "It is only viable over short distances, which makes it good for spacecraft. On our homeworlds, we use a kind of electromagnetic plasma."

"Quantum wave is new to me," Tyronius admitted. "The Commonwealth relied on EM plasma, in ships and colonies, but as we dispersed across the planet, we had no need for centralized power stations."

The ground began to shake, a light shudder that might almost have been mistaken as a shiver against the Winter air.

Tyronius smiled. "That was nothing, a minor groundquake. The real shaking will not be here for many weeks, when Cardinal arrives. Have you seen enough? Shall we return to the house? Brunch we'll be served soon."

"Brunch," Keeler said. "I don't know what that is, but if it's food, count me in."

"It's a meal served between breakfast and lunch. You don't get quite what you would get at lunch, but you get a good meal and a slice of melon at the end," Tyronius explained. "Let us return then, there is nothing left but some hectares of forest, some mountains, and some cliffs along the seashore."

He led them back, up and out of the powerhouse, and toward the dark forbidding expanse of Castle Tyronius.

"Did you ever have a wife, or children?" Gotobed was asking the Big Lord as they waded through drifts at the back of his house and crisp flakes of a later afternoon flurry swirled around them.

"My son left this world to grow up and never returned," Tyronius answered, without a hint of sadness or loss. "And, I believe you have met my wife, Lady Goldenrod."

Keeler turned to the woman who had been holding his hand since their meeting this morning. She smiled. "Well, isn't this awkward," said the Commander.

"Don't let it be," said Tyronius. "We haven't shared a bed in two thousand years, and then it was only a case of mistaken identity. Mistaken identity! Ha! Mistaken Identity! I kill me!"

They came in through a side door and stomped the snow off their shoes and cloaks. In the distance, sounds of conversation and laughter rose above a dull roar. "I know you are eager to rejoin the festivities in the main ballroom, but first, there is one room I should like to show you." Tyronius led them back, through a secret staircase at the back of the kitchen and up to the very top.

"This is the pride and joy of my estate," Tyronius said. "I have spent, literally, centuries in this room, gazing out over my lands, considering the whole of my experience on this planet. I designed it as the intellectual and physical center of my estate. It is where I think, reflect, and... watch the centuries pass."

He unlocked the double doors and threw them open with a flair. "Ladies and gentlemen, my Conservatory."

The Conservatory was in fact an elegant room. It was done in glass set in some kind of wrought metal, painted white, topped with a graceful glass dome. There were plants, ferns and flowers, a piano, a hot pool of water. Its furnishings were elegant, the art on the walls old and masterfully done, the whole of it rich and sumptuous, yet at the same time, scholarly. It recalled, in Prime Commander Keeler's mind, the Observatory at the Keeler estate, being similarly old and appointed.

The rear of the room was dominated by great picture windows and a pair of glass door that opened onto a balcony that looked out over a vista of mountains on one side and the sea on the other. The mountains were cold, impassive and majestic. The sea hissed and roiled in gray-blue waves in the distance. It had to be one of the finest views on the planet, but what riveted the attention of the tour was the body of Manchester lying on the floor in a pool of congealed blood with half of his skull crushed in.

Chapter Seven

Winter – Habi Zod

Lambrusco and Brickbat were two well-known Enforcers from the nearby village of Ultima Thule, who were fortunate enough to be at the Parliament Ball during the murder. “Been a long time since I’ve done this,” said Brickbat, the tall, dark and handsome one, taking a recorder pad from a well-beaten attaché case.

“It’s like riding a rocket-sled. It will all come back to you soon enough,” said Lambrusco, his partner. Millennia had made the chronological difference in their ages negligible, but Lambrusco would always regret not having landed on Winter thirty years earlier, before the lines in his face had grown indelible, his hair had receded and gone gray, and sagging, wrinkled skin had formed permanent pouches underneath his eyes, and paunch had come to spread around his midsection. He was spending eternity in middle age. Some of the ancients had tried cosmetic surgery, but the faces they had arrived with had always reasserted themselves. Lambrusco had not even tried.

Neither of them wore masks. It would have been rude. After arriving, they had rounded up the entire tour group, and forbade anyone from leaving the estate.

“Based on the amount of congealing, I’d say the assault occurred four or five hours ago,” said Deacon Blackthorn, the former physician for whom there was little need in this world. He rose from a kneeling position over the body to wipe his hands on his cloak.

“Can you imagine,” Tyronius exclaimed, “Murder, in my own Conservatory?”

“Are you expressing horror at the crime, or at the choice of location?” Lambrusco asked.

“Both, frankly,” Tyronius answered, and took another swig from his flask of home-brewed cognac. “We were having a rather splendid party until that time. I suppose we are still, but nevertheless...”

Blackthorn continued. “He probably survived thirty or forty minutes before succumbing, poor bastard.”

“He lived forty minutes with a smashed skull and half his brains on the floor?” Lambrusco queried, somewhat incredulously.

Blackthorn removed his spectacles and polished them thoughtfully. “Our world gives us amazing regenerative properties. I know of a man who had most of intestines eaten by a gulo and managed to live, although the subsequent six years of healing were singularly unpleasant.” He gestured toward the limp form of Manchester. “This man’s cells did try to repair the damage and his heart kept beating, there was just too much destruction to the brain.”

“This is the same guy who tried to molest the kid last night,” Lambrusco said.

“Manchester, yes,” Tyronius answered.

“The kid decked him,” Brickbat remembered.

“That’s right he did,” Lambrusco picked up smoothly. “Where’s the kid now?”

“He is back on board my ship,” Keeler answered.

“When did he leave?”

“His Aves lifted off seven hours, thirty-five minutes ago,” answered Gotobed. “He has not been back to the planet.”

Brickbat struck an aggressive posture. “A lot of your guests were offended by that. Seems on their high and mighty worlds, they don’t approve of that sort of thing. There was one guy who slugged him, I understand. Who was that?”

“Tactical Commander Redfire, my second officer,” Keeler answered.

“What’s the kid to him?” Brickbat asked.

“Max Jordan was the son of his ex-wife.”

“But not his kid, right?”

"His father was a man she met while stranded on a planet for sixteen years. It's a long story."

Brickbat kneeled down to study the body "You can tell me later. Was Redfire *like* a father to him? Would he have killed a man to protect to his son."

"We don't kill people," Keeler stated with absolute firmness. "There hasn't been a homicide on my planet in almost three hundred years."

"So, you don't kill each other," Lambrusco said. "We don't kill each other either, but it's possible one of you could kill one of us."

"It might have been an accident," Brickbat said. "From what I hear, your people are stronger and faster than us. Somebody might have wanted to just hurt him, and forgotten his strength."

Keeler shook his head but said nothing more. He could not imagine any of his people killing anyone, even though, technically, they had killed quite a lot of people since the voyage began. All of that had been impersonal and justified, or so he said when he prayed.

"In any case, *captain*, I'll want you to make all of your people available for questioning, especially the guy that punched him," Lambrusco said, rising from the floor with a slight groan and cracks at the knees.

"From what we hear, you were pretty eager to show off this room," Brickbat said to Tyronius. "You've never had another human being here in over a thousand years, but you open it up to these strangers the same day there happens to be a body inside. Does that sound peculiar to you?"

Tyronius looked insulted. "Peculiarly stupid. I could have, and would have, arranged a less incriminating means of disposing of this man's remains. If I had any reason to kill Manchester, which I did not, I would have disposed of his carcass where no one would ever find it."

Brickbat craned his neck upward toward the ceiling. "Just asking, so why is this room such a big secret, anyway?"

"Because it is mine and mine alone, my sanctum sanctorum," Tyronius answered. "Or, was..."

"Anyone else know how to get in here?" Brickbat persisted.

"Only myself and Lady Goldenrod," he hesitated. "And Lady Scarlett."

"Hah!" Goldenrod exclaimed, and stomped her high-heeled pumps against the floor. "I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!"

"After we separated," Tyronius shot back at her.

"Like that matters," playfully, she insinuated herself closer to Prime Commander Keeler.

"Can we talk to Lady Scarlett?" Lambrusco asked.

"She was not in attendance at the Parliament Ball."

Lambrusco made a note of this. "Was anyone at the party consuming any mind altering substances?"

"Just some very, very good wine," Tyronius assured them.

"Is there any way out of here besides the staircase?"

Tyronius gestured toward the large stone deck that overlooked the back of the estate. The two detectives excused themselves.

A chill wind caught Lambrusco and Brickbat as they stepped out onto the balcony. The sun was going down, somewhere, but it was behind a solid sheet of clouds. The only effect of its departure was to make the day dimmer and grayer. Snow dusted the landscape in small gray dancing flurries. Lambrusco peered over the edge to the ground, four stories below.

"No footprints," he said. "The ground looks pretty dry though. I don't think footprints would have lasted in this weather."

"If this is how the killer escaped, he'd've had quite a jump."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm trying to put a picture together in my mind. How did Manchester and the killer get in here? How did the killer get out?"

Brickbat leaned back against the rail, hands deep in the pockets of his trenchcoat, letting the wind ruffle his thick black hair even though there were no women around to appreciate it. "My money's on the

Commander, what's his name? Redfire."

"What, you don't think one of us could have done this? Remember the Age of Assassins, when a lot of the Good Lords and Ladies decided killing off each other was the height of sophistication? I don't want to think that's all starting up again."

"Some of our upstanding citizens are still rotting in the pit from that. All I'm saying is, Redfire had motive. He was real mad at Lord Manchester. If it was your kid, wouldn't you be?"

A look of regret washed over Lambrusco's face. He had a daughter, but he could not remember when she had been a kid. It seemed like a moment. "It's not his kid... and Manchester wasn't a Lord, he was a villager like you and me."

"Not like you and me," Brickbat answered quickly. "I don't play for the other team, and I don't play little league, if you know what I mean."

"Redfire had more motive than anyone we know about so far," Lambrusco conceded. "Maybe these new humans don't have as much self-control as we thought."

"Maybe on his world, this is an appropriate way to respond."

"We should look into that."

"When are we gonna go talk to him, anyway?"

"No hurry, they're holding his ship. He's not going any place, and if he's guilty, the wait will rattle him, or give him time to make up an alibi we can shoot holes in later. What else do we know about the victim, Manchester?"

Brickbat checked his notepad. "Migrated here from Hibernia. Used to be a librarian. No family. Inhabitant of the Village of Lighthouses on Sequester Island."

"Lighthouses? That's at least ten days journey from here."

"Manchester was staying at one of the nearby estates when Tyronius announced his guests had arrived."

"Which estate?"

Brickbat checked. "Last known address was the Estate of Lord Oskkokk. About 200 klicks north of here on the Surekill Glacier River."

Lambrusco nodded. "Let's see if we can have a chat with Lord Oskkokk."

Pegasus – Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-n-Jam

A glass flew across Fast Eddie's ISS&J and smashed over the booth where Eddie Roebuck was sitting with Matthew Driver and Eliza Jane Change. Eddie stood and yelled at the small metal robot behind the bar. "Keep it up, homunculus. I think somebody has a great future as a waste processor."

"Have you figured out what's going on with Puck?" Eliza asked as Eddie settled down at the table once again. It was late afternoon, but they were all drinking perfectly innocent fruit juices.

"Technical Core came back with a diagnosis: Robot Adaptive Personality Disorder," Eddie explained. "See how I am? I had Falconer program Puck with some kind of slag that makes him adapt to my personality, so he can anticipate my moods, and so I don't have to explain things twice to him. First, it was great. Anyway, over time, this program adapts the robot to the man he hangs with, and the robot adapts itself completely to the owner's personality."

"But, you don't throw things," Matthew pointed out.

"Puck can't verbalize, but he can get frustrated," Roebuck explained, as some terrible noises came from the direction of the frozen drink machine. "Lethal combination. Excuse me a minute."

Eddie stood another time. "You better be mixing Bodicéan Fanny-Bangers," he shouted at Puck.

"Bodicéan Fanny-Bangers?" Change asked.

"Za," said Eddie. "It's a ladies' drink."

"So, what happened down on the planet last night?" Change asked. "Why did I have to authorize a semi-emergency evacuation?"

Matthew turned slightly red. In anyone else, this might have suggested embarrassment, but both

Eliza and Eddie knew that Matthew was incapable of embarrassing himself. So, he was embarrassed for someone else. "I really can't say."

"Flight Commandant Jordan's kid was molested by one of the natives," Eddie Roebuck filled in. "The kid and his mom evacuated the planet. Then, Commander Redfire decked the guy."

"How do you know all that?" Driver asked.

"The Chief Guardian never misses wet flight suit night," Eddie explained.

"Wet flight suit night?" Matthew asked.

"I know what you're thinking, but it has nothing to do with absorbency," Eddie told him. "What about the punch up? Did you see any of it?"

"Nay," Matthew admitted. "I was on the other side of the room."

"Good on TyroCommander Redfire," Eddie said raising his glass in a mild salute. "I'd have smashed the guy, too."

"But not Matthew," Eliza said, kind of teasingly. "Matthew's a good Republicker, and he would trust the planetary law enforcement and public safety officials to see that the offender was appropriately punished and subsequently rehabilitated, right Matthew."

Driver was under the vague impression his masculinity was being questioned. "I wouldn't sink to his level, but I would make sure he was appropriately punished," he said. Eddie snorted and shook his head, Eliza nodded inscrutably, He couldn't tell if she approved or was amused by his stance.

"Didn't Flight Commandant Jordan say anything to you on the trip up?" Eddie went on.

"I just piloted the ship." Thinking he detected a slight look of disappointment on Eliza's face, he thought of something else that might have engaged her. "I took the trip down and back with Trajan Lear in the second seat; the Executive Commander's son. He's a flight cadet."

"Did you jettison him through an air-lock?" Eddie asked.

"Nay, why would I do a thing like that?"

Eddie shrugged. "Heard he was kind of a snog. His mother deserves no less, wicked witch of the slagging universe."

"He's a good kid," said Matthew. "In fact, I am supposed to take him through a training simulation later today." He leaned back in the booth. "A really good kid, having him around has made me think..., oh, forget it..."

"Yeah, let's forget it," Eliza agreed.

"Definitely, Let's forget it. She really is a gorgon, you know? I mean, Ex-Commander Lear."

Matthew did not forget it, nor had he meant to, but they had failed to try and milk it out of him. He continued, "I look at Trajan and I imagine what it would be like to have a kid of my own. Teach him to pilot a ship. Watch him grow into a man. Do you ever think about having kids, Eliza?"

Eliza looked sour. "Maybe if you can find somebody else to gestate them."

Matthew tried to decide if she was kidding or not. Technically, what she was saying could be arranged. "Haven't you ever wanted a family of your own?" he asked her, and not for the first time.

"Let's be realistic about this, Matthew," Eliza said, in her way. Almost a year and a half of courtship, and she still addressed him like a casual acquaintance; had never come up with a cute nickname or a diminutive or anything like that. "I am the ship's chief navigator. You are a Flight Commander, with an entire Flight Group looking to you for leadership. For us to have children together, one of us would have to step back."

Matthew had not thought about this. He didn't think he could ask Eliza to give up her position. He knew that guiding the ship through hyperspace meant as much to her as *Prudence* did and possibly more. Her life might have no meaning at all without it.

At the same time though, he was encouraged. *At least she's thinking about it.*

"These high-powered marriages never work," Eddie Roebuck, turning back toward the bar, and then adding, "Oh, crap."

At the bar, Puck was draining some of its yellowish lubricants into a pint glass. "Oh, well done," said

Eddie sarcastically. "Real mature, Puck, real mature."

Winter – Habi Zod

Lambrusco and Brickbat met Oskkokk in the ballroom. The Parliament Ball was regaining momentum. There were 400 *Pegasans* and perhaps 500 Ancients in the ballroom. If there was any suspicion that one side or the other had murdered Manchester, there was no sign of it in the din and bustle of the ballroom.

Lambrusco commented on the apathy of the group, and neither his partner nor Lord Oskkokk could hear him. The band was playing, and musicologists from *Pegasus* were studying the instruments. So, he requested the Lord accompany them to a quieter alcove for the interview. By coincidence, it was the same alcove where Manchester had been punched out by Max Jordan and Phil Redfire a few evenings before.

Brickbat began the questioning, "We know Manchester was staying at one of the nearer estates, was it yours?"

Oskkokk, wearing a variation of his previous costume, this one in a black and white pattern with a bright orange cape. "No, Manchester was no longer at my estate."

"Had he been staying with you earlier?"

"Some time ago, late last year, if you must now. He left at the start of Dawnstar."

"What was he doing at your estate?" Lambrusco asked. He hated interviewing men in masks. He could never see enough of their faces to know if they were lying.

"He stayed with me long enough to harvest some crops, slaughter and cure some meat, and perform certain menial tasks around my estate. He is a villager with few skills and little ambition of his own. He relies on landowners, like me, who require occasional assistance to sustain our properties."

"Do you know where he went when he left?" Lambrusco asked.

"If he did not return to his little house in the village of Lighthouses, I can only presume he went to offer his services to another one of the nearer estates, perhaps to Stormcloud, or Goldenrod, or Brigand, or Churchwhite, perhaps to the Estate of Lord Hasselblad. I know Hasselblad has been attempting to breed Chiraccos as draught animals, sounds like the kind of thing Manchester would ... get excited about."

"You don't seem very concerned," Brickbat said, as though he were making a note of it.

Oskkokk sighed and looked bored. "Manchester was an itinerant, landless, villager; a weak link on the human chain; a minor godling in our Pantheon of immortals."

Lambrusco reiterated the obvious. "You didn't like him."

"I expended precious little energy thinking of him. He was a tool for my estate, nothing more. We had little in common to speak of. He, for example, never mentioned his attraction to adolescent outsider males to me."

"You don't care much for these outsiders, do you?" Brickbat asked.

"Indeed, no. They have already disturbed the peace of our world. That one of them should kill a man comes as no surprise. The mortals always seek to slay their gods, but they can only slay the weak ones."

"So, maybe you'd like to see them leave the planet and never come back, maybe stir up animosity against them, make them unwelcome."

Even through the mask, he looked disgusted. "Ridiculous, Tyronius is a lonely old man seeking comfort from people who haven't grown tired of his arrogance. When his amusement with the outsiders fades, even he will bid them leave, and we will go back to being a world apart from the rest of humanity, as we have always been. Are there any further questions?"

"Not now," Lambrusco told him, folding up his notebook. "But don't leave the estate."

"I have no intention of leaving until this most entertaining of dramas plays itself out. Good entertainment has been hard to find the last few millennia. Good day, gentlemen." Oskkokk, orange cape flowing in the air behind him, stalked off.

"Charming fellow," Lambrusco said, as though he had not met Oskkokk several hundred times before.

"Shall we talk to the commander, now?" Brickbat asked.

"I think he's been stewing long enough," Lambrusco answered.

Winter – The Aves *Chloe*

Redfire had been sitting, overnight bag in the seat next to him, for almost three hours. The two enforcers came through the hatch and admired the ship's comfortable interior as they wiped the snow from their feet.

"Commander Redfire, I am Detective Lambrusco and this is Detective Brickbat."

Redfire shook their hands, and regarded them darkly. "Do you mind telling me what this is about so I can get back to my ship?"

"Sorry to interrupt your travel plans," Lambrusco snarled. They had sarcasm on Sapphire, but this was a whole different level than Redfire was used to, like the difference between fine wine and grape drink. Also, such cops as there were on mostly-crime-free Sapphire did not have such contemptuous attitudes toward the public. They could not afford to, as they were only paid as a reward from people they helped.

"No one's told you what this is about?" Brickbat asked. "I find that difficult to believe. The people of this estate are big-time gossips, and this is the biggest scandal in quite a long time."

Redfire sat a little straighter in his landing couch. "I didn't feel very social this morning. I came straight to the ship, and I've been here ever since. I'm guessing it has something to do with last night, with that old creeper I beat up. I am guessing maybe ExTC Lear thinks I've been diplomatically incorrect and owe the man an apology."

Brickbat moved to the seat behind him, Lambrusco stayed between Redfire and the hatch, leaving him boxed in. Lambrusco asked the questions. "That's almost a good guess, Commander Redfire. Where did you go after the party broke up, after you socked Manchester?"

"I went up to my room."

"Did you stay there all night?"

"Neg, I couldn't sleep, so, I took a walk around the grounds."

"A walk around the grounds?"

"That's right. I felt a disturbance and went to investigate."

"A disturbance?"

"A feeling like someone was following me. I walked around the estate, but couldn't find anyone, so I returned to my room and meditated until the ship came."

Lambrusco continued. "Did you happen to find a secret staircase behind the kitchen, leading up to the Conservatory?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Why are you asking me these questions?"

"It's our job," Brickbat answered. "What's the word on your planet for 'cop'?"

"Cop," Redfire told him.

"No kidding."

"We don't have a formal police force. Our 'cops' are just freelance agents. Usually, they go around in funny costumes, which I am sure you know all about."

"Are you trying to be a comedian?"

"Why, do I amuse you?" Redfire bristled. "We can continue a discussion in comparative law enforcement at another time. Right now, I have to get back to my ship, so let's get on with whatever you're here to do."

"What's your hurry?"

"We have a tactical situation on board, and the son of my ex-wife was almost molested by one of your people. That's my hurry."

"He's dead," said Brickbat.

Color drained from Redfire's face. "Max is dead."

"No, not the kid, the old guy that wanted to play ball with him."

"I thought people on your planet didn't die."

"They do when somebody smashes in their skull," Lambrusco elaborated.

"Balls!" said Redfire.

"Did you go into the room at the top of the stairs?" Lambrusco asked.

"Neg, it was locked."

"That shouldn't have been a problem for you. You probably know a dozen ways to by-pass a lock."

"True," Redfire admitted. "But I didn't feel like it."

"Is that what you'll tell the judge? You could have opened the lock, but you just decided not to?"

Redfire looked shocked. "You aren't suggesting that I killed him."

Lambrusco feigned that he was backing off. "Why would you? It wasn't your kid. Then again, you did seem awful protective of the kid, and you even slugged Manchester after it was over."

"Za, and I'm glad I did."

"Is that how they punish child molesters on your planet?" Lambrusco pressed.

"We haven't had a case on my planet ... ever, I don't think. We have punishments for sexual offenses. The usual punishment was castration and exile to Jessorit Island. However, where I come from, in farm country, according to folklore, a more common punishment involved a bull calf, a bucket of milk, and the exposed genitalia of the offender..."

Lambrusco cut him off. "You don't have to draw me a picture."

"Do you mind if I look in your bag, sir?" asked Brickbat, who had already scooped it off the seat next to Redfire.

Redfire grabbed for the bag, then released it. "Normally, I'd tell you to keep your hands off my bag, but fortunately for you, I have a ship and a kid to get back to. If it will get me off this planet, be my guest."

Brickbat slipped clumsily into a pair of gloves. One could tell he was long out of practice. He fumbled with the latches. "How do you open this?"

Redfire showed him. Brickbat opened the bag, and pulled aside some bloodstained underwear and some bloodstained dress socks. Finally, he removed a bloodstained candlestick from the bag.

"That can't be mine," Redfire told them.

Lambrusco spun him around and began putting him into shackles. He began reciting an ancient ritualistic incantation to the lady gods of Justice that began, "Commander Redfire, you are under arrest for the murder of Clinton Manchester. You have the right to remain silent..."

Chapter Eight

Winter – Habi Zod

Redfire was subjected to an extended process that involved being photographed and having ink smeared on his fingertips. His uniform had been confiscated by his jailers, and replaced with a non-descript beige jumpsuit. Lambrusco and Brickbat took him, deep underground into Tyronius's sub-sub-sub basement, beyond the reach of light, but where the air was humid and sultry from the junction of steam-pipes that carried heat from even deeper underground throughout the vast property. It also smelled strongly of damp rocks and slightly of things that had been rotting for a few hundred, or thousand years.

If Redfire found it curious that the Lord had kept a dungeon, it was not the foremost thought that occupied his mind.

How had that candlestick ended up in his bag? He could not begin to guess. It certainly had not been there in the morning when he put his dirty laundry in it. He had left the bag in his room when he went downstairs and grabbed some meat and biscuits. With a glass of wine, this had been his breakfast. That had to have been when the candlestick was placed in his bag.

This meant someone else had killed Manchester, and sought to blame the crime on him. Why? It could only have been because of one of two reasons. Either the killer had simply disposed of the weapon in the first place he could, or it had been done deliberately to implicate him. Considering his earlier altercation with the victim, the first possibility seemed like too much of a coincidence. So, if it was the second case, then who and why?

When he thought of anything else, his thoughts were around how much he hated being here when there could be Aurelians plotting and scheming to wreck this world as they had unknown others. He hated being 100,000 kilometers from a kid who would be the closest thing he would ever have to a son, who probably needed him now, whether he admitted it or not. This all accompanied a gnawing, impatient frustration that Keeler and Lear had not managed to free him yet.

He heard voices outside his cell, and footsteps on the stairs that led down to this hell-hole. He walked to the door of his cell, which contained a small, barred window that permitted a limited view of the corridor outside.

Prime Commander Keeler came into view, escorted by a woman wearing the uniform of *Pegasus* Ship's Watch, a male ancient he did not know, Lord Tyronius, and Lady Goldenrod. "Hoy, Ranking Phil? How are they treating you?" the Commander asked.

"Aside from accusing me of killing a man and locking me into this cell, not too indecently," Redfire answered quietly.

Lord Tyronius leaned into the small, barred window. "There, there, my boy. I trust my accommodations are not too uncomfortable?"

"I've had worse," Redfire said.

"It's true, I've seen his dorm room," Keeler said.

"When are they going to let me out of here?"

"We're working on that, Ranking Phil." Keeler continued to explain, trying to find a way to speak comfortably through the hole with the thick metal bars.

"This is ridiculous, Ranking Bill. You know I didn't kill anyone."

Keeler held up a hand. "I have complete faith that you are innocent of this crime, but the Ancients insist on investigating it according to their own laws. When they have finished, they will surely have reached the same conclusion as we have."

"Commander, They won't even let me contact *Pegasus*. I can't talk to Halo, I can't talk to Max. I can't coordinate a strategy for dealing with Aurelians."

"Honeywell can handle the Aurelians. Otherwise, we're doing everything we can. I think we should be able to arrange communication with your family, or perhaps visits."

Redfire shook his head vigorously. "Neg, don't make them come down here. They'll be safer on *Pegasus*."

Keeler took this in, then continued. "I have appointed Specialist Gotobed to represent you with the legal authorities of this planet."

"Specialist Gotobed?"

"She has a grounding in law, and she's fierce, which, from what Lady Goldenrod tells me of Winter's legal system, is more important. Also, Executive Commander Lear is arranging for Truth Machines to be brought to the surface from *Pegasus*. Once they clear you, you could be out of that cage by the end of this very short day."

Redfire sighed. "I hope so."

Goldenrod put her own face into the frame. "Hi there, my poor little manslaughterling. You just put on a happy face and hang in there. If you're not guilty, you have nothing to worry about."

Keeler pushed his way into the frame. "Isn't she great?"

Redfire looked at the two happy faces pressed into the panel. His Commander had a look like he had never seen before. "Isn't she old enough to be your... primate ancestor?"

"Hey! I totally resent that," Goldenrod pouted.

"Can you imagine a better date for a history buff?" Keeler asked, waggling his eyebrows.

"And hasn't she slept with every man on this planet?"

"He's being mean. I don't like him any more. Can I hit him?" Goldenrod huffed.

"Don't worry, babe, I still like you," Keeler said, and gave her a little kiss on the forehead. "And no, it isn't every man on the planet, not by a long shot! Right snookums?"

Goldenrod giggled. "Not even *half*."

Redfire glowered at them.

"We'll, we're off," Keeler said, breaking the awkward silence that ensued.

"Off? Off to where?" Redfire demanded.

"Apparently, Lady Goldenrod is acquainted with some General who fought in the Ninth Crusade alongside my ancestor, Lex Keeler. She is going to take me to meet him."

"It's going to be ever so much fun," Goldenrod gushed. "He's quite mad, you know, the general I mean."

How could you tell? Redfire thought. *Indeed, anybody who is crazy by the standards of this planet is someone I definitely would **not** want to meet.*

"You're leaving me here?" Redfire asked. "I'm under the gun, captain. These people think I killed somebody. God knows what they'll do to me."

"Ranking Phil, think about what you're saying. Do you really want me to stay and help, or would you rather have Specialist Gotobed?"

Redfire sighed. "Point taken."

"I am extremely confident that you are going to be set free very soon, or I would not be going. I will be getting regular updates through my comm-link, and I will have Lt. Honeywell work on a rescue plan in case worst comes to worst." He leaned over and whispered to the Ancients. "You didn't hear that."

"We'll be leaving you with Underlord Thunderstoker," Keeler continued indicating the make ancient Redfire did not recognize. "And Specialist NightStalker, one of our ship's Watchmen."

Redfire cocked his head and looked over the woman. She was a statuesque redhead, strongly built, one of those dangerously sexy women big enough to hurt you. Aside from a small mole on her cheek, she was quite flawless. "I don't believe we've met."

"We haven't, sir," said NightStalker, standing upright next to the door, looking away from him.

"Then, you two should have plenty to talk about. I will check on your defense before I leave the estate. I guess they'll be taking you to the village for trial, but they'll bring you back here when it's done. Why? I don't know. NightStalker, Underlord, take good care of him, he knows where all the bodies are buried." A beat. "Well, maybe that was a bad choice of metaphor."

Redfire leaned against the door and closed his eyes. "Thank you, Commander. If you were trying to make me feel better about abandoning me, you've succeeded."

Redfire heard Keeler, Goldenrod, and Tyronius talking as they mounted the stairs, back to a well-lit world where people could go where they needed to go and finish the tasks they needed to finish. "I guess we'll be off as soon as I check in with Specialist Gotobed," he heard Keeler say.

"Perhaps, I will join you," Tyronius answered him. "Many of your people are preparing to depart. I would like to say goodbye to your Executive Commander Lear."

"Who wouldn't?" said Prime Commander Keeler.

***Pegasus* – Flight Commandant Jordan's Quarters**

"Someone is at the door," said Jordan's door. Jordan stood up from her reading couch and commanded it to open. The Flight Commandant's quarters were more open and spacious than one might have expected, trimmed in shades of teal and gray that slowly shifted patterns throughout the day. Also on the walls hung prints and holoposters from some of Sapphire's most avant garde artists.

Beyond the door stood three people she recognized as friends of her sons. David Alkema, who had become something of an older brother figure, his girlfriend, Pieta, and the Executive Commander's son, Trajan. All of them were dressed for sport, in blue and orange jerseys and knee length padded shorts. "Good Afternoon, Flight Commandant Jordan," Alkema said brightly. "May I say, you're looking lovely today."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"We were en route to the Meadows to play Happy Fun Ball, and we need a fourth. Is young Max available today?"

"I'll see if he wants to go. Hoy, Flight Cadet Lear. I hope you've completed your required flight reviews for today."

Trajan nodded. "My homework is completely caught up, and I have been doing extra training on the side."

"You've been training with Flight Captain Driver," she said in tones that indicated she approved of this. "He's a very good man. What have you been doing?"

Trajan shrugged. "Just simulations today. We did fourteen simulated high altitude cargo drops."

"You always hated repeating simulations," Jordan said.

"I guess I don't mind so much with Captain Driver," Trajan said. "It's different with him. He makes it easier." Trajan Lear did not possess the same degree of talent for using tact with superior officers who had the power to make or break your career that came so naturally to David Alkema.

"I'll see if Max feels like going out," Jordan said levelly.

Pegasus was designed with walls between quarters that could be removed to expand for growing families. Max and Sam's rooms had once been part of an adjacent suite. They were remarkably Spartan for the rooms of young adolescents, particularly Max. They had acquired few possessions growing up on Bodicéa, and none they felt inclined to keep. Jordan rapped lightly on Max's door. "Max, it's mom. May I come in?"

She gave him a long time to answer. When he did not, she knocked on the door again and opened it. His chamber was dark inside, but she knew he was not sleeping. "20% light," she requested. Ambient light increased until she could make out Max lying on top of his bed, on top of his blankets, wearing underwear and staring at the ceiling.

"Are you all right," she asked.

Max took several long seconds to figure out an answer. "I'm fine," he said finally, in a very tired voice.

She made her way to the side of the bed and brushed his messy bangs from his forehead. He didn't feel feverish. She could not sense what was going on his mind. She had never been able to. She supposed this was because he was half Bodicéan, but it always nagged at her that maybe her maternal instinct was not strong enough to forge a telepathic link, such as other women on Sapphire and Republic did with their

sons. She had to verbalize, and make a guess based on his response. "Your friends are here. They want to know if you'd like to play Happy Fun Ball with them."

Max remained impassive, expressing neither interest nor disdain. "I really don't feel well. Could you tell them I just can't today?"

"I'm sure they're concerned about you. Would you like me to send them into say hoy, or anything?"

"I don't want to talk to anybody right now."

"Don't you want to see your friends?"

"Neg, I don't want to, is that okay?" Max Jordan said in a tone of voice that said he was going to be really pissed if it wasn't okay.

Jordan sat down on the bed and brushed his head. He didn't even look at her. "Leave me alone ... please."

"Max..."

"I don't want to talk to them and I don't want to talk to you."

He had never been like this before. Jordan did not know quite how to handle this. For lack of a better alternative, she chose to honor his request. "I'll tell you're friends you're resting right now."

Max closed his eyes.

Winter – Ultima Thule

Lord Waterstone was tall by the standards of his world, although more than a head shorter than most Sapphireans. His hair was black, but flecked with gray. There were bags under his eyes, which themselves were under a thick and surprisingly animated pair of eyebrows. He wore an old-fashioned (whatever value those words had on his world) black suit with a striped gray and white tie, slightly pulled askew.

He and his assistant, a lovely young woman (She had been a child when her family came to Winter, but had spent enough time off-world to age into her mid-twenties.) named Harmony Lowell, were reviewing the case file Enforcers Lambrusco and Brickbat had compiled. They sat in overstuffed leather chairs in an imposingly large wood-paneled office in one of Lord Tyronius's out-buildings.

"So, the search was clean?" asked Waterstone, in his gravelly voice.

Lambrusco shrugged. "He told us to look in the bag."

"Any prints?" Harmony Lowell asked.

"Not on the candlestick," Lambrusco conceded. "He could have worn gloves, or wiped them off."

"Not without wiping the blood off the candlestick," said the latest in a string of attractive, dark-haired women to serve as Lord Waterstone's assistant. Harmony persisted. "If he was careful enough to wear gloves, why not dispose of the evidence?"

"It's not our job to argue the defense's case for them," Waterstone shot, in quick, decisive tones. "If they bring it up, we'll argue he was fleeing the planet, murder weapon in hand, ready to toss it into space."

"What else do we have?" Harmony asked. She was taking notes of the meeting.

"His fingerprints were on the door of the Conservatory," Brickbat said. "These newcomers, I got to tell you, have very strange fingerprints. Look like figure eights. Very distinctive though. Also, he has no alibi for the time of the murder. He claims he was walking around, exploring the castle."

"This rubs me wrong, Jack," said Harmony. "A well-trained officer with a tactical background, an expert in energy weapons and explosives, and he kills a man by bashing in his skull with a candlestick?"

"He also punched the guy in a ballroom in front of four hundred people the night before," Waterstone put in. "He didn't shoot him with a ray gun or blow him up then."

"I thought these outsiders were supposed to be smart, Jack. Redfire didn't make one smart move, including handing the evidence to the detectives. If I were defending him, I'd be looking to cast doubt on your whole theory of the crime."

"People get stupid when they panic," said Lambrusco.

There was a knock at the door. Lambrusco and Brickbat took this as a cue to exit. "Let's try to close these holes," Waterstone told them as he walked them to the door. "My first murder case in two thousand years, I don't intend to lose."

On the other side of the door, Executive TyroCommander Lear was waiting, with Specialist Gotobed. "May I help you," Waterstone asked.

Lear extended her hands. "Executive TyroCommander Goneril Lear of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. I understand you are the one's responsible for the legal disposition of Tactical TyroCommander Redfire."

"Are you his lawyer?"

Lear giggled. "Not at all. I am only here in a diplomatic capacity, to ensure that regardless of the outcome, relations between our worlds are not damaged."

Waterstone brushed her aside. "I am only interested in justice, not diplomacy."

Gotobed spoke up. "I am TyroCommander Redfire's advocate. May I come in."

"Are you going to offer a plea," Waterstone asked, grudgingly.

"A what?"

"A plea. The best I can offer you is murder two. He does 2,500 years."

"2,500 years of what?"

"2,500 years in a volcanic pit with Overlord Corvus, the last man convicted of murder on the planet Winter."

A look of rapture briefly passed Lear's face, but she managed to reel it back in before it became obvious even to the dead and blind. "Oh, nay, nay," she said. "I am no friend of Tactical TyroCommander Redfire, but I do believe he is innocent of this charge."

Waterstone regained his chair, spread his arms in a vast dismissive shrug. "You will be allowed to present your defense at trial. I don't think we have anything further to discuss."

"A trial?" Gotobed asked. "How can we have a trial when we don't know what the truth is yet."

"The purpose of a trial is to find the truth," Harmony explained cautiously. "Perhaps you are unfamiliar with our legal system."

Gotobed nodded, and planted herself gracefully in one of the more comfortable of the available chairs. "It must be a misunderstanding. On my planet, a trial is held only after the truth has been determined. The purpose of the trial is to decide the appropriate punishment."

"I don't have time for a comprehensive course in remedial jurisprudence," Waterstone sniffed indignantly. "If you would prefer, we can appoint someone to consult on your defense."

"That would be very good," said Gotobed. "However, would you be kind enough to explain to me the basics."

"The basics?," Waterstone huffed contemptuously. "All right, the basics are as follows. In our criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate but equally important groups; the enforcers, who investigate crimes, and the attorneys who prosecute the offenders. There will be a trial, in front of a judge. There will be six jurors. I will make my best case that your Tactical TyroCommander Redfire murdered Clinton Manchester. You will make your best case that he did not. The jury will come to a unanimous verdict, and if he is found guilty, Mr. Redfire will be remanded to us for imprisonment."

"Is that it?" Gotobed asked.

"Basically, yes." Harmony continued. "You can also argue, under our system, that Redfire committed the crime, but was not responsible for his actions."

"You mean, if he were under alien mind control, for example," Gotobed suggested

Harmony considered this. "That's not a recognized defense on this planet. How is justice done on your world?" Harmony asked.

"We find the truth, and we punish the offender accordingly," Gotobed told them.

"Which is what we do," Waterstone insisted. "We may have different procedures, but the purpose of our system is to find the truth and serve justice."

"There is a critical difference," Gotobed argued. "Every person put on trial is either guilty or innocent, right? But, under your system, if both sides are equally matched, and they are both trying to prove their point, than either side could prevail. The man on trial is 100% guilty or innocent, but he has a 50% chance of getting either verdict. If a guilty man has a very good advocate, and a poor prosecutor, he would go free. An innocent man with a bad defender could also be punished."

Waterstone bristled. "We have to trust in our system. It may not work perfectly in all instances, but the adversarial approach has served humanity well over the centuries. We trust that our juries will be able to discern the truth."

Gotobed thought she understood. "Ah, I see. So, ultimately, the responsibility for finding the truth rests with these juries. They must be highly trained, very experienced, extremely familiar with both the law and with the circumstances involved in the case."

Waterstone was almost steaming. "Absolutely not."

Harmony filled in the rest. "Under our system, we try to pick juries that know absolutely nothing about the case, so that they aren't tainted in any way before the trial."

Gotobed snorted. "Now, I know you're trying to confuse me, but how stupid do you think I am. A man's life is at stake. Surely, the jurors should be the most informed people we can find."

"We are being serious," Waterstone grumbled. "A knowledgeable jury would shake our justice system to its foundation."

Now, Gotobed was getting perturbed as well. "And the people who designed this system, were they insane or just psychotically misanthropic?"

"Specialist," Lear chided. "It isn't our place to criticize other cultures."

"I have real doubts over whether their system is going to give justice to TyroCommander Redfire. We should at least offer them the use of our truth machines."

"Truth machines?" Harmony asked.

Gotobed should have figured that they did not have truth machines. "Devices, used together with highly trained telepaths, that could determine instantly whether TyroCommander Redfire is guilty or not."

"There's no provision in our legal system for 'truth machines,'" Waterstone huffed.

Gotobed's sarcasm was unstrained. "I can understand why. If you knew the truth, you'd lose out on the melodrama of a trial."

Waterstone stood up and leaned over the desk, poking his finger at Gotobed. "Perhaps if TyroCommander Redfire had committed his crime on board your ship, he could avail himself of your laws, but he didn't. He committed murder in my jurisdiction, and he will be tried according to the laws of the planet Winter." He was so keyed up he was shaking slightly, and Gotobed thought he was going to hit her.

She wasn't afraid of him. She met him eye-to-eye. "When I walked in here, all I wanted was to agree to a way to find the truth. But now, as determined as you are to see Lieutenant TyroCommander Redfire imprisoned or executed for this crime, I am twice as determined to see him found innocent."

Waterstone met her gaze, with just a hint of fierce craziness in his beady blue eyes. "Then, take your best shot, Miss Gotobed. I'll see you in court."

Winter – Habi Zob – The Dungeon

Redfire stalked around the confines of his cell, which contained a large hammock covered with blankets, a wine cabinet, several books, a fur rug on the floor, and, toward the back, a large mineral bath and toilet. Redfire pounded the walls, "Somebody get me out of this hellhole."

"It isn't so bad," Specialist NightStalker cooed through the bars. "You could be outdoors. It's been sleeting for the past hour." Her voice was mellow and husky, and made him think of wine again.

Redfire came to the heavy doors and peered through the bars at her. She stood to the side, and all he could see was the bulbous outline of her large breasts straining against the fabric of her Watchmen's garb.

"Easy for you to say."

She took a breath. Her breasts heaved. "TyroCommander, seeing as we're stuck down here, just you and me ... and this other guy... may I ask you something about the Aurelians?"

"I don't remember you from Tactical Core, are you?" he asked.

He heard her laugh. "Officially, I serve in Meteorological Survey, an exo-climatologist. My specialty is tropical systems, but this planet doesn't have one, obviously. I volunteered to guard you. I've been a long time admirer of yours commander. Some of us on the ship, well, we're not officially involved in tactical core, but we get together and talk the Aurelians. We've come up with some really interesting... insights, that maybe are worth your attention. I thought that guarding you would give me a unique opportunity to discuss... some of my theories about the Aurelians."

Wonderful, Redfire thought. Why did every crewmen who had ever played the Game of Resistance fancy herself a tactical expert. "And of what interests are the Aurelians to a Climatologist?"

"The Aurelians are unlike anything we expected to encounter out here," she said. "Not human, but not alien either. They consider themselves the next step in evolution. That was what you said in your report, right?"

"Za."

"One might wonder, not if they are right, necessarily, but what informs this opinion of themselves."

"I would never concede that they were superior to us," Redfire said.

"You don't have to concede it, but if you are going to fight them, don't you have to understand their view of their own selves? Are you familiar with the word 'voluptuary?'" NightStalker asked, undeterred.

"Of course," Redfire answered. "It means a hedonist, a sybarite, someone concerned only with sensual pleasure."

"From what I have seen, it is a term that could apply equally to the Aurelians and to the people on this planet. The Aurelians achieved their philosophy through evolution, the Ancients have achieved theirs through longevity, but they are both at the same place. They probably would have a lot to talk about."

"I really don't want to talk about the Aurelians right now," Redfire said, and he meant it. He went to the back of his cell and lay down in his hammock.

"I understand, TyroCommander," NightStalker said. "However, neither one of us is going anywhere for a while. I will be here next to the door if you change your mind."

Chapter Nine

Pegasus – Fast Eddie’s Inter-Stellar Slam-N-Jam

On one level, the reduced popularity of the Slam-n-Jam did not bother Eddie too much. It was less work, for one thing. It also meant that the people who came on the off nights were regulars, familiar names and faces. On an especially slow night, he was free to sit with Eliza Jane Change with a big plate of hot chips and two steins of homebrewed ale, as he did this night.

“The planet’s law enforcement authorities have asked for all of Tactical TyroCommander Redfire’s personnel records,” Eliza Jane Change confided to him.

“And you gave them to them?”

“Actually, Ex. TyroCommander Lear did. She said we have to honor their laws, regardless of how idiotic they are.”

“I can’t believe they’re going to put the collar on TyroCommander Redfire. He was always an upright citizen to me, even if he did kill that assol on the planet.”

Change shook her head. “No one believes he did.”

“Even if he did, he shouldn’t go to jail for it. If it was my kid, well, I probably wouldn’t have killed him. I’m totally non-violent, but I’d’ve found a way to blow up his head real good.”

“Matthew, without using quite such vivid imagery, made the same point about the need of a father to protect his children.”

“So, where’s the fly-guy?”

“He is taking Trajan Lear through a simulated training exercise.”

Eddie, offended, shoved another chip in his mouth, and spoke as he chewed. “He’d rather do that than drink beer with us? What’s his damage?”

“He’s going to ask me to marry him,” Eliza told Eddie. “It’s been almost exactly one-point-five Republic years since we began dating, which is the prescribed waiting period, and you know Matthew.”

“Like dating a human metronome,” Eddie nodded. “What will you tell him?”

She slammed her glass down. “Damn it, Eddie, I don’t know.”

That was not quite true. She knew what she was going to tell him, she just had not yet figure out how.

Winter – Ultima Thule

The nearest settlement to Lord Tyronius estate was a collection of thick-walled buildings of timber and stone (finely carved, but weathered) with deep-set windows huddled together in a sheltered canyon just above the flood plain of an occasional river. The river ran only when subterranean lava flows melted glaciers in the highlands and water rushed into the canyon. This was the village of Ultima Thule. (formerly New Ultima Thule, before the inhabitants rather cynically decided that nothing was really new any more.)

In the largest building of Ultima Thule, there was an octagonal room paneled in dark wood, scrubbed clean and polished with pine needles. The atmosphere in this room was charged, like a psychic residue of fierce arguments and difficult decisions. For those who ran afoul, or were accused of running afoul, of the law in the Land of Geminorum Borealis, the name of the subcontinent on which Ultima Thule was the largest settlement, this was where they went to be judged.

There were two rows of benches, four deep, in the back of the room. The right side was reserved for those siding with Tactical TyroCommander Redfire, the Defendant. Its benches were filled with Redfire’s friends and some Specialists from Sociological Survey, studying the administration of law on this strange planet, all clad in Odyssey Project dress uniforms. Conspicuously absent was the Defendant’s ex-wife.

On the left sat several curious villagers from Ultima Thule and several Powerful Lords and Ladies who had cast lots and called in favors to see what promised to be the most diverting amusement since the Avalanche that wiped out Lord Harbinger's estate 500 years before.

Nearby was another seating arrangement, the most exclusive of all, with seats for the six villagers who would decide Redfire's guilt or innocence; the jury. They had juries on Sapphire and Republic, of course, but on those worlds, jurors were highly paid professionals, well-trained in all matters of law, justice, and philosophy. The jurors here were amateurs, who had actually been selected on the basis of knowing *nothing about the case*. Gotobed still could not shake this absurdity out of her head.

Lord Waterstone and his assistant took their seats the left-hand table. Feigning obliviousness to the crowd, they busied themselves with pages and pages of notes in front of them. A short time later, Redfire was brought in, dressed in a formal uniform, escorted by the Watchman, Nightstalker, and Lord Brigand. Specialist Gotobed was last at the table, accompanied by a heavy, strong white haired man in the uniform of a ship's Watchman. "How are you holding up, Phil?" she asked.

"Just fine, Christina."

"Do you know Chief Inspector Churchill," she asked.

Redfire squinted. "We are acquainted."

"All rise," called the voice of a tall, bald man standing at the back of room. "The Criminal Court for the Province of Geminorum Borealis is now in session. The honorable Justice Ponce de Leon Braithwaite presiding."

A dark-skinned man with a trim beard, his hair in long, tentacle-like braids unlike anything the crew had seen before, emerged. He wore a thin black robe. "You all can be seated now," called the Judge, his voice speaking in an accent that, even without the Lingotron, was different than the others. Throatier, manlier, but somehow lyrical "Now, will someone tell me what all the trouble is, here?" He reclined in his chair and rested a finger aside of his cheek.

Waterstone approached the bench. "Your honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, what we have here is murder." He paused for effect. "Yes, let me say that again, murder. On this cold, dark, dreary planet, the only gift we have is the gift of eternal life, and we prize it more dearly than treasure. Just as there is nothing more sacred than life, and there is no greater abomination than the wanton destruction of life."

By now, he had strolled toward the jury box. His voice fell to almost a confidential tone. "We are in a room with a killer, and he is seated right... over... there." He pointed at Redfire.

He continued, a little lower in voice, but no less intense and quickly, like a pot of hot water building to rolling boil. "You are going to here some shocking things in this court room. You are going to gruesome details of a horrific and violent crime. You are going to hear about a man who has literally made a career out of violent acts, which he calls art. You're going to see how Mr. Redfire was the only one who had the motive, and the opportunity, and the will, and the skill to perform this horrible crime and how he attempted to flee the planet, murder weapon in hand, before he was caught."

Waterstone was reaching his crescendo now. Every sentence was delivered with wide, angry, incredulous eyes. He turned to the jury and spoke with barely contained rage, as though he would do furious and terrible things to them if they dare let this killer walk free. "Your duty is simple, good lords and ladies. Listen to the evidence, and see if you can draw any conclusion other than that Tactical Commander Redfire killed Clinton Manchester is guilty! Guilty! Guilty!" With that he regained his table, pausing only a minute to fix Redfire with a long, contemptuous stare, as though guarding himself against the possibility that this crazed killer would lash out.

Specialist Gotobed, wearing a dress uniform and her long brown hair gathered into a distinguished bun, stood up behind her table. "Lord Braithewaite..."

"Judge Braithewaite... or better yet, your honor," he corrected her.

She nodded curtly, a gesture Brigand had taught her. "Your honor, I'm not here to give a speech. I am not completely familiar with the way law is practiced on your world, but I can not believe that having this jury guess what happened, based on an incomplete set of facts, serves justice. How can justice be done when we have the means to know the truth, and we deny it. We can prove Redfire was innocent with one simple test if you just let us bring down our truth machines, and remove any doubt as to his

guilt or innocence.”

“Objection,” Waterstone leaped to his feet and was at the bench instantly, as though he had projected himself there by sheer force of will. “There is no recognition for truth machines under the laws of this planet. If anything, the law specifically excludes mechanical devices that determine if a defendant is telling the truth from evidence.”

The judge turned to Gotobed and prompted her. “How would you answer his argument?”

Gotobed stood firm. “First, truth machines are not strictly mechanical devices, they are quasi-technological expansions of telepathic ability. Second, the truth machines do not tell if Redfire is lying or not, they prevent him from lying. He would only be able to tell the truth.”

Waterstone jumped in. “She’s asking the court to invoke a hyper-technical application of the law to accommodate an unknown, and unproven technology.”

Gotobed interrupted. “Truth machines have been the basis of law on our planets for over a thousand years.”

Waterstone was not finished. “Furthermore, counsel has not made any motion for this new evidence to be entered.”

The judge pursed his lips. “Technically, that is true. However, if counsel would present her evidence, her truth machine evidence, in the form of an opening statement, the court might be moved to consider it.”

Gotobed was about to ask how, when Lord Brigand stood. “If it please the court, I will submit a formal and proper motion on behalf of the Defendant’s counsel for the inclusion of so-called ‘truth machine evidence,’ into the proceedings.”

“Now, that is more like it, mon,” said the judge. “Counselor, Lord Brigand knows his way around the court room. I recommend you retain him as an advisor for the length of this trial. Meantime, I will rule on including this evidence when I have had a chance to see these truth machines in action. How long?”

“They are standing by on board *Pegasus*. We could have them here in two hours.”

“Then, we adjourn for two hours. See you then,” he hit his gavel on the table and everyone stood as he left the room again.

Gotobed turned to Brigand. “Thank you.”

A near smile twitched one half of the mouth visible under his mask. “The laws of this planet are quite arcane compared to yours. I will offer my assistance to ensure that your man gets the trial to which he is entitled.”

Winter – The Ice Plains of Sker

Dashing though the snow in 14-ton armored metal hovercraft propelled by a huge turbine pulse jet engine, William Keeler and the Lady Goldenrod tore through the arctic landscape at barely subsonic speeds.

The rocket sled, a monstrosity of metal and fire, half tank, half torpedo with long, banana-shaped skids underneath, dashed across a frozen lake whose surface was gray, hard, and mottled like marble. Snow devils whirled, rose and fell in its wake. Then, in a flash, it found a narrow pass between mountain ranges and charged through.

Goldenrod was at the controls. There were a pair of control sticks for steering, and a thruster cluster in the center column that had been jammed all the way forward from the moment they had departed Lord Tyronius’s estate. She turned to him and smiled. He couldn’t hear what she said, but he recognized the mouth movements. “Isn’t this fun?”

Keeler closed his eyes tight as the huge vehicle blasted though a series of drifts, scattering snow for hundreds of meters around them, and muttered beneath his breath. “Dear God, bless this rocket-sled and protect all those who travel in the rocket sled, and please, Dear God, keep the rocket-sled from slamming into the side of a mountain or plunging into a ravine and prematurely ending the life of your most obedient servant, William Randolph Keeler, Amen.”

Goldenrod, who could not have overheard him over the whine and roar of the engine, turned and looked at him. A grin spread across her broad, pretty features. "Do you want me to go faster?"

"Neg," said Keeler. "Must not go faster, must not go faster."

She threw her head back and laughed. Keeler double-checked the heavy restraints that secured him to his seat, then cast a long look through the windscreen at the landscape flashing by outside.

He had never seen anything quite like this world, although he might have had he visited the Borealan hinterlands or the ice-giant Archon in the Republic system. As it was, he never made it any deeper into Boreala than one of the finer ski resorts and no closer to Archon than the several tons of Archonian ice he had imported for his Commemoration Party when he was confirmed as Chancellor at the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland. (Said ice makes a very satisfying crackle in a glass of gin and tonic.)

First after leaving Lord Tyronius's estate, they had crossed an ice bridge across the sea of Hiver, clipping the tips off of icebergs trapped in the frozen water. They crossed a rocky shore then veered away from some rolling hills that looked surprising brown and dirty against the snowy landscape, like the spots of a brown and white cow.

Winter was not an ice world. Although the dominant geographical features of the landscape were glaciers, but they were often off in the distance. Much of the surface was snow covered, but there were also bare spots, which she avoided, and little canyons, valleys, and rifts that were actually green with plant-life. These were places that split open when Cardinal passed near, releasing life-giving heat from the planet's interior, or received the kiss of ocean currents warmed by the same dance of gravity and geophysics. Keeler had seen little evidence of human inhabitation. In some ways, the presence of so few humans made it seem more lonely and desolate than on a planet with no humans at all, like Medea or Loki.

They stopped with a bone-jarring halt. The craft slid slightly sideways as it crunched into the surface.

"Aw, nuts," Goldenrod snarled. "Of all the dreaded inconvenience and annoyance." She unstrapped herself from the seat and began wrapping herself in a fur-lined parka. "I brought you one, too. If this nasty little planet has anything going for it, it's that you can wear real fur and nobody bitches at you."

Keeler took the parka in his hands. His landing suit should have kept him plenty warm, but he wanted the fur anyway. "Are we there yet?"

She shook her head. "No, no, no, no, no, no. We've just gone as far as we can in the Snow Bounder. The General lives way out in the middle of the Dessication — the desert outback where snow almost never falls."

She unsealed the hatch, and was met by a blast of cool air, and only cool air. It seemed, actually, if not warm, then at least not booger-freezingly frigid as most of the wind on this planet.

Keeler followed her out into it. He saw that they had come to a place where the snowfields had ended. There were thin, patchy spots of snow stretching from where they stood to the horizon where they had come from, but in the other way was a vast expanse of parched rock and hardened sand the color of bone.

"The Dessication," she explained. "Climatic anomaly, driest place on the planet. Maybe you've seen it from orbit. It's shaped like a great big, ... you know, one of those things that doesn't look like anything else."

"A syngnathidae?" Keeler asked.

"Exactly. It's actually not that big, or, not that wide I should actually say. About, maybe 400 kilometers by 1,900 kilometers."

Keeler sighed and followed her out through the hatch and toward the back of the rig, giving thanks, in a way, that the rocket sled ride was over. He didn't care how they reached their destination from here. Perhaps, she carried an eight-wheeled Rover such as *Pegasus* used for ground transport. "Have you informed this 'General' that we're coming to visit?"

"No," she said, opening a large hatch on the right side of the still red-hot pulse jet. It was still giving off smoke and heat and giving a slightly acrid stench to the air.

"What if he doesn't like unannounced visitors?"

Goldenrod laughed. "Oh, don't be silly. The General doesn't like any visitors." With that, she extracted a large weapons vest with a kind of pistol in each side. "He has people traps all around his estate."

"Maybe this isn't a great idea," Keeler began to say.

Goldenrod shot him down quickly. "Do you want to talk to someone who actually fought in the Crusades, or don't you?"

Keeler swung his battle staff. "So, about these people traps. Do you know how to avoid them?"

"Don't worry about the people traps," she said as she pulled a huge, flat wing-shape from the back of the rocket sled. She gave it a hard kick and it unfolded into a two wings, looking like a baby version of the Accipiters *Pegasus* had on board for self-defense.

"Uh, what is that?" Keeler asked.

"Rocket Glyder," she explained. "There's an engine in the back. It will get us to the estate in no time, and we'll fly right over most of the people traps."

Keeler suddenly felt as though he had two stomachs and they were both sinking into his groin. "What do you mean most of...?"

Winter – Ultima Thule

About the time the sun rose again, the court was rejoined in session. Two women and a man had come from *Pegasus*, wearing the gray and black uniforms of the Ship's watch. Their expressions were quire impassive, as though detached from the scene, observing it from some outer vantage point. Metallic pads, arrays, and wires were attached at their temples, behind their right ears and down their right arms and connected to pads on their fingertips. It might have been some form of futuristic techno-jewelry, and in a way, it was.

Judge Braithewaite ordered the trial resumed. Gotobed approached and addressed the bench. "As I explained, the truth machines are not mechanical devices," Gotobed explained. "Or at least not entirely. Each of these people is a very sensitive telepath. Furthermore, they have been trained and nurtured in their gifts since childhood. As a result, they can form a telepathic link to anyone, not just with blood relatives or intimate acquaintances."

"What about those devices they wear," asked Judge Braithewaite.

Gotobed held up an example of the device. "These are highly sensitive neural links, very similar to the one's used in our spacecraft and other systems to link controls to the human mind. That's all it does. It's just a link."

Braithewaite studied the device intently, genuinely curious. "Explain to the court, how these machines are used on the planet of yours."

"Every accused on Sapphire has a right to avail himself of a truth machine. They join minds with the accused and he is asked questions in front of a judge, witnesses and a jury."

"And this is the sole determination of guilt or innocence?"

"Not at all. In our system, both the accuser and the accused have representatives who work together to determine all the available facts and evidence of a case. The purpose of a trial, under our system, is to determine as exactly as possible, the truth of a dispute or an accusation. Once the truth is determined, a jury decides an appropriate remedy or punishment."

"What if one of these... *truth machines* ... becomes corrupted?" Braithewaite asked.

"The other two would detect it," Gotobed explained. "In any case, the accused has the right to two appeals. One truth machine might be corrupted, but it is exceedingly unlikely that three, and all but impossible that nine unrelated truth machines could be compromised. The truth machines don't even know what case they will be handling until the moment they meet the accused."

"So, how do they make a man tell the truth," said Judge Braithewaite, now clearly fascinated by the proceedings

Gotobed held up another set of pads, wires, and arrays. "Put this on judge, and we'll give you a

demonstration."

"Your honor, this is absurd," Waterstone barked from his table.

Braithewaite held up a hand. "Silence, mon."

Waterstone approached the bench. "Are you going to risk letting these people into your mind? What if they compromise your judgment?"

"A few hours ago, you refused to believe these machines worked. Now, you want to say they're a tool of mind control?" Gotobed countered, beginning to get the hang of Hibernian legal argument.

"Bring it on," Braithewaite said, smiling and showing even and immaculate teeth, two of which were blue, having been carved from sapphires.

The three truth machines approached the bench and took positions around Judge Braithewaite. They attached the pads to his temples, forehead, and the back of one ear. Unlike the machines, he had to wear sensor pads on both arms and hands.

"He is ready," said one of the machines when the just was completely ensconced in the technology.

"We will begin," Gotobed instructed. The two truth machines on either side of the Judge laid their hands on top of his. The third, the man of the group, put his hands on the Judge's temples.

"Just relax, your honor," said Gotobed in a soothing tone of voice. "Just relax."

"I can feel them coming," said the judge, almost in a whisper. "I can feel them, like voices... no, like listeners."

"... like listeners," said all three truth machines in unison with the judge.

Braithewaite looked around in amazement. "How? What is happening?" said the Judge and the truth machines.

"The truth machines now share your thoughts," Gotobed explained.

"I can't read their minds," they said in unison. "Oh, wait... now I can. They are thinking that they clear their minds of distracting thoughts before they join with me. The only voice is mine."

"Let's begin the demonstration. Please say your full name," Gotobed said.

"Ponce de Leon Marquis Le Bon François de Carabas Phillippi Rafael Book of Deuteronomy Braithewaite," the Judge answered in unison with the three truth machines.

"Where were you born?"

"I was born in the city of New Montego, on the colony of New Babylon on the fifth planet of the system 447 Sagittarius."

"When did you come to the planet Winter?"

"I came to Winter in the Old Earth Year 3856 I was called here as a temporary advisor because of my extensive knowledge of indoor agriculture. In my absence, Babylon came under assault by the Hellgod Abraxas in the Eight Crusade. I came with sixteen kilograms of ganja in my luggage and used it to establish my estate," the Judge admitted, his face suddenly turned red with embarrassment. "I did not mean to tell you that."

Gotobed reassured him. "The truth machine process often results in the accused revealing more personal information than he intended. It is why the accused my also waive the use of truth machines."

"Now, Judge, I want you to lie." She led up a yellow card, about twice the size of her hand. "I want you to say, the card is red."

The judge stared at the card, as though there were something wrong with his eyes. "The card is..." he began, then faltered. "The card you are hold is... it is... the card is..." Sweat was beginning to break out on his forehead. Stiff lines and deep furrows of concentration. "The damn card is yellow!" he finally thundered.

Gotobed held up another card, this one was black. "Tell me that this card is white."

Braithewaite tried again. "The card is... The card is not... The card could be gruh ... gruh... gruh... No, I can't even say it is gray. I can't even say it's off-white. I can't say it's not black!" He broke free from the Truth Machines stripped off the wires. "Enough! Enough!"

The truth machines moved away from him. Gotobed hid her disappointment. There were a lot more

interesting parts of the test they hadn't even gotten to, including the description of underwear, although this last was more a matter of tradition than relevance anyway. "That was an intense and gratifying experience," said the Judge.

"If your honor will permit, I will now put the device on Tactical TyroCommander Redfire."

Braithewaite brushed her off, and began scribbling furiously on the motion papers Lord Brigand had so assiduously assembled. "That will not be necessary. I will render my decision now. Although, this technology is impressive, and would reveal definitely the truth for all, there is no accommodation for it under the laws of my world, and it is in my world where the victim was murdered, and he is entitled to have justice served under the laws of the planet where he lived."

Gotobed's jaw dropped. "But, your honor, you've tried the truth machine. You know we could know the truth of this matter in ten minutes if we put Tactical TyroCommander Redfire on the machine."

"He knows," said one of the truth machines, a tragically pretty blond woman, who wore her hair slicked back. "He also knows that absolute knowledge of truth would render judges and lawyers obsolete."

"Besides, he suspects this trial will provide entertainment for the people of this world, and ease the boredom of life on this planet," said the male truth machine, thin and drawn, with slick but close-cropped hair.

"And he knows his role will assure him of invitation to Alpha List parties for decades to come," said the third woman, shorter and more dour than the others.

Another flaw with truth machines is that they could still reach into your mind after contact was broken, a kind of psychic afterglow. Under these circumstances, this was not the right thing to do. Braithewaite pounded his gavel. "Remove them. Remove them all from my court room."

When the Truth-Machines had been hustled out, Braithewaite stood. "We will adjourn for now, and meet again in two days. The Defense should be prepared, by then, to present a proper case consistent with our laws."

Chapter Ten

Winter – The Alcazar of General Ziang

The scimitar — it must have been as tall as a man and as heavy as several tens of kilograms of razor sharp stainless steel — swung down aiming right between his eyes as Keeler lay flat on his back on the cold marble floor. He spared a look at the wild-eyed man wielding the sword, a whirl of malevolence in flowing white robes fronted by a long black-and-gray-flecked beard. The captain tried desperately to suck wind back into his lungs from the fall that had landed him on his back, under the sword. If he could do that, he might be able to move.

He had already survived, somehow, rocketing over a stretch of cold sand at several thousand meters of altitude and several hundreds of kilometers per hour of speed, strapped to the bottom of an iron butterfly with a wild woman. When they spied, in the distance, a large structure, the color of sand, consisting mostly of slim towers topped with delicate domes, Goldenrod had aimed the rocket glyder at the house and, seconds later, fell onto it, depositing them just outside the front gate, barely managing to avoid several large boulders strewn across the stretch in front of it.

The landing had been rough, but Keeler had come through mostly uninjured except for some gravel embedded in the knee he had collapsed upon. Goldenrod had picked herself up, brushed herself off and offered him a hand. “Wasn't that fun,” she'd said.

Until then, Keeler had been unaware that 'forty-five minutes of mortal terror' was a synonym for 'fun.' “What about the people traps?” Keeler asked, giving voice to a thought that had hung on his mind, through the terror of the flight.

“We flew over most of them already,” Goldenrod told him perkily. “They're mostly around the perimeter... mostly.”

“What about the ones that aren't mostly on the perimeter... mostly?”

“I don't know, mostly people don't make it that far, mostly.”

He had taken the hand she'd offered and she had helped him up. “Where's my walking stick,” he had asked.

She handed to him from behind her back. “It's very pretty.”

“Thank you,” he had begun to say, but not finished, because as he had taken the staff, the ground fell away beneath both of them. A great chasm, camouflaged beneath the sand, yawned and prepared to swallow them whole. Goldenrod shrieked, in delight or terror, Keeler could not tell.

The next thing he knew, the two of them were dangling over a pit hundreds of meters deep. The staff had reached out to span the gap, and Keeler held it in a death-grip, while she held his ankles. He pulled her up until she could give him an arm, then lifted her up until she could grab the pole herself.

He had been trying to work out how she could be so unafraid of mortal danger. As Manchester had demonstrated, their immortal lives could be ended by a severe enough injury. Did she no longer care, or was she just insane? He secured his grip and swung himself upward. He caught his feet on the edge and leveraged himself to the side, then helped Goldenrod out of the pit. Once out of the pit, they found themselves standing on a ledge, about half a meter across, between the trap and the wall of the castle.

“Fun, fun, fun,” said Lady Goldenrod, clapping her hands. “That was so ... *neat*...the way you just did that.

Keeler had lifted up his staff from the ground, wondering how to get in. A nice swing would batter it through the wall and make a nice entranceway, but would hardly endear them to the castle's occupant. “So, how do we get in?”

She had shrugged as if she didn't know, then answered him. “If we move around the wall, there are three access points. They're camouflaged, but I bet you can find them.”

Keeler had nodded sharply, and they had begun feeling their way around the wall while struggling to keep a footing on the thin edge of land surrounding it. No sooner had the thought entered Keeler's mind

that if the occupant of the castle had been as severely misanthropic as advertised, he would have made the pits go right to the edge of the wall, than an iron spike thrust through the side of the wall just in front of Keeler's kneecaps. It was followed by another at shoulder level, than another behind his buttocks and another that almost took him from bass to alto.

Thinking so quickly he might not have been thinking at all, he had swung his staff hard downward on the protruding spike, blunting the pointy end. He quickly effected the same treatment on each of the other spikes, executing these movements in almost balletic style. Goldenrod had clapped. "You are very impressive, Commander."

Keeler had slipped between the spikes as more began to pop out from the sides. "Get moving!" he had yelled. Once again, he had wished that his immortal traveling companion were not quite so unafraid of death. They ran, carefully balancing themselves between the edge of the pit and the spikes that continued to pop out with a *puh-szpit, puh-szpit* sound. To Keeler, it had been like witnessing the puberty cycle of a Sapphirean quill-beast from an insect's perspective.

"Stop!" Goldenrod had yelled suddenly. She had abruptly stopped in front of span of wall, three meters by three meters, from which no spikes were protruding. "I think this is it," she yelled to him. "Push!"

She had pushed hard on the panel and Keeler quickly had lent his own strength to the effort. Shortly, the wall had flipped up and over, depositing them on this marble floor with its amazingly colorful and intricate mosaic tile and a wild-eyed man with the sword and the black beard who had promptly attacked them, swinging the scimitar down to slice Keeler's head like a ripe melon.

Before he could complete his arc, Keeler's staff leaped into a protective position held with two hands in front of his face, just in the shortest possible moment of time necessary to catch the scimitar and deflect it stingingly into the hands of the man who had laid it down. The attacked dropped the sword and shook his stunned hands.

"Had enough?" Keeler gasped. The man circled, cursing agitatedly in some language the Lingotron did not understand, all the while vigorously shaking his wrists.

"General, I am surprised at you," Goldenrod burbled, happy grin still transfixed on her face. "You used to be so nice."

The man stopped, and with a deep breath recovered himself. His dark, dark eyes squinted and fixed on the staff the Commander held. "Thean!" he hissed.

Congratulations, you have correctly guessed the pedigree of my weapon. As a prize, you win the right not to kill me. Keeler scrambled to his feet, still holding the staff protectively in front of him.

"How did you come to possess such a thing?" the old man demanded.

"Family heirloom," Keeler explained.

"General, this is Commander Keeler from the starship *Pegasus*. Commander, this is General Ziang," Goldenrod seemed graciously unaware of what had just happened. "He comes from a former Commonwealth colony. They are trying to rediscover the lost worlds of the Commonwealth. Isn't that just *precious*?"

Unimpressed, Ziang asked. "What business does your new friend have in my sanctum sanctorum?"

"I was hoping you could tell me something about the Commonwealth, and especially the Crusades," Keeler told him. "Directions to Earth, that sort of thing."

"Earth?" Ziang's eyes narrowed. He spat. "Why would you want to go there?"

"Well, my family and, everyone I know is from there ... originally."

"Your family ... Keeler is it? Are you descended from the Admiral Lexington Keeler of the Christian Fleet in the Ninth Crusade."

"He is both my ancestor, and one of the Founding Fathers of my planet. Did you know him?"

"Indeed I did. Your ancestor was a brave and honorable man," Ziang said. "We should never see his like again."

And you should count yourself lucky, Keeler thought.

The man's manner changed, but only slightly. The harshness remained, but was directed away from

his intruders. "Rude! Rude! Rude of me. This is no way to show hospitality. Come, let me show you my palace. Let me arrange dates, nuts, and pastries. And coffee, steaming and black from my vines. Your grandfather was a great, great man," he patted Keeler on the back. "I would give anything to have one more conversation with him."

"I can arrange that," Keeler said.

Winter – Ultima Thule

In the courthouse of the Village of Ultima Thule, Lord Waterstone was completing his examination of Enforcer Lambrusco. "... and what did you *find* when you opened the bag that Tactical Commander Redfire was carrying onto the ship on which he was about to *leave* the planet?"

"When we opened the bag, we found bloody clothes and the candlestick that was used to bash in Manchester's skull."

Waterstone lifted a candlestick sealed in a plastic bag. "Is this the weapon you found in Commander Redfire's bag, amid his bloody socks and underwear?"

"I believe it is, yes, sir."

"I have no further questions," Waterstone said, despite the extreme emphasis on certain words in his examination of Lambrusco, miraculously managing to maintain an air of something almost casual, a certain throw of the shoulders that said *'Jury, the case against this man is so obvious, I scarcely need to put myself out convincing you.'*

Brigand leaned over and whispered a few things in Gotobed's ear. The judge saw her roll her eyes in disbelief, then nod slightly, perhaps sigh as she resigned herself to playing their strange game. She rose and made her way determinedly to the stand. "Mr. Lambrusco, I'd like to revisit your... your theory of the case. You contend that TyroCommander Redfire killed this Manchester by several blows to the skull with a candlestick."

"Correct."

"This attack, under your theory took place in Lord Tyronius's Conservatory."

"Correct. The pattern of blood spatter indicates the attack took place in the Conservatory. The only other place we found blood was on the clothing in Commander Redfire's bag."

"Do you have any physical evidence that TyroCommander Redfire was ever in the Conservatory?"

"His fingerprints were on the door."

"You found his fingerprints on the outside of the door. Did you find any on the inside of the room?"

"No, but that only means he didn't touch anything once he was inside."

"On the contrary, he did touch at least one other thing in the room... the candlestick. Did that come from the room where Manchester was murdered?"

"No, it came from the dining room where Manchester tried to make a grab for his kid."

"Did you find any prints on the candlestick itself?"

"No."

"How do you explain that?"

"He could have worn gloves when he attacked Manchester, wrapped the candlestick in a towel, or wiped it clean when he was finished."

"So, in your scenario, he grabs the candlestick from the dining room, carefully wraps it in a towel, or wears gloves to keep his prints from it, then he takes off his gloves or puts down the candlestick to paw at the door of the Conservatory, to which he presumably led Manchester."

"Or followed him. Manchester could have let him in from inside the room," Lambrusco suggested.

"Why would he have done that?"

"Objection," Lord Waterstone rose to his feet. "Irrelevant, calls for speculation."

"Sustained, mon." To Gotobed. "That means he doesn't have to answer."

Undeterred, Gotobed pushed her attack. "He attacks Manchester, you said it's a very bloody attack. Would his clothes have become bloodied?"

"Not necessarily. The fabric your people use seems to repel contamination."

"Not even the gloves he would have worn to wield the candlestick? They would have been soaked in blood, wouldn't they?"

"We haven't located the bloody gloves yet."

"The gloves you claim he used to keep from leaving fingerprints on the candlestick. You've never found them?"

"No."

"So, he gets rid of the gloves, but he keeps the murder weapon, under your theory."

"He could also have wrapped it in a towel, or a napkin or anything."

"Have you found a bloody towel or napkin or 'anything' in the estate?"

"No, we haven't."

"In other words, you found none of Manchester's blood anywhere on Redfire's clothes except for the clothing in the bag that came into contact with the candlestick."

"He could have disposed of them."

"He could have disposed of the candlestick as well, couldn't he have? If he had washed it clean and replaced it in the dining room, no one would have noticed, correct?"

Waterstone jumped to his feet. "Objection, calls for speculation."

Judge Braithewaite shook his head. "I'll allow it, mon."

Lambrusco conceded very little. "If he had been thinking clearly, he might have done that."

"Instead, after carefully covering his tracks, disposing of his bloody clothes, washing himself clean of any physical evidence, he puts the murder weapon into a bag and hands it over to you when you ask for it, correct?"

"This was a crime of passion. People don't always think clearly..."

"That isn't an answer."

"Answer, mon," said Braithewaite.

Lambrusco sighed. "Correct, but he was in the process of taking the murder weapon off the planet when we arrested him."

"Did he resist or object in any way to your search of the bag?"

"He seemed to resent it."

"I didn't ask if he resented it. Did he resist or object to your search?"

"No."

"That's all I need to know from this witness," Gotobed said, regaining her seat.

"She's a quick-study," Harmony whispered to Waterstone.

"If she was trying put doubt in the minds of the jury, I don't think she succeeded," Waterstone grumbled drily. He stood. "Redirect, your honor."

The judge waved him forward, and he strutted up to Lambrusco. "Were any fingerprints other than Redfire's discovered on the candlestick?"

"No."

"On the travel case?"

"No."

Waterstone seemed satisfied. "Nothing further."

Pegasus — EdenWorld Vivarium, Deck 14

Pieta, David Alkema, and Trajan Lear lay on the green grass of a small arboretum off one of the primary vivaria, one dedicated to botanical samples from EdenWorld Colony. The collection was limited to those species of plants that did not eat people and whose scent did not produce hallucinogenic or aphrodisiac effects as quite a large number of Edenian plants did. David Alkema believed there were going to be a *lot* of follow-up missions to EdenWorld.

Without Max Jordan, their attempt at Happy Fun Ball had fallen apart quickly, and now they lay on their backs, staring up at the strange golden simulated sky of Eden, watching holographic clouds tell pantomime stories of monsters and dragons. When the peace and silence became unbearable, Pieta nudged Alkema and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Alkema, being the youngest of four brothers and the beneficiary of wisdom they acquired by trial and error, knew exactly what a woman meant by this question. "I was thinking how much I loved you, what nice things I could do to show it, and also wondering what you were thinking about," he answered, covering all the bases.

"I was thinking about when we met," she said, sounding gratified that she could immediately get to the conversation she wanted to have without having to listen to whatever thoughts might be on David's mind. "Remember, I was just a little girl, then. I was so..."

Obnoxious, Alkema and Trajan thought, for them this had been less than two years ago.

"... sweet and innocent," she finished. For her, almost eighteen years had passed. "I saw you and I just thought, I'm going to have that man. I'm going to keep him all to myself just like mater kept Tobias. I can't believe I ever thought that way, now."

She nestled in a bit closer to him. "When you first brought me back to the ship and you didn't want to have sex with me, I was devastated," she continued. "It took me forever to learn that things are different here."

"I was surprised, too," Alkema said. "Because you were Iestan. In the Book of Vesta, *Interludes and Examinations*, it's written that sex is the closest humans come to godliness, because the power to create life is divine, and procreation is as close as we come to it. Iestans are supposed to approach sex with reverence."

"We were taught that those verses only apply to procreative sex, our interpretation was guided by the prophet Juno," she shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I just was so hurt that you still rejected me when I first came on board."

"It wasn't rejection," David Alkema told her.

"I know that now," she said cutting him off. "You were still adjusting to me being a woman, and not a little girl."

"I would have been a first rank jerk to take advantage of you then," Alkema put in.

She paused. "In those first days on your ship, I missed Tobias, and Tamarind, but Jordan wouldn't let me stay in my chamber. She forced me to ... to try and find a place in your crew."

"You've done an amazing job with Sam and Max," David told her. "This transition was a lot harder on them than you, and I don't think Commandant Jordan could have managed without you."

"Max has always been pretty mature about things, but Sam has been a handful. Remember when he hid his comm-link in the UnderDecks and made everyone think he was trapped in a water conduit?"

Alkema chuckled at the memory. Trajan shivered whenever anyone brought up the topic of water conduits. At Eden, he had nearly died in one.

Pieta continued. "Or the time he and Marcus drank the pure syrup at Fast Eddie's Slam 'n' Jam and ran around the ship singing and dancing,"

Alkema laughed out loud. "Or the time Sam filled up Grounds-Technician Willard's quarters with cream corn after he took his hoverboard away from him."

Trajan cracked a smile. That had been a funny one.

Alkema remembered another. "Remember when he broke his leg in the natatorium and, while he was stuck in his chamber, made all those prank calls to Eddie, asking for crewmen who didn't exist?"

"Like Specialist Assmaster," Trajan remembered

"And Specialist Buck Naked?" Pieta added.

"Lieutenant Incontinentia Buttocks!" Alkema remembered. "Technician Phil McCracken!"

"I don't know where he gets it from," said Pieta. "Jordan isn't like that. I'm not like that. Tobias sure wasn't like that."

"TyroCommander Redfire is like that," Trajan said. Reminded suddenly of the unpleasantness of the trial on the surface, the laughter dropped dead, and the conversation endured an awkward pause.

"I am sure they'll find him innocent," Pieta said, to break the silence. "They have to."

"Prime Commander Keeler won't let them get away with it, if they do, which they won't," Alkema said. "He already has Honeywell working a rescue plan."

Pieta sighed, reached over and stroked Alkema's arm. "I think things have begun to grow between us, don't you?"

"Definitely," Alkema answered. "I don't see you as a little girl any more, that's for sure. You've grown... in every way that matters."

"Thank you for noticing," she said, in a way that might have been playful. "I love you," she added.

"I love you, too," said Alkema, with more confidence than affection. He gave Pieta a kiss and then turned toward Trajan. "I hope you don't feel left out of our intimate conversation?"

"Huh? ... oh, nay. I could leave if you want."

"No, stay here," Pieta insisted.

"What were you thinking about, anyway?" David asked Trajan.

Trajan stared at the auburn clouds in the sky. "Max hasn't been in school for three days."

"Are you worried about him?"

"I guess."

Alkema nodded. "We'll have to do something about him. I'm worried about him as well."

Winter – Ultima Thule

Commander Redfire was on the stand. Waterstone was questioning, pacing and stalking through the courtroom as though it was an arena and he was a gladiator. He paced and strode between the prosecutor's table and the jury box, pretending to formulate the questions he had in fact rehearsed for days.

"Mr. Redfire, how did it make you feel when you learned Clinton Manchester had propositioned your son, sexually?"

"Max is not my son," Redfire reminded him, "but I was shocked and angry."

"So, you hit him?"

"I cold-cocked him," Redfire said with firmness and defiance. "It was an appropriate and measured response in accordance with the custom of self-policing practiced by my people and enshrined in our laws."

Waterstone continued, breathing quick, deep, contemptuous breaths. "So, you would have us believe that you acted out of a pure sense of justice," he spat out the word 'justice' with a growl and with eyes that almost seemed ready to shoot out of his head. "I don't believe you, Mr. Redfire. I think in your fury, the furthest thing from your mind was your people's law, Mr. Redfire. I think that your assault of Manchester, an assault that several witnesses have described to this court, was an expression of your own rage ..." pause, change of pitch, "over what he attempted to do with that child."

Gotobed stood up. "Your honor, Lord Waterstone is just acting agitated in hopes of getting the jury to empathize with his rage."

Judge Braithewaite's eyes widened slightly. "What's your point? Do you have an objection, mon?" He seemed to be suppressing his amusement.

"Za, I do object, za. How can you get justice by working up people's emotions. You have to be dispassionate and examine the facts objectively."

Braithewaite shrugged his locks. "That's the system. It works most of the time. Objection over-ruled."

Gotobed sat down, and Brigand comforted her. "You broke his rhythm, well done."

Waterstone launched back into it, seeming not at all diminished. "Answer the question, Mr. Redfire."

"Uh, was there a question?" Redfire asked.

"Was your assault on Manchester an expression of your rage?"

"Za."

"Let the record show that the defendant answered za, which means 'yes' in his own language.² In other words, your assault was an expression of something you felt in your heart."

"I was angry and so I hit him, za. My people would consider that an appropriate and measured response."

"What your people think is not on trial here," Waterstone moved quickly toward the prosecutor's stand, where Harmony was handing him several small black plastic squares. "The people wish to enter into record the following examples of Redfire's self expression."

Gotobed knew what was contained in the data modules. She rose to object. "Your honor, I don't see what bearing this information has on this case."

Braithewaite waggled his finger. "Approach."

Before he reached the bench, Waterstone was arguing. "Your honor, this evidence establishes that the Defendant has a predilection toward expressing himself violently. It speaks to motive, and to his violent character."

Gotobed replied. "None of these images indicates that Commander Redfire is violent, let alone guilty of murder."

"Then, the jury may fairly draw that conclusion. Show the tapes."

Of course, they weren't tapes, but the usage of that word had persisted long into the era of solid state data storage. The first black square was placed on the witness stand and Waterstone waved his hand over it.

The first image showed a huge building, a tall, oval structure of burnished copper, with interesting chunky piping snaking all around it. Suddenly, there was a bright pink explosion. The building disintegrated, and settled into a neat ring of rubble with a half-circle and two round piles that almost resembled a smiling human face.

"Do you recognize this Mr. Redfire?" Waterstone asked.

"Za, it's a work called 'Have a Nice Day.' It's when I destroyed the Enterprise Commercial center in the city of Coolsville on Sapphire."

"And this one..."

The next image showed a bridge, a double-decker, double span stretching across a wide, broad river. Suddenly, water shot straight up in the air, a hundred columns or more, like waterspouts. They tore and tore at the bridge until it collapsed into the river below.

"'Troubled Water,' the destruction of the Seriate Bridge on the Old Man River on Sapphire."

"How about this one?"

A big, slab-shaped building rose up into the air, managing to stay together long enough to slam into the building adjacent, which slammed into the next, and into the next, until all four structures collapsed in a single horrendous pile of rubble.

"'Domino Effect,'" Redfire answered. "Teague Commercial Center, 7287. What of it?"

"What are these images to you, Mr. Redfire?"

"It's my art."

"Art... it's your expression of your inner self in other words."

"I suppose."

"Could one rightfully conclude from this that you are a very violent man, Mr. Redfire?"

"Oh, come on," Redfire said.

"You express yourself violently in your art, you express yourself violently when your family is threatened."

"Your honor, now he's just being silly," Gotobed shot.

Not waiting for Braithewaite to over-rule, Waterstone jumped in. "Silly? Is it silly to bludgeon a man to death with a candlestick. Is it silly to get outraged because you, Mr. Redfire, violated the highest law of

our planet. Thou shalt not kill. We have nothing on this planet but endless life, and when you attacked Clinton Manchester, you took the one thing from him that could not be replaced." Waterstone was shaking with rage again. "Your crime was not just against Clinton Manchester, sir. Your actions were an assault against this planet, and against the only thing we have. I have no further questions."

"Your honor...!" Gotobed began.

"Restrain yourself, mon." His eyes flashed toward the jury box. They did not seem to have been especially moved by Waterstone's speech. Even Gotobed knew this was a bad sign. It meant their minds had been made up.

"I think we all take a break now and be cool," Braithewaite announced. "Let's recess for the day, and come back when everyone be mellow again, iree?"

Chapter Eleven

Winter – Habi Zod

"That didn't go very well, did it?" said NightStalker. Redfire was back in his cell enjoying, if that was even the word, a prison meal consisting of a hearty stew made with homemade noodles, spiced gravy, two kinds of native meats, and a combination of potato-, onion-, and turnip-like vegetables, served with hot, fresh buttered bread on the side, and a bottle of moderately decent merlot.

He paused to answer her. "Specialist Gotobed pointed out on cross-examination that none of my art has ever contained an act of violence against a human being."

"It may not have been enough, and the whole episode might have been a ploy by Waterstone to draw you off-message," NightStalker said. "I am not sure where the jury is headed with this. The evidence against you is convincing, but Specialist Gotobed opened up some genuine points of uncertainty. Maybe enough to make Lord Waterstone offer a deal."

Redfire shoved more hot buttered bread in his mouth. Regardless of what might happen to him, he still needed carbohydrates. "A deal?" he said around his food.

"Yes, a deal by which you agree to admit to a lesser charge in return for a lighter sentence. It's one of their more... curious legal customs. I heard some of the Ancients discussing the possibility."

Redfire stopped eating. "So under their ridiculous legal system, you can go to prison for something you didn't do to avoid being rightfully sentenced for something you did do?"

"Apparently so, it is intended to insure that the guilty receives some kind of punishment while sparing the judicial system the inconvenience of a trial. Although, from what I overheard, Lord Waterstone will not be a popular man if he does offer a deal. These people want your blood."

Redfire sighed and put down his spoon. There was a bread pudding and whisky sauce offered for dessert. He should have been too worried about his fate to eat, but found reserve within himself to consume the rich dish. He sighed and picked up his spoon again.

Somehow, he had stopped worrying about the Aurelians. He still could not sleep with thoughts of their agents on this world, plotting to add it to their list of conquests, but he now had come to realize that this trial was more than an inconvenience standing between him and his duty. His fate was in the hands of six people who knew nothing of him and were, from what he understood, the most guileless and dull-witted people the village could offer.

Grim thoughts, indeed.

Winter – The Alcazar of General Ziang

Wind was whipping up a fearsome mix of ice and dust particles and the high altitudes over the Great Dessication. These currents gave the Aves called *Zilla* a good rough slap as she powered down to the surface. One of her passengers did not care for this at all, and his howls carried from the rear of the passenger compartment all the way to the command deck.

Zilla descended straight down and made a spot-perfect landing before the well-hidden main gate of General Ziang's estate. The hatch slid open, the pilot emerged, accompanied by a pair of gleaming blue and/oroids who hefted between them a lustrous black casket. The pilot was a small statured man, very young, wearing a heavy leather jacket that looked like it was borrowed from his older brother, and a thick beige woolen scarf against the sharp dry wind. When he reached Keeler and Goldenrod, standing by the gate, Flight Lieutenant Blade Toto saluted. "Reporting as ordered, Commander Keeler, sir."

"Oh, my God, he's just darling!" Goldenrod gushed. "He's so cute? Is he old enough to be flying that thing?"

Probably not, Keeler thought. Blade Toto looked like a kid, like he belonged back on *Pegasus* playing Calvinball, like the closest he should have been to an Aves was in class with Trajan Lear and Max Jordan. It was his curse. His hair was the least interesting shade of mouse-brown imaginable, straight and brushy. His eyes were large and brown beneath thin, dark, straight-line eyebrows that should have lent him some seriousness, but only succeeded in accenting his overall boyishness. Keeler thought of Toto as the son he never should have had. "There should be someone else on the ship," said the Prime Commander.

"He wouldn't come out, sir," Toto drawled. He had the heavy, languorous speech pattern of the midlands of Sapphire's Alpha Continent which didn't help his reputation at all.

Keeler wrapped his own scarf around his neck, a determined expression on his face. "We'll see about that. You go on in. I hope you like sticky pastries and strong coffee. This guy's crazy with them."

Toto kind of shrugged, kind of nodded, as though to say, *"I guess now I'm going to have some sticky pastries and strong coffee because that's what life put in store for me."* He gave the impression that if you told him General Ziang was going to throw him into a pit of starving rats, he would have responded with the same resignation. Some people come by this attitude after a lifetime of being beaten down and disappointed by unrelenting setbacks to their course of life. Toto had apparently been born with it.

Keeler had other work to do, and with a determined stride made his way toward the Aves. The wind kicked up his hair as he passed in front of the wing-blade, and then he entered the hatch.

He left the hatch open, and shortly there was a sound like a woman screaming. Keeler reappeared at the hatch of the Aves with an animal in his arms. He tried to put it down, but it swatted at him. A resentful meatloaf of fur with flattened ears and burning green eyes was carried from the ship.

"Oooh, a kitty?" Goldenrod gushed.

"Oooh, a hussy," Queequeg snarled back at her, then turned to the Commander. "Don't you even dare put my tender paws down on this cold, cold ground."

"They have a better attitude if you neuter them," said Goldenrod.

"Are you talking to me or him?" Keeler asked. "Come on, let's get back inside. It's so cold out here, if you wanted to neuter me, you'd need a rectal probe."

They passed within the walls of the great estate. There was a small courtyard, but the most striking feature was the array of pipes that stuck into the ground, reaching deep to a volcanic vent that supplied heat... dry heat, to the whole estate. When they re-entered the house, the and/oroids had already carried the casket into the central area Keeler thought of as 'the Conversation Pit.' They were standing off to the side, silent sentinels counting electric sheep. Ziang was pouring coffee for Toto, who already had crumbs on his chin.

"You didn't waste any time," Keeler said.

Toto shrugged yet again. "I guess I was hungry."

"What do you have for me to eat, really, really old guy," Queequeg asked.

Ziang patted the cat's head. "I believe I have some dried fish in my pantry."

"Take me, I'm yours!" the cat exclaimed. The general brought him some dried fish and the cat curled up on a rug before the fire.

"So, you said you could arrange an audience with Lexington Keeler for me," Ziang said. "I confess I am intrigued, but expect to be disappointed."

Keeler's eyes immediately flashed to Toto. While the existence of the Council of the Passed, 'the Dead

Guys' was an open public secret on Sapphire, only a few had witnessed them in action, and no one knew that one of the 'Dead Guys' was on *Pegasus*. Keeler figured if anyone could deal with this, it was Toto. With a slight sigh of his own, Keeler agreed. "Let's get to it."

Winter – Ultima Thule

Closing arguments were delivered a short Winter day after Redfire was cross-examined by Waterstone. The Tactical TyroCommander was finding the adjustment to the rapid diurnal cycle of Winter to be somewhat disquieting. He felt as though he were living life at fast forward speed, that events were flying by twice as fast as they should. He rubbed his eyes as Specialist Gotobed and the Ancient, Brigand, took the bench next to him. "What happens now?" he asked.

Brigand repeated what he explained earlier. "Both Specialist Gotobed and Lord Waterstone will make one last speech before the jury, summarizing their case. Lord Waterstone will go first. The jury will then be dismissed with instructions to find you guilty or not guilty."

Hearing it again, Redfire still found the whole idea shocking and vaguely offensive. No professional jury to hear him, and no Truth Machines to set him free. This was a concept of justice worthy of a Sapphirean Street Circus. Nevertheless, he felt obliged to thank Brigand. "Gotobed and I are both grateful for your assistance through this trial."

Brigand brushed him off. "No one else was willing to come forward. I wanted to see you had a chance at least at a fair trial. Your Gotobed learns quickly, and is quite sharp-witted. You should thank her."

"If I get out of this, I will. You know, the thought occurs to me, if this jury does find me guilty, you are never going to find the actual murderer. You'll have a killer among you."

"Even if they find you not guilty, it will be the same," Brigand told him. "The Enforcers are not going to search for another prospect."

"Why not?"

"It will be assumed that you were guilty, but somehow managed to avoid justice. They will leave the file open, but they will not actively search for the killer."

Insanity, Redfire thought. The back door opened, and in came Waterstone and Harmony, followed by a boisterous complement of villagers. They were shouting questions, which Waterstone studiously ignored. Waterstone and Lowell took their seats without sparing the defense a look, promptly opened their brief cases, and pretended to make a few final word changes in the speech he had been practicing since the trial began. He had to wait only a few minutes before Judge Braithewaite called the court to order, and gave Waterstone leave to begin. The prosecutor came out from behind his table. There was no cock-of-the-walk swagger now. He moved with certainty, but also weariness. He looked tired, and the lines in his face were more pronounced and drawn than they had been before. His clothes seemed a little more rumpled than usual.

"As I walked into this courthouse today, it was snowing, as it has nearly every day for the past 3,882 years," he began, his voice breaking at the pre-calculated spot in the speech. "This planet has only two gifts to bestow on its human inhabitants. It gives us geothermal energy, enough to make the place habitable and keep the snow from piling too deep, and it gives us life... long, immortal, miraculous *life*."

His tone grew sharper. "Because we have so little else on this planet, just life and the eternal chill, sometimes an occasional promise of spring shown to be a lie, we cling to life. It is our precious gift, the only compensation for living on this cold and desolate world. Perhaps, that is more than an outsider can understand. Their lives are brief. A century? A century and a half if they are lucky. Fie!"

Fie? Redfire thought.

"TyroCommander Redfire took the life of Clinton Manchester. On his world, where life is so fleeting, this may be seen as a fair punishment for the attempted and aborted ... *aborted* ... seduction of a child, but not here." His eyes went wide, as they had seen so many times, and his body shook, but Lord Waterstone managed to keep a weary scratch in his voice, to remind the jury that his pursuit of justice was an exhausting chase.

"On his own world, Redfire called himself an artist. What he was ... was a demolitionist. He expressed his aesthetic through the violent destruction of old unwanted things. In his mind, perhaps, the

murder of Clinton Manchester was just the destruction of an old unwanted thing.

"On his ship, he serves as the chief tactical officer, where his duty is to protect his crew from threats. In his mind, he saw Clinton Manchester as a threat to his crew, and he removed that threat, just as he did with the other enemies his ship had encountered. In this case, the threat was even more personal, to a young boy Redfire regarded as a son."

He picked up the candlestick, which was contained in a plastic baggie. "After assaulting Manchester in the ballroom, Redfire found that his anger had not fully discharged, as he has admitted. He was still angry, so he left his room, as he has admitted. He waited, returned to the ballroom and grabbed this candlestick." He lifted it high. "He then somehow encountered Manchester. He may have led him to the Conservatory, perhaps on the pretense of offering an apology."

Waterstone moved menacingly toward the jury, still brandishing the candlestick perilously close to their heads. "When he and his victim were alone, Redfire smashed Clinton Manchester's brains out and left them scattered on the floor." He swung the candlestick to illustrate, let the jury take in its heaviness, the damage it could do.

"It did not take more than one or two blows, according to our detectives. Whoever assaulted Manchester had to have superior strength. One thing we know about these new humans, they are extraordinarily strong. Their muscles are denser than ours, and larger, and TyroCommander Redfire had received years of military training. He had the strength, the motive, and the weapon with which to deliver the fatal blow."

"His death, had to have been agonizing," Waterstone continued, musing angrily. He placed the candlestick down on the table, gently. "The very cells of Clinton Manchester's body struggled to keep him alive as he lay on the floor, his skull smashed to pieces, his brain shredded, and dark, cold blood emptying from his wounds. A normal human would have died instantly, but some part of Clinton Manchester survived long enough for him to experience the horror and the agony of his own dying. The precious gift of eternal life snatched away from him by a vengeful outsider."

Waterstone favored Redfire with a brief, contemptuous stare. "Redfire then took the weapon, escaped from the Conservatory. We don't know how, it doesn't matter. The next day, he was on a ship, preparing to flee this planet, to flee from justice once and forever. Were it not for the diligence of Enforcers Lambrusco and Brickbat, his crime would have been complete.

"But we caught him. We were lucky and we caught him, with the bloody candlestick still in his bag, with little bits of Clinton Manchester's brains still clinging to it. We caught him, and now we can do justice, both to the memory of Clinton Manchester, and to the horrible assault that was made against us ... yes, against us! ... by this man. When Redfire killed Clinton Manchester, he was telling us that our lives ought to be as brutal and short as the one he has known. He deserves punishment. He deserves to never see the light of day again."

With that, Waterstone completed and sat down. Gotobed waited for him to sit, then stood, and slowly moved to the center of the courtroom. The assembly hushed, about to hang on her every word.

"You will all have to forgive me if I am not as eloquent, or emotive as Lord Waterstone," Gotobed began. "You have been good enough to bear with me as I have stumbled through the strange laws and customs of your planet. I have been advised that the best way to argue against Lord Waterstone is to declare that the prosecution has not 'met its burden,' meaning they have not definitely proved that my friend, TyroCommander Redfire killed Manchester. My friend's fingerprints were never found on the weapon, nor was any physical evidence found that he was ever inside the Conservatory. There was no blood found on his clothing or hair, despite the viciousness of the assault. He handed over the bag containing the bloody weapon as if he did not know what was inside, because he didn't. Mr. Redfire has testified that he never touched that candlestick, and I believe him. Do you know what else they found in my friend's bag? A pulse cannon – a weapon with which Redfire could have dispatched Manchester with a single shot.

"As you can plainly see, there are many, many major holes in the prosecution's theory, but these are not why you should find my friend not guilty. You should find him not guilty for the simple reason that he did not murder Clinton Manchester.

"There has not been a murder on my planet for over a thousand years. We are not a violent people. We are, as a people, committed to the relentless pursuit of the truth." She looked at Waterstone. "There have been times when truth seemed to be the last thing this court was interested in, when the prosecution has gone out of their way to prevent anything that did not square with their version of events."

Waterstone could not object. He wanted to. Anyone could see it in the throbbing vein of his neck and forehead. "But the final, inescapable truth is, TyroCommander Redfire did not kill Manchester. He did not somehow get into a sealed room, deliver a violent beating, and slip out again, leaving the room sealed, without a spot of blood on his body, without so much as a hair left in the room, and then hand over to the police the bloody murder weapon while protesting his innocence.

"TyroCommander Redfire did not kill Manchester, because he is not a killer. A defender, za, he defends the lives of his family and shipmates, but Manchester was not a deadly threat. Manchester sexually propositioned a boy Redfire loved, and Redfire gave him the beating he deserved, but no more than that. No more than that.

"TyroCommander Redfire is a brave officer, who has many times risked his life to protect strangers. He would have done the same for anyone on this planet, including Clinton Manchester. He would do the same for any one of you, He is not a killer. He is innocent of this crime."

She sat down, feeling like it had all been too weak and unconvincing. A negative can not be proven, she reminded herself, once again. She had a bad feeling this was not going to turn out well.

Winter – The Alcazar of General Ziang

Keeler tapped the top of the casket. "Okay, time to raise the Dead."

For a few seconds, just enough time to give doubt and make the Commander start to sweat, nothing happened. Then, the silver crest of the planet Sapphire on the cover began to glow with a faint white light. Suddenly, a beam of light shot upward from the side, followed by another and then another until the effect was almost blinding. Amid the light, a figure appeared.

It was quite an entrance. Usually Dead Keeler just appeared. This time, the apparition continued to grow and swell until it was twice human size. Its eyes sparkled with ancient and forbidden wisdom. Its face was a mask of grim rectitude. When it stopped growing, it unfolded a ghostly arm and pointed at the General. With a rasping, ghostly intonation it spoke, "That jerk owes me forty bucks."

"Is this a hologram?" Ziang asked.

The apparition laughed. "Nargh, I'm the real deal. The essence of Lexington Keeler's intellect and spirit, maintained in a matrix of pure energy, and you still owe me forty bucks."

Ziang squinted at the specter examining it. "How do I know that this is no trick?"

"Because I hit that bank shot and sent the entire planet of Boer IV into a black hole. Now, pay up!"

"How does it know about that?" Ziang asked.

"It's not an it, it's a he," Keeler answered. "My ancestor was a founding father of the planet where I live, and when his body died, they preserved his essence in a cybernetic matrix."

"This is most curious," said General Ziang. "Is this really you? Is it your spirit, or just your intellect?"

"Is laughter the music of the soul?" Dead Keeler asked. "'Cos I get a great laugh whenever I watch this boob of a descendant try to command a starship."

"Do not let this dog insult you," Ziang turned to Keeler. "He was never anything more than a pirate."

"Aaarrrrgh! Aaarrrrgh!" Dead Keeler growled. "I be not a pirate."

"Before the Christian fleet captured his privateer and pressed him into service, he and his crew were the scourge of the Capricorn sector."

"Arrrgh! Now that's a blasted lie. My crew was the scurviest lot of space-dogs ever to send the minions of a Dark Lord to Davey Jordan's Locker. Arrgh! They'll not have their good names spat upon by the likes of ye! Arrgh! Arrgh!"

"To think I mourned for you when I learned you had given your life driving the Dark Lord Enoch from

the galaxy. How did you ...?"

"Survive?" The Apparition put in. "Damb near didn't. Went into stasis when my ship was shot up and drifted back into Commonwealth space three hundred years later. Real science fiction-y. Eventually, though, I had the good sense to die properly, unlike some people I can think of. Good God, what happened to you, Zhanzhou? Every day on the line you prayed to die fighting, and now I find you here? In this planetary-scale retirement home for the undead?" The Old Man's eyes were ablaze.

"Bank your reactor, Deathwish," came a low voice from the fire. Queequeg looked up from his fish. "The man is a righteous host."

"No, his criticism is just," said Ziang. "I have rebuked myself a million times for my cowardice, my fear of ..." He broke off, then addressed the ghost. "What is it like being alive without a body?"

"Wouldn't *you* like to know?" Dead Keeler growled. He cast an eye toward the Lady Goldenrod. "Who's the babe?"

Goldenrod lit up like a thousand candles on a Solstice Tree. "Whatever he is, I like him."

Dead Keeler made a kind of purring/growling noise that would have come from the deepest parts if his throat if he still had one.

"Oh, stop it," said Live Keeler.

"I'm dead, but I am not that dead."

Ziang turned away in anger. "Same old obstinate fool he was 3,000 years ago."

"I don't get older, I just get better."

Ziang maintained a calm aspect and turned to Keeler. "You wish to know of the Crusades. Where shall we begin?"

Suddenly, Keeler felt rather foolish. He had been so preoccupied with the demands of his journey, he had not thought really of any questions to ask. "Uh, well, let's start at the beginning. The origins of the Crusades are shrouded in mists and legend..."

"Which is where it should stay..." Dead Keeler interrupted.

Ziang turned on the ghost. "You have never told them."

"They don't need to know, besides, I'm dead."

"That's his excuse for everything," Live Keeler confided.

"I have something to show you, that will illustrate much about the Crusades." Ziang shuffled over to a large, ornate cabinet that stood upright in an alcove of the main hall. The cover was black lacquer trimmed with gold hinges and levers. He opened it and revealed the figure of an alien. The creature had pink skin and a kind of teal cap of flesh in place of hair. Its narrow skull crested in a high protuberance. It had a snout, rather than a nose, long sharp teeth and rounded ears that gave it an over-all shaved-rat-with-an-old-cheese-hat-like appearance.

"What is it?" Live Keeler asked.

"You don't recognize the creature who supplied your weapon? This is a Thean."

"Oh, is it?" Keeler said, failing to sound nonchalant. Not many drawings of the enemy had survived since the aliens had laid siege to his world, and those that had survived had apparently not been very accurate. It was remarkably well-preserved, no sign of decay at all. Its beady black eyes stared straight ahead. "Where did you get this trophy? Did you do battle with the Theans?"

"No one did battle with the Theans," Ziang answered. "They were badly misunderstood. They laid siege to your world, as I remember. They called it 'Sas,' and thought it was a lost colony of their empire, but they never attacked, did they?"

"Neg, they did not."

"This specimen was part of the collection of the Commonwealth Knowledgeum on the Inner Colony New Dawn. Before New Dawn fell to the dark forces in the Eighth Crusade, much of its treasure was shipped off-planet for safekeeping in the Perseus Quadrant. This particular piece never made it. However, somewhere in the Equuleus Sector, as I understand it, is an artificial, terra-formed planet with treasures from the Twelve Inner Colonies hidden somewhere on its surface."

Keeler licked his dry lips. "You wouldn't happen to know the ... uh, name of that artificial, terra-formed planet would you?"

"That's not important right now," Ziang hissed. "Let me show you why the Theans do not fight." With a quick flip of his hand, ripped the face from the Thean. It came off smoothly, revealing a patchwork of circuitry and intricate gearworks.

"A Thean and/oroid?" Live Keeler asked.

"The Theans were all and/oroids," Ziang told him. "They had once been an organic species, but they fell to extinction millions of years before humans went into space. They never left their home-world, only sent mechanicals to explore the galaxy, but their sun died, and they died with it. Their and/oroids wandered around the galaxy, until they too expired. They did not fight, and they did not survive, because they were without purpose."

Ziang carefully replaced the faceplate. "The reason humanity survived, and other races did not, is because we found our purpose. The reason we have survived is because the side that believed in the purpose of humanity won the Great Crusades."

Ziang led them down a long hallway, and continued talking as he spoke. "You see, in the centuries before interstellar travel became possible, human artists and writers speculated that our galaxy would contain hundreds and thousands of alien species. Hundreds of hours of what the ancients called 'movies' and 'television' depicted these aliens, most either taking the form of humans with strange-colored skin or odd bumps on their foreheads, or, at the other extreme, aliens whose physiology was biologically improbable.

"The reality was greatly different. We encountered the Garr, a gray-skinned species with tiny bodies and enormous heads, who had once attempted to jumpstart their dying species with infusions of human DNA. In our pre-spacefaring era, they kidnapped human women and implanted them with hybrid embryos. They also tried to do something similar to men."

"Something similar?"

"They had a terrible misunderstanding about human reproductive and digestive anatomy. Much, much later, we encountered the Theans, but other than that, the galaxy was ours. Thousands of inhabitable worlds, worlds without end, for us to colonize.

"You can not possibly imagine the impact this had on humanity. A great, empty galaxy, filled with stars and worlds, ready for us to claim, to colonize, to build on. A generation earlier, humanity had been dying. Miraculously... *miraculously!* ... we discovered Starflight technology, and soon after we realized, we would not be fighting among aliens for a piece of galactic territory, nor, in our more egomaniacal fantasies, that we would become leaders of some Benevolent Pan-Galactic Federation, leading other alien species and spreading our enlightened values across thousands of intelligent worlds.

"Instead, we found ourselves alone. And even though only one star in several hundred thousand contained inhabitable planets, this still meant the galaxy contained hundreds of thousands of such worlds, ripe for inhabitation... by us!"

"To the dominant, agnostic culture, it was a matter of scientific probability, but to the religious minority, many took this as fulfillment of prophecy, a manifest destiny. For Islam, for Christianity, for Iest, the open galaxy was the opportunity to found worlds in line with our creeds. All of a sudden, the universe was like a yawning chasm begging for us to fill with our voices, a banquet laid out before us by a benevolent, providential Jehovah."

"So, the Crusades really were Holy Wars?" Keeler asked.

"Not really... not, entirely, and not at first, anyway. The Crusades began as a simple rebellion. It was the beginning of the fifth century of the human experiment settling space. There were already hundreds of colonies, but almost 9 out of 10 humans lived on one of the thirteen Old-Line Inner Colonies, or Earth. The other colonies were small, trivial and unregarded. It was the conflict as to whether the new colonials would remain independent, or remain under the law of the Commonwealth, that launched the Holy Wars."

"So, what you are saying is, the Crusades did not begin as Holy Wars, they were begun as a result of demographics and politics?" He was appalled at the mediocrity.

"Initially, but evil seized its opportunity. You are familiar with the Prophet Crow?"

Keeler had, as did all Sapphireans. "He demonstrated conclusively that human were spiritual entities, that the soul existed. Naturally, they killed him for that."

Ziang nodded. "Crow also said that the primary conflict of humanity was between purpose, and purposelessness, between the enlightened whose being was animated by the guiding light of the universe, and the willfully adrift, who denied that life was in any way meaningful. As we moved into space, Crow was more and more proven right."

Live Keeler was holding a small cup of coffee that had gone cold as he had listened to the General talk. He now asked, "So, I still can't get my head around how these Crusades became the Battle of Good versus Evil."

"At the time they started, no one else did either," said Dead Keeler, not exactly warming to his topic, but needing to get his licks in. "Evil took the form evil always does, the desire to possess, control, and micromanage human lives and deny human freedom. The desire to take that which one had not built, to steal what one had not earned. The fervid, fetid desire of people to dictate the destiny of others. The Inner Colonies sought to expand their control over the Outer Colonies."

Ziang picked it up from there. "They were dying, you know, the Inner Colonies. Stagnating. Their populations were old, uninspired. The people with vitality, with spirit, they were all migrating to the frontier. The populations of the outer colonies grew more vital, and creative. The populations of the Inner Colonies became ever more mediocre. A new doctrine was enacted. It stated that all Colonial authority rested with the Commonwealth Central Government on New Europa. Each of the Outer Colonies would be assigned a Governor-Administrator, would be required to observe all Commonwealth laws. Some of the Outer Colonies accepted the new doctrine, but most of them didn't. Governor-Administrators were sent to these worlds, and were sent back to New Europa in boxes... very small boxes."

"You make it sound as though the Commonwealth was the enemy." Keeler asked.

"Initially, they were, the Inner Commonwealth anyway, except for Atlas, which had far too many trade ties to risk by offending the Outer Colonies. Proxima and Corona also remained neutral."

"Whoa!" said Keeler. "By Clovis' Lobotomy Scar! This is completely different from the history I've been teaching. All along we thought the Commonwealth fought against the Enemy in the Crusades. Professor PlaneChanger was right that the Crusades began as a civil war."

"You owe him forty bucks and an ale," said the cat.

"Za, fat chance he'll collect on it," Live Keeler turned to the spirit of his ancestor. "You never told me any of this."

"And you shouldn't be listening to it now," the Dead Guy snapped. "It's dangerous propaganda, that's what it is."

"Is it true?"

"Yes! That's the most dangerous propaganda of all."

Ziang hit his fist on the coffee table. "Do you want to hear the story or not?"

The ghostly old man turned his back on them, which was a very visually impressive effect since his face remained staring at them, his eyes squinting angrily and glowing with yellow fire. "You ought not be listening to any of this... the senile rantings of this anti-social kook. The only anti-social kook rantings you should be listening to are mine!"

Keeler put his cup down and turned to Ziang. "So, what happened?"

Ziang settled into a couch, prepared to begin a long story. "The First Crusade, which was then called the Battle of Orion, began when eleven of the Outer Colonies banded together to build a fleet of starships, a first step toward declaring Independence from the Commonwealth..."

Keeler's heart warmed, and he settled in for a long night of war stories. In the corner, his dead ancestor brooded.

Winter – Ultima Thule

"Only an hour to decide. Is that good or bad?" Gotobed asked Brigand, as they hurried toward the

courtroom, having been recalled barely an hour after the jury had been released.

"Most likely... bad," Brigand answered.

"What happens if we lose?"

"You will have to call for the Supreme Court to be brought together to hear an appeal on Mr. Redfire's behalf."

"How long will that take?"

Brigand shrugged, once again producing the familiar crunch of leather. "To bring together the designated Lords and Ladies, a month at minimum."

"What happens to Commander Redfire in the meantime?"

"He would be taken to The Pit." The Pit, Brigand had previously informed her, was a deep, deep cave in which prison cells had been hewn from the living rocks. It smelled unceasingly of rust and sulfur and was never reached by natural light. Redfire would be confined there for several thousand years. The only other denizen was a certain Lord Corvis, who ate people.

The door at the rear of the chamber swung open heavily about then, and allowed in Lord Waterstone and Harmony. Waterstone was almost swaggering, his chest puffed out as though to pop the buttons from his coat.

"Here goes everything," said Gotobed, as more villagers shuffled in. After they had been seated, the jury was led in by the clerk of the court. Gotobed noted that they avoided looking her way, and thought she saw one woman juror flash a quick smile toward Lord Waterstone. Her heart sank.

"All rise," called the Clerk of the Court. "The Criminal Court of the Village of Ultima Thule is now in session, the Honorable Judge Ponce de Leon Marquis Le Bon François de Carabas Phillippi Rafael Book of Deuteronomy Braithewaite presiding."

The judge veered unsteadily toward his bench. His eyes were red, and he carried what seemed to be a small packet of roasted ground corn snacks. He pounded his gavel languorously and called the court to order. "Who is the jury fore-humanoid?" he asked.

A skinny man with a stringy moustache stood.

"Have you people reached a verdict?"

"We have."

"Will the Defendant rise?"

They looked toward the empty spot on the table where Redfire was supposed to be sitting.

"O.K., what did you do with the defendant, mon?"

The clerk of the court signaled to a deputy, who shrugged. At that moment, another deputy came in through the door at the back of the room, whispered to the first deputy. The two of them together then went to the front of the court to confer with the clerk.

"Clerk!" Judge Braithewaite repeated, louder this time, "Where is my defendant!"

The clerk of the court looked highly embarrassed. "I regret to have to inform this court that Commander Redfire has...umm..."

"... has what mon?" Judge Braithewaite demanded.

The clerk, a large man, as big as a Sapphirean and with a shaved head, gathered himself and answered. "TyroCommander Redfire has escaped."

Chapter Twelve

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

“John Hunter,” --- not his real name --- descended the long ladder that connected the air processors (the lungs of the ship) to the primary pressure locks that lined the deck beneath the electromagnetic launch rail system that ran the length of *Pegasus*. He was dressed in black coveralls and carried a pack on his back in which was contained everything a man needed – and only what a man needed – to survive in secret in the vast empty UnderDecks of the Great Pathfinder Ship; a day’s supply of food, two liters of water, a tool-kit, two changes of underwear, a datapad, a gun and a towel.

John Hunter was a stowaway. *Pegasus* was designed to support a crew (or “shipboard community,” the Republicers called it) of 35,000 people, but was launched with a crew (shipboard community) of less than 7,000. The designers reasoned the mission was multi-generational, and so allowed room for growth. They never imagined there would be people like John Hunter lurking in the utility areas of the ship’s underside, which were never intended for inhabitation. Then again, they also never imagined that a disillusioned technician would make a tertiary wastewater tank into a happening nightclub either.

When *Pegasus* had cast off from the Republic Out-system, there had been nearly two hundred people hiding in these UnderDecks. Some had come to be part of ‘the Greatest Adventure of All Time,’ some had come to sabotage that same adventure, and some had been sent to capture them. Although rumors of stowaways filtered among the regular crew, great lengths had been gone to keep their presence secret. The secrecy would have bothered the crew, so the secrecy itself was kept secret, and so it went. Official policy was that any stowaway caught in the UnderDecks would be put into stasis and sent back to Republic, or dropped off at the next Way-Station. Discovery at this late date and this great distance, (440 light years from home), might have invoked the better nature and sense of the regular crew, who might have made some accommodation for including the stowaways in the ship’s life. Executive TyroCommander Lear, and her secret force of Centurions, would make sure that no opportunity would arise to offer such clemency.

At EdenWorld, Hunter had chanced on an opportunity, kidnapped the Executive TyroCommander’s son, intending to use him to gain an audience with the ship’s Commander, a reasonable man Hunter was sure he could deal with. He sincerely and deeply regretted the whole episode, now. It had been a horrible miscalculation. The boy had escaped, and the Centurions had cracked down as never before. A lot of people had been frozen in the last two years, most of whom would not be missed. Nevertheless, it had made life in this secret sub-culture all that much harder. Some, on the verge of starvation, had just surrendered to the Centurions, and put in the great icebox for the thousand-year journey home. Hunter doubted there were more than thirty stowaways left in all the UnderDecks.

The secret to survival was to keep moving. He had hiding places throughout this shadowy realm – in spare escape pods, in empty holding tanks, behind conduits – and he moved between them constantly. The Centurions had gotten clever about monitoring the food storage bays, but John Hunter had found a way around that. His was not the healthiest diet, but it sustained him.

He dropped the last few feet of the ladder, hitting the deck solidly, but nearly silently. He turned around and found himself face-to-face with a man wearing the uniform of the ship’s Watch.

An adrenaline rush electrified his system. Surprise caught him, struck him immobile, and so was the Watchmen. So far as Hunter knew, regular security never came this far below, only the Centurions. His mind raced. Could he bluff his way out of this? Passing himself off as one of the crew was unthinkable – the beard was a dead giveaway. Someone from the planet? He had to think of something, had to stall long enough...

The Watchman had no such hesitation. He raised his arm and a pulse of bluish light leaped from his palm that struck Hunter with the force of a lightning bolt, jolting every nerve, muscle, and organ in his body. He was knocked him against the back wall with the force of an explosion.

Before he blacked out, Hunter had almost enough time to think, *Watchmen don’t just shoot people like*

that...

Winter – Habi Zod

Chief Inspector Churchill stood over the heavy door from Redfire's cell, which had blasted across the cellar, charred black and still smoking slightly. Lambrusco and Brickbat were also there, and another Watchman, Specialist Phoenix Sukhoi, was assisting him. Sukhoi, a lanky man, with a thin face and thinner hair, surveyed the inside of the cell, which was smashed, but not burned. Redfire's chair and desk were blown to splinters, his hammock hung in shreds.

"So, how did he blow the door off?" Churchill demanded of the two detectives.

Brickbat answered. "We'll have to work on that. Redfire was an explosives expert. We can see what was in his cell, as one of the ship's..."

"Forget it. We'll ask him when we catch him," Churchill growled. "The means of his escape are not relevant. Where he went is more important, now. We do know that he does not carry a tracking sliver implant. Damned Sapphireans." He strode through the scene of the crime, the rather primitive cell that had held the ship's chief tactical officer. It had never really been anything more than a small room with thick stone walls and a heavy ironwood door. Without force fields or tracking devices, it was amazing it had held Redfire as long as it had. "Where were the Guards?" Churchill asked Lambrusco.

"Both burned, beat-up pretty bad but they'll make it."

"When they're conscious, I want to talk to them. We'll begin by figuring out how far a man can get on foot since he was put back in his cell. Meantime, quarantine this area. No ships leave the surface until Redfire is captured. If I were he, the first thing I'd try to do is hitch a ride back to our ship. How many Aves are on-planet now?"

Sukhoi answered him. "Four... three here... one with Prime Commander Keeler, but that's 2,200 kilometers from here."

"I don't think Redfire can run that fast," said Church, drily. "Are any vehicles missing from the grounds?" Churchill demanded.

"We're working on that," said Brickbat.

"Work harder," Churchill ordered.

"Now, just hold on..." Lambrusco protested. "That man was our prisoner. This is our investigation. He belongs to us."

"Then, you ought to take better care of your possessions," Churchill returned.

Before Lambrusco could respond, Sukhoi entered the ring. "Orbital sensors are being realigned for a life-signature search of the surface. We can bring down additional manpower... unless Enforcer Lambrusco thinks his resources are sufficient."

Lambrusco knew he was beaten. "Just remember who's in charge, okay?"

Churchill studied him. "All right. Let me tell you what I would like to do. I would like to establish a perimeter. I would like to use aerial surveillance craft and ground-based sensors to probe every centimeter within that perimeter. I intend to search every house, building, structure, cave, hole, tree and rock within my perimeter. I would like to secure my perimeter so that TyroCommander Redfire cannot go outside of it. I would like to use TyroCommander Redfire's psyche profile to determine what he is most likely to do and where he is most likely to go from here. I intend to find TyroCommander Redfire and immobilize him in a stasis chamber, and then deliver him to the courtroom to hear his verdict. Now, if you have any objection to this thorough and well-considered course of action, I will be pleased to return to my ship, with Guardian Sukhoi and all of our equipment, and let you two men search for TyroCommander Redfire, if that is preferable to you?"

"We can agree with your plan," Lambrusco said. "All I'm saying is work together. Cooperation could benefit both of us. Our people know the lay of the land a lot better than you."

"Fine, we'll work together," Churchill said. "Just stay out of my way."

Winter – The Alcazar of General Ziang

Keeler returned to the sitting room, where General Ziang was serving another round of coffee, pastries, and dried fish. "Sorry, minor crisis back at the Fun Factory. Murderer on the loose. Nothing to worry about."

Ziang was seated in one of set of large, high-backed, red leather chairs arranged in a shallow parabola in front of his fireplace. Night had fallen, quickly as it did on this world, and outside the glow of the fire, the room was quite cold. Queequeg was curled up, the picture of contentment closest to the fire, which was fueled by deep underground deposits of methane. Ziang's estate happened to be positioned over the planet's largest reserve of fossil hydrocarbon fuels, and he had made quite a fortune exchanging it with the other Lords and villagers.

Blade Toto sat in one chair, dozing and occasionally snoring. Goldenrod sat on the rug at Keeler's feet. Earlier, she had tried to pet the cat, but he swatted at her until she stopped. When Queequeg did this, she turned her attentions to the Commander, stroking his thigh and playing with his feet. Of course, Keeler had just one thing on his mind, "So, General Ziang, you were just about to tell us about the Third Crusade."

Ziang leaned back in his chair and looked toward his ceiling, which was dominated by a massive gold dome decorated with constellations of tiny silver stars, as though the story was written there. "The peace established after the Second Crusade, the Futura Accords signed on the ashes of Li Shen Major and Li Shen Minor lasted for barely two generations. By this treaty, the Inner Colonies of the Commonwealth had all become ostensibly neutral, but in the end, they found a means to carry on the war through their surrogate colonies.

"A swath of worlds in the Eta Carinae arm of the galaxy were under the control of a cabal of overlords known as the Red Committee. Thirty-two colonies ruled by absolute terror. Do you want to know why they were called the Red Committee?"

"Why were they called 'the Red Committee?'" Live Keeler asked.

"Because they styled themselves after ancient human vampire myths. They believed they could become immortal by consuming fresh human blood, or so they said. They chose for their home-world a small planet called Draconis, which orbited a binary pair of red dwarf stars not much brighter than two full moons and appeared in the sky like a pair of blood-red eyes. The Red Committee feasted on blood and hearts torn from live human victims. They sprayed the clouds with iron oxide so it would appear to rain blood and turn the planet's rivers red. On Draconis, they built a whole city from the bones of their victims and called it Ossaria."

Dead Keeler said nothing, but mouthed a scatological reference to male bovine ruminants.

"The Third Crusade began when the Chaldean resistance attempted to take back the colony Alia, under the banner 'There Is No God But Jehovah.' The Red Committee, tipped off to the attack by its agents on the Inner Colony world Pacifica, massacred the force, and shipped the banner back to Malachi with the last two words cut off.

"Insulted and enraged, a coalition of colonies mounted another expedition, with four times as many men and backing from the Christian Fleet. Three hundred ships departed from a secret base within the Tarantula Nebula. Most of them were corvettes, compact ships that looked much like the assault rifles our armies carried into battle with them. They came along with the battle cruisers, which had three great star-drive engines mounted in a trimaran arrangement around the primary hull. Finally, they were led by three dreadnoughts, which were massive vessels, shaped like swords with great guns protruding forward and aft and scores of one- and two-man fighters swarming around them like clouds of flies."

"Were the small fighters capable of interstellar travel?" Live Keeler asked.

"No, but the Dreadnoughts could generate a field large enough to take them into hyperspace. They had to hold tight to the Dreadnoughts, though. When they entered hyperspace, it was like a cyclone of energy unleashed."

Goldenrod yawned. "You know, this man-talk really isn't doing it for me. Z, darling, mind if I, you know, give you a hearty slap on your mud-flaps and call it a night?"

"Of course, you may retire now. Br'aaq will show you to your room. Br'aaq!"

The and/oroid Thean stepped forward from his chamber. "You may show the woman to her chambers now, Br'aaq."

Without any gesture of acknowledgement, the machine led the way. Goldenrod followed, pausing only long enough to turn around and give Keeler a wink and a toss of her ringlets.

Ziang seemed put off by the gesture, but returned to his story. "The fleet departed, led by General Wu in his flagship, the *Dreadnought War Emblem*, but at the last moment, fearing he would be betrayed again, General Wu told his navigators ..." at which point General Ziang took a deep breath, rolled his eyes into his head and let loose with a series of high-pitched squeaks and clicks.

"Excuse me?" Live Keeler asked.

"The Navigators were Cetacean. At the time, all fleet officers were fluent in the cetacean... or most were anyway."

"The cetaceans came from Earth, too," Live Keeler said, more for the purpose of making notes in his recorder than anything else. "We have none on Sapphire."

"If God meant us to squeak and click, he wouldn't have given us translation matrixes," Dead Keeler snarled. Then he grumbled, "Stinking show-off."

Ziang sighed, repeated his squeaks and clicks, and then translated. "Set course... for Ossaria. He had had a vision, in which the Angel of the Lord told him that the Red fleet was lying in wait at the colonies at Reyhan and Alia, Leaving Draconis vulnerable. The Angel told him to strike at Draconis and the Lord would be with him."

This sounded more like the stories of the Crusades Live Keeler was used to hearing.

Ziang went on. "His crew thought he was mad, and nearly mutinied against him. He warned that any ship that broke formation would be fired upon and destroyed. They were going to Draconis, and all the vengeance of God was going with them."

Ziang leaned forward, gesturing with his hands to describe the movement of the fleet. Shadows danced in the firelight, as though demons and the ghosts of those warriors were coming forth to listen to their stories being told again. "The standard tactic of the time was to hold back part of your fleet in reserve, to exit hyperspace in three or four or five waves, to wear down the enemy and make it difficult for him to count your numbers. Instead, Wu brought them all out at once, and unleashed all the fury their weapons could deliver."

"The battle was pitched and fierce and lasted for several long hours. The Red Committee's fleet was small, but it contained the best ships, and the most die-hard soldiers in all the Red Horde, as their army was called. The Red Horde fought without pity or remorse. When the battle was all but lost, they rammed their ships into Wu's fleet. In desperation, they imploded their reactors, bathing the planet in deadly radiation even as they immolated parts of our own fleet.

"By the end of the battle, Wu had lost many of his ships. Of his three Dreadnoughts, only *Green Dragon* survived. However, the Red Guard had been completely destroyed. Wu ordered a last assault to lay waste to the cities of Draconis, and to pound Ossaria to dust such that no living thing would survive. When his bombardiers had done this, and Ossaria was nothing but a smoking crater, he pulled his fleet out, knowing that the rest of the Red Fleet could return at any moment.

"They set a course for Reyhan, and Wu fasted for three days to thank God for his victory. As he prostrated himself, the Angel of the Lord reappeared, and told him to return to Draconis.

"Wu, exhausted from the battle, protested. 'I have lost a third of my ships and men. How can I take on the whole of the Red Fleet?'

"The Angel of the Lord grew incensed. 'Who are you to question the Will of God?' The Angel became a great flash of light, and Wu was struck blind.

"Wu made his way to his Bridge, and ordered the whole fleet turned back toward Draconis. Again, his men thought he was mad, but they saw the mark of the Lord upon him, and they obeyed."

At this point, Dead Keeler interjected. "Wu was blind and disfigured at this point, but somehow no one thought to attribute this to, I don't know... *radiation poisoning!*"

Live Keeler was shocked at his ancestor's impudence. The Dead Guys never questioned the Divine Nature of the Crusades. Not that such questioning would not have been permitted because of the Sapphorean devotion to free debate, but only social deviants like Queeg Rockshadow ever seriously engaged in such pseudo-intellectual poseury. The Crusades were as close to sancrosanct as anything got on Sapphire.

Ziang yawned, took another strong drink of coffee, and continued. "Wu returned to Draconis, and caught the Red Fleet by surprise. Another long battle raged, and when it was over, he had lost another third of his ships. But, the Red Fleet had lost twice as many before Wu was forced to withdraw."

"More significantly, when the Draconis was first attacked, the Red Committee had sent a distress call to their compatriots at Alia. So, both Alia and Reyhan were left with only light defenses. The Second and Third Fleets were able to retake both easily."

"Was Wu's sight restored?" Live Keeler asked, feeling like a kid, almost.

"The sight came back to his right eye when Reyhan was regained, and to his left eye when Alia was brought back to light. The Third Crusade would rage through the Eta Carinae arm for another forty-three solar years, but after the Battle of Draconis, the Red Horde never recovered."

"Is that it?" Live Keeler said, his agitation severe. "What about the other battles? What tactics did they use? What were the names of the ships? I want to know it all! I *must* know it all!"

Ziang yawned again. "All of that is trivial. There were more battles and ships, but what you must remember is that the Third Crusade was widely known as the War of Miracles..." Ziang began, but then Dead Keeler cut him off.

"Miracles, bah! Miracles! It should have been called the war of overheated propaganda. The only miracle was that our side did not lose despite the arrogance of General Ruhullah Wu."

Ziang answered, with only a touch of anger in his voice. "Through God's intervention in this Crusade, our eyes were opened that humanity was a part of something greater than the physical universe. Our purpose crystallized. We saw the physical realm as but one part of a great whole, and we saw our duty. Good and evil, order and chaos, light and darkness were continually in conflict. Even though our reality was just a shadow of what went on the higher planes, we still had our duty; the galaxy was occupied territory and we were freedom fighters. On one side the faithful. On the other, nihilists who believed humans were no more than meat."

"And in the middle, forty billion other people just waiting to see which side came out on top," Dead Keeler spat.

"The greatest trick Satan ever learned was convincing people that he did not exist," Ziang answered. "I apologize, to my guests. You have unwittingly become caught in the springs of a very old and unsettled argument. The jibes grow meaner, the hearts grow harder, and every old offense and slight is revived to walk the night again."

"I think you just described every Keeler Christmas party I've ever attended," Live Keeler answered.

"Listen to both of you," the Old Man snarled in a way that made Queequeg howl in his sleep. "This all happened a thousand years before he was born and he talks like it happened to *him*. You take everything he tells you at face value. He could tell you the entire Army of Light painted themselves blue and juggled kittens, and you'd believe him. To hell with both of you."

"Was he like that when you knew him?" Live Keeler asked.

"And you're even worse," Lexington Keeler turned on his descendant. "Why don't you tell the General how you had let a whole world fall under the Forces of Darkness? How you let them mow through you like a harvester in a pansy patch, when you could have wiped out their invasion force with a single nemesis warhead, but *no-o-o-o-o-o-o*."

"The Nemesis warhead would have opened a white hole and immolated the entire system in a supernova," Live Keeler answered in a defensive growl. So, he had been told anyway. Alkema had told him and he trusted Alkema.

"That's your excuse for everything. In my day, we would have taken the hit. Believe me, they would have been better off dead," Lex Keeler insisted. "I know I am! *The* enemy has returned. There is no holding back against evil." In a flash of light like a genie returning to his bottle, he disappeared.

The Prime Commander was shocked at the behavior of his dead ancestor – even more so than usual. William Keeler had known Lexington Keeler to be ornery, bad-tempered, peevish, crabby, cantankerous and grouchy, but this was the first time he had seen him mean and bitchy. *There is something else between them*, he thought.

Pegasus – Fast Eddie’s Inter-Stellar Slam-n-Jam

Eliza Jane Change sat across the bar from Eddie Roebuck, who was telling her what her problem was.

“You know what your problem is, beauty?” Eddie challenged her, pouring a triangular glass of orange janeberry juice. “You don’t want to be happy. That’s what your problem is.”

“You’re right, I don’t,” she agreed with him, which, as usual, failed to dissuade him from elaborating.

“On Sapphire, we used to have these entertainments, they were called ‘situation philosophies.’ There was one about this rich merchant from Coolsville who adopted three Borealan children. That was one of the really big ones. Did you ever watch any sit-phils?”

“No, Eddie. In the Guild, our primary forms of entertainment were ‘Caged Heat’ matches, in which men and women settled their personal conflicts by battling naked in big metal cages in zero gravity.”

Eddie winced. “I always knew I should have been a guildler. Anyway, one of the big themes of sit-phils is that you make your own happiness, okay. It’s not a matter of what you get, or what you do, or who you’re with... it’s just you. You see how I am?”

“Not really.”

Eddie sighed, spitting out janeberry juice onto her uniform sleeve. “Okay, when you were in the Guild, did you have some kind of plan you were working on?”

Eliza admitted it. “I thought that if I saved, I have enough money for my own ship, eventually. Just a little courier ship, nothing big, but enough for me.”

“Did you think it would make you happy?”

“Of course not. It’s just the way I wanted to live.”

“All right, point is, that’s you. No illusions. Total reality woman. Captain Sky-Pilot, on the other hand, has spent three years on your trail because he thinks it’s what he needs to be happy. He thinks happiness is getting you to play house with him. No fallback plan.”

She nodded.

He continued. “However, I get the feeling being his house-woman wouldn’t make you any more or less happy. You’d just be the same. Right? Because you, by nature, are not happy, and can not be made happy. You don’t know how.”

“Are you trying to make some kind of point, Eddie?”

Eddie rolled his eyes and violated the barkeeper’s first rule. He took a slug of his own drink. He grimaced. “Neg, I’m pretty sure I don’t. I did when I started. If I think of it again, I’ll tell you.”

Winter – Habi Zod

Executive TyroCommander Lear and Chief Inspector Churchill were sitting across from each other in the great, red leather chairs of Lord Tyronius’s study, which he had lent to them so that they could better organize the search for Redfire. On a low table before them was a holographic map of the estate and grounds, showing the locations where Watchmen were positioned, and places that had not yet been searched.

Lear was saying, “I have no doubt in my mind that Redfire was innocent of this murder. He knew these people were going to find him guilty and so he, rather than wait for us to resolve this situation, took it upon himself to escape.”

“But you don’t believe his goal is to get back to *Pegasus*,” Churchill prompted.

“Anyone else in our crew would attempt that, but not Redfire. First, it is too obvious. Second, he is still loyal to that romantic, Sapphorean Code of Honor. His code, I believe, will compel him to try and find the actual murderer.”

“And you want us to confirm your hypothesis.”

She nodded quickly, as though not wanting to acknowledge their arrangement out loud. "In the meantime, the best I can do is to try and contain the diplomatic fallout. It would be a terrible shame if a potentially valuable alliance, were sacrificed for the sake of one individual. I am going to meet with Lord Tyronius to discuss the next steps. His people are justifiably furious. This entire mission is in jeopardy, and salvaging it will require dedicated effort by our people."

"The impossible is what we're here for," Churchill answered, just as a knock came to the door of the study. Lear gave him a look that said "Our business is concluded," and he called to the door "Come in."

The door opened. Sukhoi and Brickbat appeared. "All of the vehicles on the estate have been accounted for," Brickbat reported, as soon as he walked into the room. "If Redfire got away, he got away on foot."

"Good morning, Executive TyroCommander," Sukhoi said to Lear. He looked at Churchill, somewhat perplexed as though he had missed a scheduled meeting. "Were we..."

"Chief Inspector Churchill was just advising me on the progress of the investigation," Lear said as she stood. "He has expressed the highest degree of confidence in our ability to assist local law enforcement." She gave a smile and nod to Brickbat. "I think the best role for me at this point is to step to the side, and let you gentlemen continue with your important work."

She showed herself out of the office. "Nice lady," Brickbat said.

Churchill and Sukhoi were not the kind of men to say "And you call yourself a detective" out loud, but they were the kind to think it to themselves.

"How do you wish to proceed from here?" Churchill asked, patiently.

"We're waiting for the guards to come around, but they probably won't remember anything. We don't think Redfire would have left the estate through the front door, but there are four different tunnels and doors in the cellar that he could have escaped out of. I bet you didn't know about those. We're running them down."

"Excellent good," Churchill said. "Our ship's sensors have scanned an area twice as large as Redfire could have been expected to reach since escaping. Low-flying probes have taken over, but the chase is young."

"Just let me know if you find anything."

"Of course," Churchill said. "I should like to converse with Specialist Sukhoi."

"About the search," Brickbat asked suspiciously. No one was going to cut him out of any communication loop.

Churchill reassured him. "A minor administrative matter that will only bore you. You ought to continue with the search."

Looking little reassured, Brickbat left, closing the door slowly behind him and loitering in the hallway to see what he could overhear.

Churchill took Sukhoi to the very back of the room, and spoke to him very quietly. "There is someone on board *Pegasus* who might be able to help us find Redfire."

"Flight Commandant Jordan?" Sukhoi asked.

"She is already being interviewed by one of the regulars," Churchill said. "This job calls for a Centurion." He activated his datapad and showed Sukhoi a picture.

"John Hunter?" Sukhoi couldn't believe it. "What has he to do with anything?"

"Two years ago, he kidnapped the Executive TyroCommander's son. The only reason he is not now dead, or in stasis, is because of certain knowledge about Hunter, that would someday be of use to us. That day may have arrived." Churchill answered. "If Hunter can help us find Redfire."

"How?"

"All will become clear when you show him this." He handed a datapad to Sukhoi. It contained a file for him to read, and another file, that could only be read by Hunter himself.

"You want me to bring him down to the surface?" Sukhoi asked.

"If possible, but at least find him and make contact."

“How will I get back to *Pegasus*? What about the quarantine?”

“Executive TyroCommander Lear needs to return to *Pegasus* as well. You will go in her ship. It’s going to be thoroughly searched and scanned before launch. Our two Detectives and Lord Tyronius have agreed to let the Aves *Chloe* depart when Executive TyroCommander Lear is ready. Once on board *Pegasus*, it will be immediately placed under a detection shroud and guarded by four Watchmen and four of their people, continuously.”

Sukhoi waved the datapad in the direction toward which Goneril Lear had departed. “Does she know about this?”

Churchill snorted. “Of course, she does. As far as she knows, the idea was hers.”

Chapter Thirteen

Pegasus – Flight Commandant Jordan's Suite

Max Jordan's room was cool and dark, optimized for sleeping, cloaking him in the silence he required. Some persons preferred soft music, sea sounds, or white noise while they slept, but Max had spent most of his young life in a place where waking up at the snap of a twig could mean the difference between life and death, and could only sleep in complete silence.

In addition to keeping him cool and quiet, his sleeper unit ionized the air to maintain his relaxation and monitored the alpha waves of his brain to keep his sleep peaceful.⁷ When it detected excessive agitation, it altered the ionization of the air and activated positional cushions and massagers to relax him.

Some demons, however, were too strong and too deep in the mind to be warded off by crude techno-mechanical manipulation. Although the monitors showed his skin was cool, feverish sweat had already soaked through his linens and the silken pajama bottoms he wore. His alpha waves were skittering all over the graph, and nothing the machine could do could quiet them.

"Look pretty at you come, my let you little boy."

Max kicked and turned over, unable to awake, unable to escape his awful dreams. He had never mastered his mother's teachings on dream mastery, the Sapphirean discipline of shaping the dreamworld, making it coherent, and using it as a place to confront fears and challenges. Black and White images, came and went. He was in a great forest, or a ballroom, or a long, long hallway. He could hear voices all around him, chattering and chattering.

"you will very so pretty now live let I for are you."

"will you very now I for let are you live so pretty "

"very so pretty are now live let I for you will you will."

Sometimes he could see the people who were talking, just flash-impressions of people, staring at him but pretending not to. They were all men, and they were all bald, with fat fleshy hands reaching for him.

Then all was calm. The hallway, the forest, the ballroom had become a long mall, with short walls on either side leading toward an immense stone courtyard where children were playing. Max was much younger, and he was naked, and even though it was all in monochrome, he knew the color of the grass and stones.

In the middle of the courtyard stood Manchester, smiling and playing with the children, dressed in furs, He looked like a great big urso, and his teeth were pointed like a urso's and glistening with spittle. He turned toward Max and called to him.

"Come here, you pretty little boy and let me look at you."

Max Jordan fought not to obey. He did not want to go to the man... the Manchester... no, not the Manchester. He was someone else using the Manchester's face. Max Jordan knew if he could tear off the mask, he could see who it really was. In fact, he could know who it really was if he just put his mind to it, but he could not bring himself to.

The Manchester leered at him, smiling with dripping, pointed teeth. "Come here, you pretty little boy and let me look at you." Max Jordan would not go to him, and steeled his body for a fierce resistance. Somehow, though, he was moving ever closer to the Manchester, who now wore a suit of armor with the image of a hanging man on it. He was reaching out with fat, bald hands. His teeth dripped. Laughter. Voices.

He was on top of Max, smothering him. His skin was hot and smelled of dirt, body odor, blood, and dank basements where things were left behind and forgotten to rot. Max struggled to breathe. Manchester laughed. They stood apart.

"Come here, you pretty little boy and let me look at you."

Manchester reached for him, not with a hand, but with an arm that ended in syringes and daggers.

It was too much for the sleeper. Max woke up and cried out into the empty room, which sensed his panic and gradually brought up the lights, just enough to show that he was safe. He struggled for breath as though he had been drowning, gasping four or five times before realizing he was in his own room, his mother was sleeping in the next room, and no one on this ship would ever, ever harm him.

He could take no comfort in any of that. His mind felt as fragmented as the images in his dreams, all

fading now except for the feeling of being smothered, and the long metal knives pointed at his throat.

He turned over, grabbed his pillow, and began to sob uncontrollably.

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

With a wet cloth, the woman wiped the dried blood from John Hunter's upper lip. He hurt thoroughly. His pain filled him like water fills the sea, as though his very bones had been scraped raw. Whenever he breathed, he smelled dried blood. Whenever he swallowed, it was like squeezing a lump of glass through his throat.

"I feel terrible," he told the woman. He lay on the floor of a maintenance compartment directly behind one of the composting units the recycled *Pegasus's* organic waste into rich fertilizer for the vivaria. The deck was freezing, unfinished alloy with painful safety-step treads protruding outward, but at least the recycler gave off enough heat to keep him warm.

"Who attacked you?" she asked him, her voice soft. She was very pale, even her hair was white, and it made her seem somehow insubstantial, as though it were a ghost tending to him. So was she called, in the UnderDecks where everyone had an alias, Ghost.

"He wore the suit of a Watchman." Hunter did not know which hurt worse, getting the words out of his bruised lungs or squeezing the words out from his throbbing mind.

"A Watchman... this deep?"

"I only said he wore the suit of a Watchman."

"If he had been a Watchman, he would have taken you into custody." She had one of the one-liter bottles of water from his pack, and after she finished cleaning him, she offered it for him to drink. He shook his head, and felt his sore brain sloshing around inside his skull.

"If he had been a Watchman, he wouldn't have shot me." He painfully raised an arm as a shield and slowly opened his eyes. He was still achingly sensitive to light.

Over the shoulder of the ghost, he made out the shadow of a figure behind her. With reflexes only slightly impaired by pain, he reached toward his pulse cannon.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said the voice, strong, certain, and a little contemptuous.

"Tyro-Centurion Constantine, my old friend," Hunter said, clutching the pulse cannon at last.

Constantine stepped out of the shadows. He was in full Centurion regalia, the black jumpsuit trimmed with silver accoutrements. "In Vesta's name, Hunter, you look like hell. What happened to you?"

"Jealous?" Redfire taunted him.

The Centurion said nothing, but instead examined the chamber. Redfire had to ask. "How did you find me?"

"Spiked your last food pick-up with micro-probes. They've mostly passed out of your body by now, but we were able to track you for several days. You weren't in your other hidey-holes, so, you had to be here."

"Very clever."

"Thank you," Constantine slowly reached for a device on his utility belt.

Hunter armed his pulse cannon. "Don't even think about it, Constantine."

Constantine paused. "Medical scanner," he said. "Obviously, if I were going to stun you and take you to the freezers, I could have had both of you by now."

"Where have I heard that before?" but Hunter conceded this logic. "You can take out the scanner. Take out anything else, so much as twitch in the direction of anything else, and you'll never make breakfast for Bellisarius again."

The Centurion took the small, clear plate from his belt. "Concussion... second degree burns on your chest, multiple contusions throughout your muscles and skeleton, minor hemorrhaging in your nasal and esophageal passages, bruised spleen and liver. You must be in a lot of pain, Hunter." He slowly replaced the plate in his belt. "If you can restrain yourself from shooting me, I have some medicine that would help."

"Neg, you can keep your medicine to yourself."

"Suit yourself. So, what happened? Did you try to roast marshmallows by opening a plasma conduit?"

"Someone shot me."

Constantine brightened. "Anyone I know?"

"He wore the uniform of the ship's Watch, that's all I know."

A concerned look tightened Constantine's eyebrows in the middle. "A Watchman you say. The Watchman don't usually go around armed, and that wound is not the signature of a Watchman paralyzer." A genuine smile came to his face. "It must hurt like madness."

"If you didn't come to put me in a freezer, then what are you doing here, Constantine?"

"Bellisarius sent me to ask ..." Constantine had to take a deep breath and squeeze out the last few words, "...for your assistance."

Despite the pain that shuddered through his body, Hunter threw his head back and laughed heartily. "Ho, ho, ho... Belly sends his favorite bitch-boy to ask me for a favor. All right, he may have my assistance, but I am only going to remind him one more time... socks first, then jack-boots."

"Tactical TyroCommander Redfire is missing," Constantine said simply. "He was being imprisoned on the planet's surface while being tried for murder. He escaped."

Hunter's good humor cut off immediately. "Escaped? Murder? You'll have to forgive me if I am not up on the latest news. What the hell is going on down there?"

"A native of the planet was found murdered. The murder weapon was found in Redfire's bag. He was put on trial, but escaped from his cell. Half the Ship's Watch is hunting for him on the surface."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"Bellisarius believes you would have special insight into how he escaped, and where he might have gone."

Hunter considered this. "And on what basis does he believe I would have any special insight?"

"He would not say."

Hunter ran his tongue over his lips, while staring hard at Constantine. "All right, you want my insight, then tell me this, did he actually kill someone?"

"We do not believe he did."

Hunter nodded. "If he were guilty, he would not have escaped. He values honor and would have accepted his punishment. If he is not guilty, he may have escaped, if he believed it necessary to prove his innocence, but I do not believe he would. If he did escape, he would be working to prove his innocence. If he did not escape on his own, then he is in the custody of someone else, and I do not believe I can help you."

Constantine spoke. "I am going to reach for a datapad, now, that Bellisarius asked me to deliver to you. I will place it on the floor in front of you and activate it. No tricks."

Hunter contemplated this for a moment, then nodded. Constantine slowly placed the small black square on the ground near Hunter's feet. It activated, displaying a text message from Bellisarius. The woman gasped when she read it, but Hunter, apart from one raised eyebrow, did not betray a response.

"His proposition is that I accompany you to the surface. If Redfire is found, with my aid, he will promise to grant me amnesty, within the UnderDecks. If Redfire is not captured, I remain on the planet. Connie, shall I explain to you *all* the reasons why this plan is flawed?"

"It's better than being put in stasis and shot back to Republic," Constantine answered.

"But no better than the life I have now."

"You would no longer be hunted," Constantine reminded him. "You would no longer wonder if every meal, if every drink of water, has been infested with micro-molecular tracking probes."

"What about her?" Hunter said, nodding toward the woman.

Constantine bristled. "I am not empowered to negotiate. If you have nothing to offer, I will return to my regular duties, and inform Bellisarius that you turned him down, and have nothing to offer us."

The two men glared at each other across the deck. *They hate each other*, Ghost thought. It was an obvious thought, too obvious not to be thought.

Hunter finally broke the silence. "Even if every instinct wasn't screaming at me that this is a trap... and really, Connie, if this clichéd set-up really is a trap, then the state of creative thinking in the Notorium is truly pathetic ... I know better than to make any deal with men who are bound by neither law nor honor."

"Then, our business is concluded," said Constantine. He briskly turned and began walking away.

"Wait," Hunter called back. "This Watchman... the one who shot me... does that not bother you. Now, first, someone in the Watch may be making unauthorized trips to the deep UnderDecks with a dangerous weapon, which would not be good. Second possibility, one of us could have gotten access to a Watch uniform and a weapon, which is worse. Third possibility, someone from the outside has infiltrated this ship, which would be as bad as bad can get."

Constantine paused at the hatch. "Rest assured, Hunter. We will investigate."

"Most of your personnel are on the surface looking for Redfire, and I am the only one who has actually seen this guy. I also know my way around down here. If you want to get to the truth of this, you're going to need me."

"If you think I would work with you..."

"Connie... you can not neglect something like this, and you can't investigate without me."

Constantine paused a moment. His lips moved as he worked through Hunter's suggestion. Then, he asked. "What's in it for me, Hunter? Why should I sweat a guy who goes around shooting you UnderDeck trolls?"

Hunter slowly began to replace the pulse cannon in his bag. "All right, Connie, you opportunistic bastard, as soon as we find the guy who shot me... I'll go to the surface with Bellisarius and help you hunt down Redfire."

Constantine looked slightly crushed, and it was obvious, he had been hoping Hunter would reject the offer. Reluctantly, he approached again, saying, "Then, the deal is made. You're going to love working for me. As we say in the Notorium, the enemy of my enemy is my friend." He offered Hunter his arm.

"Does that mean the friend of my friend is my enemy," said Ghost.

"It does, very often," said Constantine.

Hunter took the arm and lifted himself painfully from the deck. It hurt to put weight on his legs, but he imagined it would pass as he moved around more.

"There is just one more thing," with a lightning swift movement, Constantine jammed a hypodermic into Hunter's shoulder.

Hunter jerked away, but could already feel a warm pulse spreading through his body. "What the hell was that?"

"A healing accelerator and a pain suppressant. I won't be carrying you all over these UnderDecks."

Winter – The Alcazar of General Ziang

A sunrise and sunset had passed as Keeler had spoken with Ziang by the light of the fire, and the conversation continued. "The enemy took advantage of a vicious, in-dwelling alien species that incubated inside a living human host and emerged as an almost unstoppable killing machine."

"Oh, you don't want to hear about that," Ziang waved him off. "That barely counted as a Crusade. Let me tell you about the Fifth Crusade. The Fifth Crusade was known as 'The War of The Strange.' The Stranges were devoted to order, conformity, and homogeneity. They were humans who altered themselves to gray-skinned, unisex bodies, and shaved heads. They wore dark gray uniforms with numbers printed on the left breast patch. Their ships were spherical, and unmarked."

Keeler tried to look smart. "I have some notes on that. The spherical design minimized surface-to-mass ratio, making the ships difficult to attack."

"The Stranges did not attack in that manner," Ziang told him. "Their preferred method of conquest was to infest a planet with pods. These pods took over people's bodies when they slept, replacing them

with a Strange replica, tied into a single hive mind. Eventually, the Strange had established themselves on 100 worlds. They chose, at that point, to stop expanding and to consolidate their hold on the worlds they had conquered.

"We knew they conquered a hundred worlds, but history does not record what happened to them."

The old general yawned. "I'll get back to them later, but now the hour is late. And I grow fatigued." He rose gracefully and gestured for Keeler and Toto to follow him down the long passageway. Keeler shook Toto awake.

"I don't have much in the way of guest quarters, but I should be able to make you comfortable." Ziang stood.

"Do you have any books or anything?" Keeler asked. "That coffee will keep me awake for hours, and if you had any histories, I would be..."

"Books, you want?" Ziang said, and chuckled haggardly. "Books were almost extinct in my era. Heirlooms. We mainly used data storage devices... like this." He tapped the datapadd on which the Commander had been taking notes.

"On Sapphire, only our most revered texts are preserved on paper," Keeler conceded. "I probably couldn't read the language anyway. It was worth a shot."

"If it's books you want, I may be able to arrange something of great interest," Ziang said.

"Like what?" Keeler asked.

"Later," said Ziang. "Sleep now."

Keeler muttered something under his breath about Ancients, cryptic comments, and foreshadowing. The night would be short, Keeler knew. Ziang showed him to a snug, sleeping loft Ziang provided, and made his way to his own chamber. Keeler waited until his footsteps had faded, and then longer enough to make sure the general had retired for the night. Then, he crept back to the sitting room, intending to raise his ancestor from whatever it was he did in the matrix and have a word with him... probably many words, a number of which would be profane.

He was surprised to find Lexington Keeler up and about, a pale, luminescent presence standing beneath Ziang's skylight, staring out at the stars. Technically, this was something he did not need a manifestation to do. That he had taken on a physical form meant that he wanted to be seen. "I knew you'd come back," said the ghost.

Keeler was blunt. "Why are you being so rude to our host?"

"He has no business telling you about the Crusades."

"If some of the things he's said are true, you and the rest of the Dead Guys have been lying to us for centuries."

"We have not been lying to you," the ghost protested. "We just have been making sure the best possible version of the truth was the one that you all accepted. The truth that the Crusades were a noble struggle of good versus evil, good triumphed, evil was driven out, and humanity was the better for it."

"Nothing he has said has contradicted that view."

"Tomorrow, Ziang may tell you more about the fourth, fifth, sixth, and eighth Crusades, in which our side had the Holy Spunk beaten out of us. Think too long on his facts, and you may see The Crusades not as a moral struggle that we won because God was on our side, but as something the side we happened to be on happened to win, so we could then say that because we won, God must have been on our side all along."

Keeler seated himself on a cold stone bench. "The only one in this room who has suggested that is you..."

The ghost took on a pained expression. "Perhaps, because, at the time, it is what I believed, until I was proven terribly terribly wrong."

Dead Keeler shimmered in the light as a brief small cloud passed between him and the starlight. "Ziang was always a true believer. He never questioned the righteousness of our cause."

Live Keeler interrupted. "It feels more personal than that."

"Reckon it was."

"Was there a woman involved?"

"No, it was a boy."

Live Keeler was taken aback. "I had no idea."

"Bend over and pick up your mind out of the gutter. That's not what I meant. The boy was a child we found in the ruins of Ninevec, the capital of Miracle Colony, after a horrifying attack by the Annihilation Swarm, under the last Dark Lord, Enoch." He paused and looked his descendant over. "Come here, I want to show you something."

The ghost approached him, and reached his hands toward the captain's temples. They began to glow more brightly. The ghost's face became a grinning rictus. "You should feel privileged, only a few of your kind have ever experienced this. Now, this might hurt a lot."

He plunged his fingers into Keeler's brain. There was a flash of light and a sensation of icicles working their way deep into his cerebellum. Then, there were visions in his head, washed out of color like faded flowers, and he knew the old man was sharing memories with him. He could hear the voice of his ancestor both in his mind and in the room outside, from everywhere at once it came, forcing itself onto him.

"The Swarm were a force of destruction consisting of millions of soldiers who had been altered, genetically manipulated and fused with technology until they were no longer recognizably human. Their arms looked more like insect legs, they had wings that buzzed and enabled to leap or fly over short distances. They sprayed acid and biotoxins from stingers on their backs." Keeler could see it. The skies of a world darkened with millions of horrific creature, like human faces had been pasted onto insect heads. They opened their mouths to scream, but all that came out was a horrible, insect screech.

"They laid waste to every city on Miracle, and any other world they came across. They didn't use the quantum bombs that dusted cities in an instant, they didn't use fast molecular disrupters that instantly vaporized people ... and painlessly. They used fusion bombs, concussion blasters, and fire-blazers; weapons designed to inflict maximum agony. If you got hit with a fire-blazer, your skin would be flash-fried and you'd be horrendously disfigured, but it might take you days to die... or worse."

"Worse?" the captain gasped.

"You might live. These weapons didn't destroy planets, they transfigured them into Hells. Miracle had been a pretty nice planet at one time. Not a lot different from Sapphire, there used to be a nice beach on the Beta Southern continent that served the best Tequila Fanny Bangers in the Libra Sector. The swarm began their attack by firing nuclear incendiaries into the planet's petroleum deposits, splitting open the fault lines with resonance bombs, and just to make sure the atmosphere was completely poisoned and choked with dust, bombarding the surface with asteroids. By the time we managed to fight the Swarm into retreat, the sky was burning red, filled with acrid black smoke and the rain was pure sulfuric acid.

"Ninevec had been a city of four million people. The Swarm didn't leave anything intact. What had been tall gleaming buildings were nothing but twisted, blackened skeletons. The homes where people had lived had all been burned.

"In the ruins that city we found one survivor, a boy. It was me, who found him, underneath what had been a temple in the city center. He was about twelve... twelve was younger then than it is now... he was ... starving, filthy, poisoned." Image fragments spun through Keeler's mind. He could not focus on any one image, hold it in his mind long enough to really see it, but he could almost *remember* seeing a small, thin white body, covered in with ashes, lying on a metal plate, and shivering. He could almost remember feeling the weight as he picked up the thing and carried it in his arms.

"I had him taken to my flagship, *Ark Royal*. The boy was an orphan, no family, not even a world. As he recovered, I grew very fond of him, as did my crew. We encountered two more of Enoch's units in the next solar year, the Lesion Legion at Carrabas and the Black Watch at Gabriel III, and we defeated them easily. Some even suggested that the boy, whom we came to call 'Johnny,' was like a good luck charm."

"The only one whose heart was not turned was General Ziang. Our fleets met up at Charlemagne Base, and as soon as he saw the boy, it was like two cats meeting in an alley. They did not fight, but you could almost see their eyes narrowing to slits as they regarded each other, fur standing on end, sizing each other up.

"When were alone, he related his doubts under no uncertain terms. He doubted one small boy could

survive a holocaust that killed fourteen million people. The mark of darkness was on the boy. What if the Swarm had 'left him alive,' to spy on us, or worse. He warned me to be careful, but I would not listen, I was even offended that he would so distrust this boy, who was almost like a son to me and a kid brother to my crew."

Images drifted through Keeler's mind. Ships, people, planets, but never long enough to focus on them. It might have been a function of the old man's fragmented memory, but Keeler had feeling the old man was hiding details from him. Feelings, however, were bright and clear ... terror and remorse foremost among them.

"I believe it was the onset of puberty that triggered the change in the boy. His behavior became hostile, more erratic, and we attributed it to hormones. Then, the physical changes happened. He grew larger and larger, almost before our eyes, and the pain as his bones and muscles stretched was agonizing. His screams echoed on every deck of my ship. His teeth fell out and new ones grew in as fangs."

Keeler could almost see it. He saw the arms and legs of a very young boy, in agonizing spasm as they transformed. He could hear the screams, but the old man would not let him see the boy's face.

"We tried to confine him to the infirmary while my doctors and geneticists looked for a cure. We could not find any medical source for the changes. A physicist... and don't ask me to ever explain this, the technology is far beyond my comprehension... believed that the boy was somehow connected to another dimension, and some horrid creature was emerging through him, gradually taking him over.

"Ziang, of course, had a ready solution. 'Kill him!' He said it would be a mercy to Johnny and to my crew. I could not bring myself to give the order. While we argued and searched in vain for a cure, he got out. First, he killed everyone in the infirmary beginning with my chief nurse. We discovered her body next to his bed and the top of her head, above the jawline, in the adjacent lavatory."

"Lavatory?" Keeler asked.

"Euphemism, as you call them. Everyone else was killed in their beds, usually dismembered. Every piece of equipment was smashed. The beds were twisted and fused together. He had ripped out the intestines of every patient, strung them together, and decorated the room with them... and he had done all of this in a matter of seconds.

"He tore through the ship. Tracking him was easy, a matter of following the trail of screams, smoke and blood, and body parts. When we caught up to him, he had become a raging beast. His head was like a dragon, and he could make your head burst into flame with a single look. He was a monster, and immune to our weapons. He slapped us aside like toys. My security officer died before my eyes, and his entire squad was burned to a crisp. Why he let me live, I can not imagine.

"We fought for half a day with him, as he lay waste to huge parts of my ship and crew. We ejected him into space, and he tore his way back in. We lured him into a section, sealed it off, and blasted it to hell, and still he lived.

"The ship's physicist, the same weirdo who deduced that some creature was emerging through him came up with the solution. We would have to fire through his dimension, hit him from the inside. He knew a way to do it. Of course, it was dangerous. Of course, it was a long shot, with the slimmest prospect of success. Somehow he pulled it off. Energy weapons didn't work, so he kept the channel open and sent jagged hunks of metal through. They appeared, piercing through the beast's head and body. He mewed, he howled, there was a flash of light.

"When it faded, the boy was lying naked in the ruins of my engineering deck. He looked around, and began sobbing. He did not remember what happened. I picked him up and tried to comfort him. He begged us to make the changes stop, to drive the monster back inside him. Despite all the horror inside him, and all the terror he had unleashed on my crew, his eyes were still the eyes of an innocent little boy.

"I promised him I would help him, and we would never let the monster come back again. I thought we could somehow isolate him from the changes, or at least get him to some planet, where we could try and help him and no one would get hurt.

"Then, he screamed, and I looked his hands. They were lengthening into claws again, growing scaled. The creature was coming back through him, faster than any of us could have imagined.

"I did the only thing I could do to save what was left of my ship and crew. I put my blaster to his head

and I vaporized him, instantaneously, and for him, painlessly. For me, I died, at that moment, and I swore a black vow that I would piss on Enoch's grave.

"The first ship to answer our distress call was the *Dawn Dragon*, Ziang's flagship. He never said I told you so, but I hated him just the same, for being right about the boy, for being right about the nature of the war we were fighting. After killing the boy I loved because the Dark Enemy had made him a monster, I could no longer believe that this was anything but an Armageddon, a battle to the death between Good and Evil.

"Fueled in vengeance for Johnny, and for my crew, and for that part of me that had died, Enoch became my obsession. I fought his minions without mercy, no quarter asked and none given. I dogged him. I took every chance to destroy him. I laid waste to whole solar systems, I destroyed the stars themselves. When I drove him out of the galaxy, three years later, when I fired every weapon I had into the huge ship of his, the one that looked like a giant black stormcloud, I wasn't thinking of God, or the billions of lives he had snuffed out, or the worlds he had set ablaze. I only thought of Johnny."

With that, the old man drew his fingers away. The icy needles in his mind withdrawn, Live Keeler was dizzy and confused, the raw emotion of loss, anger, pain and vengeance were lingered like the terror of awakening from a nightmare. "Kumba Yah," he said, finally.

"Kumba Yah, indeed. You won't find that story in any history of the Crusades, and if it shows up, I'll know who to send headfirst into the hardpan."

"But that story... that's what made you understand the nature of the war, the real stakes. The simple fact that history has forgotten almost dishonors..."

"Don't give me that. I would rather keep this truth in my heart than take a chance that it become bastardized by some scholar or poet with his own agenda. Everyone is entitled to some secrets. This is mine."

Winter – Somewhere

Damp, cold, and a pervasive stench of rusting metal were all Phil Redfire could comprehend of his surroundings.

Blindfolded, he saw nothing, but could hear a distant sound of dripping water. His arms were tied to some kind of metal frame and spread apart. His legs were tied together and secured to another pole. He could barely move.

Under other circumstances, he might have enjoyed this.

He felt a hand caress his cheek, a woman's hand, soft and warm. When it finished its caress, it swung back and slapped him hard.

"Hello, Phil," said a familiar voice that he could not place, a woman's voice. "You're going to have a lot to be grateful for... if you live through this."

Chapter Fourteen:

Pegasus– Hangar Bay 19– Prudence

“Adjust your trim, good. Now, close to 400 kilometers and reduce speed.”

Matthew Driver was giving instructions to his protégé, Trajan Lear. In the simulation, they were taking *Prudence* into an “Inspection Orbit” of the icy rings of a gas giant planet. *Prudence’s* training simulator projected holograms on the canopy, and give them the illusion of flight.

“Line a parallel course 200 meters above the rings.” Matthew ordered.

Trajan Lear was holding his right hand at chest level, fingers together, slightly banked, in an attitude that represented the angle at which the ship was approaching the rings. He eased the hand until it was flat, the ship leveled out also.

Matthew smiled approvingly. “Good, watch your velocity.”

Trajan had to remember to breathe in. He sensed *Prudence* at work, calculating the perfect orbital velocity. When it reached optimum, the ship gave him a kind of mental ‘thank you.’ It was so smooth, so easy, when Flight Captain Driver was in the seat beside him.

“Very good,” Matthew said. “Now, calculate a trajectory through the rings and bring us underneath them.”

Underneath was relative, Trajan thought, but he acknowledged Matthew, and began the sequence. First, he strengthened and adjusted the ship’s pseudo-gravity field to protect the hull. Then, he moved his hand, angling it downward, adjusting course. His other hand held a thruster control, which he squeezed to adjust the ship’s velocity.

When the ship passed through the rings, a snowstorm flashed above the canopy, tinted blue in the backlight of the nitrogen-methane planet. The snow and light dappled the flight deck. Suddenly, Trajan found himself unable to breathe. He had to struggle for breath. The ship shuddered.

“Steady... steady... ” came Matthew’s reassuring voice.

“I can’t...”

His hand was shaking. The ship was following its motion.

“Can we pause simulation?” he asked.

“*Prudence*, pause simulation.”

Trajan was staring up at the blue crystals projected in the canopy. His heart was pounding, and it was a struggle to pull in air to breathe.

“What’s wrong.”

It’s like being underwater, Trajan thought.

Matthew turned to him. “Does it frighten you to be underwear?”

Trajan looked at him with a mixture of surprise and anger. “I thought you said you couldn’t read my mind.”

Matthew’s expression became somewhat embarrassed. “I’m sorry, that thought was so strong. I thought you were projecting it.”

Trajan slumped back. He didn’t know why he was afraid of the water, but he had been ever since his Passage. “How was I doing?”

“You’re getting better,” Matthew answered.

Trajan sensed that there should have been a “but” at the end of that sentence. “What am I doing wrong.”

“I didn’t say you were doing anything wrong.”

Trajan tapped his interface. He could not possibly have detected any critical thoughts from Matthew through it, but it made the point.

Matthew answered him. “You still are trying to control her too much, trying to force your will on

her. *Prudence* wants to work with you, as a partner, but you only listen to her when you want something. You have to work with her, cooperate, not force your will on her."

Trajan could not get what Matthew was saying. "How can I fly her without forcing my will on her? Isn't that what piloting's all about?"

"She has a mind, you know," Matthew told him. "All she wants to do is fly, and all you *should* want to do is fly, and together, you can make her..." he stopped. "Let me ask you, why do you want to do this?"

"Why do I want to be a pilot?" Trajan said for clarity. Dave Alkema had once asked him the same thing, and he had been able to come up with an answer to satisfy that time. He wanted to get away from his mother, but that was only partly true. If he said it was because he wanted to be like Flight Captain Driver, that would be closer to the truth, but it would be like admitting his mother was right.

"I just think piloting an Aves is the best job on the ship," Trajan told him. "I don't want to be in Operations Core. It's boring. Everything's boring, but Flight Core." He looked expectantly toward Matthew to see if the answer was acceptable.

"There is no other position on the ship I would want to have," Matthew told him. "But, do you feel a passion about actually flying?"

Trajan squirmed, not comfortable being under Matthew's scanners. "Why did you become a pilot?" he said, thinking to divert the conversation.

Matthew had clearly not expected this. He leaned back in his seat, and his gaze fell across the control panels of the ship he loved. "I remember first seeing *Prudence* on the final construction floor of the CloudBuster Avian finishing facility, on the Sapphirean moon of Hyperion.

"It's an underground complex, mostly. They built it inside a large crater. The floor is smooth, and they built a huge glass dome over the top. When they put the final markings and coatings on the spacecraft, they move them up from the finishing area and into the delivery area. It's almost pure white, the floor I mean. Mechanoids shine and buff it every day. The way their sun catches the light is exactly like the crystal in the dome over the Inhabitation Decks. It catches the light and splits it into prisms... I don't know how to describe it, but you know what I'm trying to say."

Trajan nodded.

"There were two Aves being prepped for delivery. *Prudence*, and her sister ship *Prowess* which was going to Pathfinder Four. Her skin had just gotten its final polish. It gleamed. I... I had just never seen anything so beautiful. She was made for flying. She looked like she wanted to leap right up into the sky. I had this mental image of *Prudence* flying through the crystalline dome, running toward the sun, shards of broken crystal raining down like snowflakes. It was as though nothing would restrain her.

"And she would be my ship. We would travel between worlds together. We would share in that miracle that is spaceflight, her hull keeping me alive and warm, her engine, making awesome speed. My ship. My home. My life. I had flown ships before, trainers, defenders, shuttles... but she was greater than any of them, and I knew we would do great things together. She wanted to fly."

Matthew's tone grew almost religious. "Sometimes, I think, we have these bodies that slow us down. I wonder if death frees the spirit inside of us, that once we are free of the physical limitations of our bodies, we freely take wing and explore all the planes of the universe, of Creation."

"Kumba Yah," said Trajan.

Suddenly, Matthew became all embarrassed, and pulled back. "I guess it's just... do you want to fly," he told Trajan, like a seal to cap the confidence he had just shared. "I believe we were born to fly, and as pilots, we get closer to that than anyone."

Winter – Habi Zod

Specialist Gotobed was stranded on Winter, inhabiting a modest garret in Lord Tyronius's estate for as long as the quarantine endured. As she watched the snow falling — *again!* — from the graphite sky outside, she pondered immortality. Was eternal life worth an endless succession of short, and dismal afternoons. After living here long enough, wouldn't you trade your hyper-extended longevity for just one afternoon on the beach in the warm sunshine? Was having a sure thing worth enduring this miserable climate, rather than risk that at the end of mortal existence, there was no more?

Which brought her, uncomfortably to thoughts of the Afterlife. Could an afterlife, any afterlife, hold out more promise than this? Even if heaven was a wondrous expanse of light and beauty beyond her wildest dreams, was it a place in which she would want to spend sempiternity? Forever was such a damped long time, after all. She thought of the people here, and what boredom had driven them to. Some believed in the afterlife, all would live as one, and all would be in peace in the same place. There were plenty of devout Theologians, Iestans, Saints, and Buddhists she would rather suffer for a year from a painful, rectal itch than spend an afternoon with. Would they be there, in her paradise? How could she exclude them and still remain a good Theologian (of Christian Aspect) and want to exclude *anyone* from her version of the perfect Elysium.

She took another drink of the olive liqueur Tyronius had gifted her with before the trial. Her hair was out of the bun and flowing freely around her face and shoulders, and she was glad to no longer look like a human groundnut. Without Redfire to defend, or Keeler to abuse, she had nothing to do. Maybe a hot bath would make her feel better.

A knock at her door made her turn. Lord Tyronius was already inside the room. He owned the castle, and owed privacy to none of his guests. "Good Lady, with all that has transpired, I have not been able to inquire as to your comfort. Are you well? Are the quarters comfortable enough?"

"I am fine, ... Lord," she had never really been comfortable addressing the Ancient by his title, but it was less awkward than "Tyronius," which struck her ears as like the kind of nick-name you shared with a lover in the heat of passion. She wondered what his original, colonial, name had been, but had never found the right moment to ask.

"I didn't realize until now you had opted for such a small room," Tyronius said, almost musingly.

"It has windows on three sides. The Night of the Parliament Ball, it seemed like an appealing choice... at the time."

Tyronius reached for the snifter of liquor, covering her hand in his. "I believe it is too small, and since you may be on this estate for some time... the chambers adjacent to mine are larger and warmer."

Gotobed was surprised to find herself blushing. It must have been the olive oil.

He stroked the back of her hand with his thumbs. "Forgive me if it seems forward, but it has been a long time since I have felt the incomparable caress of a woman's hand."

"You caught me by surprise."

Tyronius seemed genuinely bemused. "Have I? I saw those looks you gave me when you first came into the castle. I thought I was imagining it, but there you were again, on the tour, moving close to me, listening to me as I spoke. Your interest took *me*, by surprise, and I surprised myself when I realized your attraction was not unwelcome."

She had to admit it was true. The very ancientness of his being had drawn her to him, he seemed so wise and in command. Was there more than just a spark of attraction?

He maneuvered closer to her, took the glass from her hand and set it on the table. "I have a confession to make. I have had carnal knowledge of thousands of women on this planet, a few for love, many more for lust, many more than that out of boredom, and some more out of pity, but you ... you are like a beautiful yellow flower pushing your buds into the sunlight of a belated spring." He fell to his knees, took her hand, caressed it, kissed it.

There was another knock at her door, and it was flying open before she could decide whether to tell the new visitor to come in immediately or lose himself. Lord Brigand burst into the room. "Christina, come with me, back to my estate. There's no point in waiting in this dreary alcove. I will teach of you pleasures only gods have imagined..." He stopped himself when he saw Tyronius, on his knees, his lips still on Gotobed's knuckles.

Gotobed whipped her hand back. "This is awkward," she said accurately.

Winter – Somewhere

"I know what questions you have," the unseen woman continued, in a voice at once commanding and condescending, like a bad teacher trying to ruin a good student. "If I had to wait for you to ask them I

would be bored very quickly. So, let me answer them on your behalf."

Redfire tugged against his restraints, just to test them. They proved to be very tight, and very strong.

She continued. "Where you are is not important, except that you are far beyond the help of your friends. How you got here is at most a trivial detail. A little narcotic in your food, a blast of energy, a fast, stealthy transport and... here we are.

"Am I the one who killed that pathetic Manchester? I am indeed. Did I frame you for his murder? I certainly did.

"Why did I do it? Now, you see why I took the initiative. It would have taken you five questions to get to an interesting and relevant one. The answer is as follows: I had to do something to drive a wedge between the people of this planet and your people. I had also to keep your people distracted and off-balance while we worked on some other schemes. I also had to get you alone. When I saw how you over-reacted to that Manchester's advances on that boy -- which demonstrated what any more enlightened being would recognize as perfectly normal expression of a healthy sexual appetite -- I saw how all of these things could be brought together.

"I approached Manchester and informed him that you would accept an apology, and that you would meet him in the Conservatory at midnight. Manchester, having previously been a servant of Lord Tyronius, knew how to gain entry. I met him there. The enforcers properly surmised the rest. He mewled after I first struck the blow, then gurgled and died. It was a good kill, a very good kill.

"I left the Conservatory through the balcony, which allowed me to enter your room through the window, then led you on a chase back to the Conservatory door. I locked the Conservatory from the inside and escaped through the balcony again. I hid the candlestick in your bag, where those two walking meat sticks managed to find it.

"And then there was a trial. Of that, I don't know what was more entertaining, watching the prosecution strut and go through its rituals, or watching your defense sputter and fume because the system did not allow them to prove your innocence. It was hard to keep from laughing out loud.

"They found you guilty, you know? That jury of half-wits, four of them spent your trial dozing off and a fifth stared at your defense attorney like he wanted to swallow her whole. I can't totally blame him, she would make a delicious dish.

"Now, of course, all of the inhabitants of this planet, think you escaped rather than face justice. Many in your own crew think you have escaped in order to find the real killer and prove your innocence. They are scrambling all over the planet like insects. The whole dilemma preoccupies everyone. What to do? What to do?"

Redfire felt the cold steel blade of a knife against his temple. "By now, you probably have only one remaining question. Who am I, and who are we? Unless you are fatally dim-witted, you probably have a good idea."

She turned the blade of the knife toward his temple, and it dug in with a little pain. "You are at a crossroads, Philip John Redfire. If you choose correctly, evidence will surface showing that that old man was murdered by an alien interloper, bent on keeping your worlds apart. You will return to your ship, resume your duties, resume your life with your family. Choose poorly, and everyone on your ship will die, and a lot of people on this planet, too."

The knife swiped downward, cutting away the blindfold. The first images to register Redfire were girders and pipes, catwalks and rails. As his vision cleared, he saw Specialist NightStalker standing before him.

"Surprised?" she continued. "All the clues were there. If you really are worthy of what we are about to offer you, you should not have been surprised at all."

"NightStalker?" he whispered.

"I can not say that I knew the woman for very long. A long needle pushed into the base of the skull kills quickly. She should not have been so trusting."

He saw that she wore a kind of black leather tunic, with the symbol of a wand and the number nine superimposed on the left breast.

"I am an Aurelian, a Nine of Wands. You may call me, Mercuria."

Winter – The Alcazar of General Ziang

Another cold, dim fluorescent morning dawned over the barren lands of the Dessication. William Keeler squinted through the window of his bedroom loft. The raggedy saw-teeth of the nearby mountain range were shrouded in a gray-white mist. It looked positively miserable outside, and he had slept horribly, awakened by one dream after another of fighting monsters in the decks of his own ship, monsters in the form of red-skinned beasts with carapace armor, hideously elongated limbs, and brains filled with metal spiders. He hated it when the symbolism of his dreams was too obvious.

"Are you decent?" called Lady Goldenrod from the adjoining chamber.

"I certainly hope not," Keeler answered. Without awaiting his response, she had entered the chamber, wrapped in thin gold veils and a low cut tan shift. "Nice dress you're almost wearing," he added.

She leaned up and kissed him. It felt odd, not unpleasant, nice in most of the superficial ways a kiss from a beautiful woman ought to be, but without ardor, without passion, almost perfunctory. "Are you in a big hurry to go downstairs, listen to a bunch of boring old exposition and eat figs?" she whispered lustily.

"What did you have in mind?"

She leaned in close to him, and touched his neck and shoulders. "Whatever it takes to make you happy."

"Excellent, make my bed and wash my underwear," He pulled away and made for the hallway. Lady Goldenrod followed at his heels, laughing and throwing things at him – vases, shoes, and the occasional jug.

They arrived in the kitchen, where they found Blade Toto, already at the table. "The Ghost is in there, talkin' to the Old General," Toto told them. He leaned back in his chair, and bit into one of the exotic, brown, sticky fruits Ziang had provided.

The captain's ear pricked up. "Really?" Keeler gestured for the woman to be quiet and quietly crossed the kitchen to a large glass door, from which he could view the scene.

Dead Keeler and Ziang were standing in a tiny courtyard. When Ziang spoke, his breath made smoke in the air. It occurred to Live Keeler that he had no idea how his ancestor made himself heard. The Ghost had no lungs and no speech organs, no physical presence at all. How he made the air vibrate was a complete mystery, and the cold air gave no clue. Keeler closed his eyes and strained mightily to hear the words exchanged outside in the cold.

Ziang: "Your children have done surprisingly well."

Dead Keeler: "Strong, yes. Smart, yes. Spiritual, yes. In mind body and soul, they have what it takes to stand up to the enemy. I have seen them in battle, though. They are ill-prepared, and they lack resolve. They are unprepared to make the necessary sacrifices."

Ziang: "They simply do not know what the stakes are yet."

A gust of wind blew just then, and whatever Dead Keeler said was lost to it.

Ziang: "... a genetic protocol because they were on the frontier, and far from the rest of humanity."

Dead Keeler: "Humanity was ever noble as a man, and ever as much vulgar in large groups. I am not ashamed at what we did, neither should you be."

Ziang (*sounding bitter*): "What had to be, had to be."

With that, the General turned toward the house. In a comical flurry of activity, Keeler and Goldenrod lurched for the table, almost stumbling over each other. As they took their benches, they attempted to strike casual poses, juggling with fruit, biscuits, and coffee, before finally seating themselves.

Ziang came in and slammed the outside door behind him, nearly rattling the glass from its frames. Dead Man Keeler followed him, passing through the door, an easy trick for those whose presence exists only in the space between the orbits of electrons and atomic nuclei.

"I hope the breakfast I have prepared is adequate," Ziang told his guests, still in a pique. "I rose early and prepared it for you."

"Oh, it's shah-riffic," Keeler replied with gusto, loudly chewing on some kind of dried meat although these were the kinds of mornings he would have favored a hot bowl of oatmeal and toast with lemon marmalade.

"Yes, and we definitely were not listening in on your secret conversation in the courtyard," Goldenrod added with a sly, smug look that said *"Don't ever tell me to wash your underwear again."*

Ziang seemed not to notice the remark, as he settled into a heavily padded seat at the head of the table. He rubbed Queequeg's ears and the cat purred appreciatively, "At last, someone who cares about *my* needs."

"Cats are among the things I miss the most," Ziang sighed. "We almost lost the cats, you know. A parasite from the colony-planet Jasmine nearly extincted them."

"Another reason I prefer never to leave the ship," Queequeg said. "But you're okay. Any more fish?"

Live Keeler pulled out his notepad. "Shall we pick it up at the end of the Fifth Crusade? Vesta's Resurrection. The Century of False Peace?"

"The Sixth Crusade was called the Anti-Crusade, the Unholy War. Its spark was a movement that arose within the Inner Colonies, a conspiracy of anti-priests, anti-clerics and anti-monks. They and their followers set out specifically to destroy every vestige of faith and religion from human civilization."

Keeler interrupted, "According to our legends, that's what **all** the Crusades were about."

"The Sixth Crusade was the Crusade that defined all of the Crusades as a human struggle against between meaning, and nothingness. It was preceded, as you stated, by the century of False Peace, and precipitated by technological developments that brought every arm in the galaxy within human reach and immortality itself within our grasp. Do you know what motivated the Unholy in starting this Crusade?" Ziang asked.

Keeler answered. "It was hubris, mostly, and arrogance. Our technology had brought us to the edge of godhood. We could create worlds, control the destiny of things. The Unholy thought this meant that religion was a ridiculous set of superstitions and it was absurd for humanity to be clinging to them. We had left our home planet and were among the stars, what need did we have for a mythology created by our primitive, agrarian ancestors."

"A conventional explanation that's wrong," Ziang said. "Or, at best, only partly true, which is worse. The Unholy wanted to eradicate every trace of religion as a form of... experiment. They wanted to see what would happen if they wiped away every trace of the Old Gods? Would Jehovah intervene to preserve himself, miraculously? If all religion were wiped clean, what would replace it? Would humankind create new Gods, would the old Gods reassert themselves, or would we move on as atheists, amoral and existential? They felt the only way to determine whether or not God lived, was to try and kill Him."

"And if only one God did assert Himself," Keeler added, "That would settle the issue of which religion was the One True Faith."

"True, true. In any case, the Unholy War was less a battle of guns and ships, and more one of conspiracies and plots, covert operations and sudden, destructive attacks. Across the galaxy, temples were burned and obliterated, ancient texts were destroyed, by fires and bombs of arsonists. Monks and holy men died by the millions, from poison and bio-bombs. There was a planet called St. Augustine, whose population was devastated when the Unholy soaked an entire shipment of Eucharist bread in cyanide. It took centuries, but eventually, the Unholy took power on many worlds, including all of the Inner Colonies. They abolished prayer, or the display of any religious icon was punishable by death.

"Their anti-Crusade spread across the galaxy, always underground, always discreet. Holy places, repositories of spiritual wisdom were their favored targets. Rome, on Earth, was obliterated by an anti-matter bomb, as was Mecca. Jerusalem was nearly destroyed, but saved by some miracle, or other. Iest was burned to ashes, Lhasa was spared only because anything of religious significance was moved to secret and sacred places. The Ganges was poisoned, so that none could bathe in it..."

"The Unholy struck at Earth?" Live Keeler asked.

"Earth was the home of All Humanity's Gods."

"They must have known their cause was futile," Keeler said.

Ziang smoldered. "They were ruthless and patient, and they came very, very close, and in the end, they nearly succeeded. Many religions did vanish under their assault." He paused a moment to grunt. "...so much for the Unitarians."

Live Keeler felt he should say something then. "Perhaps, in their failure, they realized that God could not be killed, and in that answer, found faith."

"God can not be killed," Ziang came back. "But not for lack of trying. By then end of the Sixth Crusade, a third of humanity had been killed, and half the survivors lived under the Dark Forces. The Unholy had succeeded in creating a Great Schism in the Commonwealth. Believers, those that survived, were driven into the hinterlands of the galaxy. By the end of the Sixth Crusade, the Outer Colonies tended to be profoundly religious, while the Inner Colonies were bound to a fanatical, agnostic secularism."

"And Earth?" Keeler asked.

Dead Keeler answered. "Earth was neutral territory, meaning it was full of people from both sides, spying and plotting on each other."

"The stage was set for the conflicts that followed," Ziang explained. "The lines were clear, on the one side, those who believed in Something, finally united in purpose. On the other, those who believed in nothing, just as resolute that nothing should prevail."

"The Seventh Crusade was also called 'The War of the Dark Realms' The Thirteen Princes of the Unholy, each holding sway over a different sector of space, launched a grand master plan to turn the Religious colonies against one another. They dispatched false prophets and Messiahs, genetically and technologically equipped to perform miracles, in hopes of splitting the faiths. They succeeded in dividing the forces of the faithful. Only in the last did they join forces to fight back the expansion of the Princes."

"The Crusade was not so much a victory for us, as a failure for them. On worlds where the Unholy had succeeded in eradicating faith, they had to keep the populace contented. They emphasized hedonistic pleasures, and self-fulfillment. Now, humans may be content to live for these things, but they will not fight and die for them. The Unholy could not find enough willing warriors to fight for them. They tried conscripting people, but their warriors were undisciplined as well as unmotivated. In the end, they tried clones, androids, cyborgs...automatic war machines..."

"Berserkers?" Keeler asked.

"Some of them called them that," Ziang spat. "But the true 'Berserkers,' the ultimate weapons, did not come until the Eighth Crusade. a.k.a 'The War Against the Night' The Princes began consolidating their power into building Megadeathships, huge vessels the size of small moons. These ships would approach a planet, then dispatch 20 – 30 enormous Destroyers that they carried piggy-back. The Destroyers would obliterate every major city on the planet, one-by-one, until the colony surrendered. If they still held out, the Megadeathships carried a doomsday weapon that could pulverize an entire world. However, they required a crew of perfectly synchronized hive-warriors."

"The Strange?"

"Exactly. The Megadeathships moved through space and destroyed many Commonwealth colonies, until, by complete chance, a weakness was discovered. Both destroyers and Armada Ships were vulnerable when their main guns were fired. A precisely timed attack would destroy them. By using this tactic, the Commonwealth was able to defeat them."

"At the end, the Thirteen Dark Princes abandoned corporeal existence for life as huge, planet-sized clouds. They swallowed worlds, and their populations, digested bodies and souls. They were ruthless, and to defeat them would require a miracle."

Chapter Fifteen

Winter – Somewhere

Winter – Somewhere

Phil Redfire pulled against the bands at wrist and ankles that bound him that bound him to the rough metal girder behind him. They were not metal, not cloth, not rope or plastic, but they bound him without giving in the least.

"How did you bring me here?" he asked. "I would really like to know how you escaped from Habi Zod without drawing attention."

NightStalker ... no, she was Mercuria, she always had been Mercuria ... met his question with a sweet, sweet smile, tinged with malicious delight. "What do you remember?"

He thought hard. "You came into my cell, told me that a verdict had been decided and I was to be removed to the village. There was a flash of light, and I felt something stabbing into the base of my neck. Then, I woke up here." He rocked his head slightly, and found the back of neck was still sore. Something had stuck in there.

She nodded, apparently satisfied. "Very good."

"You had an ally," Redfire said. "You had to. Someone in the crew, maybe. Then again, you've been here long enough to make allies among the population."

"Winter is already ours," she told him coyly.

"I can't believe the Echelon would want this cold, miserable little planet."

"Ahhhh," she said, shaking a finger at him. "This planet has a great, great gift that compensates for its climate and the ramshackle state of its technology."

"You want to live forever... here?"

"We don't want the cake, we only want the recipe. This is a small planet. It can be taken without displacing the native population, but the climate is untenable. However, the Echelon are very excited about the prospect of eternal life, and the construction of pleasure domes would make life here far more bearable. If permanent inhabitation becomes necessary, we will have to transform it. Using our technology, we can change the ecology and climate of a planet as easily as you would change the curtains in your sleeping chamber."

"What if the anti-aging effect is tied to the climate, in some way? The natives believe that the harshness of the climate is the price they pay for their long lives."

"That's ridiculous, a primitive, guilty superstition, based on the primitive belief in Karma, that every joy in life must somehow be paid for. Really, Commander, nonsense like that is more appropriate to a man pounding on the ground with a rock than a man who walks among the stars."

"What about the people?"

"The Echelon has not decided yet, or at least, has not made their intentions known to us. Like you, we can only communicate one-way with our megaspheres. The population is small enough to be absorbed into the body whole, at least those who willingly join us."

"So, those that join you become slaves, and those that don't, I imagine, will not be immortal any more."

She waved him off. "That should be no concern of yours. Even by your standards, they are a stagnant, degenerate population. Whatever fate they have, they certainly deserve it. I did not bring you here to discuss this planet's fate, I brought you here to discuss yours."

"I don't see any point to it," he told her. "I think I can guess what choice you're going to give me. If you are going to ask me join the Aurelians and betray my ship and crew, you can save yourself time and energy by killing me now. I will never join you."

"Why not?"

"Because you're evil."

She laughed heartily at this. "Evil... good... words from a dead language, representing the dead moralism of defunct gods." She sighed and caught her breath. "Only a very few humans at your level can ever learn this truth, but the Echelon believes you are one of those very few."

"One of the enlightened elite, whose privilege it would be to guide the destinies of all the inferior masses?" Redfire snarled. "No idea in history has caused more human suffering."

"We offer you riches beyond your imaginings," she answered. "A chance to fulfill every desire, to create the art you love on the scale of planets, of star systems, a place in the Echelon, where you will rule over armies and planets as a god!"

She ran a finger across his cheek. "We know all about you, Philip John Miller Redfire, of Graceland. When the Eighth Echelon made contact with your ship, they extracted every piece of data on the officers and crew."

"From the crew of *Hector*, and *Basil*?"

"Yes, among other sources"

"Before you murdered them."

She sighed and pinched his chin in the cup of her hands. "If you are going to use judgmental terms like 'murder', then we are not going to get anywhere. Aurelians do not murder. Sometimes it is necessary for some to have their lives humanely shortened to serve the greater communal good. The needs of the collective are greater than the needs of any individual."

"How convenient for you."

"Regardless, you were profiled, as were Prime Commander Keeler and Executive TyroCommander Lear. We developed profiles on over 600 of your crew and the Echelon determined that you were one of the most promising prospects for conversion."

"Only *one* of the most, who was more likely to be converted than me?"

"That is of no concern to you?"

"Was it Ex. TyroCommander Lear?"

She laughed. "Oh, no, no, no. Lear is far too limited in her thinking to ever comprehend what it is to be Aurelian. She would make, at best, a four of cups... perhaps a wand. She may be useful, but she is not suitable for the Echelon."

Redfire wondered for a moment if Lear would flattered or offended by the rejection. "Who then?"

"That is not important."

"If I am not leaving this chamber alive, why not tell me?"

"I will only tell you now that if I told you, you would be very surprised. I will tell you, should you decide to join us, but until you do, it would only distract you. I have three days, and three days only, to convince you to come over to the Aurelian way, and days are very short on this world."

She gave a slight toss of her head, and gave him a good, hard, look. "The important thing is, when I deliver you and this world to Aurelia, it will assure my ascension to the Echelon. I have worked my whole life to gain a place with the Echelon. You, on the other hand, are being offered the privilege of joining the Echelon outright. You have no idea the magnitude of this gift."

"And what would this 'gift' entail?"

"First, you would return to your ship. When the time was right, you, and others whom you would recruit to join us, would deliver the ship to Aurelia."

"How could you be sure I would not betray you?"

"You will give yourself completely and voluntarily to us. You will prove your loyalty to us, and you will be monitored. If you ever so much as think of betraying us, you, and everyone on *Pegasus* will die."

Redfire had figured as much. "What will happen after I turn over *Pegasus* to Aurelia."

An expression of wonder and joy came across her. "You will become an Aurelian. You are already more Aurelian than human. Your mind needs only to be given a body worthy of your intellect."

"A new body?"

She approached him, and began stroking the short hairs at the back of his head with her fingertips.

"First, your body would be cloned, not as it is, but improved. You would be larger, of course, with two hearts to sustain your greater size, and maintain the enhanced brain they would provide you. Your own brain would be grafted with it, preserving all of your intellect and memories."

"Then what?"

"You would assume your place among the Echelon. Aurelia wants you badly, commander, very badly, and our reward would be beyond your imagining. You would command a megasphere, with an army of Swords to protect you, an Army of Cups to serve you. If your body grew boring, you could exchange it for another, perhaps even a female, a comely maiden from among the Cups or Pentangles. You may decide to get inside their skin and see what it feels like."

Redfire twitched in horror. "Don't judge it until you experience it," she said. "I've worn many bodies. It's extraordinary. Every person sees colors differently, they taste differently, they hear differently. You can be anyone. Man, woman, child... and experience the world through a different pair of eyes ... one thing you could never achieve on your own... you want that, you want that very, very much."

It was attractive, Redfire admitted to himself, but he said, "It's immoral."

"Your morality is based on second-hand accounts of imaginary encounters with long dead gods. The Echelon are living gods... gods make their own morality."

"From what I have seen, Aurelian morality is centered around drinking and screwing all day, killing people at a whim, and occasionally destroying planets."

"Not destroying, liberating."

"Like you liberated half a billion Bodiceans from their lives, and this was after they had agreed to an alliance with you."

"Surely you, of all people understand why that was necessary?"

"Destroying their world eliminated the possibility of resistance. You destroyed the planet, then arrived as saviors, restoring order and civilization. If you had left the planet intact, its inhabitants would have had the will to resist you."

She smiled. "Partly true. You can not simply graft a fundamentally different social order on top of an existing one. The most benevolent approach, sparing the largest number of people the largest amount of dislocation and distress, was to wipe the planet clean and start over. Those who survive are being given a great and wonderful gift. They will be part of Aurelia, the greatest civilization the galaxy will ever know, the pinnacle of evolution. They will know perfect equality, perfect unity, perfect security, and perfect fulfillment of all their physical desires."

"Which must be of great comfort to the millions who died."

She wiped his forehead with her hand. "The dead are gone. They are dust. They do not matter. They would have died anyway. It is the living who deserve our compassion."

"I think you enjoyed laying waste to that planet," Redfire told her.

"As much as you enjoyed destroying those buildings on your home planet."

"I usually moved the people out first." Except for volunteers, he remembered. Some people liked being inside buildings as they were destroyed, but they were protected by force-fields.

"Your art is what showed us that deep inside, you have the potential to become part of Aurelia. Before you came along, buildings were routinely destroyed when they were no longer safe, or needed. It was a utilitarian function, but you turned it into an art form. You saw the beauty of creation in the violence of destruction." She smiled and whispered, as though sharing a confidence. "And that ultimately is why you will join us, because Aurelia calls to the destroyer-creator inside you."

Redfire tried to stare hard at her. He wanted to expose this for the lie he knew it was, but could not bring himself to say it.

Besides which, he was beginning to feel the strain of being hung from his arms and tied by his legs, a kind of tight pain passing as his muscles became taut cables of suspension.

He took a breath, made hard from the weight of his chest pressing on his lungs. "What I did was informed by ... my aesthetic. I made turned something thanatic into something ... that I thought was wonderful and beautiful."

"The same thing we do. We take worlds that are ugly, and make them beautiful."

"You force your will on them. I didn't force my art on anyone."

"The same as an adult forces his will on a child by taking a sharpened knife out of his hand." She waved her hand and suddenly a knife appeared in it. It was half again as long as her hand, with a slim and sharp-looking blade that glinted wetly in the light.

"I never harmed anyone. Not like you. You are evil."

As with everything, this seemed to amuse her. "Once you free your mind from those primitive concepts of Good and Evil, vast new expanses of possibility open up."

"Like sucking out kid's brains."

Mercuria rolled her eyes. "Now you see, that is a perfect example of letting yourself be limited by rules you have never even thought to question. Just because your morality considers a certain act to be abhorrent, you will not even consider the possibility that it serves a higher purpose."

"What higher purpose could possibly be served by sticking a stiletto in the neck of a child and sucking his brains out."

"Firstly," she said, waving her knife generally toward his neck, "that is a very barbaric and inaccurate description of what happens. The child is anaesthetized, and feels no pain during the extraction. Second, the brain is not sucked out, just secretions from the pituitary and pineal glands."

"The child still dies."

"And in your morality, killing a child is always wrong, even if it serves a higher purpose. Suppose you could save a thousand humans by killing a single child. What would your morality say to that?"

"Morality doesn't speak to mathematics. It would still be wrong."

She rolled her eyes again, and twiddled with the knife. "You really are impossible. So, the child dies. So what? The Echelon uses those secretions to extend life expectancies to more than six hundred of your years, sometimes longer. Certainly giving one enlightened being five hundred years of life is worth shortening the life of a mere drone by a few decades."

"You don't have to kill anyone." Redfire couldn't believe he was about to suggest this. "With our technology, we can easily synthesize pineal and pituitary secretions. We would be willing to share this technology with you."

Mercuria sniffed. "Please, we are perfectly capable of biogenetic synthesis. However, synthetic hormones are not adequate to sustain the Echelon. We don't know why, they just aren't. To receive the full effect, the hormones must come from a human host, ideally in earliest adolescence when the hormones are strongest. Besides, the procedure is quite rare, perhaps two or three extractions per year."

"For everyone in the Echelon. How many millions of children... "

She grabbed his face, pinched his cheeks between her thumb and fingers. "Would you shut up and stop whining about the damned children." With her other hand, she gently scratched the back of his neck with the knife. "The Echelon only harvests from those who have the least to contribute to the gene pool."

He tried to turn away, but only made the knife cut him more deeply. He winced. "I will never join you."

"You would sacrifice your entire ship, for the sake of your morality? Your wife? Her sons?" She dug the knife into the top of his jumpsuit near his collar and cut outward. The knife dug and sawed and tore at the fabric, until it was shredded and much of his chest and shoulders were exposed to the chilly, damp air.

She stood in front of him, holding the knife against his crotch, pressing just hard enough that he could feel the sharp metal point against his testicles.

"To an objective observer, this would be an easy choice to make. Join us, and not only do you save your ship, and your family, you also begin a long, possibly everlasting life in a body built for pleasure, for fulfillment of every desire."

She twisted the knife and cut into the jumpsuit. "All these would be enough to sway most humans... and you are tempted by what I am offering, but not for those reasons."

She continued cutting, making shreds and tatters of the material that covered his private parts. "If

those things were enough to tempt you, we would not be interested in recruiting you. The Echelon has no interest in ordinary humans."

"Stop," he told her, knowing it would do no good.

"You are curious about us... obsessed with us. All you could think about while you were sitting in that cell was our little ship, and how you wanted to tear it apart and learn our secrets. Sure, you hate us, but the more you are repulsed, the more you are intrigued, because that is who you are. You crave depravity, you are never so alive as when the harshest offenses exquisitely sting your sensibilities."

"You want to destroy human civilization," he whispered.

"Yes," she answered with husky passion. "Humanity's time has come and gone. We are at the advent of the Age of Aurelia. We will cleanse the galaxy of human filth, world by world. We will return every planet infected with the human virus to its natural, pristine state of nature."

"Neg..."

"Oh, yes. Humans had no business going into space. Humans are nothing more than a species of predatory apes, *barbarians!* But we are our own gods. We make our own worlds. We make our own morality. And you want it, too. In your heart, you have always rebelled against the constraints of your world, its stifling morality. Now, embrace it. Embrace what you think of as darkness, and free yourself. Free your mind. Free your body."

She cut away the last of the material and Redfire immediately felt one soft warm hand fondling him. She slipped the cold hard knife under his genitalia and held it there, cutting edge against his ballsac. Her eyes flashed up at him importantly. "Coercion is not our way and seduction is much more fun."

Redfire breathed a sigh of relief as she released his penis and stepped back away, as though to admire her work. She released the knife and it clattered to the floor. Metallic echoes rang in faded off into the depths of wherever they were. She opened the front of her tunic, allowing first the left, then the right breast to pop into view. Nice breasts they were, too, supple and round like apples. She languorously peeled her tunic off, gently sliding it off her shoulders slowly enough to let him imagine the material gliding over her soft skin.

She dropped the tunic on the floor, and paused to cup her breasts in her hands. "Very nice," she sighed. Then, began working her way out of the bottom half of her uniform. "You come from a planet where sexuality is repressed to an extreme degree, even by the standards of most of the worlds we have encountered. Someone like you, though, is brave enough to test those inhibitions... those taboos."

Redfire laughed at her. "If threatening my family and my ship doesn't turn me over, why do you expect that sex will?"

She stepped away from her clothes and stood before him completely naked. He beheld her, or rather the body she had taken, her skin taut and supple, her womanly curves like ripe fruit. She bent over, providing a sublime view of her succulent buttocks, and removed a small brown bottle from her pocket, uncapped it, and approached him, pouring out a golden brown oil onto her finger tips.

"Sex is just a key to the prison of inhibition you're locked inside." She came close to him and raised a hand to smear the stinging, pungent oil on his lips. He flinched and turned away from her, but it was no use. He was locked up tight.

"Here, baby, here," she cooed, and smeared the oil across his upper lip. It heated his skin wherever he touched. The vapor seemed to rush into his nose without his having to breathe, traveled into his sinuses, stinging his soft tissues, and spreading a warm rush into his brain, penetrating like millions of tiny, electric needles.

"How does it feel?" she whispered.

"What is it?"

"A narcotic, an aphrodisiac, a muscle relaxant, a mild hallucinogenic."

"Øpra?"

"Oh, nothing so banal. This is called Aalai. Much more intense... with just a little drop of that pineal fluid you find so abhorrent."

He could feel it working its way into him, a great, warm, electric cloud blanketing his mind and

senses.

She moved in and wrapped herself around him, her bare breasts against his chest, her loins against his. She whispered. "How old were you when you lost your virginity?"

"Fifteen," he answered helplessly.

"Would you believe," she whispered, "that by the age of eight of your years, I had had four hundred lovers?"

He should have been disgusted by the revelation, but his brain was clouding over as though some primal pleasure center had been awakened. Fighting it was like holding off a pack of hungry wolves."

"This particular body has hardly been used at all," she reassured him, nuzzling into his neck. "I wonder what it would feel like to make love to you with it."

Redfire could not move, but his arms were straining against the bonds, wanting to wrap himself around her, wanting to take her wantonly, to ravish her body, suckle at her breasts like an infant, devour her, bang her like a drum.

He felt her come close to him, thrusting her body against him. He could hear her husky breathing, could feel her excited heartbeat. His own body was on fire, with every nerve ending screaming to be touched, and when touched, bursting in tactile fireworks of ecstasy.

He felt her warm, wet mouth enveloping his reproductive organs. He closed his eyes. Was he helpless against it, or did the drug only make him *think* he was helpless against it?

He had to turn his mind away from her. It was like being in a crashing Aves, like all his strength was not enough to pull the ship out of its fatal dive, but it was all he could do. He had to invoke a meditation, the Meditation of Oing. He had to shift himself away from the pleasure she was forcing on him. He had to put his mind into Oing.

I am Oing, he thought. Oing is me. All is Oing. Oing is all. I am Oing. Oing is all.

Hard, hard he thought against the words, like he was pounding on the bars of the cage of his mind. *I am Oing. I am Oing. Oing is all.*

The fireworks and ecstasy slowly receded. He felt a transition, a sense of separation between the body and the spirit. He was outside the scene, but aware of what was being done to him. Mercuria was on her knees, devouring him.

And he was...

Oing!

... rising

Pegaus -- Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-n-Jam

Eddie Roebuck had Puck pinned behind the bar and was banging his small metal head against the deck. "That's it!" Eddie yelled at him. "You've sprayed the last customer with your last Mauve Daiquiri. Now, I'm going to reprogram you with a rotary blade."

The small mechanoid squealed in protest. Eliza Jane Change sat at the bar, nursing a large janeberry-flavored tea. There were about 15 others from the crew in the bar, three of whom, two women and a man from the ship's technical core, were dripping with Mauve Daiquiri residue. They were not enjoying the current drama, but they were about to get another.

The hatch slid open, and Flight Captain Driver entered, looking peeved. His mouth was set in a tight straight line. He crossed to Eliza and stood next to her at the bar. "How long have you been here?" he asked her.

She answered him casually. "Forty-seven minutes."

"Did you forget that you were supposed to meet me on the starboard observation spar?"

"I did not forget," she told him. There was a reason, she didn't go there because she knew very well what would be coming next. "I thought if I came here, you would find me."

Puck squealed again. Eddie had flipped him over and was removing his vocalization module. The mechanoid fell silent, and Eddie began digging for the motor control module.

Diver reached into the sleeve pocket of his uniform. "I had hoped the setting for this would be more romantic, or at least more civilized, but if you would rather we did it here." He drew out a ring, an amazingly beautiful ring that shined like a bright star in the dim light of the bar. Several of the other customers went "ahhhhh!"

Driver handed the ring to her. "It's a starfire crystal, diamond mostly, with molecules of luminescent triluminarium..."

"I know what a starfire crystal is," Eliza told him. She looked at the ring as though it were some strange object handed to her in a foreign land, and she couldn't decide whether it was meant as a pet or as an hors d'oeuvre.

Driver had prepared a little speech, which he had hoped to give to her beneath stars shining as brightly as the ring he just gave her. Instead, he would tell her here, in this bar, in front of other crewmen, with a smell of spilled ale and mauve daiquiri filling the air. "Eliza Jane Change, you are the woman I want to be with, always. I want our souls to be united. I want you and me to become us and we. I don't want to spend another day apart from you. I want our lives to become our life. Eliza, will you make me whole, one year from day, will you become one with me."

She pretended to examine the ring. "I've been expecting this for a long time," she said very gently. "But I never thought about exactly what I would say."

"Just one word," Driver told her, in a hushed voice. "Either word, there are only two choices. Even if you refuse me, I have to know. But I hope you will not refuse because I will spend every day of the rest of my life making sure you never regretted choosing me."

Eddie looked back and forth between them, and at the other people in the Slam-n-Jam, trying to endure this awkwardness, trying not to pay too much attention while trying not to appear indifferent at the same time. "Drama is bad for business," said Eddie Roebuck.

She held the ring out in front of her. "Before I take your ring, may I ask one thing of you?"

"Anything," Matthew said. If he had been perturbed upon entering the bar, the sight of Eliza had put his mind and emotions into absolute focus.

"There is a custom among the people of your planet, the Convergence. Before I say yes, I want to undergo the ritual of Convergence with you."

Matthew was taken aback. "But the Convergence only happens after two people have agreed to marry. No one does it before accepting a proposal... it's unseemly..."

She looked at him, that way she always did, the way an owner might stare disapprovingly at an overly exuberant puppy-dog. Matthew being somewhat more compliant than a puppy dog, it worked better on him. "This isn't for me," she said. "You deserve to know exactly what you're asking. I know you love me, and the truth is, I love you too, and I love you too much to let you go into this without knowing all you can know about me."

"I know enough ..." he began.

Before he could elaborate, she cut him off. "No, you don't. You think you know who I am, but you haven't seen everything, not by a long shot. This is for you, Matthew. Agree to Convergence, or the answer will be no. It will hurt me to say it, and it will destroy you. But, if we do the Convergence ritual, and you see what's inside me, and you still want to get married, then, I'll agree. The choice is yours."

Driver turned this over in his mind. It went against any number of his personal philosophies, but he saw no other course. "Agreed then, we'll have a Convergence. During the Night Watch? 2600 hours."

"Agreed," said Eliza. She pocketed the ring. "I'll keep this until that time."

"I hope you'll keep it after that time." Matthew looked around the bar. Everyone was staring, even Puck, although with his motor control module removed, he really couldn't help it.

Winter – The Alcazar of General Ziang

As his Thean slave-bot rounded up the last round of stained coffee cups and sticky trays, and as Goldenrod and Toto snored, nested amid mounds of cushions, Ziang wrapped up the Ninth Crusade, in

which the thirteen Dark Lords were driven from the galaxy, at enormous hardship, and humanity was both freed and purified. "And at that point," the General concluded. "We on this planet decided to have no further contact with The Commonwealth. Four thousand years later, your ship showed up."

Keeler was exhausted, too. What he had learned in the previous days was enough to re-write every text on the Crusades, but still amounted to an outline of events. "Isn't there more?" he asked.

"Of course there is," the General said. "But I have been exceedingly generous in both my hospitality and the sharing of my knowledge. I have grown curious about your people, and now, I would like to ask questions."

"By all means," Keeler said. If there was anything he loved more than listening to someone else talk about history, it was hearing himself talk about anything.

Ziang stood and looked about his chamber. "How did your people manage to sustain their faith? The war ended long ago, and in my experience, human memory is short."

"Our people believe that we have evolved spiritually as well and mentally and physically. No one on my planet doubts the existence of a Creator-Sustainer, of a Grand Design, any more that you could expect us to live in caves or have vestigial tails."

The General scowled. "Perhaps I was not pointed enough. Let me ask this: In the last three thousand years, has any Messiah, any Savior come to your world, performed miracles, started a new faith in his name?"

"Not really," Keeler answered. "We once had a prophet named Sumac..." he cut himself off. The way he said it sounded like he was launching into a bawdy limerick.

Ziang looked at him, with a penetrating, interested gaze. "And this Sumac..., did he perform miracles? Did he start a religion?"

"Maybe and sort of. To this day, there is an Order of Warrior-Monks that follow his teachings. They believe that their purpose is to protect humanity should the Darkness ever return."

"So, apart from this Sumac, no new religions have been spawned on your world."

"Variations of the Old Ones seem to service us just fine."

"You have been alone in the night, thousands and thousands of light years from your home world, but you still follow its religions, why that?"

Keeler's answer was what he would have told anyone. "When you manage to burn off and boil away all the philosophy, and sophistry, and beastshit solipsism, it all comes down to a single point of logic: The existence of God is the only way the Universe makes any kind of sense."

Ziang nodded, apparently satisfied. "Ever since your kind came to this planet, I have been studying you. Its like seeing my grown-up children, and seeing the lessons we fought so hard in my age to pass down have been taken up, learned, integrated in the human character."

"You are probably pretty disappointed."

"Only in those of us who have lived long, but not grown at all," Ziang said. "We haven't accomplished anything. We haven't built this world, except just enough to suit our needs, and our wants. We haven't built any new philosophies, we have just endlessly recycled the old ones, the ones we knew. We fought the Crusades, but we failed to make the lessons of the Crusades part of our culture. As immortals, we have lived without the threat of Final Judgment. It hasn't made us wiser, or better, it's only made us selfish, narcissistic and decadent."

"You have done well. Not by your civilizations, which are still modest, or by your technology, which is far short of what we built. However, I know from your grandfather, your pilot, you, even your cat, that your people have a purity of spirit, a sense of your purpose, almost a righteousness like nothing I could have imagined in my time. You are the future of humankind, we are relics of a time passed." He paused.

"So, basically, you're saying we're all right," Keeler said.

Ziang glared at him. "Don't belittle what I'm saying. I've seen the future in your people. God kept me alive to see that humanity is in good hands, in the hands and on the wings of angels..." he paused. "That sounded trite."

"A little," Keeler agreed. "We're not angels, but thanks for the compliment."

Ziang sat back heavily, and took a long drink of his thick, strong coffee. "There are more interesting things than events of four millennia past. The Admiral and I have been discussing the Aurelians."

Keeler looked toward the ghostly figure of his ancestor, lurking in the background, pretending to study the ceiling. On the other hand, the ceiling was covered with a painted scene of naked virgins frolicking with noble warriors. He might genuinely have been interested in it. "What did he tell you?"

"He described to me the obliteration of all life on the planet Medea, the brutal assault on the planet Bodicéa. He described the pillaging of the planets Hearth and Coriolus. He believes they are evil. Do you share this belief?"

"Absolutely," Keeler answered.

"Why?"

"The goal of the Aurelians is absolute human subjugation. If they succeed in their goals, all humanity will be either enslaved, or extincted. Clearly, that is evil."

The General looked unsatisfied. "That is evil in the mundane sense. Whom do they serve, these Aurelians?"

Keeler had to shake his head. "Themselves, I guess."

The General grunted. "To live life in the service of nothing, is not just a waste, but is also evil. He says you are dithering over whether to declare a Tenth Crusade against them, but they seem to be undertaking a Crusade without waiting for your decision."

"It is no longer a matter of whether to fight the Aurelians," Keeler clarified. "That was settled at Bodicéa. The question is how to defeat them."

"I am gratified that you think this way," Ziang told him. He then spoke in a tone of undeniable weightiness. "Commander, how would you like to take a long trip by sea?"

"I would rather take a short trip by space ship," Keeler answered. "Where are we going?"

"In defiance of your esteemed ancestor's wishes, I wish to give you something, a great gift."

Dead Keeler suddenly appeared next to Keeler's ear whispering. "Don't do it. He just wants to get you alone so he can kill you and eat your liver." He made slurping noises.

Live Keeler's eyes slid sideways. "You can do better than that, Dead Man. A long trip by sea, you say? And where, pray tell, would we be going?"

"Shipwreck."

Keeler sounded dubious. "A long journey by sea to Shipwreck. You know, if they want to attract tourists, they should change that name. Honey Beach, or some thing, but not Shipwreck."

"Shipwreck is the oldest town on this planet, not that that means very much. It predates the Exodus from Hibernia. There is not much more there than anywhere else. Some homes, some community buildings... but there is also a library."

Now, Live Keeler's ears pricked up. "A library?"

"A library containing a full selection of literature from the Commonwealth Period, including thousands of detailed, contemporaneous historical volumes, the complete history of the Crusades and the Commonwealth, and very probably detailed starmaps to all of the former Commonwealth colonies... and Earth itself."

Before he had finished speaking, Keeler's head had rolled backwards, he had begun salivating prodigiously from his open jaw, his eyes had rolled far back into his skull, and he had nearly fainted.

Chapter Sixteen

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

"I could get used to having Bellisarius's Bitch Boy at my service," John Hunter mused, lounging more-or-less comfortably in the rear of a transport pod. This was the first time he had made legal – or at least, semi-legal – use of *Pegasus's* internal transport system.

"Don't worry, you won't," Constantine answered through clenched teeth. He was in the front of the pod.

Revisiting the scene of the crime had only confirmed that Redfire's assailant was unknown and the weapon he used was also unknown. After Constantine exhausted nearly two hours confirming this data by scanning every millimeter of deck with his instruments, he had agreed with Hunter that they might do better to ask around and see if anyone in the UnderDecks had seen anyone strange. Hunter knew just the man to ask.

Hunter leaned back, crossing his arms behind his head, watching the intraship tubeway markers flash overhead. "On Sapphire, I once owned a '73 Scorpion, black, with chromium piping, flip top, and curved stinger tail. I used to take it out on the Cerulean highway on the north edge of the Alpha continent, all the way from Electric City to Coolsville. It was a sweet, sweet ride."

"Unh-huh," Constantine grunted.

"See, I think one of the major, *major*, problems with your people is a lack of personal transports."

"Republic has highly efficient systems of public transportation."

"Za, right. That's what you always say. Your cities are compact and densely populated. Private transportation is a waste of resources, except for high officials of the Government who can't be expected to wait for a transport. It's not about transportation, Constantine, it's about personal expression."

"There are ways to express oneself without conspicuous consumption of finite resources."

"Name ninety-five of them."

"Shut up."

"That's only one."

"We're here."

The transport pod docked. Hunter and Ghost seldom came this far back in the ship. Constantine checked the docking area carefully before letting them out. His two passengers were dressed in nondescript off-duty attire that any ordinary crewmen might have worn. Still, he hoped they met no one, especially no friendly member of the crew who might feel compelled to walk up and make the acquaintance of someone they did not recognize, especially a masked and bearded stranger and his thin, pale girlfriend.

"No one around," Constantine reported, with some relief. "This better not be a trick, Hunter."

"I could do better than this, I assure you."

"I can drop you like a sack of leguminous tubers."

"And you'd enjoy it, too. That alone is reason enough for me to make sure it never happens." He led them away from the dock, down the gray-blue, utilitarian corridors of UnderDeck Minus 221, Section 90: U40.

"What are we doing here?" Constantine demanded after following him in silence for sixty meters.

"Like I said, we're meeting someone who knows what's going on... over and under decks." Hunter paused in front of a section hatch. "Wait here."

"Absolutely not."

Hunter fixed him with a perturbed look. "You want to scare off my source, go ahead. You won't get any info."

Constantine's perpetual frown deepened. "Then, I will wait here, but I will be monitoring you."

"Good idea. If I get in trouble, I'll use a code word. 'Naked sailors' ought to get your attention."

Constantine watched Hunter disappear behind the hatch. He looked at Ghost. So pale, he had a sense that even before coming into the UnderDecks, she had not seen sunlight in years. "How the Hell do you put up with him?"

"He's a good man," she told him, and cast her eyes toward the deck. "He rescued me when I was in a bad place." She answered barely above a whisper.

"Is that it?" Constantine asked.

Her whisper became curiously strong. "And since then, I've pulled him out of a lot of worse situations."

Constantine put a finger in his ear to listen to what Hunter was doing. He heard the sound of footsteps, of three hatches opening and closing, and finally a voice.

The voice was not Hunter's, nor anyone else he recognized. "Hey, Beauty, why is your face in my space? It's not Firesday is it, 'nless I slept through another Windsday."

"I'm not here for the drop..."

"Magic, because I am tragically without comestibles. I have to put in my allotment request, see how I am?"

"I need some information."

"If I know it, you can have it. If I don't know it, you don't want it."

"I want to know if you've seen anyone strange around here."

"Strange? Like in 'never-seen-you-before' strange, or as in, what's-that-assol-doing-to-that-dog strange?"

"The first... but also possibly the second if it relates to the first."

"Neg, beauty, I haven't seen anyone new, but strange things are afoot."

"Like what strange things?"

"This planet... the one where people live forever, it's giving off a weirdness vibe, the strongest weirdness vibe since planet Eden."

"What about it?"

"I said strange things were afoot, beauty, and it's all because of the weirdness vibe. A cat came in and ordered a Jane and Tonic."

"That is odd."

"Za, he usually orders a White Borealan. Also, the band was jamming the other night, got stuck on the same riff for forty-five minutes. A tech-and-a-half from Enviro-core, never gets any luck at all, but last night drew four washes in a row playing Bongo, and one of the Watch-holes, Lazlo Replacement, had his Watch uniform stolen."

"Stolen?"

"F'real, Not only, the way it was stolen. He was in the euphemism on Deck Minus 44 by the transport dock, all right. Next thing he knows, he wakes up naked, and its three hours later."

"He doesn't remember what happened?"

"Swears that's what happened, beauty. Thinks he was being pranked. New to the Watch. Hazing and all that. They all deny it, but you know Watch-holes."

"Unfortunately."

"She right. Listen, Beauty, you need snack items now? I was going to make the drop..."

"Just make the drop as planned."

"I see how you are. Thanks very much. How's Lady Ghost?"

"She is well. Take care of yourself. Stay out of the weird."

"Of only I could, bud."

Constantine wondered who Hunter was talking to. It certainly wasn't the voice of anyone *he* knew. He listened to a hatch opening and closing, and counted the footsteps as Hunter returned. "That was

useless," Constantine growled. "We're wasting time."

"Are we?" Hunter asked. "I considered that exchange quite valuable."

"We already knew the attacker was dressed as a Guardian."

"Now, we know for sure he came from outside the ship," Hunter said. "No one in the UnderDeck would have stripped a Guardian. Those of us that are left didn't survive by attracting attention to ourselves. Anyone in the crew could get a Watch uniform without jumping a Watchmen, and why would they need to anyway?"

Constantine was not convinced. "It doesn't help him. Replacement's access codes would have been changed after he reported the assault."

"Which he did, right?"

Constantine consulted his data pad. "He did. We assumed it was one of you."

"Replacement was a Republicker, was his Ident Sliver intact?"

"It was."

"His data pad?"

"Also deactivated."

"Not immediately, though. Whoever hit him had at least three hours. You can get from one end of the ship to the other in less than three hours."

Constantine grunted.

"Was anything accessed during the three hours between the assault and its deactivation?"

"I can find out," said Constantine. He lifted his own pad and retrieved everything Replacement had accessed. "Maps of the ship. Information about our propulsion systems. Aves. Technical schematics of our weapons systems."

"Weapons systems?" Hunter asked curiously.

"I know what you're thinking. That's restricted data. He should not have been able to get more than cursory specifications, nothing we don't teach the children about in school."

"Suppose he did," Hunter asked drily. "Which weapons systems in particular?"

"Hammerheads, Jack-hammers, Ass-Kickers, Nemesis systems..."

"But nothing about the shields, or the particle cannons, or the phalanx guns. May I see that pad?"

Constantine handed him the pad. Hunter activated its mapping function. "When I was attacked, I was in Forward Section 63:L25 on Deck Minus 25. If the attacker used Replacement's pad to plot the most direct course from Deck Minus 44 Section 99 Zeta to Deck Minus 25 Section 63 ..." Wheels turned in his head. "We may have a problem."

"Why?"

Hunter showed him the map. "Your intruder is going for the Missile Hatcheries."

Winter – Collinstown

Keeler, Ziang, Goldenrod, Queequeg, and Toto traveled on *Zilla* to Collinstown, a small settlement on the edge of the Southern Sea. Their ultimate destination was a place called Shipwreck, 700 km away on the opposite shore.

"I still don't see why we can't just fly there by spaceship," Keeler complained. He shared his landing couch with Goldenrod, who lay with her head in his lap. Queequeg had disappeared into the engine room, and was fast asleep on a heat exchanger.

"Don't people ever take voyages by sea on your planet?" Ziang asked, seated across from him on a comfortable couch in *Zilla's* lower deck. Between them, on a low table, was an array of juices, fruit, and sweets from *Zilla's* larder, Keeler's attempt to repay the General's hospitality.

"Za, we have supersonic sea-skimmers for transport from one continent to another, and sail-powered pleasure ships. As a matter of fact, my estate back on my home-world rests on the shore of our largest freshwater lake, Lake of the Loons. We have several lake yachts. Every October 4th, we hold a party on the largest one, *Outstanding Folly*, and pour glasses of wine over the side to commemorate my great

ancestor August Keeler's raid on the Moon's Silver winery when he and a band of confederates, dressed as Borealans, dumped 1,600 barrels of wine into the lake. The waters washed red for days afterwards."

"Why did he do that?" Ziang asked. "Was it a protest of some kind? Did he oppose the consumption of alcohol?"

"Neg, he just wanted to see if fish could get drunk. This was in the 6600's, when the Keeler gene pool got a little bit, er, diluted. His brother was Hannibal Keeler. Now, that guy... that guy was a complete nut, but the less said about him, the better."

Ziang was inspecting the cabin. "Compared with the shuttlecraft of my day, yours leave something to be desired. Ours had bright lights, shining metal. All the instruments and controls were in plain view, not hidden behind opaque panels. The interior of this craft reminds me of a hospital, and the food is..." he paused, and gave a slight smile to show he was just being polite. "...marginal."

"So, tell me more about this library."

Ziang looked out his window at the bleak landscape passing below. "The decision to cut ties with the Commonwealth was not unanimous. A few of us still felt loyalty to the Commonwealth we had fought to preserve and purify. We were defeated, but we did fight to preserve the knowledge of the Commonwealth, and some memory of its culture. Some of those who thought the memory of the Commonwealth was worth preserving gathered together as many records and as many reference books on the Commonwealth into a central location, the last place anyone would look lest some Parliament Ball get out of hand and decide to eradicate them. I know that may sound like a ridiculous fear, that people would destroy their own culture."

"Not so ridiculous," Keeler reassured him. "On the planet Republic, there were several drives to destroy all records of pre-colonial knowledge. It was intellectually fashionable at one time to believe that knowledge of the past was an impediment to progress."

"So, you understand."

"What kind of knowledge did you store there?"

"Star maps, descriptions and locations of thousands of worlds, including Earth, accounts of battles, depictions of art, recipes..."

"Recipes?" Keeler asked.

Ziang picked up a piece of chocolate and nougat from the tray in front of him. "Are you aware that in the Ancient Commonwealth, there was a planet where hydrocarbons combined in the atmosphere to produce sugars, and these sugars blew across the surface of the planet like great, sweet sandstorms."

"Are you making that up?" Goldenrod asked. "I've never heard of such a planet."

"It is real... I assure you. The sand was sugar, unfortunately, the atmosphere was quite toxic, and the surface almost completely dry and waterless. Nevertheless, some humans did adapt to life there. They harvested the excretions of native life forms, which were a powerful euphoric and hallucinogen."

Keeler interrupted. "I ask again, *recipes?*"

Ziang ignored him. "The planet became much fought over and was ultimately destroyed. Various factions within the Armies of Darkness wanted to possess it. The battle for it so distracted them, so consumed their resources, it actually helped us prevail in the Third Crusade."

"And what does this have to do with recipes?" Keeler persisted, unable to explain why he had gotten mentally stuck on this point.

"There was a pseudo-Messianic figure who arose on the sugar planet and led its native ... or I should say, its adapted human inhabitants ... on a campaign to rid it of those off-worlders who were battling to possess it. Strangely, before becoming the leader of the planet's people, he had been a cook in the house of the Duke who had claimed the planet. When the Duke was deposed by another Dark Lord, his entire staff was executed or cast into the wilderness. His cook was rescued by one of the sugar tribes, and eventually became their leader, and the leader of all the tribes. Still, though they revered him as a savior, a divine warlord-philosopher, his first interest was cooking. Half of his religious screeds consist of recipes. It is said when he overthrew the Dark Lord that had deposed his Duke, he served the lord and his minions a sumptuous feast seasoned with a slow-acting poison that gave them agonizing deaths."

"I think that same guy used to head the kitchen staff in my dormitory," Keeler put in, just as the Aves began banking into a long, shallow curve. Toto was bringing his ship down through the cloud deck, and the first view of Collinstown was spreading below them.

Collinstown looked like one of the small, quaint fishing villages that dotted the southwest coast of Boreala and the northeast coast of Carpentaria on Sapphire. It was even smaller, of course, the number of buildings in the town, narrow structures with sharp, black roofs, could not have been more than a dozen. These cowered at the foot of some stony hills, beyond a stretch of water protected by a high outcropping of rock about a kilometer from the shore, a natural breakwater.

The intercom called for their attention. "You want me to set down next to the boats?" Toto asked. There were a handful of small ships parked along the shoreline.

"No," Ziang told him. "Find a flat area between the town and shore."

Toto said no more, and soon the ship was on the ground. The air was biting cold when they exited, damp, and sea-flavored. The other three stood before the hatch shivered as Toto brought the hovercraft round from the ship's rear cargo bay. The hovercraft was a distant cousin to *Pegasus's* intraship transport pods, but larger, much more rugged, and not shaped much like an egg. It had the curves of a ground vehicle, though, and four levitation pods that kept it 0.5 meters above the ground. Its color was off-white, trimmed in black and orange. Its passenger compartment could hold up to eight people in reasonable comfort. An automech helped load some cargo from General Ziang's estate into its rear cargo trunk, and the four of them headed for the town.

Its doors opened upward, like gull-wings. "Shall we?" Keeler invited, gesturing toward the hovercraft.

"Hold on," Goldenrod said. She looked at Ziang. "Where exactly are we going?"

"The man we're going to see is a seaman, a trader who brings goods and travelers across the Southern Sea."

"Oh, no," said Goldenrod. "You don't mean... *him*."

"The Shipmaster, yes."

"Not the man in the red shirt?"

"Yes, the man in the red shirt."

"That's what I was afraid of," Goldenrod told them. "I won't be going with you. And if you value your life, Silly Billy Keeler, you won't go either."

Keeler would not be turned back. This library could make the whole Odyssey Project worthwhile. He thought of all that data and sucked back a mouthful of salivation. "Who are we talking about?"

She shook her head. "I will not say his name. He's a walking disaster area. You can not even say his name on this planet except in conjunction with calamity."

Keeler turned to Ziang. "You're sure we can't go by spaceship."

"No."

"You're not sure, or we can't go."

"By sea, or I will not show you the library."

Keeler stroked his chin grimly. "Then it's decided. Toto, get in touch with Gotobed. Let her know where I am. I haven't been able to reach her."

"Then, you're going anyway?" Goldenrod pouted. She slipped her arm around Toto. "Then you go without me. Perhaps, this lovely young man would fly me back to my humble mountain estate."

Toto's eyes widened to the margin of his brow. "Za, ma'am."

"... and maybe you can stick around and help me... make my bed."

Toto and Goldenron returned to the ship, walking with her arm around his waist. "My boy is growing up," Keeler muttered. "Well, General, it's just you and I now."

They took the front two seats of the hovercar. Keeler had not driven since he had left Sapphire. He guided the vehicle from the landing site, catching a view of *Zilla* arcing skyward as they started down the hill.

They exited the vehicle at the edge of the town. Ziang led Keeler down ancient, weathered stairs cut

into the side of a hill. Over the sea, the sun was filtering through the slats of a gray cloud deck, washing the scene in a light that seemed somehow used and leftover from some brighter place.

There was a small shelter at the base of the hill, not much bigger nor sturdily built than a hut. Ziang knocked, and there was no answer. He knocked harder, and there was still no response. He was about to knock again when the door swung open suddenly. Ziang dodged, but the door caught Commander Keeler in the eye, smarting severely. "My eye!"

The man who emerged cowered back. "Oops, sorry."

Keeler rubbed his eye. "Quite all right, it doesn't seem to be seriously injured. Just hurts like..."

"Like getting hit in the eye with a door," Ziang finished. "I should have warned you."

Through his good eye, Keeler checked out the man who had clobbered him. He was tall, very thin, and beneath the wisps of a goatee, he had a face that had grown wizened without growing wiser. He indeed wore a red shirt. An array of nautical gear was hung around his neck.

Keeler extended his hand. "I'm Prime Commander William Keeler of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*."

"Ishmael Gilligan, at your service," said the man, saluting and managing to pop himself in the eye with his telescope with one movement. "Ow, well, at least I guess we're even now."

"I suppose we are ... Ishmael," Keeler repeated. *What an odd name*, he thought. *Wonder where it comes from?*

"Call me, Gilligan," said Ishmael.

Gilligan, Keeler thought, and shivered from something other than the chill of the sea. Gilligan was a mythological trickster demon of powerful significance, the principle figure in a series of stories in which characters representing the seven deadly sins were trapped on an island hell. It fell to Gilligan to keep them all trapped, to thwart their every effort to escape. His mother had told him those stories as he had gone to sleep as a child. Keeler shuddered at the memory. Why would anyone choose such a name?

"Is the *Little Fish* still available for a passage," Ziang asked.

"No," Gilligan answered.

"Why not?"

"Because it sank three years ago."

"I see, have you procured a replacement?"

"No, but I bought a new ship."

Keeler shuddered. This speech pattern of negating, then repeating a speaker's question was a hallmark of the ancient Gilligan, the trickster demon from the stories. He understood why Goldenrod had been afraid of him.

"The point being," Ziang persisted, as though unperturbed, "you have a vessel capable of carrying us to Shipwreck."

"Yes."

"We would like to engage your vessel for that purpose. When can we leave?"

Gilligan shrugged. "How about today?"

Ziang nodded. "Excellent! Then all that remains is the delicate matter of Shipmaster Gilligan's remuneration."

"I don't care about that," Gilligan said. "I just want to know how you guys are going to pay me."

"In the vehicle at the top of the hill are four barrels of petroleum jelly, four barrels of kerosene, and six canisters of methane. Will that be sufficient?"

"Not only that, it'll be enough, too." He turned away from his hut, leaving the door open. "Follow me."

Gilligan led them down to a wide pier that fronted the sea, constructed of thick planks that might have been stone, or might have been wood. It was coated with a faint trace of frozen sea ice, and the commander nearly slipped once or twice. They passed three small ships, each one a black, tube-shaped vessel lying mostly beneath the water, before coming to the end of the dock, where a sailing ship waited.

It was smaller than an Aves, a little. Its hull was dhow-shaped – high in the back, low in the middle, and pointed in the front – and dark gray. Its sails were a rather elaborate array of convex lenses in

various sizes articulated on long metal limbs.

Keeler looked at the nameplate on the side. "*Peckwad*," he read. "Does that name mean anything?"

"No," Gilligan answered.

"Good, I like it, then. Shall we board?"

"We shall," Ziang said.

Pegasus – Flight Commandant Jordan's Quarters

In his dream, Max Jordan was naked, and his skin was covered with strange symbols. He was lying in his quarters, filled with dread, wondering what the symbols meant, thinking he should know what they meant. They covered his legs, his arms, his shoulders, his back... every part of his body except for his face. They glowed, like cat's eyes in the dark when light catches them. He turned his arm over, and the symbols changed, like text on a flowing display.

He listened, knowing he was going to hear voices. They came, carried on the wind at first, then growing louder. "...only want to read you... only want to read you... only ... want to read you..."

He looked up to the ceiling. Manchester was there, his head attached the body of a giant metal spider. He was grinning. "I only want to read you." He fell from the ceiling toward the sleeper.

Max Jordan eyes snapped open. Somehow, he was no longer in bed, but standing beside his sleeper, frightened, disoriented, and panting. Dream and wakefulness were not yet distinct, and he was gripped with panic.

He grabbed the side of his sleeper to hold himself up, to anchor himself to a reality. In his fevered mind, he could not place himself on *Pegasus*. "This is not Bodicéa," he forced himself to say. "This is *Pegasus*. This is safe."

He knew where he was, but the part of his brain that had been programmed in the first twelve years of his life insisted that beyond the walls of his chamber was a jungle, and a hostile planet inhabited by monsters, who wanted to kill him, or worse things. The much less time he had spent on *Pegasus* had only produced an illusion of security.

Though only a boy, he thought he could see something the Commander, even Tactical TyroCommander Redfire, could not, and that was that the Aurelians were chasing *Pegasus*, and were chasing him personally. They would pursue him across the galaxy, to any star system, and as far and fast as *Pegasus* could fly he would never be beyond their grasp.

And in this resignation, a sense of calm came over him.

After a while, his breathing eased. He left his sleeper, and went to crouch in a corner of his room. Eventually, he fell asleep again.

Chapter Seventeen

Winter – Somewhere

And Redfire rose, and rose, and rose.

*The sensation of flight, of travel without movement, continued, though he lacked any visual reference points, and there was no sensation of wind or motion. There was a sense of transition, as though passing over and beyond some twilight horizon, through a cold, pale, bloody winter sunset and into some dark, starless night. He had left Winter, left *Pegasus*, left the all-devouring mouth of Mercuria, and had gone into The Dreaming.*

As a student, Redfire had dabbled in Sumacian mind tricks. He had been on the Dream Plane before. He knew the rules.

"Never fails, does it?" said a voice. It was indistinct at first, but he knew it belonged to Jordan even before she appeared to him, a ghostly image like a reflection in a milky pond. "Leave you alone on a planet with a beautiful woman, the next thing you know, your marital vows are out the airlock." Her eyes looked downward, and disapproved. "Look at her, on her knees, slobbering like a dog. How degrading."

"You're just a pretender," Tamarind snapped, suddenly joining Jordan. "You've tried Sumacian meditation rites before,

but you've never been this far, and it took a dirty Aurelian narcotic to do it."

"Running away again?" Of course, his mother would there as well, looking as she had when he was 12-13 years of age, her hand outstretched, holding a cap that he ought to wear since winter was coming. "You got as far away from your family as you could. You never even let us know when you left. And you're still out in the cold without a cap."

Redfire did not respond. These were not true images of the dream planes, these were artifacts of residual guilt he had brought with him. The thing to do was ignore them, and he had plenty of practice in that. He looked up toward the sky, and tried to find the very brightest star, to focus on. He needed to go there, or bring its light inside him. Either way, the Guide Star was the key to escaping the Ghosts of Guilt. Soon, the star would take the form of a great bird of prey and descend from the sky to guide him.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around. He saw no one at first, but then realized Max, his wife's son, was standing there, barefoot and dressed in white.

Redfire turned away from him, but only found Max standing in front of him again, wide-eyed and innocent. "Don't turn away," he said. "I'm not an artifact of your residual guilt."

"That's just what I would expect an artifact of my residual guilt to say," Redfire answered him.

"Oing," said Max, in Redfire's own voice.

"Are you supposed to be my guide?" Redfire asked.

"Za, ... in a way, kinda, sorta."

"It's always been an eagle before."

Max opened his mouth, and emitted a perfectly pitched version of an eagle's cry.

"All right, I'm convinced." Redfire extended his hand.

The boy shook his head. "Not that way. If you want to see the future," Max told him. "You're going to have to do something to me. If you can do it to me, you can do it to all of us."

Redfire nodded. Dream informed him of what to do. Dream logic demanded he do as he was told. Max bowed, offering Redfire the back of his neck. Redfire knelt over the boy, kissed him on the space where his head met his neck. He felt cold metal plunging into the boy's neck. Max stiffened and cried out, a puppyish sound. The words, "No, not again," in Max's voice echoed across the wind.

Blood and a clear, salty fluid began to pour from the wound Redfire's kiss had opened. Even as he felt perfect, bottomless horror at what he had done, Redfire eagerly lapped his son's cranial fluids. As it entered his blood and his brain, every neuron sizzled and burst. He let go, and the boy's body dropped with a muffled thud.

There was the faint call of an eagle and a sudden clarity.

"Wake up, Ranking Phil," said someone, urgently.

He opened his eyes to bright sunlight beaming down from an icy blue sky, stinging him. As he crunched his eyes shut against the onslaught of light, this sun was eclipsed by a large, red-cheeked face in a parka. "It's me, Bill, your captain." He stretched out a hand. "You've just been rescued. Let me help you up."

He grabbed his captain's hand and was lifted up. He found himself standing on an ice floe, floating in the midst of a great indigo sea. In the distance, he saw smoke, as though a huge building were on fire. It smudged most of the horizon.

"Barely a scratch on you," said Keeler. "Remarkable considering what you've been through."

"What is this?" Redfire asked.

"This is a possible future that assumes you somehow escape from that Aurelian and are not converted," Keeler explained. "You sent your mind here to escape the fact that she is currently performing a rather impressive sex act on your body. Personally, I would have stayed."

"Libertine," Redfire hissed.

"... but then, I don't have a wife."

"Ex-wife."

Keeler pursed his lips and waved his hand in a brooming motion. "Just a mere technicality." As he spoke, a second sun burst in the sky like a supernova.

"What's that?" Redfire asked.

"Oh, that? I imagine it's the ship being blown up. Isn't that what she threatened would happen if you did not join her?"

"Za." He scowled. "Does this mean I should join her, for the sake of the ship?"

"It's a consideration," Keeler answered, making it sound like a concession. Shooting stars and fireballs were appearing high in the sky above their heads as the first bits of Pegasus's debris hit the atmosphere. "Would you like to assume, for the sake of argument, that we somehow foil the agent she has put on our ship, and the ship will survive regardless of your decision?"

"Will the ship survive regardless of my decision?" He spoke up louder. Debris was now shrieking and roaring down from the sky, filling it with thunder. Soon, the first pieces would hit the sea.

Keeler shrugged. "That's out of your control."

"What would happen?" Redfire insisted. Shouting now. Bits of ship were smashing all around them.

Keeler spoke in his normal voice, but Redfire had no difficulty hearing him over the roar. "In the short term, the consequences would not be noticeable." He held up a hand, and the debris from Pegasus began flying upwards and backwards. Converging on a single point in the sky.

As soon as this was done, the landscape around them changed from arctic ocean to primeval forest. "In the long term," Keeler went on. "We travel a long path, to a different place. Actually, I should say you, not we, because I don't make it. For that matter, neither do you... well, sort of, but not really."

Redfire turned, Keeler was no longer visible. He was still there, but he had no physical substance. He moved through the trees until he came to the edge of a large clearing. He heard people in the distance.

There was some sort of city... unlike any city he had ever seen, but somehow familiar, spreading across the hills. He could see people moving in and amongst its buildings. Most of them seemed to be children, not very young children, but adolescents. There was something about its shape, something about the two towers that dominated the city. He realized he was looking at Pegasus, crashed or somehow landed, he could not tell.

"We don't make it," Redfire whispered. "How does this happen?"

"You can't see it because I'm invisible," the Commander said, "but I'm shrugging."

Redfire awoke.

He was still chained upright to his posts, spread-eagled against the skeletal metal framework. His skin was bare, now, and he was quite naked. His clothes lay in a heap on the floor in front of him. He shivered. The brief Winter night was upon them now and it was bitterly cold.

Mercuria sat before him, legs crossed, back turned, warming herself in the glow of a heater. Sensing he was awake, she turned slowly toward him, her hair sexily mussed, her lips swollen slightly. "It's about time," she said as she stood up and approached him.

His lips and mouth were dry, made worse by the dehydrating effect of the drug she had given him. "You should put some ice on that," he croaked. "How long was I gone..."

"Far too long. You now have less than sixteen hours to save your ship. On the plus side, I must say, your performance was impressive indeed. The Aalia must have really opened up your inhibitions. It tells me that, deep inside of you, the lust of a true Aurelian burns."

Burns, Redfire thought. Was there something in his dream about burning? "I'm cold," he said, in a hoarse but sincere-sounding voice.

"Would you like your clothes back?" she said in a tone that said she wanted him to beg, only so she could deny it to him, again and again.

"You could move the heater closer, or bring your warm body close to mine."

She did not fall for that. "You're either seeking to lower my guard, or the Alaia has not worked its way out of your system."

"There is a chill in the air tonight that reminds me of autumn on my home planet. It's something we have not managed to replicate on my ship. There is no pleasure in life quite like sharing a fire with a beautiful woman on a cold night."

"Would you like some water?"

"I am very thirsty."

"Are you hungry as well?"

"Za."

She stood. "See how quickly it comes back to basics. Water. Food. Warmth. Sex. All we are. Two animals, seeking warmth, comfort, food, reproduction. Animals. Nothing but delusion compels us to think of ourselves as anything more," she purred. She was close to him, breathing on his bare nipples. Her warm hands reached down and cradled his hardening manhood.

Redfire asked her. "If I agreed to join you, how would you know I was not agreeing just to save my ship? How would you know I would not betray you?"

"I fully expect that you will agree with me just to save your ship," she told him. "However, once you agree to come to our side, we will persuade you to serve us willingly. Your initial agreement is only the first step. We will in time convince you that Aurelia offers a superior vision to whatever it is you believe in now. There will also be controls ... and, ultimately, tests of loyalty."

"Such as?"

"When you're ready, I will tell you. Until then," she smiled and drew herself close to him. "I'll keep you warm, and persuade you that the vision of Aurelia is superior." She kissed him, intensely,

"So, tell me about Aurelia?" He said when she pulled away again. "I have some right to know the history of the people I am to serve."

She paused. Obviously, she preferred having sex to discussing history. She sighed. "Where shall I begin?"

"With the beginning. Where is Aurelia? Is it a colony of Earth?"

"Aurelia was once an outer colony of the Commonwealth. It wasn't called Aurelia, in the Human Era, but that is not important. It was located far out on the rim, on the very edge of the galaxy, above the plane. From one of its hemispheres, you could look out and get some sense of the spiral of the Milky Way... silly name, don't you think? Milky Way? A throwback to when humans were simple agrarians, slaves to the rhythm of nature, willingly subservient to their own imagined gods."

"So, at one time, the Aurelians, the Echelon I mean, they were humans?"

"Before they evolved, yes. Shortly after the fall of the Commonwealth, Aurelia was invaded by aliens called the Aenaugh. They came from outside our galaxy in a ship that encased the whole planet like a great black cloud. The Aenaugh destroyed their cities, ruined the planet's eco-systems, and made the people their slaves. The Aenaugh fed on them like cattle. Every year, the Aenaugh would descend from the sky to take the weakest part of our population up to their ships to be consumed."

"What did they look like?" Redfire asked.

She sighed. "The Aenaugh were never seen by the eyes of humans, only their minions. The minions were cyborgs. They snatched us from the fields where we labored, sometimes lining up whole families and settlements, and just choosing whoever looked sick, or dumb.

"It was the Aenaugh who divided our population into the four suits: the Cups, who served; the Swords, who fought; the Pentacles, who performed menial tasks; and the Wands, who perform more challenging tasks."

"And you liked it so much, you retained it when they were gone?" Redfire interrupted.

"The Aenaugh were cruel and oppressive, but we did not see fit to reject everything they brought. The four suits were orderly and efficient.

"For a thousand of that planet's years, the Aenaugh ravaged the Aurelian home-world. Then, a thousand or so of their years ago, a bright light pierced the clouds. A man fell from the sky. His name was Aurelius. Aurelius was not one of their minions. He was human, but he was more than human. He saw how the people of our world were living, and he told them they must rise up and destroy the Aenaugh.

"Aurelius understood the technology of the Aenaugh. He taught his people to fight back, led them on a raid to steal Aurelian weapons. There was a long and terrible war, but in the end, the Aenaugh were driven off. He established the Aurelian ideals of equality, community, peace, and enlightenment."

"So far so good," Redfire offered. "So, at what point did the Aurelians start conquering other planets and sucking out people's brains?"

She would not be baited. "With the technology the Aenaugh had left behind, he raised his people up,

advancing human evolution my millennia. By the time Aurelius died, his planet was now populated by a race stronger, more beautiful, and more intelligent than anyone had ever thought possible. They took the technology of Aenaugh, and went forth to spread enlightenment to other worlds. Because they could not bear to leave their world behind, they constructed the first megasphere, using technology from the Aenaugh. Those who left the planet, to spread peace and enlightenment, were called the Echelon."

"The first human world they found was called Touchstone. The Echelon came in peace, but the human inhabitants were hostile toward them. Touchstone had suffered through many conflicts, and had much weaponry. They rejected the Aurelian way with terrible violence. The Echelon defended themselves with the weapons of the Aenaugh, when it was done, the planet was in ruins, a great burning from pole-to-pole. The Echelon realized they would have to change their strategy."

"They became invaders."

"They recognized that they must first prepare a society for their coming. They decided they would insert agents into the population first, to set the stage for the Aurelians, to make sure the population is disarmed, and open to our philosophy. When they arrive, they undertake a massive strike, that wipes the planet clean of the old order."

"By inflicting so much death, how are they any better than the Aenaugh?"

She reached down, dug into her pack and removed a small box of white tubes. One of these she stuck into her mouth and inhaled deeply. It still dangled from her lips when she spoke again. "Aurelia is the destiny of humankind, destroying the past is painful, but it makes the future possible. My forebears lived on a colony called Columbine. The Aurelians liberated us four hundred years ago."

"Liberated you from what, control of your own destiny?"

"We were liberated from our own ignorance, from our own superstition, from our own small-minded prejudices. We were much like you before the Aurelians came. But now, we are one thread of the infinite and beautiful tapestry that is Aurelia." She leaned against him, breathed outward, intently. There was a smell on her breath, a penetrating chemical aroma that stung his nostrils and seared through to his brain. Fireworks began to explode in his mind.

She drew herself close to him, until she smothered his loins with her warmth. "Are you ready for the next phase," she said again, blowing her breath into his mouth.

"Oing," Redfire answered.

Winter – Habi Zod

In Lord Tyronius's Conservatory, Gotobed faced her two suitors across a very low-slung table. Atop the table was a board, two mugs of hot chocolate liqueur, a brightly-colored board, some small disks, and three datapads.

Brigand rolled the dice, and dropped them from his leathery palm. They came up eleven. He moved his piece across the board, landing on a blue square. "Your category is 'Geography,' for one-thousand points and a wedge," said Gotobed. She picked up her data pad. "The river that forms the boundary of Graceland and Oz provinces. Oooh, that's an easy one."

"It is if you're from your planet," Brigand growled. "Which I am not!"

"Don't be cranky," she said. "I'm letting you use *The Writ of Common Wisdom*."

"Yes, but you don't directly allow us to ask the question of the machine."

"What challenge would that be?"

"Am I allowed to look at a map of this... Grease-land Province?"

She nodded.

"Show me a map of Grease-land Province," Brigand ordered the machine. He scowled at it. "The answer is, the River of Ducks."

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. The correct question, what is the 'Old Man River,' the 'Old Man River.'"

Brigand waved the datapad at her. "It says the River of Ducks! What manner of insanity is this?"

Insanity, I tell you, insanity!"

"Stop with the insanity, the River of Ducks is the boundary between Oz and Panrovia. Lord Tyronius, it is your turn."

"Why do we have to play this ridiculous game?" Tyronius demanded as he took up the dice. "Surely one of us is the favored rival for your affections, woman, if you have any to give us."

"Isn't this more genteel?" Gotobed purred. "On my planet is a continent called Carpentaria. The northernmost peninsula of that continent is sparsely populated and endures long winters. The people, as a result, do two things better than any other people on the planet. They drink alcohol, and they play this game. I am doing them honor by bringing that custom to this planet."

"It's ridiculous for you to choose a paramour based on who wins a trivial game!" Tyronius thundered.

"Insanity!" Brigand repeated.

Gotobed stirred her hot liqueur. "I never said I would stay with whoever won. I said this game would determine whom I stayed with. Have you ever heard that expression, 'it matters less whether you win or lose, but it matters more how you play the game?' Well, that is the case here."

Tyronius rolled a four and moved his disk to an orange square. Gotobed lifted her datapad. "Your category is entertainment, for four hundred points. The answer is, it won the Rory Award for Most Ironic Song in 7287."

Tyronius hunched over his copy of *The Writ*. "Let's see... Rory Awards ... 7287... It must be 'The Irony Song.'"

"That's the right song," Gotobed cooed. "Unfortunately, you did not phrase it in the form of a question, so it's my turn."

"What!" Tyronius raged, then slapped his forehead. He knew the rules. "Son of a one-legged whore!!"

"Ha. Ha," said Brigand.

"The really ironic part is nothing in the song was ironic. It was just a string of idiotic situations connected by a catchy melody." Just as she picked up the dice, Gotobed's communicator chirped. "Hold that thought."

She rose and crossed to the dressing table where she had laid down her uniform jacket. She received the message in privacy mode, so she would be the only to hear it. "Got it," she said at the end of the message, and returned to the game.

"What was that?" Tyronius demanded. "Did they find the escaped prisoner?"

She picked up the dice. "No such luck. That was just Prime Commander Keeler's pilot telling me he was headed to some place called 'Shipwreck.'"

Brigand and Tyronius spoke in startled unison. "Shipwreck!"

"Something wrong?" Gotobed asked, knowing something must have been.

"We must go," said Brigand. "Your captain is in the most extreme mortal danger you could possibly imagine."

"That's putting it mildly," said Tyronius, reaching for his long robe and sword. "We must leave at once."

"Why, what's so bad about Shipwreck?"

"If your captain makes to Shipwreck," Tyronius said gravely, "It is very unlikely he will get off the planet alive."

Pegasus – Pieta's Suite

David Alkema approached Pieta's small inhabitation suite, adjacent to the Jordan family's, and asked himself why he felt so nervous. The hatch slid up into the ceiling and Pieta appeared before him, freshly showered, dressed in a loose robe. "Hey, beautiful," she said.

"Hoy, yourself. May I come in?"

She tossed barely dried hair over her shoulders, gesturing inside. She kept a small space, large enough

for a bed, a small couch and chairs around a table. She needed little. "Where's the rest of the band?"

"Max is still crashing out. Trajan's on a combat drill with Flt. Captain Driver. Have you noticed how he completely changes when he's around Driver? He's like a little puppy-beast. I brought you something."

Pieta clapped her hands together. "Oooh, give it to me."

He shook his head. "Neg, wait, I was supposed to tell you something first, to set it up. Do you know what day this is?"

She blinked at him. "Windsday, I think."

"Za, Windsday, although, we never even tried to keep a calendar since we left the system. On Sapphire, so I am told, its October 14. Remembrance Day."

"What's that?"

"On October 14, in the year 5244 A.S., the outpost on Hyperion, one of the moons of my planet, was attacked by what we believed to be, a fleet of Tarmigan ships. They blasted the surface with intense gamma radiation, killing everyone. Fourteen thousand people, wiped out in an instant. Remembrance Day is when we are supposed to think about the people we love, and how they have enriched our lives. We honor them by producing handmade gifts and exchanging them." He reached into his pack and produced a silvery disk. "This is my gift to you, Pieta."

She held it in her hand. As she did so, figures seemed to rise from the surface, like liquid mercury. They took the form of skaters and glided across the silvery surface of the disk. Just two of them, they described beautiful pirouettes, leaps, and spins, like ice dancers. Very, very quietly, music played.

Pieta was enchanted. "It's beautiful. How does it work?"

"Nano-bots. I programmed them myself. I realize it pushes the definition of handmade, but..." he blushed. His heart was weightless.

"Thank you," she whispered. Her lips curled preciously downward. "I don't have anything for you."

"I didn't expect you to. After all, I don't guess that they have Remembrance Day on Bodicéa. I just... just..." He had to stop, close his eyes, smile, shake his head. "I love you, Pieta."

She tousled her hair, and curled onto the couch. "Are you going to ask me to marry you?"

"I want to do that, too... and soon..., but I know you've got certain customs on your world..."

"On my world, I'd live in a commune with twenty other women and only have a man when I felt like breeding... not too mention, my world no long exists. I'm ready to move on. At first, the idea of committing to one man seemed... kinky. But now, I really want to have your babies... lots and lots of your babies."

It took Alkema a second or two to process this. Should he go ahead and propose, or had she already done it? "I want to marry you," he said, thinking this could be either an answer, or a question, depending on how Pieta wanted to hear it.

"Doesn't this usually involve me getting a costly piece of jewelry?" she asked.

"I'll take care of that. Ummmm," he licked his lips and steeled himself. He looked deep into her brown eyes. "There is ... something... you should know before you agree to be my wife."

"What could you tell me at this point that would change my mind?"

"My name isn't David Alkema, and I really shouldn't be on this ship."

Chapter Eighteen

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

Constantine, Hunter, and Ghost were aboard the transport pod again. Hunter was not relaxing this time. "Must go faster," he urged the Centurion, Constantine.

Constantine did not seem overtly concerned. "The Isolationists have tried to sabotage our offensive defensive weaponry before. We have always stopped them."

"Put it together, Constantine," Hunter snapped. "These are not Isolationists. This is an outsider, and far more dangerous than you give him credit for."

Constantine replied with a grunt. "You haven't proven that this is an outsider. I still think we're dealing with an Isolationist."

"Don't be stupid, Constantine. The Isolationists are gone."

"Not all of them," Constantine countered. "What of the Tall Man?"

"The Tall Man abandoned ship when we were about to crash onto Fiddler's Green. Hasn't been seen since."

"What about the Moonwalker?"

"Moonwalker's been dead for a hundred and sixty-five mission days. Tried to sabotage a power relay on Deck Minus 135. Flash-fried."

"What of the OverShot Brothers?"

"Defected on Independence."

"The Woman Who Sings?"

"Sang... sorry, Constantine. There are very few of us left down here, thanks to you."

Constantine's perpetual frown only deepened. "The Missile Hatcheries are inaccessible, if they are even the target."

Hunter did not bother to argue. "You'll want to stop at the next dock."

"That won't take us to the Hatcheries."

"You brought me along because you wanted to know the shortcuts. I know them. The shortest path from the transport pathway to the Hatcheries is straight up, and over. You can cut through the water balances on Deck Minus Three."

Constantine did not have to check a schematic to know Hunter was right. He overshot the next dock by a few meters, but quickly backed up to it. Constantine punched a command into his Datapad. "Until we round-up the intruder, I'm ordering the Missile Hatcheries double-sealed."

"Which will be great unless our man is already in the Hatcheries," Hunter said.

"If he had gotten in, the security systems would have detected him. We always go to enhanced security in planetary orbit."

Hunter snorted. "Do I have to say it?"

"Say what?"

"The obvious... if you're security systems are so great, why am I still here?"

Constantine ignored it. "The Missile Hatcheries are above Deck Zero, I don't think you'll be able to be of any further assistance."

Redfire pointed to the Data Pad. "You can over-ride me."

"I could if I wanted to," said Constantine, "but I don't want to. In any case, I will thank you for your assistance, Hunter. The Notorium will take it from here. And one more thing," he grabbed a paralyzer cuff from an outer pocket and slapped it on Hunter's wrist. "You're going to Winter."

Hunter every muscle frozen, refusing to respond to any neural impulse, stood like a statue in mid-step. Ghost screamed. "You bastard!"

"You can keep him company," Constantine countered. "I'll be happy to arrange it."

"Oh, John, John, ..." Ghost cried, wrapping her arms around his frozen form.

"He knew I couldn't let him get to the Hatcheries. They're above Deck Zero. He also knew I couldn't be trusted, but he went along."

"You sick bastard," Ghost called him again. "He only wanted to save this ship."

"Maybe he did save this ship. If so, he's a hero. But he's also a criminal, and he's going to help us find Redfire or he's going to be flash frozen and sent back to Republic. When I've secured both of you, I'll alert Tactical Core, and they will lock down the Hatcheries."

"You betrayed him!" Ghost would have lunged at him, but his hand weapon stayed her. "You're a bastard."

"You know, I never get tired of hearing that. Now, there's something I've been dying to do all this time," Constantine continued. "I wanted to take that stupid mask off." He reached for the mask.

"Get away from him!" Ghost tried to hold him back. He pushed against her. Hunter remained frozen, like a statue of a zombie, indifferent to the struggle. Constantine pushed Ghost down and pulled off the mask.

When he saw Hunter's face, he was dumbfounded. "By the Holy Twins!"

Ghost lunged. "Get away from him you stinking bastard."

She didn't make it because at that moment, two bolts of crinkling blue electricity shot through the darkness, striking Ghost in the back and dropping Constantine where he stood. The two of them crumpled to a heap on the deck.

Winter – On the Southern Sea

The weather started getting rough on the second night after the tiny ship left the harbor at Collinsport. They had set out from the southernmost point of one island continent toward the northern-most point of the island-continent to the south. They had caught a swift-moving current of water. Then, Gilligan had announced that the current had carried them four degrees off course, and he corrected course head-on into the spot where two storm fronts were converging.

Twenty minutes into the tumult, Commander Keeler lay face down on the cabin deck, sick and frightened beyond the ability to do anything other than cling to the floor and moan, "Me no likee. Me no likee!!!!"

Ziang, who was sitting calmly on one of the cots. "Don't be such a coward. This is nothing. Do you know the Commonwealth included several planets that were nothing but ocean. There were waves sixteen kilometers high on some of them."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," Keeler replied. "I said, 'Me no likee!'"

"You think it is a great burden that this raging storm assails us from all sides, invades us to the core. The truth is, the only time the body is troubled is when the mind is at rest."

"Meaning what?"

"You would forget this storm in a second if you were properly distressed." With that, he rose, crossed the deck apparently unaffected by the ship's violent rolls and falls, and kicked Keeler sharply in the ribs.

"Ow, why did you do that? Me no likee! Me no likee!"

"I just explained why I did that, now stand up."

He extended an arm to Keeler, which Keeler jerkily and reluctantly grabbed, like a suicide pulled in from the ledge of a high building. "What possessed me to get on a ship in Winter, skippered by man named Gilligan, with a mad three-thousand year old general, to go to a place called 'Shipwreck?' What was I really expecting?"

At that moment, the deck pitched almost straight up as the *Peckwad* ran up the trough of a huge wave and almost capsized. Then, the water dropped out from under the boat and it came crashing straight down.

Keeler was slammed to the deck again, but restrained himself from crying out. He crawled, half-dragging himself to a place where he could gain a grip and pull himself up. As he clung desperately to

the wall, trying to remain upright as the ship, the cabin door blew open with a blast of wind and sleet. Shipmaster Gilligan blew in with it, wrapped in a yellow rain-slicker. He tried to close the hatch behind him, but could scarcely make progress against the blasting wind. Ziang heaved himself into the effort and they almost managed to close the hatch before a fresh blast blew it open again, driving Gilligan's rain hat into his face. His eyes covered, Gilligan tried to brace the door with a pole, but only succeeded in mashing Ziang's thumb. Ziang grabbed Gilligan's rain hat and hit him over the head with it. Finally, they counted to three together and wedged the door shut between them.

"Some storm, huh?" Gilligan said.

"We know," Ziang said. "How long before we make landfall at Shipwreck?"

"Maybe today... or tomorrow... or the next day."

"You don't know?"

"We're kind of lost right now. I won't be able to figure out until after the storm."

"How long will that be?"

"Um, basically we'll be lost until the storm ends and we spot land and I see a landmark I recognize."

"Where is your compass?" Ziang asked.

Gilligan grinned sheepishly. "I sort of ... lost it."

"You *sort of* lost it."

"I was throwing stuff into the sea to balance the ship, and I accidentally threw it overboard. Sorry."

Ziang looked quite calm. Keeler wanted to grab the rain hat and hit him again, but the ship lurched hard, and he instead vomited. He had thrown up several times already, and there was nothing but bile in his stomach, which made his violent retching raw and painful in his throat.

"It's a good thing it's too rough to feed you," Gilligan said.

At which point, the boat seemed to catch some kind of whirlpool, that swung it 270 degrees. Gilligan was thrown into Keeler, and Keeler was compelled to turn him around and send him back toward Ziang, who gingerly dodged aside, opened the hatch, and returned Gilligan to the storm.

"A shipmaster belongs on deck at a time like this," the General explained, securing the door behind. Pounding came from the outside, but it stopped after a while.

"I think I am ready for some distraction," said Keeler, sloshing through the water that had built up on the deck.

Ziang took his seat again, which was soaking wet, but he managed to convey both dignity and gravitas in the simple gesture.

"Would you like to hear about another Crusade?" Ziang asked.

"Maybe later," Keeler answered. Once they reached the library, the point might be moot anyway.

"Then I will ask a question of you. When your ship leaves, how long before more from your world will return?"

"In local years... forty, fifty maybe." Keeler didn't have a clue, but he had sense of how the time had been increasing with each world *Pegasus* had visited, twenty at Meridian, thirty at Independence. He extrapolated.

"Barely an afternoon on my time scale," the General said. "Your people are good, but you do not know how to fight. I can not leave with your *Pegasus*, a Keeler and a Ziang on the same ship has never been... portentous."

As if to underscore the assertion, there was a sound of splintering wood as something in the back of the ship cracked, and icy fingers of wind penetrated the cabin.

Ziang continued. "But, perhaps, when you return, there will be a place on one of your ships for a very old General who wishes to fight on the side of good one last time."

"If you leave this planet, you'll die," Keeler told him. As if to remind him that their immortality was conditional in any case, a blinding sheet of lightning split the sea beside the ship, and was followed with ear-cracking thunder.

Ziang shook his head. "If I can fight this new evil, then the thousands of years I've been kept alive will

have some purpose.”

Pegasus – Pieta’s Quarters

“My real name... or I should say, my given name, was Eric Alkema,” David Alkema told Pieta. “David was my older brother. The minimum age, on my planet, for signing up for the Odyssey Project was sixteen. I was four years too young, but I wanted to go more than anything, and I couldn’t wait. I put my older brother’s name into the lottery. I was ecstatic when my brother’s name was on the first draw. I knew he could take me with him. When, he said he did not want to leave Sapphire, I was destroyed. I actually cried. And when that didn’t work, I wiped the tears from my cheek and said, ‘Okay, then, give me your Odyssey Project Identity card.’”

“What did your parents say?”

David grinned. “I think my mom’s exact words were...” he began to shout, *“Is this how I raised you, You didn’t really think you were going to get away with this?”* It was a fair rendering of his mother’s voice, pitched at the edge of hysteria.

*“You signed up for the Odyssey Project using your brother’s identity, and you thought we wouldn’t find out? You think the Republicers aren’t going to use every bio-metric they have to figure out who you really are? Is this how your father and I raised you. If you’re going to do this, do it right, for Sumac’s sake. Find a really good cybernetic intruder and get set up inside the system – **inside the system!!** – Didn’t I teach you anything?”*

Pieta was confused. “She supported you?”

“Meredith Burning-Rainbow Alkema was, in the words of everyone in Josh-Nation who crossed her path, a formidable woman. She would have fitted in very well on your planet. The next day, she set me up with a black and white cat named Holstein. Holstein altered every file he could to make sure no one would doubt that the recruit who showed up on Republic was David Alkema, and not his little brother Eric. Holstein claimed his changes would be completely unidentifiable and untraceable, but you know how cats are.”

“They never caught you?” Pieta asked incredulously.

“I didn’t have any real problems until I got to Republic, the reception cell for Odyssey Project Training. Everybody there was staring at me. I almost drowned myself when I got to the Intake Area. The adminicrat gave me a look of pure death, and I know she didn’t believe I was old enough. She did a double biometric scan on me, quintuple checked my identity card.”

“What were you going to say if she challenged you?”

“That I had a childhood bout with Bonesaw’s disease and my growth was delayed. Mom’s idea, Holstein put it in the file. But I didn’t expect her to challenge me. You have to understand, Republicers are trained from infancy to trust the system, trust the data. If my file said I was sixteen, she had to believe it.

“When we got to the dorms. They put me in with other guys they *thought* were my age. I was in a suite with three other guys, two Republicers and another Sapphirean. The Sapphirean, his name was Ranaroundthespaceport High Sunday, Ran for short. He didn’t make it through the first quarter. Three fourths of the people who began the training either never finished, or didn’t get a ship posting.

“Every once in a while, somebody asked how old I was, and I told them ‘sixteen’ and they said I didn’t look sixteen and I told them I couldn’t help it.’ After a while, they lost interest. I couldn’t do much socially, so I had a lot of time to study, and train.”

“Did you miss your home?” Pieta asked.

“More than I ever thought possible,” Alkema conceded. “Republic was such a bleak planet. You probably can’t imagine it. I mean, where people lived, it was a lot like this ship, in the cities. Outside the cities, it was bare rocks and lichen. I went from living in one of the most beautiful places of my planet to... it was like moving from a beautiful garden into a parking garage.”

“A parking garage? What is that?”

“Like a hangar for personal transport pods, but that’s not important right now ... Some nights, I honestly cried myself to sleep. More than anything, I was afraid I would fail and get sent back, and never have a chance again. I spent my thirteenth birthday in an ice cave on the planet Archon... which is

basically this huge ball of ice in the Republic system. It has double normal gravity, and twelve of us had to survive for twenty-one days on the surface, with limited food, water, heaters, and oxygen. It was survival training. The only way to survive, is to totally work together and depend on your team. I led my team to a volcanic vent, marching across glass ice for four days, then deep underground. I figured out a way to harness the heat to make air. It was great. It was like I was the leader... like everyone was depending on me, turning to me.

"Four people on our team didn't make it. They didn't die, they just couldn't deal. And called for extraction. I took it on myself to lead each one to the surface, to the extraction point. One of them was so mad... so jealous... I just knew she was going to sell me out.

"By the time we were extracted, as a team, I had severe frostbite. Actually, we all did, but mine was the worst, because I had always been the one to take the washouts to the surface, and I had been on point the whole time. We had to get into this healing bath, hot water and healing knitters, completely naked. You know, at thirteen, being naked in front of all those people was scarier than the whole three weeks on the ice-planet.

"I finished my primary training. I signed on for *Pegasus*. Then went into specialized training on the ship. I took both Operations and Tactical. Usually, people only take one, but I took both, and all but worked myself to exhaustion. They were scrutinizing me, the Odyssey Project Directors, because one of the washouts from Archon told them I was just a kid, and I had no reason to be there.

"So, I had to work twice as hard to finish both programs, and twice as hard as that so no one would question my being there. Finally, it was over. I wasn't even half-way to fifteen when we left the systems. So, basically, when I met you, I was sixteen years old... eight years old by your planet's orbit."

"So, you really weren't that much older than me," Pieta said.

"Za, and that means, I'm even younger than you than you thought. You've lived a whole lifetime more than me. Do you still want to marry me?"

"Yes... za, a thousand times over. I still want to marry you. Even more." She kissed him repeatedly, her words emerging between pecks. "If you were that much of a man at thirteen ... and you're the man you are now at eighteen... I want to make sure I'm around to see what kind of man you become later... and what kind of ...father you're going to be to the ... lots and lots and lots of babies I'm going to make for you."

He took her in close in his arms, and they wrapped themselves in one another. Around them, a warm aura of love burned so brightly, it almost gave off visible light.

Pegasus – Hangar Bay 19

Prudence parked in the Hangar Bay. The hatch opened, and two figures in flight togs walked through it. Matthew and Trajan were quite close in height, with Trajan's eyes meeting Matthew's nose when they stood at level ground. They walked more stiffly than even most Republicers, but there was an easy manner developing between mentor and protégé, that made them seem more natural together than either was on his own.

"You're getting good," Matthew told Trajan.

"Thank you," Trajan said, almost grinning and embarrassed. Praise from Matthew meant a lot to him.

"Your final approach was perfect. Next time, I'll let you take it all the way in."

"Thank you," Trajan said again. "Um, after the post-flight review, would you like to get some food with me...maybe some pizza."

Matthew smiled shyly. "I was going to ask if we could do post-flight tomorrow morning. There's something I have to do right now."

Trajan pulled in his lips, disappointed, almost seeming hurt. "All right, I guess tomorrow will be okay. What do you have to do?"

"I asked Eliza Jane to marry me," Matthew said. He would not admit to Trajan that he was about to

undergo the Convergence ritual, Trajan would not have approved. "I'm going to meet her in her quarters and she's going to give me her answer."

Trajan's mouth formed an 'O.' He did not know what to say at first, but at last he managed a "Congratulations."

"She hasn't agreed yet."

"I'm sure she will. Who did you choose for your summoner?"

"I decided to ask her myself. I'm not an Iestan, and ... I just couldn't think of who else to ask besides Eddie Roebuck, and I wasn't about to ask him."

Trajan nodded, soberly.

"If she was going to say 'aye,' don't you think she would have said so right away."

"Things with Eliza are never uncomplicated," Matthew shrugged. "It's the way she is."

"Is that why you love her? Because she's complicated?"

Matthew looked into the boy's eyes, and the utter honesty in them, and could not help feeling he was being less than honest when he answered, "It's a part of her, and I love the whole of her, I guess have to love that part, too."

"Good luck," said Trajan, half-heartedly.

After a few parting words, Matthew walked on from the hangar.

When he had gone, Trajan looked back toward the ship. He told himself he had no right to be jealous, to begrudge Matthew his happiness or resent Eliza for taking away one of the few friends he had on the ship. Matthew and David, and that was about it. David Alkema would probably be marrying Pieta soon. Then, where would he be?

He no longer felt like eating. The only thing he thought he might want to do is run flight simulations, but flight technicians were already doing post-flight checks on *Prudence*. He checked the flight roster and saw that *Basil* ship, was in an adjacent bay.

It took only a few minutes to cross over, using one of the landing bay bridges. Crossing these bridges was actually one of Trajan's secret joys. From the top of the bridge, he could see most all of the landing bay, and the dozens of Aves nesting there, each in its own pool of light. He now saw them as Matthew Driver did. The ships were so proud, and so graceful, and he took satisfaction in knowing he was part of them, part of this whole organization.

Evening was on, and the crew shift was minimal. Only a few technicians and automechs were around. He encountered no one before descending the bridge on the other side, and walked across the hangar to *Basil*.

He touched the hatch opener, but nothing happened. He tried again, but the hatch refused to open. He pulled the pad to the side to get at the manual over-ride people. It had not occurred for him to ask why the ship was inaccessible when suddenly the hatch slid open.

He turned to enter, and saw Max Jordan standing in the open hatch. "What do you want?" Max demanded.

Trajan was unable to answer immediately because he was too completely shocked by Max's appearance. His eyes were red, and stood out from his pale face like bloodstains on an old sheet. His longish red hair was alternately matted to his head, sticking up in unruly screws, and hanging in strings around the back of his neck. The hand that rested on the hatchway showed nails that had been chewed bloody, and was shaking. He was dressed in flight togs, like Trajan, but they hung from him like they were three sizes too big. "What do you want?" he repeated loudly.

"I was going to run some practice simulations before the exam," Trajan answered.

"What good will that do. You're a terrible pilot. You'll never get into Flight Core without your mater's help, and even if you do, you'll just end up crashing your ship on some planet or getting blown up by the Aurelians."

Trajan flashed red. "Max, go stick your head in a pork-beast." His voice shook as he said it.

"Just go away," Max said, in a dead, dead voice. "Nobody wants you around. Can't you understand that?"

"I'm going to do a flight simulation," Trajan tried to push his way into the ship, but Max blocked him. He tried to shove Max aside, and suddenly took a round-house punch to the side of his head.

Acting on instinct alone, he plowed into Max, catching him in the mid-section and pressing him back into the ship. Max sprang back with a knee to the groin and an elbow in the face. Trajan felt his lip split open, and swung for Max's face but managed only a glancing blow. He swung again, and made a better connection, but Max grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed his head against *Basil's* hull once, then twice. As the bay swung around him, turning gray, Trajan managed a half-powered punch at Max's face, before a third slam against the hull stole his consciousness.

Chapter Nineteen

Winter -- Somewhere

And Redfire rose again.

This time, it was Sam who was waiting for him. Redfire held out his hand again, and as Max had done before, Sam refused it, shaking his head. "Not that way. If you want to see the future," Sam told him. "You're going to have kill me. Max is already dead."

Sam gestured down to where Max lay. The sight of the body filled him with horror. It was nothing more than a skeleton and rags, something you might find at the bottom of an old ruin after bacteria had had several hundred years to clean the bones.

Sam looked at him again, offering himself, with neither joy nor regret. "Come on. Do you want to see what happens if you join her, or not?"

"I would never do that."

Sam shook his head. "You've thought about it. You really, really have. You think you can get inside without becoming a part of them, but you really can't. You don't want to help the Aurelians, but you're dying to know what they really are. I can show you what they really are."

Sam bowed himself, offering Redfire the back of his neck. Redfire knelt over the boy and kissed him. He felt cold metal plunging into the space where the boy's head met his neck. Sam fell without a sound next to Max. Redfire had a nanosecond to feel infinite grief and horror, before Sam's brain juice fired his blood.

The sensation this time was of being carried upward by a violent, irresistible force, -- like a tornado -- up, up, and away. Winter and Pegasus flashed by and diminished to nothing. He was shooting through the stars a million times faster than the speed of light, Worlds Without End rushed by him. He sensed he was somehow leaving reality itself, passing through a mirror into some other set of dimensions, to Aurelia, which was not so much another place, but another reality, trying to pull the strings of this one.

And he became Aurelian, and he saw who the Aurelians really were.

***The Hanged Man** hung upside down by one leg in a tank of warm, viscous liquid. His mind was the central processing unit of a planet-sized ship, called **The World**. He was plotting a course through the elaborate gravity of a double star system, the World-Ship powered by **The Sun** that burned at its center. Far and away ahead, **The Moon** and **The Star**, smaller versions of the great world-ship, guided its course through the system, past the gas giants and the ringed worlds to the warm, wet, rocky terrestrial planets of the interior.*

*From his viewpoint in **The Tower**, which ran through the major axis of the world ship for 1,000 kilometers, Redfire would be **The Chariot** (but it was not him and it never would be. He would never be of the Arcana, he would never be in the Echelon. (This was the great lie³ of **The Lovers**, who, now, in the overture of a great conquest, lay together surrounded by naked Cups, lovingly caressing one another's voluptuous bodies in a ritual to bring forth erotic energy.) Even as **The Chariot**, he was without will of his own, merely a vehicle drive by the ambitions of others. The whip that was cracked over his shoulder was held in the hands of **The Devil**, whom the Arcana did not acknowledge but could not escape.*

<<We are what we are.>> said all their thoughts.

The great World-Ship, drove into the system, met first by a phalanx of small ships with powerful guns. Redfire did not recognize their design. It was rare for the Aurelians to mount a frontal assault, but now they had come across a world that was impervious to their usual methods of conquest, that refused to be seduced, pacified, and subjugated; a world that was fighting back, however briefly

*He of the Arcana who was called **Strength**, rested each hand on the head of a sword, the picture of tremendous force held in place by sheer will. His face was smooth, his hair was black and stars glistened in it. "Destroy them," he sang. Swords flew from the great world-ship and cut the defenders to pieces. It was over quickly.*

*Redfire looked out over the planet they approached, its jewelline blue oceans, and saw two of its continents were shaped like birds, one in flight, one just about to land. **The Magus** raised his wand and drew circles around the major cities, Corvallis, New Cleveland, New Halifax, Matthias, New Tenochtitlàn, Kandor...*

<<Our/their cities mean nothing,>> the thought came to him. <<It is what they always do.>>

A million Pentacles knelt at the feet of the red-robed **Heirophant**, awaiting his word, as he contemplated how, and to what vision, this world would be transformed. Another million Cups stood in rapt attention before the **Empress**, gorgeously corpulent, as she looked toward this world, eager to taste and devour all the things she hungered for. A further million Wands waited at the Right Hand of the **Fool**, who was thin and anxious, twitching impatiently, itching in his brightly colored clothing. And for **Death**, dressed in shining black armor with a skull picked out on the breast, there were a million Swords, arrayed in a thousand ships poised to strike at this peaceful blue world.

He watched **Temperance** pour liquid from one cup into another. Sparks flew from the bowl and she announced that it was strong enough. **Justice**, who had been holding his sword high in his right hand, prepared to lower it. At the signal, all Hell would be unleashed.

He saw, in a way, **The Emperor**, resplendent in his purple gowns, his head adorned with the horns of a goat, bow before **The Priestess**. Pleased, she gave a slight nod. **The Emperor** rose and said "It is decided. Aurelia will have this world."

And **Fortune**, never seen and always present, smiled.

Redfire felt as though he was watching a ritual, a ceremony performed perhaps a hundred times, always on the eve of some colony falling to Aurelia. With Sapphire, though, it was different. This would be the end of his former world. Yet, he felt he was detached from it. He felt fine, and he did not know why.

The Hermit, in rags cast off by the other Arcana, who kept his own counsel and seldom spoke, broke his meditation and whispered in the **Emperor's** ear. The **Emperor** stood. "Bring the Priest," he bellowed. Six Swords were dispatched for the task. As in a dream, they immediately reappeared. They brought a Sumacian, in chains, wearing a tattered black robe, onto the floor. He was bruised and beaten, about to die, Redfire knew, but his expression was placid and meditative.

The Sumacian was laid out in the middle of them. The Arcana drew around him in a great circle. "Your world is about to end, look," said the **Emperor**. And the sky above the Tower was filled with the vision of Sapphire, and the thousand ships about to set upon her.

The Priestess laughed and raised a cup. "Aurelia triumphs," she said in a voice that rang like a beautiful bell.

The Sumacian looked unconcerned. "That is one possible outcome."

"It is the only possible outcome," **Fortune** thundered. Redfire could not see **Fortune** clearly, but only the image of a great circle projected into the sky, and a voice like rolling thunder, indomitable.

"We will burn your world," said **The Hierophant**. "Your seas will be boiled away, your mighty cities pounded to dust, your surface scourged until it is sterile."

"You and your kind will be forgotten," laughed **The Fool**.

<<Death precedes/means change.>>

"As I have said," the Sumacian repeated. "That is one possible outcome. I can think of one other." "In my version, your great world-ship burns, and takes all of you with it. Aurelia is broken."

<<If they kill him, they will die,>> came the voiceless knowledge again. <<To die is to change.>>

"Kill him, now," ordered **The Empress**. And **Temperance**, in a movement swifter than lightning, reached out with his sword and pierced the Sumacian through his heart.

The Sumacian looked at his wound. "Now you've done it. You can call it destiny, or you can call it quantum-chain-destablization. It just takes a very small detonator to start, small enough that an army of them can be carried in the blood, awaiting for exposure to the air."

"Kill him again," ordered **Strength**, and **Temperance** struck out again.

The Sumacian reached toward the spot where the sword has first pierced him. His hand was soaked with blood, but the blood was rapidly transforming, from red material substance to bright white light.

<<Fire is not the same as light.>>

The laughter of the Arcana fell silent. The Sumacian lifted up his arms, snapping the chains, which fell apart into dust and rust. He spread them far apart like an eagle in flight and as he did so his body began to burn with a white-hot flame.

And **Death** cried out, "Stop him!"

But there was no stopping him. In less time than "Stop him" takes to scream, the warrior had dissolved to white flame. The flame spread, faster than wildfire, faster than lightning, faster than the burning ring of a supernova. It touched each of the Arcana in turn, and they burned like sodium dropped in water. White light of flame traveled down the **Tower** to the very heart of the World-Ship and set the **Hanged Man**, suspended in his tank, to boiling. Somehow, it crossed the ether,

sent *The Moon* and *The Star* into nova.

Across the face of the world-ship, thousands upon thousands of starfires bloomed, consuming all.

In the last second before the world-ship burst apart its debris burning and flying into space as it burst, far too much of it about to rain down on the planet on Sapphire, whose oceans would not be enough to quench the all-consuming flame, Redfire felt an aesthetic admiration for the elegance of the weapon and wished he had thought of it.

Redfire awoke. Mercuria was slapping him in the face. "Time to wake up, Nappy. Time to move."

Redfire felt the soreness of his loins and groaned. "I honestly don't believe I can do it again."

"Not that way, Sweetie." He felt a splash of ice-cold, salty water in his face. He opened his two heavy eyes. Mercuria was unfastening his chains.

"How long..."

"Until your ship is destroyed... four hours, a little less."

"I've been out for twelve hours?" It did not seem like that long.

"Not quite, but circumstances have forced us to accelerate our schedule." His wrists were shackled together, but she had freed his legs. "Also, we have to relocate. Now move."

"Aren't you going to ask me if I have decided?"

"You haven't yet. There's a process here. You've been seduced, drugged, and subjected to all the tools of Aurelian persuasion. Perhaps you think you know how you'll decide, but the real moment will not come until you face the imminent destruction of your ship."

"Suppose I told you I wanted to do it, I wanted to be in."

"You'd be lying. Now, move." She jammed something into the back of his ribs, a sharp, cold metal point delivered a jolt to his system. She pointed him down a long hallway of rusted metal. Her lamp illuminated the first few meters, but after that nothing could be seen.

She prodded him again. "Move it."

Redfire shuffled. He had been shackled in place so long his legs were stiff. The progress of his first few steps was clumsy.

"Bear in mind, if you try to run, I will kill you, and destroy your ship."

"May I ask a question?"

"So long as you keep moving."

"Who are the Arcana?"

For the first time, she seemed genuinely taken off guard. "How do you know about the Arcana?"

"Give us some credit. The Arcana are... what, your leaders?"

"Nothing so trivial as that," she snapped.

"Your gods?"

She struck him across the back of the head with her prod, scratching him and drawing blood. "We are not primitives!" she yelled. "And that is silly, superstitious nonsense."

"Who are the Arcana?" he asked again.

He could feel her glaring at him. The sound of her voice was hateful, but a little awed. "The Echelon are the next level above humans, and the Arcana are the level above the Echelon. That's all you need to know."

"But who are they... *what* are they?"

"I have told you enough. I'll strike you again. You will learn more about them when you join with Aurelia. We will tell you all you need to know."

Something moved his lips and spoke for him, because he hadn't formed the thought himself. "They have been speaking to me."

He thought he heard Mercuria gasp, then felt the sting of her prod on the back of his head. "Liar! The Arcana speak only to the Echelon, and only to the high Echelon."

"The Emperor... right, big man, Purple robe... The High Priestess, clothed in sky-blue with great

white horns... Strength, the infinite woman, power over animals ... Temperance, not like forbearance, but like tempered steel, a tempered will... Fortune... you can't see her, but she casts a shadow in the shape of a wheel..."

"Stop it... stop it!" She screamed at him. "Those are just the outward manifestations of the Arcana," she said, still suspicious. "The true Arcana have a nature that can not be known, or even contemplated by base animals like us. Each of the Arcana symbolically and literally embodies an aspect of Aurelia."

"So they are both symbolic *and* literal?"

"Yes."

His eyes became peaceful. "That pleases me, aesthetically. The idea that... not only can a thing be literal *and* symbolic at once, but such things can become the governing...entities of an entire race."

She took this in, trying to judge whether his comment was sarcastic or sincere. "The closest you might understand is that they are guiding spirits. Your own world has ideals, freedom, honor, for example. Our Arcana are literal manifestation of the things Aurelia values. The First Echelon created them, using some kind of technology from the Aenaugh to draw their highest essence from within, so that we would always have their guidance."

"Where did they come from?"

"The Arcana have been with humanity since the Dawn of Evolution. The First Echelon drew them out from the from the mind and gave them form. That is all one needs to know."

"Where do they live?"

"They are everywhere and no where. They appear as they are called upon. When we embrace a new world, they always come to the megasphere, to rejoice with us."

"Have you ever seen them?"

She did not answer, but he sensed that she had not, and resented him for it. They had arrived at a great shaft. It extended upward for hundreds of meters, into darkness. Was it too tall to see, or was it night outside? Redfire did not know.

But she could not help herself, she had to ask, "What did they whisper to you?"

"That my world would never become Aurelian, we would be destroyed...that fire is not the same as light... Death mean or precedes change, we must die in order to change, something like that... and we are what we are."

Mercuria struck him angrily. "Now, begin climbing, and do not mention the Arcana again. I will not kill you, but I'll give you a misery you'll not soon forget. Climb!"

Winter – The Southern Sea

By dawn on his part of the planet, the storm had broken.

"As near as I can tell, we are not too far off-course," said Gilligan, standing high in the foredeck of the battered *Peckwad*.

Ziang surveyed the ocean. A rare, almost brilliant day on planet Winter had dawned. The veil of clouds that hid the sun was thin and ragged, like old lace. Icy white and yellow light poked through the holes and dappled across the bruise-blue sea.

Keeler, his face nearly as white as an ice floe, clung to the rail in a death grip. "How long after the ship stops moving before I don't need to throw up any more."

"I could sure go for some breakfast," Gilligan said. "I could really for a cream pie right now, or some oysters."

Keeler shuddered. "Stop that! You're creeping me out and making me sick at the same time."

"I think there's some food in the food locker," Gilligan continued.

"That seems like a reasonable supposition," said Ziang. "Find out what there is."

With Gilligan absent, Ziang scanned the horizon with a double-telescope. "No sign of land, yet," he said. "I am afraid our shipmaster will not be able to navigate until we can find a recognizable piece of land."

"At least the water has quieted down," said Keeler. "It's a beautiful day."

"Calm seas are not necessarily a good thing," said Ziang.

"In what way," Keeler asked.

The Old General grunted.

From below, there came a noise, as if thousands and thousands of tiny creatures were bumping their heads against the bottom of the boat. Keeler crossed to the prow, from where he could see an enormous school of fish (or whatever sea-swimming organism passed for fish on this planet.) They were fleeing, rushing madly away from the *Peckwad's* direction of travel.

"What's going on?" Keeler asked.

"They are running," Ziang said. "Running for their lives."

"From what?"

Ziang gestured.

Far out from the boat, a tiny spot of the ocean had begun to boil. In the midst of the quite sea, a perfect circle of bubbling, roiling waves disrupted the surface. The circle grew wider and wider. Presently, something began to emerge.

"How lucky we are," Ziang whispered.

Before Keeler could question Ziang's definition of the word 'lucky,' the boat began to rise and buck as the disturbance spread outward from the point where a great horned creature was rising from the sea. Its head came first, a helmet-shaped thing with two-lobes around a vertical slit that might have been an eye or a mouth. At first, it appeared as a giant snake, all head and long, coiled body, but as it rose higher and higher, and larger and larger, other even more hideous body parts began to emerge.

When it had fully emerged, the beast towered over them, and looking toward it, they could see nothing but a sky of stony gray scales. Tentacles fanned out in every direction from a torso, large enough to wrap all of *Pegasus* in their twists and writhes. Huge plates ran up the back and tail of the beast. The head of the beast was so far away, at the top of its elongated neck, that it looked like a mere dot, although, by Keeler's estimation, it had to be considerably larger than a milkbeast.

Keeler's mind reeled, trying to put some sense of size and scale to the thing. Being of a professorial mind, he imagined the beast being described and depicted in some text. There would be two-full pages of text, or one massive two-page illustration (worth a thousand words at historically consistent exchange rates) and there, in the lower-right hand side of the page, the page number would be the relative size of his boat.

Gilligan appeared at the side of the boat, wielding a large harpoon gun. He aimed it at the monster, although the gesture would obviously be futile. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, it dived beneath the waves again and vanished, leaving scarcely a ripple in the icy-cold sea.

"What do you call that thing?" Keeler asked.

"Richard," Gilligan answered.

"Oh," Keeler said, opening the small emergency brandywine flask he kept with him.

"Do you want to know why?" Ziang asked.

Commander Keeler already knew. "Because he looks like a Richard," he answered. He discovered he was shaking too badly to stand or move, and could do nothing but only wish he had brought a change of pants.

Chapter Twenty

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

Constantine came to, feeling like a herd of large, heavy herbivores had butted him into the path of heavy earthmoving equipment which in turn knocked a hydroelectric dam down on top of him. Every bone felt crushed, every muscle felt like burned meat. His ears rang and his vision was limited to a small circular area surrounded by pulsating black and purple.

Also, his jaw was bleeding, and it felt like a tooth had been ripped out from a place where teeth do not naturally grow. The intruder had ripped out his Ident Sliver. He felt for his datapad and weapon. Both were gone.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he heard Hunter say humorlessly.

"What are you still doing here?" Constantine said, with difficulty, it was as though his tongue had swollen and dried out in his mouth.

"I'm trying to stop an intruder from getting through to the missile hatcheries. And when I get through with that, I have to give a certain Centurion thorough and well-deserved ass-kicking."

Constantine pulled himself up to where he was almost standing. His vision was not clearing, and now his head was throbbing like an angry bell. Ghost stood next to Hunter, a hateful scowl on her gentle face.

"You want this?" Hunter said, holding up a medikit.

"This isn't the right time to be playing games, Hunter, or should I call you..."

Hunter threw the medikit hard and caught Constantine in the stomach. "We've got to go, quickly. The transport pod is gone."

"So is my ID Sliver," said Constantine, wiping blood from the back of his jaw. "Without my ID Sliver, I can't over-ride the perimeter defenses around the Missile Hatcheries."

"I thought the Missile Hatcheries were locked down," Hunter said.

"I didn't have time to alert the Watch. I was going to do that after... afterwards."

Hunter finished for him. "Regarding that..." he turned his hand over and dropped pieces of the paralyzer cuffs to the deck. "The next time you and Bellisarius play 'Good Cop, Bad, Bad, Bad Cop,' you'll have to borrow his."

Constantine avoided it. "There's nothing between the intruder and the missiles but the auto-defenses, and he can shut them down with my data-pad and my ..." he took out the pain suppressor patches from the Medikit and attached one underneath his chin, to stop the pain there, and placed the other on the back of his neck, where it could intercept pain signals from anywhere in his body.

"Then, link Tactical and tell them there's an intruder in the Missile Hatcheries."

"I can't activate communication links on this level without my Sliver," Constantine looked like he wanted to crawl into a waste reclamation unit and die.

"Spare me, Connie. You're a Centurion, you have communication nodes built into your skeleton."

"That energy bolt fried all my internal systems, I can barely see you." The pain that was only beginning to submerge beneath the cold cover of the anaesthetic was caused by tiny devices in his body recently burned and scorched. Parts of his musculature were now cooked like roast beef.

Hunter analyzed the situation for a few moments, crossed the deck, and slapped Constantine hard across the face. "Listen Connie, I know it will take every molecule of strength in your being, but try not being a knocker just once in your life. That intruder is in the Hatcheries. The only people who can stop him is us. Now, I suggest we get to maintenance lift 219G, we can take it up to Deck minus twelve. From there, we can take conveyance tube 122F up to deck zero. If we move forward toward Section 7, we can access the Missile Hatcheries through the launch instrument clusters."

"I can't take you to the Upper Decks..." Constantine growled.

"Shut Up, Connie, we both know you can."

"Not without my Sliver."

Hunter contemplated this. "What if we go outside the ship, climb over the hull, drop into the Missile Hatchery directly."

Constantine shook his head, which hurt and he could feel his brains sloshing around. "Even if we didn't have to get into space gear, we'd never make it in time."

Hunter knew he was right. "Slag," he said finally. "All right, we go through the ductwork. When I reach Deck 1, it'll set off the intruder sensors. Maybe that'll give the Watch time to get to the hatcheries."

"I'm not taking you," Constantine insisted.

"You don't have a choice," Hunter told him.

"The defensive systems will attack you.... Probably me too, without my Sliver."

"Oh, for just one nanosecond forget about the slagging chip. Why do you always have to be such a pucker puss?"

"This is no joke, Hunter."

"If I wanted to laugh, I'd pull your pants down."

Constantine grunted, grimly resigned to the reality that he could not pull this off without Hunter. He was beginning to feel like he could move again, and took a cautious step forward. With this movement, he discovered painfully swollen muscles in his calves, but he thought he could locomote.

Hunter turned to Ghost. "This is too dangerous for you," he whispered, tracing a finger gently along her cheek. "Go back to the cargo decks and hide. I'll find you again... or you'll find me."

"I'm going with you."

"Go!" Hunter hissed urgently. "This isn't safe, and I don't trust Connie. If there were an open airlock and he only had time to eject me or the intruder... I'd be touring the ship from the outside."

"It's my ship, too. I'm going."

He stared at her for a moment, then pulled her in and kissed her.

With Hunter and Constantine both in pain, and limping, they made their way to the UpShaft, a great hollow pillar of steel about two meters in diameter. The UpShaft transported materials quickly from the artifactories in the UnderDecks to *Pegasus's* Inhabitable Areas using air pressure and microgravity. The access hatch on this level was about half the size of a standard ship's hatch, and the opening it left after Hunter pried it open, was somewhat smaller still. A stiff wind blew out.

"These weren't intended for use by humans," Constantine called out over the breeze.

"Why should that bother *you*?" Hunter shouted back. He looked about to leap, but then swung and grabbed Constantine by the shoulder. "One more thing, Connie, when this is over, I *will* beat you to the edge of death for that handcuff trick."

"If we live long enough for you to try..."

Hunter would not let him finish, but leaped into the shaft.

***Pegasus* – Lt. Navigator Change's Suite**

Matthew Driver was deeply perturbed. This was not the proper purpose for the Convergence Rite.

On Republic, a couple to be joined in matrimony lay together in bed – surrounded by family to make sure nothing marital happened – and attempted to share one another's dreams. It was a test of compatibility and connection. Sometimes couples could not connect, but this was not considered an impediment to a happy marriage. It only indicated the couple needed assistance in either forming the bond or compensating through other forms of intimacy. In theory, the Rite of Convergence enabled the couple to determine the course of a life together. The Rite had nothing to do with Iest, everything to do with risk aversion, which was almost its own religion on the planet Republic.

But the Rite was never done as a litmus test. The answer to a marriage proposal was never meant to depend on the outcome of the convergence. Republicer ethics were quite clear on that. But Eliza Jane Change was not bound by Republicer ethics. Driver tried to tell himself it was just one more thing to get used to about her.

Eliza Change met him at the door, dressed in the one-piece jumpsuits she favored in her private time. She didn't even engaged him in pleasantries, but just asked "Are you ready for this?"

"I am," he told her.

She led him into her sleeping chamber, a very small alcove off her living space. The unit was small, and very simple, a slab of padding and linen covers just barely big enough for the two of them. "Are you ready?" she asked him one more time.

"This still feels wrong," Matthew protested.

"You can still leave," she told him.

He shook his head. He was resigned to this. He sighed and pulled himself onto the sleeper. She joined him and they lay beside each other. Eliza Change lay her fingers gently against his temple, and he lay his against hers. The physical contact was not necessary to make a connection, but it did make the couple feel more comfortable and relaxed.

Matthew stared into her Eliza's. Eliza stared into Matthew's. They breathed as one. Deep in their chests, their heartbeats synchronized into a single pulse. Together, they departed consciousness, and joined each other in the space of a shared dream-realm.

Matthew had no memory of the path he had taken to arrive here, only he was aware that he was with Eliza, and they were dreaming together. He felt happy. "We have connected."

"We've always been connected," she told him. It was the right thing for her to say, but he sensed, somehow, she meant it differently than it sounded.

"Now what happens?" he asked after a long, empty silence.

"What do you feel here?" she asked him.

He looked around. "It's a big empty space."

"How do you feel?"

He had to think about it. "Comfortable?" he hazarded.

"To me, I feel very warm and secure," she told him. "I'm feeding off the emotion you feel for me."

That much gladdened him.

"The connection is good," she told him.

Matthew saw a crooked smile break across his own face. Did this mean...

He felt her calling him away. "I have to show you something."

There was no wavering light, no all-consuming flash, no tangible sort of transition. Suddenly, he was both watching and participating in a kind of diorama.

The quarters were larger than her or his had been. He saw himself, sitting on a couch, reviewing a mission log. He couldn't focus on himself, couldn't see himself clearly except in brief flashes that left more an impression of feeling than of seeing, and what he felt was gnawing anxiety, a desire for solitude.

The Convergence was only intended to enable people to connect, to feel the full range of emotions felt by each for the other. Driver realized that Eliza was doing something different, showing him their destiny as a married couple.

She came in, Eliza, his wife. He could see her clearly. In this dream he could sense an aura around her, a dark red glow like a sun's corona at sunset. "Would you clean that stuff off the table," she grumbled.

"Right away," he told her, indifferently. She crossed the room, ignoring the couch, where he sat, and going to the solitary chair, the one he knew she always chose.

Present Matthew was thinking he should go over and message her shoulders, kiss her, snuggle with her... she was his wife! Future Matthew wanted to retire to the sleeper unit immediately. "Would you like anything?" Future Matthew asked, hoping she'd decline.

"Chilled water," answered Future Eliza without looking up from her star charts.

Future-Matthew was thinking. She's cranky because she's missed four rendezvous since we came to the Orion Arm. He gamely tried to engage her anyway, knowing he would fail. "Would you like to go to the Recreation Nexus later?"

She shook her head. Puzzlement riddled Present Matthew's brain. He could feel the thoughts of present Eliza, but

future Eliza was a blank slate to him.

Future Matthew was running through his mind either echoes of past arguments, or outlines of arguments he would never have the guts to deliver. For seven years... for longer, I have been waiting for her to give me credit for what I do, and to respect me as a man. She doesn't. She is incapable of it. She never will.

"Nothing I ever do seems to be good enough for you?" he had never told her. "My Flight Group saved both ships at Crucible. I rescued you at Dominia. We fought off the Ghost Fighters at Extremis. When I come home, all I hear about is some spill in the cocina, or how the automech doesn't make the bed the right way."

She would just scowl at him and say. "You wouldn't have any planets to fly to, if I didn't guide this ship to the right stars. So clean up the spill in the cocina, and make the bed the way I like it."

Was this all they had to look forward to?

Negative.

There was an even sorer topic. Children, and Eliza's refusal to make any. Present Matthew wanted to know why, but future Matthew was so averse to the topic, his feelings on the issue were buried inside him, locked in a vault and tossed into the deepest, most impenetrable chasm of his future inner self.

"I can't stand this any more," Matthew heard himself screaming inside his head, but the vision of himself in this dream said nothing, resigned to stick with her, stick with his vows.

There was a fleeting sense of something else, it was akin to the loss of things he had given up to remain with her, but it was quick and sharp, and there was a sense that he could not allow himself to recognize it.

"Matthew..." Eliza was calling to him in the present time. He opened his eyes. He was rolled into a fetal position on her sleeper. She was sitting up, above and over him. He didn't need to look at a chronometer to know several hours had passed.

He met her eyes. His present emotions were confused with what he had sensed from the vision of himself in the Convergence dream. "Do you understand now?" she asked him.

Like a bright star on which a pilot might fix his course, there was one point of absolute clarity. He loved her now, and she loved him, but if they tried to make a marriage out of it, they would hate each other. The Convergence was the only one she had of showing him this destiny.

She pressed the starfire back into his hand. "I do love you, Matthew, I could even be your lover, but your religion does not allow that. For marriage... we will both end up miserable and unsatisfied. Isn't it better to know now, than seven years from now?" she asked.

He realized then, she had made up her mind about this a long time ago. In the midst of it, he thought he should have found himself furious at her, for making him waste his time on her.

"I never asked you to stay with me," she reminded him. "I've done everything I could to warn you off." She touched his forehead, tenderly. He winced. "It just can't be," she told him. "We are not meant for each other. I should have told you a long time ago. Now, we both know. We are good friends, we would be terrible lovers."

Matthew rose from the sleeper and turned away from her. "I told you I got it. Here's where the story ends, right?"

She stayed in the sleeper, looking up at him from beneath bed-tossed hair, not pleading, but just saying. "We can still be friends."

He backed out of the room. "I already have enough friends," he said, and then, with depressing force, came the realization that this was not true.

Pegasus – Hanger Bay 22

"Traj, wake up."

Someone was slapping him lightly around the face calling his name. "Trajan, Wake up! Wake up now!"

Trajan Lear slowly opened his eyes, finding himself on the floor of the hangar deck. He immediately remember how he had gotten there. "Max!"

"Max is gone," Alkema told him. It was Alkema and Pieta who had awakened him. "*Basil* is out on a training flight, authorized by Flight Commandant Jordan, but Jordan is asleep in her quarters."

Trajan's head hurt, and tried to get around what Alkema was telling him only with great difficulty. He tried to stand. "I'm going to *hurt* him."

"Easy companion," Alkema said, trying to help Trajan to his feet.

"How do you know?" Trajan asked.

"What do you mean how do we know? You told us."

"I did?"

"You called us on the comm-link, said Max had knocked you out and taken *Basil*. Then you passed out."

"I did? I don't remember any of it."

Pieta looked toward *Basil's* dock, and then to the little utility niche where they had found Trajan. "I'm guessing thruster backwash from the launch probably knocked you back here."

"I'm really, really going to hurt him," Trajan said, although saying made his teeth throb. He was sure at least one was loose. "How long has he been gone?"

"*Basil* cleared the launch twenty minutes ago." Alkema told him.

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to get into an Aves and track him down, talk some sense into him." Alkema sounded completely confident as confident in his ability to talk sense into anyone as he did in his ability to steal an Aves.

"Just send a search and rescue ship," Trajan protested. "Send out some Accipiters with grapplers to pull him back."

Pieta was just as insistent. "Max doesn't need a rescue team. He needs friends. He needs us. He needs... you."

Trajan's gut response was that Max was not his friend. Max was the better pilot, the Golden Boy, He Who Could Do No Wrong.

"We don't have much time. Come on." Alkema grabbed his arm and began pulling him across the landing bay.

Trajan tried to break free, physically and rhetorically. "Look, if we send the Accipiters, they'll pull him back. He probably won't be allowed in Flight Core now, but after a year or two, he'll get his chance."

"I'm not worried about his career," Alkema said. "Something happened to Max. I don't know what it is, but ever since he got back from Winter, he hasn't been the same..." he broke off, a thought too horrid to finish.

"What?" Trajan demanded.

Alkema swallowed. "I wonder if the Aurelians could have gotten to him somehow. They can do that. Put parts of brain in your head. They lie dormant until its time to act, then they force you to do something. Maybe whatever happened on the surface set it off prematurely... unbalanced him. I don't know... but I'm going to help him."

"So, help him, but leave me out of it,"

Alkema was all but dragging him to the hangar bridge. "Trajan, I hate to put it this way, but don't be a selfish brat about this. Max would do this for you..." he paused. "Flight Captain Driver would do this for Max."

This set Trajan to seething, but he knew Alkema was right. Bastard! He put up no more resistance as Alkema and Pieta led him over the bridge to Hangar Bay 19, where the Aves *Prudence* was docked. "Open it up," Alkema ordered.

Trajan could not believe what they were asking him to do. "I can't just take out the ship. That's Matt... that's Flight Lieutenant Driver's ship."

Alkema remained as forceful and persuasive as ever. "It's the only ship we can take. You've been training on it. You're encoded into its sympathetic systems."

"I can't just take out a ship, there's launch codes, clearance codes. We can't even get to the launch-rails without them."

"Will the Commander's over-ride codes do?" Alkema asked, Keeler's technical disinterest working for him yet again.

Trajan looked at *Prudence*. The ship had never seemed so big before. Also, he was acutely aware that the ship *was not his*. What would Flight Captain Driver say if he so much as scratched it? "I can't," he said.

"You will," Alkema told him.

He'll make you do it, even if you don't want to, said Trajan's brain.

"If we don't launch now, we'll never catch him," Alkema told him.

Defeated at every turn, Trajan placed a flat palm against the side of his ship, and thought the access code.

Alkema turned to Pieta. "When I met this kid, he wouldn't sneeze without a note from his mother. Now, I've got him stealing a spaceship. I'd say he's progressing nicely."

Prudence – The UnderDecks

There was a sensation, not so much of flying, but of falling upward. Hunter, Ghost, and Constantine fell up, caught like scraps of paper in a fierce updraft. A few seconds of this, and they were dumped on Deck Minus 12, landing in a heap, with Hunter on the bottom.

"Ewwww, Connie, you touched a girl," Hunter said, rolling out from beneath the pile. He stuck out a hand and helped Ghost to her feet, left Constantine to figure out how to stand on his own.

They over-rode the hatch above Conveyance Tube 122. This was part of the Intraship Transport System, a highway for transport pods, seldom used, except for the occasional inspection crew.

Normally, Constantine could just think about hailing a transport pod, and the neural transponders in his skull would handle the rest. If Hunter or Ghost were a part of the regular crew, they could have just touched the "Taxi" pad, and one would come.

However, all three, as far as the Great Ship was concerned, did not exist. There would be no Transport Pods. They would have to make it up to Deck Zero on their own.

"We'll never make it in time," Constantine grouched.

"Oh, ye of little faith and small genitalia," Hunter sighed. A few meters off was a maintenance locker. Hunter walked over to it and forced it open with a few brutal thrusts of his prying bar.

From its interior, he withdrew two slabs of poly-alloy about 1.5 meters in length, maintenance sleds. "The transport pods travel on an electro-magnetic fields. The sleds hover above the deck using a similar principle. If their polarities are reversed..."

"We'll shoot down the conveyance tube like ..." Constantine could not finish, his mind was just not up to the task of creating a metaphor for shooting through the ship on waves of Electromagnetic energy at high-subsonic speeds.

"Exactly," Hunter told him.

"That is positively insane."

"Not really,... Well, actually really."

"How do we stop?"

"You can't, we'll have to jump for it when we reach Section 10-7, otherwise we'll slam into the bulkhead at Section 10-6. Your call."

Constantine could not find words. Hunter was not about to wait for him. "On me," he ordered Ghost. He took a running start with her holding his hand. They leaped as one into the tube, the maintenance sled underneath them, Ghost on his back. The instant they hit the electromagnetic wave, they shot down the tube and vanished.

Constantine grabbed his board. He realized with absolute certainty that he was going to die. If he managed to survive this insane ride, he would be killed by the intruder, or die when the missile was fired.

If death were inevitable, he decided, there was no reason to fear it. He ran for the tube, holding the board to his chest. He leaped in the air.

The next moment, he was bulleting through several hundred meters of *Pegasus* in the space of seconds, the intraship tubeway flashed by in a blur of light and metal. He calculated it would take about 3.7 seconds to reach the jump off, and even with the mental discipline to dilate time, it was an impossibly brief moment to measure. When it passed, Constantine did not jump, but simply let go. The maintenance sled shot away from under him and he rolled to the side, landing in a ball at the side of the trench. His head banged to the side, almost hard enough to knock him unconscious, but with the thoroughgoing pain inflicted by the lance already slow-roasting his body, he barely noticed it.

He rolled and looked up at the two figures staring over the lip of the trench at him. Hunter reached his hand out. "Stop fooling around, Connie. We have work to do."

Constantine grabbed it, let himself be lifted up. Blurrily, behind Hunter, he saw a panel indicating they were on Deck 13. Hunter and Ghost had made it.

"The scanners should have detected you," Constantine muttered.

"They look kind of disabled," Hunter told him. Constantine tried to focus, blurrily, he saw the bank of sensors and interfaces was greyed out. Deactivated, probably with his Sliver and datapad. If the intruder had his codes, he could disable whole sections of the ship's intruder detection systems, without being reported to Technical Core. He would have groaned, but that would have hurt his head too much.

"Now what?"

"We go to the hatcheries, and we find him," said Constantine.

"Which one," Ghost asked. "There's over a hundred?"

Constantine took a painful breath. "Our intruder is definitely from outside the ship. He or she has spent much more time gathering information, disguising as a Watchmen, these are things one of you trolls would not bother to do. Therefore, the intruder is from the planet, or an Aurelian, or unknown."

"Why does it matter, Connie?" Hunter put in, but Ghost, shushed him.

"An Aurelian won't commit suicide to take us out. I don't think the people on the planet would either."

"Unless they're insane."

"Right... I have to factor in that, but if it is an Aurelian, which seems likeliest, then our intruder must have an escape plan. He won't go down with the ship. So, I think I can narrow down which of the hatcheries he'll want to use."

"Then, Bellisarius has rubbed off on you," Hunter said. "In more ways than one. Then, by all means, lead on."

Chapter Twenty-One

Winter – Near Shipwreck

Peckwad drew up close to a black, stone-shot shoreline, from which a deck of fine, wispy fog was lifting as the sun approached noon-time. “There,” said Ziang.

Rising from the sea, about a hundred or perhaps one-hundred fifty meters from the shore was a huge black-metal trapezoid nearly eight hundred meters high, the biggest man-made object on the planet. It was narrow at the top, wider at the bottom, then tapering again on the underside, essentially, a huge box enclosed by a sturdy latticework of metal. It was held up by four great legs that were now almost entirely beneath the waves except for some metal pillars.

Keeler recognized it immediately and was so overwhelmed he almost fell overboard. “That’s a colony pod!”

“Indeed,” Ziang said levelly. “This is where we have gathered all the maps, all the records, all the shipping routes that were the legacy of the Commonwealth. Everything is there.”

Keeler barely heard him. An image came to Keeler’s mind of the ancient colonizer ships, nothing more than huge assemblies of metal scaffolding with star-drives on one end and command centers on the other to which dozens of colony-pods were attached. At habitable planets, the pods were fired off to form the cores of colonial settlements. Each was self-contained, generated its own power, purified its own food, water, and air, and could support 20,000 people.

On Sapphire, these pods were systematically dismantled over the first century of inhabitation as the population spread over the planet. On Republic, they became the cores of that planet’s mega-cities. Keeler had never supposed to find one intact.

Slight problem, they were usually designed to be put down on land. “Why did they drop a colony pod into the sea,” Keeler asked.

“The sea wasn’t here when it landed,” Gilligan explained. “I tried to warn them that the sea was rising, but they didn’t believe me. They thought I was trying to trick them.”

“Who are *they*, exactly,” Keeler asked.

“The villagers of Shipwreck,” Ziang confirmed. “The shoreline here used to extend several kilometers further than it does now. As time has passed, the landscape has changed. The sea has risen here. The village lies beyond it, on the shoreline.”

‘Village’ was a generous description. ‘Outpost’ would have done only a little more justice to what looked like three small buildings, little more than stone huts, well-weathered by the constant battering of the sea and wind.

“It looks like a very small village,” Keeler commented.

“Population – seven,” Ziang told him. “The library is guarded by the seven. They were stranded here thousands of years ago.”

“By me,” Gilligan clarified.

Ziang continued. “They will not let anyone pass without solving a complex series of puzzles, each more fiendishly diabolical than the one before it. Navigating their challenge will be as challenging and intricate as a game of chess among world masters.”

Keeler looked toward the pod again. In the thin light that filtered between the clouds, he could see that its top-most levels were laid bare and ragged, exposed to the elements, and imagined chunks of hull plating breaking free and splashing into the sea. “Well, if they’re on the land and we’re on the sea, I don’t see a problem,” he said. “Let’s skip the diabolical series of puzzles and sail right out to the library.”

“Or, we could do that,” Gilligan agreed.

Ziang smiled mysteriously, as usual. “Then you have past the test. Any man who would submit himself to an unnecessary challenge is too much of an idiot to be entrusted with all the knowledge of the

ancient Commonwealth.”

Gilligan spun the ship’s wheel, and set them on a course to the looming black structure.

Winter – Somewhere

After climbing up for what seemed like a thousand meters, Mercuria commanded Redfire to stop. Exhausted and starved, he doubted he could have gone on anyway. He crawled across another punched-metal floor, which was cold and lightly frosted. Without his landing gear, and its built-in heating, he had begun to shiver uncontrollably.

Mercuria seemed to revel in his vulnerability. “Time’s almost up,” she purred, crawling off the ledge and joining him. She stood. Redfire could make out nothing in the darkness, but she knew her way around easily. She opened a side-locker and pulled out a long metallic weapon with several sharp, pointed tips.

“Are you going...” Redfire heaved, needing another breath to finish, squeezing the words past a parched, dried throat, “...to kill me.”

“That all depends,” she told him. “This weapon isn’t for you. I have to kill someone else... very soon. Don’t think you’re the only thing on my plate. I’m a very busy wand.”

Setting the weapon down, she freed a hand to caress his forehead. “You’re hungry, cold, tired, and thirsty. In taking you to this state, I have freed you from all the false programming your society has given you and replaced it with the clarity of what you’re true human wants are. Now, you should see clearly, Aurelia is the true path.”

Redfire nodded weakly. “I will surrender myself to the service of Aurelia.”

She leaned over and kissed him. “An excellent choice,” she whispered.

“Is there some ritual now, some pledge?”

She reached into an inner pocket of her coverall and withdrew something that she hid in her closed hand. “Not so much a ritual, but as I said, we would monitor you.”

Her fingers unfolded. In her hand was a tiny, metallic spider with needle thin legs. “We call it a zokor. It’s a smaller version of the kind implanted into the brains of the swords, which gives us perfect control over them.”

“You would be controlling me?”

“This is a more... unobtrusive form of the zokor. It only monitors you. You have to give yourself to Aurelia freely.”

“You didn’t give Specialist NightStalker that choice.”

“She was not for the Echelon. You are. You will return to the ship with this in your skull. Our agent on your ship will contact you. You’ll recruit others to the cause. In time, you will eliminate Lear, and then Keeler, and then assume command of *Pegasus*.”

She looked like she was waiting for him to say something. But meeting only his wide, tired, expectant eyes, she continued. “And if you tell anyone what happened between us, try to warn them in any way, if you should even think of betraying Aurelia, the zokor will plunge its appendages into your cerebral cortex, the center of your being, and take over all that you are. You will become our slave, and when we take *Pegasus*, you’ll die like the others.”

He nodded gravely.

“There will be one additional test of loyalty, before our agent contacts you,” Mercuria said.

“How can I ever my loyalty to you?”

“Your mate has two boys on your ship,” she answered. “You will kill both of them... to prove your loyalty to Aurelia.”

Redfire stared at her in shock, almost unable to move his lips, certain that no sound would come out if he tried. He looked up to her with pleading eyes and raised his hands in a gesture of supplication and pushed himself up into a crouch on his back legs. “I want you to know something,” he said in a gentle whisper.

“What is that?”

"I don't know how this is all going to play out, but I know for sure, your side isn't going to win," He raised his arms up high, still shackled, and brought them swinging down with all his might. He caught Mercuria at her midsection and punched her as hard as he could.

Considering how weakened he was by hunger, thirst, hallucinogens, and sexual exhaustion, it was a good shot. It threw her back, but she bounced off the wall and came for him again.

"You bastard! You piece of excrement!" She said, and began to rain blows on him, as fast and as sharp as driving rain. "You give up a long life of endless pleasure, for the sake of two mongrel brats, who aren't even good for brain juice." She attacked.

She wasn't as strong as he was, but she was rested and sharp. Her nails cut into him. He swung once, twice, and realized he could never match her, blow for blow. He ploughed into her, shoulder first, throwing his weight on her.

He caught her off balance. They rolled across the hard metal deck. Suddenly, there was no deck. Redfire realized that they had rolled into the shaftway. He felt them falling together into the pit.

The Aves Prudence – Space

"I can't believe I'm doing this," said Trajan Lear for the 94th time, and then, just in case anyone missed the point, he said it again. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

David Alkema put a hand on his shoulder. "Easy Killer."

Trajan sat in the command seat ... in *Flight Captain Driver's* seat. The interface that covered his cheek and brow looked much too big for him. He had a near death-grip on the control column.

Ahead of them loomed Cardinal, an angry red planet. From afar, it had looked smooth as a Holy Day ornament. Close up, they saw pink tendrils, clouds from surface dust storms. There were crinkly maroon mountains that loomed over smooth, ancient seabeds... long since emptied.

"What kind of atmosphere does that planet have?" Trajan asked out loud, though he had intended to question for *Prudence*.

Pieta pulled down an environmental display. "Looks pretty minimal... surface pressure less than .065 microbars."

"I can't do this," Trajan said. "That's not enough atmosphere to break us at this speed. I can't do this."

"You can, you have to," Alkema reassured him. "Do you have a lock on him?"

Trajan pointed. Projected on the canopy display was a small gold bird-shaped symbol, representing *Basil*. It was 90,000 meters above the planet, 12 minutes ahead of them.

"Can you close the distance?" Alkema said. *Before Max smashes his ship dead on into the big red planet*, he did not add.

"I'm trying to. The engine's almost red-lined as it is, and I still have to calculate an insertion vector."

"You know what my mother always said," Pieta chirped up. "She said, you can red-line the mains for 270 seconds with no impact on structural integrity. All you have to do is release the over-ride the inertial compensators. That will increase your velocity vector."

Alkema could not believe he was hearing this from Pieta. "That would have been your mother Jordan."

"Za, my other mother would never have cared much for flight dynamics."

"Great, you fly it," Trajan told her.

"Neg," Alkema said firmly. "Keep your hands on the control column." He reached over Trajan's head. "I'm pushing the thrusters to red-line."

"Over-riding inertial compensators," Trajan told them. "I'm going to set the mains for twenty percent over maximum."

Alkema shook his head. "Go to thirty or you'll never catch him."

Now Trajan was scared. He didn't think he could do this either. "Thirty over Maximum in six seconds." He tightened his grip on the control column until his fingers ached.

Pieta turned to Alkema. "Better strap yourself down, my love, or you're going to be smeared over the

rear bulkhead like chunky strawberry jam."

"That's just what mom used to say." Alkema took his station and tightened the restraints. "Three... two ... one... redline!"

Prudence shot forward. It had run this fast before, both times with Aurelians in hot pursuit. This was the first time it had been the hound, chasing prey. Every instrument read-out turned red. Sudden acceleration kicked her three occupants back in their seats.

Trajan held the control stick in whatever level of attachment came after death grip, to the point where his fingers felt molecularly bonded to the device, but to his complete sense of terror, he couldn't seem to move it. He felt the muscles of his forearm quiver and shake, but the control stick stayed rock-steady, while Cardinal grew larger and larger with each passing second.

"Traaaa-jannnn," he heard Alkema say, distorted with the weight against his throat and face.

"C-c-c-can't... m-m-m-move," Trajan stammered, fighting the raw g-forces. He looked toward his position display. His insertion attitude was all off. If he hit the atmosphere at this speed...

"D-d-d-did your m-m-m-mother t-t-t-tell you-u-u-u how-w-w t-t-t-to st-st-stop?" Alkema asked Pieta.

"S-something ab-about f-f-f-field g-g-g-geometry," she stammered back.

Neuro-control, Trajan thought. *Prudence, ease off the mains. Go to fifty per cent of maximum. Go to any percent of max so long as we're slowing down.*

Prudence reminded him that she couldn't slow down by reducing thrust, she could only reduce the rate of acceleration.

Initiate braking sequence, he told her.

Prudence told him, rather urgently, that she was too fast, and too close to the planet for standard braking maneuver. Trajan looked through the canopy. Cardinal was no longer a big red sphere, it had become a landscape, filling his field of view with its surface, perilously close.

What can I do?

Prudence suggested he abort landing, head away from the planet and gradually decelerate.

We have to catch Max. We have to land on the planet and help him before he hurts himself.

Prudence suggested to him some rather severe braking maneuvers. It would involve her twisting down toward the planet like a corkscrew.

Is it dangerous?

Prudence told him she thought, even with her help, this maneuver was beyond his piloting skills.

Do you care that it's me piloting you... and not Flight Captain Driver?

Prudence told him this was irrelevant.

Present velocity?

14,900 meters per second.

That's way too fast.

Prudence told him he had to act immediately if he was going to complete the maneuver.

Trajan felt his stomach dissolve in anticipation. *Initiate*, he thought gravely. Cooperatively, they changed the geometry of *Prudence's* propulsion field.

Prudence kicked nose up, almost back-flipping completely, as she flew against her own self-generated gravity wave. Trajan struggled to maintain control. Speed was down, relatively speaking, but they were still faster than a speeding bullet, ripping across Cardinal's red-black sky.

Prudence wrenched back and forth, spiraling down toward the planet's surface.

Inside, the cabin was juddering, rocking back and forth, side to side, shaking the crew around like rocks in a box.

Trajan tugged urgently against the control column. "I-I-I-I've g-g-got t-t-to sm-smooth th-this out." He ought to have known better. At this velocity, control surfaces were useless.

The altimeter said they were at 18,000 meters. Far below, Cardinal's landscape was like nothing in

their home systems. Tall, thin, pointed mountains stuck up, randomly here and there, sometimes in rows. All over were huge boulders perched on spindly rock outcroppings, often at geometrically unlikely angles.

Plus which, they were flying over it upside down and almost out of control, which lent a certain drama to the proceedings.

"Aaaaarrgh!" screamed Trajan.

Velocity?

Prudence told him her velocity was 11,000 meters per second.

When it gets down to 3,000 mps, cut the grav engine and give me full thrusters.

Prudence told him that was exactly what she would have recommended. She still doubted his piloting skills were up to the challenge, and offered to automate the procedure.

Trajan wavered. *Nay*, he decided. *Keep me in the loop. Take us down.*

The main drive cut out. The nose thrusters spat out a long spray of fiery light, pitching the ship down and cutting her velocity. The blade jets fired a few seconds later, balancing the ship out. Ahead of them was a huge valley, teardrop shaped, with steps running down the side. *Basil* had landed at the far end of it.

3,000 mps *Prudence* whispered.

"Thrusters," Trajan said out loud. The main engine cut-out. The thrusters on *Prudence's* nose and forward blade kicked to life again, pitching her up like a cobra about to strike. An instant later, the tail thrusters kicked up, and she rode them 3,000 meters into the sky before cutting out.

Forward velocity was down to something less than the speed of sound (in a normal atmosphere, not the lethargic pace the thin gas sheath of Cardinal would have allowed). Trajan wrestled with the ship, guided it closer and closer to the ground.

Proximity alert, *Prudence* announced.

Trajan looked at the three-dimensional terrain read-out. "Aw, phunk me," he said involuntarily. The steps had looked so smooth and neat from altitude were irregular as hell. Hanging rocks and irregular walls zig-zagged madly in front of him. How could he navigate this shape through the geological obstacle course that lay in front of him.

"I can't do this," Trajan said.

"Max did it," Alkema reminded him.

If Trajan had not needed every ounce of control to wrestle with his ship, he would have slugged Alkema across the mouth. He had to save it for later. Still speeding, *Prudence* dropped to 2,000 meters of altitude. Trajan punched the jets.

"Warning. Terrain." *Prudence* spoke out loud and in his head. "Collision in four seconds."

Trajan had fired the starboard thrusters a second two long, and *Prudence's* port blade was perilously close to the side of a canyon already. Another wall was jutting out. He tried to bring the ship up, and almost cleared the side. There was a loud bang, nothing more, like someone had taken an enormous hammer and slammed it into the ship. After that, there was only a shudder that ran along the ship's port side. He heard Pieta ask what that was and Alkema telling her that he thought they had hit something

Trajan could almost feel *Prudence's* hurt. The airflow was all wrong, and there were parts she should have been able to feel, with her sensors, but she could not. But the real horror, the heat and hollow fear that was flooding his mind, was what Flight Captain Driver would think when he saw what was done to his ship.

And there was little time to think even of that. *Prudence* was a hundred meters off the ground, and ahead of her lay a meditative rock garden on the scale of Brobdingnagian Zen Buddhists for a landing field. She was pulling hard to port, and still way too fast. The instruments showed *Basil* was on the ground, just a few kilometers back. Trajan reversed thrusters.

Prudence dropped, her gear skimmed the dusty surface, kicking up a pink sand blizzard that whorled around her wings. She rose again, skipping across the surface, barely clearing a rock formation that looked like a pyramid dropped on a Stonehenge. She smacked into the sand again, skipped again, and

smashed through a large sand dune. Her momentum, broken at last she skidded to a stop.

In the command Deck, Trajan, Pieta, and Alkema remained in their seats, as if waiting for the ship to continue to its docking area. Alkema finally spoke. "Well done, Traj."

"Well done!" Trajan screamed at him. "I almost killed us."

"Za, but almost only counts in Quoits." Alkema began disconnecting his restraints.

Pieta patted his shoulder. "And like Momma Jordan used to say, any landing you can walk away from is a good landing... and if you can use the ship again, then that's a great landing."

Alkema checked the instruments. "We're only 2,000 meters from where *Basil* set down. Let's get outside and find Max."

Oh yeah, Trajan thought. *I'm sure Max made a flawless landing.*

As if reading his thoughts, Alkema patted his shoulder. "Let's get into space gear. I'm sure the damage isn't nearly as bad as it looks from in here."

Winter – Shipwreck Bay

Peckwad glided across the water, across the choppy afternoon surf, to the giant looming pod. Keeler, standing on the top deck in the teeth of a bracing wind, could scarcely keep still, could barely contain himself over the thought that he would soon be holding in his hands all the lost and forbidden knowledge of the Commonwealth. His conversations with Ziang may have diminished it as the paragon of virtuous civilization, but it still had thousands of years of history, multiplied across thousands of worlds. He quivered like a boy, metaphorically about to slip his hand under the silk blouse of history and cop a feel. In fact, his intentions were to metaphorically go all the way with Commonwealth History and, if necessary, make it breakfast in the morning.

"The data, inside the library, is it sorted in any way?" Keeler asked.

"We have developed an indexing system, what are you interested in, particularly?"

Keeler had to think for just a second. "Star charts. If we knew the location of Earth, of the Inner Colonies, we could chart a direct course. We could get there in years, instead of centuries. I might live long enough to set my feet on Earth itself. Historical information about the Commonwealth, what colonies were weak, what colonies were strong. Which colony served the best Fanny Bangers in the known universe? What are the precise locations of all the EdenWorlds, so we can Nemesis all of them before they get out. Where were the great centers of learning and intellect... Avalon colony, for example, and Brainworld Prime?"

Ziang grunted. "I think you will find enough to satisfy yourself."

"Interesting choice of words, considering the metaphor I was contemplating a second ago."

"Excited, then, yes?"

"I feel like ..."

"A child in a chocolate shop."

"I was thinking more of a fetishist in a shoe store, but that will do." He cast loving eyes toward the great metal hulk that loomed over him. *I'm going to metaphorically run my tongue over the strapless pumps of war and conquest and lick clean the stiletto heels of human progress.* He shook his head before it came up with any other ridiculous allegories. He went to the prow of the ship and stood in the pointy bit. He opened his arms wide toward the colony pod. "I'm the potentate of the globe!!" he called out.

"Iceberg!" Gilligan called out from the forecastle.

It was a small one, relatively speaking, a hunk of ice big enough to fill Avenger Stadium in New Cleveland that had broken off from a much larger iceberg, what the scientists called a "growler." It was almost completely submerged in the choppy surf, which was part of the reason Gilligan didn't see it, the other part being he had picked an inopportune moment to bend over and tie his shoelaces.

Peckwad shuddered, and there was horrid scraping noise underneath. Keeler grabbed the rail to keep from toppling into the sea.

"Are we all right," Ziang asked Gilligan.

"Of course, we are. This ship is unsinkable." Gilligan stomped the deck for emphasis and was

answered with a sudden fountain of water shooting up from its underdecks where his foot had impacted. The vessel lurched hard and began to list. Ziang climbed onto the forecastle and took the wheel.

They were close enough to the colony pod by now, and Ziang had only to guide the ship across the last few meters of waters and bump it hard into one of the leg supports. They found a ladder jutting from one of the legs, leading a climb upward to a small aperture at the side of the structure. The rocking of the boat would make getting on difficult.

"Before we disembark," Ziang began, and turned to Gilligan, "Do you have any weapons on-board. Perhaps, your harpoon gun?"

"Harpoon gun? What is it?" Keeler asked.

"A harpoon gun is a weapon that fires an explosive tipped harpoon," Ziang explained. "Many sea captains keep them for self-defense, but that's not important right now."

"I meant, why do we need one."

"Because sometimes creatures infest the structure."

Keeler looked at the weapon. It looked massive and dangerous enough, but against the creature they had encountered before, it would have been like fighting off a Borealan land-beast with a shoehorn.

Ziang sensed his feelings. "Not all sea monsters are as massive as the one we encountered. Besides, some creatures of the sea are harvestable."

"...and not only that, tasty," Gilligan added.

"But there are ones that can infest ... ships and structures of the sea, and they do not respond well to human presence," Ziang told him.

"We call them 'head biters'," Gilligan explained, furiously bailing.

"What do they do?" Keeler asked.

"They bite off your head," Ziang answered.

"Oh, dear," Keeler handed the gun to Ziang. "This is all the weaponry I have ever needed," he said, brandishing the walking staff.

"Of course," said Ziang, slinging the gun over his shoulder. He turned to Gilligan. "I imagine this is where we part company?"

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid I have to go." Gilligan answered. He began untying the lifeboat as the water on deck rose to his ankles. "I am going to the village. Pepper and Marjoram promised to make me a sandwich, and I'm not even hungry."

"Give my regards to the Spice Sisters," Ziang said, tapping his head by way of salute. He checked both the harpoon gun and his sword. Assured that both were secure, he turned toward the ladder.

Keeler also, looked doubtfully up the ladder. "Well, shall we dance?" Without waiting for an answer, he mounted the first rung, a task made difficult by the rocking of Gilligan's tiny ship.

The ladder was a tough climb, it was none-too-securely anchored. Every step up resulted in a shudder and shake. When Ziang added his weight, the metal groaned noticeable, and Keeler could feel it stretching and straining underneath him. The wind was no help. It was biting cold, sharp as a blade, stinging as needles.

He nearly fell at the top. There was an overhang. He didn't see how he was going to manage making over it without a long cold plunge into the depths of the sea, when suddenly a hand reach out, a woman's hand, with finely manicured nails. It grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up and over the ledge. He lay on the cold metal and turned toward his savior.

"Welcome aboard, sir," said Lt. Gotobed. "Did you have a nice trip?"

Pegasus – Fast Eddie's Inter-stellar Slam-n-Jam

Eddie did not need to ask Eliza "How did he take it?" because the look she wore as she entered the bar told him everything he needed to know. Nevertheless, it was good form. "How did he take it?" he asked when she came in to take the Hyperspace cocktail he had prepared in advance for her.

She sucked in a long breath. "Like we thought. He's wrecked... but I think ..." She shook her head and took up the big glass of red liquid, clouded with black. She took a long enough drink to lay the typical dock-worker flat on the deck.

"Krishna," Eddie said. "Go easy on that, its two parts brandywine to four parts rocket fuel."

She put it down. "Eddie, what does a man do after a woman ..."

"Rips out his heart, throws it onto the deck, and stomps on it?" Eddie finished. She nodded, and took another long drink. "What? They don't have nasty break-ups in the Guild?"

"Guilders don't fall madly in love," she told him. "They just fall madly into bed. Tell me what you would do, if you were Matthew."

"I'd drink a lot." He paused and watched her down the glass. Apparently, she had the part covered for both of them. "And, then I rebound with somebody completely the opposite of the woman who spaced me."

She stared at him.

"That's if I were Captain Sky Pilot, what he'll actually do is..." Eddie realized he could not imagine what Matthew would do.

"More..." she said, handing him the glass. She cast her gaze around the bar as he refilled it. There were any number of men there who were completely unsuitable. "What I wanted to make Matthew understand is that I shouldn't be with anyone." She looked around. "Business has picked up. Did you get Puck fixed?"

He shook his head as he passed her a more dilute version of her previous beverage. "Neg, Beauty... I just found a way to make his condition work to my advantage." He gave her a two-fingers-over-the-head 'c'mere' gesture and led her and her drink to the rear of the pub.

A crowd was gathered there, men and women mostly from the technical core. Clanks and roars were coming from the other side of the crowd. Eddie and Eliza pressed their way to the front, and reached it just as a roar went up from the crowd.

In the middle of a small, semi-circular pit, Puck was raising his metallic arms in triumph over the wreckage of a toolbot, sparking and cracking on the arena floor. Eddie shouted above the cheers. "Mechanoid wrestling. Saved my bar. Puck wasn't the only malfunctioning mechanoid on this ship. This way, he gets to take out his aggressions in a way that is both entertaining and profitable. You know what they say. Life hands you groundnuts, then make by-cracky bars."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pegasus – Missile Hatcheries

A painful crawl through a tight maintenance shaft brought Hunter, Constantine, and Ghost to one of the Ship's magazines, directly below the missile hatcheries where the Nemesis missiles were kept. The ceiling was low and the deck was lined with military apparatuses made of thick, heavy metal reinforced against blast and shock. The walls and floor were striped yellow and black. One wall, sections of the ceiling, and most of the machinery were colored white and optic orange; a color scheme that meant, "Stay the Hell Out of here."

"The intruder came through here," Constantine announced.

"Za, the defenses are disabled, figured that out on my own," Hunter told them. He reached a gracious hand toward Ghost. "This way, my lady."

"Thank you, my lord," she bowed graciously, exiting the shaft.

"Comm Links also disabled," Constantine reported. Constantine grunted and activated a munitions lift. It was designed to carry different payloads from the Magazines to the hatcheries, for loading into a Hammerhead Missile or (full proper name) Nemesis Multi-Payload Weapon of Mass Destruction Delivery System. Sapphireans called them "Big Damage," or more often, "Big Dam" Missiles. A full-yield Nemesis

warhead, and *Pegasus* had 131 left on board, could destroy a planet.

"Get on!" Constantine ordered. With the three on board, the lift quickly took them up to the hatcheries.

The hatcheries themselves were not painted, but bare metallioid composite trimmed in red and black stripes. It was not that no one was allowed there, more that no one was expected to survive on this deck long enough for unauthorized entry to be an issue. Twenty meters above was an array of hatches, each of which opened directly into space. The temperature inside was kept at the minimum necessary for instruments to function and the air was preciously thin. This was intended to minimize the missile's transition to space environment. The fact that no trespasser without survival gear could long survive in the environment was a helpful side effect.

This hatchery contained four Big Dam missiles, two locked down in tight docks, two at the ready, near the launch gun. They looked slightly like chunky, miniature, wingless Aves. Inside, however, were warheads, each a bullet-shaped projectile about twice the size of a big and tall human. These each contained a heart of anti-matter. A full yield would pulverize a world.

Constantine stepped off, and had no sooner touched a toe to the deck, when a hologram appeared.

"You have accessed a restricted area of the ship," said the hologram, using a feminine voice with a clipped Republicer Accent. Then its head spun around, to reveal an angrier, scarier face as the holo grew beefier and more threatening, growing weapons from its arms and shoulders. Its next voice was both mechanical and masculine. "Get the Hell Out of Here! You have twenty seconds to comply."

"Good," said Constantine. "Internal security knows the defensive areas are breached."

"No time, Connie," Hunter called out, from behind his life mask.

"Fifteen seconds," the hologram updated. Then, it vanished.

"Don't move," said a voice that could have come from anywhere. "From where I'm standing, I can kill any of you where you stand."

The Intruder.

"He's lying," Constantine whispered. "If he had the drop on us, he would have taken us out by now."

"Maybe his weapon doesn't have a kill setting," Hunter whispered back.

The intruder answered. "One shot from the lance hurts. Two kills. I didn't have time, before, but now..."

A spear of blue light flashed out of no where, striking Ghost. She fell to the ground. Hunter, out of reflex as much as anything, ran to her.

She was gone. Her body was lifeless. Without so much as a poignant parting words, "at least I died a free woman in the Upper Decks," or some such, she was gone, life stolen away.

"She's dead," Hunter said, flatly.

Another flash of blue light lashed out, would have hit him had not Constantine jerked him out of the way.

Winter – Shipwreck Bay, The Library

Gotobed, with an assist from Lord Brigand, pulled Keeler across the ledge. Tyronius helped up Ziang. "You old fool," he said.

"You knew of this place," Ziang said angrily. He whipped out his sword. "I should cut you to pieces, feed your meat to the sea and fertilize my figs with the dust of your bones!"

Brigand waved him down. "Oh, Ziang, do blow it out your manhole. Do you really think any secrets survive thousands of years on a planet where gossip is currency."

"Where did you come from?" Keeler asked.

"Tyronius heard you were coming here, and insisted we leave immediately. We took a rocket-sled to the village over there," Gotobed jerked her head toward the shoreline. "Scariest thing I've ever been in, except for love. When we got to the village, they wanted us to solve a challenging series of puzzles, each

one more diabolical than the next," Gotobed went on to explain. "We humored them for a while. Then, we figured, what the Hell, let's just go. If they try to stop us, we'll just shoot them. And here we are."

"You're going to share our secrets with outsiders," said Brigand, angrily to Ziang. "No one gives you that right."

"Okay, that's enough small talk," Keeler said, his speech was excited, jittery. "Bring on that library."

Gotobed had never seen Keeler like this, excited and aroused like a dog at a bacon festival. "Maybe, I should scan for life-forms," Gotobed offered.

"Okay, just scan quickly," Keeler twittered. "Where do you keep the stash?"

"Most of the Galleries are in the mid-levels," Ziang said.

"Wait, wait, wait," Brigand said, raising a leather-clad arm. "Are we so sure we want the Outsiders to know these secrets. These have been kept secret for a reason."

"It is their legacy," Ziang protested. "It is part of their history, and they have every right to it."

"I have to agree," said Tyronius. "There are things that you are not going to want to see in there, things you don't want to know. But it is the truth of your human heritage, and you should know it."

"There are terrible secrets among them," Brigand said. "Things better left forgotten and buried."

"How would you know?" Ziang demanded. "You never took an interest before."

Brigand answered by scowling at him from beneath his mask. Gotobed was standing apart, scanning the interior of the colony pod with her tracker. "I'm detecting life forms?"

"Head-biters?" Keeler asked.

She shook her head. "Human."

"I thought the library was uninhabited," Keeler said.

"The seven visit occasionally, but they are all accounted for."

"Well, somebody's in there, I'm detecting two lifeforms 210 meters above us... no, wait... 205 meters... 202... 198...192..." She shook the tracker. "They seem to be falling."

Winter – The Library

Redfire landed on top of Mercuria, slamming her against another steel deck and knocking the wind out of her. He rolled off of her as she lay gasping, blood beginning to trickle from the side of her mouth.

He pulled himself up by a handhold found in the metal nearby. He was shaking, but didn't feel any serious damage. His mind issued an imperative. "Get away from her. Run!"

He obeyed, stumbling at first, then breaking into a run. He could feel a cold breeze on his face, and the smell of the sea over the stench of very old metal and oil.

He ran toward it.

Cardinal

Alkema was wrong. The damage looked at least as bad from the outside as it had seemed from the inside.

There was a huge gouge on the port side of the forward section, and several more gouges along the port wingblade... as though a giant monster had clawed the ship. The port Accipiter was a mangled ruin.

Trajan Lear looked at this and screamed. "Arrrrrrrrgh!"

Which was probably not a great thing to do while wearing a space helmet.

Trajan's head dropped and he cradled it in his helmet. He could not scream again. He could not cry. He really wanted to, but he had reached that nadir at which none of the body's physical outlets would balance his emotions of horror and remorse. Involuntarily, he fell to his knees, impacting in the powdery red dust of Cardinal's surface.

Alkema caught him on the way down. "Trajan, are you okay? Speak to me?"

Trajan said nothing.

"Don't worry about the ship. Just tell them I did it," Alkema offered.

Trajan shook his head. The flight recorder would show who was in command, anyway. However, he found he just wanted to take whatever punishment he had coming. "Nay, nay, I'll tell him. We'll talk about it. It will be all right. I can probably forget Flight Core, but it will be all right."

Alkema clapped his shoulder. He feared for whatever Trajan was going to be in for, and yet somehow felt that the kid was going to be all right.

Just as he might have planned it.

Pieta was taking in the landscape. Red on Red as far as the eye could see, a crimson desert ringed by wine-colored mountains as tall, as thin, as sharp as needles and all of it washed in bloody red sunshine. The valley itself cut down in steps and its grounds were littered with strangely shaped rocks.

"Surreal," said Alkema. Then, he began walking toward *Basil*, knowing the others would follow him.

"How could two big planets share such a close orbit with smashing into each other?" Pieta asked.

"There must be some gravitational effect or something that cancels out the attraction of two big objects for one another. It's the same principle that lets Lear, Keeler, and Redfire all fit their egos onto the Command Deck at the same time." He gasped sharply. "Did I say that over an open channel?"

"You did," Pieta affirmed.

"Sorry, Traj."

Trajan grunted. He knew what his mother was like, and was aware of what people thought of her.

They saw Max Jordan before they reached his ship. He was sitting on a rock, about a hundred meters from where Basil had set down. His visor was set for 100% opacity, so his face could not be seen, but instead reflected the red sky and stars. As they got closer, something looked wrong about him. There was something missing from his suit.

Alkema figured it out first. "He's not wearing a re-breather pack."

Without the air-recyclers, the suits contained only about an hour's worth of breathable air. How long had he been out already?

The answer, when they saw how much oxygen was remaining on his wrist readout, was ninety-one minutes. He stood when they approached, and began backing away from them, toward the edge of the cliff near which he had landed. "Don't rescue me!" He insisted.

Alkema held out an arm to halt the others. "Okay, Max. We just came to see what was bothering you. We were very worried. Your mother is worried, too."

"Max, why don't we get back and the ship and just... talk about things," Pieta said.

"I'm sorry you came here," Max told them. "I just wanted to be by myself."

"Why, Max?" Alkema asked.

"I don't deserve to live."

"Max," Alkema said in his best, best friend voice. "This is us, okay. We know some nasty man on the planet wanted to get into your flight suit, but that's because *he* is a piece of human debris, not you."

"He's dead," Max said. "It doesn't matter." He raised one foot over the ledge.

"Max!" Alkema shouted.

"Leave me alone," Max said. "I can't expect."

"Max," Alkema was trying to sound soothing. "Come on, get back in the ship."

"Hey, you tomhead," came a voice over the commlink. It was Trajan. "I did not steal a ship, throw away my chance at Flight Core, and smash land on this planet just to hear you cry about being molested again. Get the Phunk over it!"

"Trajan!" Alkema and Pieta said at once.

"I'm sorry Max had a tough life!" Trajan screamed back. "I'm sorry some old pervert tried to grab him, but nothing can be this bad! It can't be worth killing yourself over! By Vesta's Grace, Max, you think you're life is ruined because some old pervert makes a grab at you? What about me? I'm a terrible pilot. My mom is always screwing up my life, and nobody likes me. Matthew's going to marry Lt. Change. Lt. Alkema's going to marry Pieta, and I'm going to be by myself... probably for the rest of my life, but everybody loves you, you stink-hog. If you're life isn't worth living, what does that say about mine? Well,

you got everybody's attention, now. So just tell me, what makes a guy like you, who has everything, want to run off and die, because I really want to know."

There was silence, as four people in space suits stared at each other against the grotesque backdrop of sand-blasted rocks and absurdly pointed mountain ranges.

"Forget all of you!" Trajan said. "I'm going back to what's left of my ship." He turned.

Before Trajan had begun walking, Max began speaking. "It happened about a year before *Pegasus* came back to rescue us," he said, in a shaking and uncertain voice. "We, my mother, me, and some other women, we were... we had gone into a city to get supplies. We thought it was safe, or they wouldn't have brought me, but we needed some medicines very badly.

"I was at the supply point, with Mother Jordan, getting medicine using fake authority. She told me to stay with her, but there was a big shout, and people said the Swords were coming. I wanted to see them because I knew they were the enemy. I think I might have even wanted to do something, like fight them. So, I snuck away, just a little bit away. I just wanted to see them.

"Before I got there, some men saw me. They grabbed me and took me away. They weren't swords, they were... wands. They were looking for kids, but I was the only one they found, and they wanted to take me to the Echelon Director.

"The Echelon Director was an Aurelian named Equelor. They brought me to him. He lived in this big, white house behind walls and guards. When I walked through the gates, I saw that there were other children there. I wondered if I would get to play with them later, but they weren't playing.

"They took me to him, his guards did. And one of them brought one of those things... one of those things the Aurelians stick in your head to drink your brain chemicals. But he didn't want to just kill me, and suck the juice out of my brain. He ..." Max's agony was palpable. There were details here that he just couldn't bring himself to go into. "You guys... just go. Take the ship back to my mom, and tell her I'm sorry."

"Max..." Alkema began, and tried to move closer.

"Stop!" Max called at him, and took another step closer to the edge. "Take another step and I'll jump. I'll open my helmet and I'll jump."

"Easy guy," Alkema repeated. "We just want to know."

Beneath the faceless helmet, some sort of wretched anguish was happening, but all they could sense of it was in the chokes and cries of his tormented voice.

"He took me into his sleep chamber with him," Max said. "There was another boy there. He was asleep. He was my age, a little older. He had curly dark hair. He was sleeping, and he looked really happy. And the Aurelian woke him up and said, 'I don't need you any more.' And he stuck a needle into his head and he sucked out his brain juices.

"And then he turned to me, and he said, 'The longer you keep me happy, the longer you can live.'"

Alkema felt a sudden weight on his shoulder, and realized Pieta was leaning on him. He tried to give her comfort, hard to do through nine layers of space gear.

"Okay," Alkema said. "I get it. An Aurelian did something really really terrible to you, and that guy Manchester, he also tried to do something terrible to you, and you're really, really... angry about it, but it's not you, Max. It's not you who deserves to suffer for it, it's them."

Max said something that was incoherent through his sobbing. Alkema had the impression it was something about he wished Equelor had just sucked out his brains and killed him on the spot.

Alkema looked at Max's wrist. Less than three minutes of oxygen remained. "Max, let's talk about this inside the ship."

"You don't understand!" Max shouted, loudly, accelerating his oxygen depletion. "I shouldn't be here."

"Hey, Max, easy guy. You're alive. The Aurelians tried to kill you, but you're alive. You're alive and you're free. You beat him."

"You don't understand!" Max screamed again. "I was in his house for sixty days, and every night he ... the Aurelian... he forced me... he ... it hurt so much.

"Then, one night, we were alone. And he was touching me all over, like he always did, but it was different. He was saying to me that I wasn't... I wasn't just ... He said I could be like them. He thought I could be one of his Wands. And he stroked my hair, and he sang to me. And all the time, I wondered if he was going to kill me, or if he ... if he saw that inside, I was terrible like he was... and that was why he wanted to make me like him.

"And while he did that to me, there was a flash of light... like lightning... like thousands and thousands of lightnings hitting the same spot at once, and the thunder knocked me down. I couldn't hear, and I couldn't see, but all around me, I could sense people running and screaming. Somebody grabbed me, pulled me away.

"I woke up back in one of our camps. I could see again, but my ears rang for days. I could not hear anything. My father, Tobias, had found out where I was. He had led the raid to save me. They killed Equelor, most of his men, and they destroyed the whole compound. They burned his house to the ground."

He paused and took a deep breath. "Tobias lost six of his men just to save me."

"Max," Alkema said softly. "I can't imagine how this feels for you, but ... but those men who died to save you... do you think they did it just so you could come back to this ugly red planet... and die."

At that point, his oxygen meter hit 0:00:00. He still had enough air in his helmet to go on, a few more breaths, gasp out a few more words. "They... are... Aurelian. They... can ... never... stop."

With that, his body fell limply to the ground, kicking up a puff of lavender dust. There was no sound. There was no alarm. Alkema reached over to Pieta and quickly decoupled her spare oxygen tank. In seconds, he had it clipped to Max's suit.

"Let's get him into the ship," Alkema said, quietly.

Pegasus – The Hatcheries

Hunter and Constantine skirted around in back of a Nemesis missile, taking shelter from a barrage of fire from the intruder. Constantine's mind raced. He reviewed the Intruder Alert protocols for the ship's weapons areas. First, the area should decompress, depriving the intruder of oxygen and heat. The lights should fail, putting the area into complete darkness. Loud noise would activate to deafen the intruder, and then, in the event the intruder was wearing a re-breather, lights, and ear-guards, 'stun-pops' tiny automated generators would deploy, filling the area with a strong electromagnetic field that disrupted nervous functions, leaving the intruder lying on the ground, twitching and soiled.

Constantine had a hunch all but one of these defenses had been disabled. The air was getting thin, however. "Hunter, pay attention. Ignore the shooting, just get with me to a space gear locker, fast. He's going to blow the hatch."

"How do you know?"

The speech was punctuated by four sharp blasts from the intruder's weapon. Constantine ripped the locker open. "Hurry..."

"Why?"

"Because an Aurelian won't commit suicide. He picked this hatchery because it was the closest one with escape pods in it. Believe me, he wants to be as far from the ship as possible when the Nemesis goes up."

"Krishna, Constantine, I almost think you might care."

"I don't think you'll be much use stopping him with your skin boiled off and your lungs on the outside of your body." Constantine was squeezing into his gear. These were emergency suits, just enough to keep you alive for a little while when the chamber depressurized. This would allow you to get out of the chamber, or into an escape pod if necessary.

The lance got off several more blasts. Constantine made some mental calculations, and determined that the intruder was just behind the missile on the launch platform. Hm, too bad he couldn't initiate a launch cycle. He could have put intruder and missile outside the ship in .02 seconds.

On the bulkhead opposite, behind the intruder, were three emergency escape pods. If only he had a

weapon. He quickly scanned the dock behind him to no avail. The maintenance crew was very picky about not leaving loose tools laying around anti-matter missiles. Also, without his ID Sliver, none of the control consoles would activate. No hope of opening the hatch and blowing the Intruder out into space.

This, Constantine reflected, must be why the Notorium made you spend so many years working out the logic puzzles where five people live in five habitats with five wives and which one is married to Maxia and has a red couch and all that nonsense. Although none of that seemed useful in resolving the current dilemma.

Hunter finished putting on his space gear. "Now what?" he said, as two more wild blasts from the lance burst above and to the side of their hiding place.

"Can you move out from behind the missile and flank her while I keep her distracted?"

"That's it?" Hunter said. "That's your brilliant plan? You distract her while I try to tackle her from the side. That's your brilliant plan?"

Constantine grunted, and began undoing the latches on his heavy black Centurion boots.

"Don't you at least have something heavy to hit him in the head with?"

"I don't have much left, but what I have, I'm going to need. When you get to the back of this missile, take a good long look at the Intruder. Memorize exactly where he is."

"What are you going to do?"

Hunter looked him right in the eye. "I'm going to throw my boots at him."

"Your boots? Who the hell throws boots? Are you out of your mind?" but Hunter saw that he was serious. "This is it, I'm going to die, aren't I?"

"They're all I've got left... unless you want us both to rush him."

"What the hell, we're going to be dead in a minute anyway," said Hunter, crawling toward the back of the missile.

Constantine waited until he saw Hunter cautiously peer over the back of the missile, then began to slowly remove his boots. Quite possibly the stupidest plan he had ever had, but this was what he was left with. He positioned himself and looked toward Constantine, who nodded once quickly.

Hunter charged.

The Intruder turned toward him, raising his weapon.

Constantine stood up and threw the first boot toward the intruder, he ducked it easily. He tossed the second.

There was a suddenly flash of light.

There was a sudden total darkness.

Bodies collided, tumbled together, rolled.

The darkness broke in stabs of strobing light, then dissipated. When it cleared, Constantine stood over the Hunter and the Intruder, whom Hunter had pinned to the deck.

"Your boots... exploded," Hunter said, looking rather stunned.

Constantine grunted. The Notorium called it NightBringer, four seconds of complete darkness. No need to tell the likes of Hunter about it. He bent over, and pulled off the intruder's life mask. Long honey-blond hair spilled out. A slender arm bore the tattoo of the number six over the image of a wand. Their intruder was a woman after all.

"For the People of Republic," Constantine said, these were the closest thing the Notorium had to Holy Words, "I take you as my prisoner."

"You're too late," she hissed. "I die, but Aurelia triumphs." Her eyes flashed right, toward the warhead, and toward the weapon she had hitched to the side, now pulsing blue. Constantine lunged toward the missile.

It was a fairly straightforward arrangement. The intruder had left the lance weapon attached to the warhead and set it to overload. The resulting explosion would rupture the containment field, allowing an uncontrolled matter-antimatter reaction that would blow up the front of the ship, probably rupturing additional warheads in a vast explosion that would turn *Pegasus* into a cloud of vaporized metal.

Constantine only needed to look for a moment to know it was too late to stop the overload. He stepped backwards very calmly, crouched himself as low as he could, closed his eyes and stuck his fingers in his ears.

The flash was horrific.

The missile spat out showers and showers of sparks and waves of multicolored light, sending the whole chamber briefly into a strobing, photonegative.

When it was over, Constantine surveyed the damage. The outer hull of the missile had peeled away in layers. There was a great scorched hole in the center of the damage, as though someone had held a blow-torch to it. He grunted in satisfaction. "Silly woman, do really think we would have made our most powerful weapons as easy to sabotage as that?"

"Exploding boots," Hunter said. "I can't believe you wear exploding boots."

Winter – The Library

Commander Redfire stumbled out of the tunnel. He was on some vast metal structure, surrounded by water. He turned toward the tower where he had been held. Above him stretched hundreds of meters of tarnished gray metal.

"Ranking Phil, is that you?"

He spun around. Keeler was standing on the same ledge as he, perhaps a hundred meters away, with a group of Ancients and a woman wearing a ship's uniform. He began to stumble toward them.

"We detected human life signs and climbed up to this level," Keeler said when Redfire reached their position. It was actually not that far above their initial landing point. "Are you all right?" he asked again.

"I'm... not," Redfire said.

"Who's that?" Gotobed asked.

They turned. A large, angry woman was charging down the rail, waving a very large weapon. She fired again and again. Small projectile blasts burst all around them. Keeler, Gotobed, and the Ancients hit the deck.

Redfire did not turn toward her. Shakily, he walked across the ledge as the projectiles continued to burst in the air around him and ping off the side of the tower. They were like tiny missiles, capable of exploding on impact or in the air. As each one detonated, a blue fireball, about the size of a hand-fruit, appeared and vanished, indicating the size of the hole the weapon would punch in a human.

Redfire reached the spot where General Ziang was lying. Projectiles continued to zing and burst around him as he slowly, carefully, reached down with shaking arms and, with fingers that trembled from cold and hunger, picked up the harpoon gun.

He stood erect, turned to face his nemesis, and raised the harpoon gun to his shoulder. Mercuria saw him, stopped charging, and cocked her head. With an evil smile, she steadied her own gun, and drew a bead on Commander Redfire.

Redfire breathed deeply and tried to steady the shaking gun. A purple bead flashed in his eyes, her targeting beam, disorienting him further. He closed his eyes and aimed from memory.

He fired.

She fired.

The kick of the harpoon gun shoved him aside and against the sea-rail. He scrambled to grab hold as the shot went wide, and finally detonated over the sea, a bigger blast than the preceding one.

Redfire looked up to see Mercuria.

Mercuria, the Nine of Wands, stood against the sea-rail, what was left of her, but the harpoon had passed cleanly through her. Face, brains, and the back of her head had disappeared, leaving just a ragged hole outlined by her skull. Redfire could see daylight shining clearly through the shell of her cranium. Then, like a drunken gymnast losing her balance, she flipped over bar and toppled into the sea.

Redfire handed the harpoon gun back to Ziang, muttering something flippant and ironic that no one, in the heat of the moment, quite caught. Keeler, Gotobed, and the Ancients carefully picked themselves up

from the cold, metal ledge.

"One of the Aurelian provocateurs," Redfire told them. "She killed Manchester, then, she kidnapped me, tried to turn me to her side. Does anyone have anything to eat?"

Keeler handed him a big of honey-roasted nuts.

"If that's the end of that chapter," Keeler said, "I want to see the inside of that library, now."

"Library?" Redfire stammered. "You mean I've been kidnapped, tortured, and molested in a library?"

"I bet you'll never have another overdue book," Keeler muttered. "Come on, you people, let's go in. Now! Come on! Come on!"

The Commander led the way into the tunnel from which Redfire had entered. He wished he had brought some glow balls. Gotobed hit her wrist lights. Ziang and Tyronius lit torches.

"The records are toward the interior," Ziang said. "In the central core."

"Right, the central core, that's just where I would put them," Keeler muttered. They kept walking, past branches off and passageways leading to other parts of the ship. Through these halls which, 4,000 years ago, colonists had once passed. And, Keeler reminded himself, the same people were still around. That's when the impact of this planet's weirdness really hit him between the eyes, but there was no time to consider it. He was on a mission.

The central core of the colony pod housed a huge central processor, now more or less inert, although the optical files locked inside would contain trillions of datapoints and unknown volumes about the Commonwealth.

Up to the top, level upon level, were books upon books. There were bound books of paper and leather, electronic pads and files, crystal storage sticks, super thin light tubes, holographic memory waves, and those weird shiny things that transferred knowledge to the brain with a single touch. They reached up as far as his eyes could see, and far below as well. The spaces in between the bookshelves and data storage racks were packed with crates and boxes, containing maps, posters, and artifacts.

Keeler's eyes began to glisten. *I have the whole knowledge base of the Commonwealth before me*, an inner voice said.

And a life as long as you need it to be to study it, a more sinister voice chimed in.

Keeler felt suddenly as though some kind of wave were washing over him, a terrible revelation. If he wanted to, he could spend thousands of years here on Winter, in this library, until he had had studied every scroll, page, and byte of information. *Pegasus* could go on, with Goneril Lear as captain. He would have everything he needed to cheerfully blast apart thousands of historical treatises with evidence none of those fools had access to. He would become the keeper of this library, its guardian. He would become wise and eccentric and guard his treasure with all the resolve he could muster.

Temptation was staring him down. He had all bit submitted, when Lord Brigand stepped forward. "Magnificent, isn't it?"

"It's... everything," Keeler said.

Brigand nodded gravely, then leaned beside him on the rail. "Engineering knowledge and customs from thousands of worlds, the largest repository of human knowledge left in the galaxy. The secret to weapons of unimaginable destruction, the location of every world, including Earth herself, the secret of hyperspatial navigation."

I could start my own University, Keeler thought. *A modest campus with a liberal arts focus, right on the beach where the village is now. Scholars from every star system in the Perseus arm could...*

Brigand went on, "teleportation, terra-forming, quantum leap technology in genetic enhancement, the secret locations of the most advanced worlds and secret research centers of the old Commonwealth." Brigand shook his head and withdrew two small, black spheres from the pockets of his leather topcoat. "The tragic loss of this library will be a great setback for Aurelia, but the human resistance can not be permitted this knowledge. If Aurelia can not have this treasure, then no one can." Lord Brigand said. He then hurled the two black spheres, one after another, deep into the core

For a moment, the Commander was not sure what was happening. When he figured out, there was

barely time to scream.

“Ne-e-e-e-e-e-e-g,” Keeler screamed.

A moment later, a massive incendiary burst filled the halls with flame. A fireball spread from deep in the interior, upward. The shockwave pushing ahead of it knocked all of them to the ground.

When the fireball had passed, Brigand climbed atop the rail and raised one arm in a gesture of defiance. “Aurelia triumphs!” he yelled. He turned to face Keeler one last time, smiled madly, then let himself fall into the core.

Keeler watched in horror as the flames raced up through the interior of the core. Within seconds, the whole of it was a wall of flames, consuming paper, plastic, wood, and liquid storage media alike. The flames cascaded upward, an inverted waterfall of oxidation.

Something up above them exploded, showering bits and pieces of metal and flaming debris.

“I think it’s time to go,” said Tyronius.

Keeler was unable to move, watching in horror as knowledge turned to ashes before him.

Something else exploded, larger this time, and the pieces of debris were heavier, including beams and supports. Keeler felt someone grabbing his arm. Gotobed. “Commander, we have to go,” she said.

Keeler looked out over the infernal tableau before him and let out a loud, agonized
“A-a-a-a-rrrrrrrrgh!”

He shook his head.

Keeler and the others ran for the side. All around them, the tower was in flames. Hundreds of meters below was an icy sea in which they could survive, perhaps, fifteen minutes, provided the fall didn’t kill them. In between was a long slope of rough metal, climbing down it would take them away from the fire, and buy them enough time for rescue by Aves. It seemed the best the course of action.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Queequeg's Journal

By my estimation, the date is 05 November 10 202 A.S.

We are preparing to depart 10 004 Horologium IV (Winter), three crewmen less than when we arrived. The ship is safe, the crew is secure, and the planet is only a little worse off than when we got here; one dead guy, one torched library. We've done worse. Furthermore, most of what went wrong was not totally our fault.

Not totally our fault, but try impressing that on a captain who's just watched five thousand years of human history immolated before his very eyes. He has been in the deepest funk I have ever known.

As my mother used to say, 'There are things in life that are worse than furballs, but I would still rather not have furballs.'

Winter – Shipwreck

Morning dawned a rare cloudless day. For the first, last, and only time, Keeler saw the sky of Winter in its true color, a kind of blue-black, like a severe bruise. Near its peak was the sun, not a radiant plexus, but a cool white disk that might be mistaken for a moon.

"We should have known," Keeler said, huddling under a blanket on the shore of Shipwreck Bay, nursing a thermos of hot cinnamon mauve tea, standing next to a fire with Ziang, Redfire, and Gilligan. "The Aurelians knew about the library, and they destroyed it to keep us from its secrets."

"And not only that," Gilligan said, trying to comfort him. "Who knows how many secrets they stole before you got here."

The ruins of the colony pod/secret library were still smoking. Three broken sides protruded from the harbor on burnt and shattered columns. The main part of it had collapsed into the sea about the time night fell. Keeler would have missed the show entirely, were it not for the searchlights of the four Aves that had been emergency-dispatched to answer Gotobed's distress call. Some automechs and some sympathetically-linked and/oroids were picking through the intact sections, but had found nothing so far that had survived.

"Without their ship, they'll have a tough time transmitting them to their base," Commander Redfire said. "That's something."

Ziang looked at Keeler quizzically. "Unfortunate that nothing of value survived."

"To say the least."

Ziang scowled, the same way he had scowled before agreeing to show them the library. "How long have you been in space?" he asked, finally.

"Almost three years," Keeler answered.

"And how far are you from your homeworld?"

"Five Hundred and Twenty Seven Light Years," Keeler seemed to remember Alkema saying that.

"At that rate, it will take you something on the order of 340 years to reach Earth. Do you expect to live that long?"

"I wouldn't *want* to live that long... no offense. *Pegasus* was designed to support a multi-generational mission."

Ziang went on. "Needless to mention there are billions of stars between here and there, thousands of colonies and outposts. From what I understand, your ship has survived some of its encounters by luck alone. No offense."

"None taken."

"But all of which reduces your chances of surviving long enough to reach Earth."

"If you are trying to make me feel better, you really aren't very good at it."

Ziang reached into his robes and withdrew a small, oblong piece of heavy glass, gray and glossy like a

polished stone teardrop. He passed it to Keeler. "What is it?" he asked.

"A key ..."

"A key to what?"

"A set of coordinates..."

"Coordinates to what?"

"A shortcut."

Keeler bit his lip. "You're being deliberately cryptic, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So, what do I do with it?"

"Your cat can probably figure it out."

"Okeedokee." Keeler slipped the piece of glass in his pocket.

Alkema approached. He had come down the morning after, finally having gotten over his Independence flu. He wore a heavy parka, and was rosy cheeked in the frigid air. "Commander, one of the automechs retrieved this. It was hidden in a crawlspace between levels."

It was a metal tube, a canister about a meter long and a few centimeters in diameter. It was scorched, but intact. Keeler twisted off the end cap and shook out a rolled sheet of what appeared to be paper laminated in plastic.

Alkema poked at it. "Nothing's happening."

Keeler lightly removed the map from the range of Alkema's probing fingers. "It's a static image... I'm guessing a map of some kind."

Most of it was shades of blue, representing, presumably, bodies of water. On right side of the map, a large landmass stretched across ninety or more meridians of longitude. The southeast corner was marked several island archipelagos that stretched toward an island-continent away from the main landmass. Another large landmass, with a massive bulge to the west and another to the south, a horny projection to the east, was jammed against the southwest corner of the larger continent. The northwest corner of the landmass was all peninsulas and tendrils, with a particularly crinkly and interesting one reaching toward the northern pole and one shaped like a boot sticking into a middle sea. On the other side of the map was a double landmass, connected by an isthmus. The southern continent, which was smaller, was shaped like a T-bone steak. The northern continent was large, with an interesting array of large lakes toward the center and a herd of large islands in the sea to the north.

Alkema scowled at it. "What a terrible projection. All the upper latitudes are distorted."

Keeler stared at the curious symbols that marked the map. They bore only a slight resemblance to the Sapphirean and Republic alphabets, but one could see that they were related. He traced a finger some of below them: N-O-R-T-H A-M-E-R-I-C-A.

"Any idea what we're looking at?"

"I wish I did," Keeler said, carefully rolling up the map.

"Maybe one of the Ancients could..."

"Uh, neg, I don't think so," Keeler said, replacing the map in the cylinder. "At this point, I would rather go on not knowing than ask one of those jerks anything. Is my ship here yet?"

"We can't reach Flight Lieutenant Toto, but Captain Wang has a spot on Winnie."

Keeler sighed. "Za, I'm ready to blow this popsicle distribution point. Bring on the Wang."

Mercuria and Brigand, whatever their real names were, died at Shipwreck, leaving the universe not at all poorer. The third Aurelian, so I am told, gave us a mighty chase, but is currently a guest of the Ship's Watch. They intend to pump her for information and, when they're done, put her stasis and shoot her back to Republic. I have been asked to assist in the interrogation. I have six sides, five of them are pointy and the sixth is something most humans do not appreciate having waved in their face. I welcome the opportunity to fight the evil Aurelian horde.

***Pegasus* – Commander Keeler’s Study**

“So, what are you people doing in my Study?” Keeler growled at TyroCommander Lear and Chief Inspector Churchill. Frankly, if it didn’t have to do with the object Ziang had given him, which Technical Core said was a data storage device of some kind, he didn’t want to know about it. For that matter, he wasn’t even sure he cared about the object.

“We’re here to discuss the security breach that occurred while we were all planet-side,” Lear explained patiently. “Three days ago I sent you a report, it was marked Maximum Importance, For Immediate Priority Review.”

“Ah, yes, the Immediate Priority, Maximum Importance Report,” Keeler poured himself a mug of hot cava, then, he poured a shot of Borealan whisky into it. “Fine piece of work, well done Executive TyroCommander.”

Lear’s left cheek twitched slightly. “Did you really read it, or did Lieutenant Alkema just give you the gist of it?”

“Exec, you’ve known me for three years. What do you think I did?”

Goneril Lear sighed. “While we were on the planet Winter, an Aurelian agent slipped aboard *Pegasus*.”

“Don’t we have rules against that sort of thing,” the Commander asked.

“Aye,” Lear sighed. “We believe the intruder slipped aboard with some of the crew who were returning from the Parliament Ball. You’ll recall it was Lord Brigand who insisted on sending a large delegation from *Pegasus*.”

“Za, I was there. I suspected something was amiss with that guy from the moment he threw the incendiaries and yelled ‘Aurelia triumphs!’”

“Apparently, the Aurelian intruder assaulted one of the Ship’s Watchmen stole a uniform and a datapad, and was able to access technical information about our ship. Subsequent debriefings with Tactical TyroCommander Redfire confirmed that the goal of the Intruder was to destroy *Pegasus*, or, alternately, to infiltrate the crew and betray us.”

“Dastardly!” huffed Churchill.

“The intruder proceeded through the UnderDecks. Using the Watchmen’s datapad, the intruder was able to by-pass the detection systems on those levels. Her objective was the Missile Hatcheries, where she intended to sabotage a Nemesis warhead and destroy *Pegasus*.” She paused for effect.

Keeler made ‘keep going’ motions with his mug. “... and then what?”

“The intruder’s attempts to bypass the security measures in the Missile Hatchery were detected. Anti-invasion protocols were engaged, including decompression and stun fields. Elements of the ship’s Special Watch arrived in time to take the Intruder into custody. There was minor damage to one of the warheads, but there was no breach.”

“And the Intruder?”

“She was found unconscious in the hatchery, and has been interrogated using the Truth Machines.”

“And...?”

Keeler could not tell whether Lear was disappointed or lying when she answered, “Aurelian agents apparently have a mind-wipe device implanted in their brains. When it activated, her thoughts were scrambled. She is being kept in an infirmary within Hospital Four. She cannot speak, she cannot focus for more than a few seconds on any thought. Meanwhile, the device keeps her pleasure center constantly stimulated.”

She waved a hand in the air, producing a display of the device in the Aurelian’s brain. It was a small, spider-like creature, with long, needle-shaped legs plunging deep into her cerebrum. Keeler looked at it with a mild kind of interest.

“The ship was never in any real danger,” Lear assured him. “All of our internal defenses functioned perfectly. No lives were lost.”

“Well, that’s just duck-like,” Keeler said. “So, we’ve accounted for three of the four Aurelians on board

the ship we intercepted. Any idea where number four is?"

"If he is on this ship," Lear said, smiling confidently, "we will definitely find him before he can commit any mischief."

The Prime Commander also pardoned the Executive Commander and the Flight Commandant's sons from disciplinary action, explaining that he just didn't feel like it. I guess he pulled a lot of pranks himself when he was a rug monkey.

I, personally, would have whacked the kid silly. Of course, I never much cared for human children and would take any excuse to whack any of them silly. Of course, whatever Ex. TyroCommander Lear did to her whelp was probably worse.

Prudence – Hangar Bay 19

Matthew Driver looked down at his ship. Technicians had enclosed *Prudence's* port side in repair scaffolding, most of her port blade had already been removed. A squad of technicians and automechanoids were in the process of restoring his ship to full operation. Driver's eyes were narrowed and dark, as though he could feel his ship's pain, but he seemed otherwise not too troubled.

Trajan Lear approached him from behind, dressed, for the first time ever, in a Flight Core uniform, dove gray pants and jacket with royal blue shoulders and sleeves. "Flight Cadet Trajan Lear, reporting as ordered."

Driver did not turn around. "I understand you had your final flight examination this morning cadet."

"Aye, sir."

"How did you do?"

"I passed... barely," Trajan told him. "Ninety-point-oh-one per cent proficiency." He paused, and then asked the delicate question. "How is *Prudence*?"

"Forward spars need to be replaced, port blade needs complete replacement, aft and side landing struts need reconstruction, exterior hull needs resmoothing in nine places, and the Accipiters are unsalvageable." Matthew recited the list with less anger than Trajan would have expected. Perhaps, he was not in a punishing mood for some reason.

Trajan took a deep breath. "I apologize, sir, once again. Taking the ship without your authorization was both stupid and inexcusable. I have no right to your forgiveness, sir, but I swear by the Holy Twins, I will never dishonor you in such a way again."

"I understand the reason you took my ship was to affect a rescue mission."

"Aye, sir."

"You rescued a fellow pilot in distress. How is he doing?"

"Flight Cadet Jordan was unharmed. He has, however, been expelled from flight training for one year."

"If you had asked, I would have authorized you taking *Prudence* to support the rescue of a fellow pilot," Matthew said. "You have my forgiveness."

Trajan needed a moment for his relief to register, and some time more to actually be able to speak. When he could speak again, he said, "Thank you, sir. Does this mean I can still come to your wedding?"

Matthew turned flat. "There isn't going to be a wedding."

The boy was taken aback, before he could ask why not, Matthew told him why not. "She said nay."

Trajan's incomprehension took over his face, his mouth formed an "O" and his eyebrows knitted. "Why?"

Matthew sighed "It just wasn't meant to be."

Trajan was having none of it. "But ... you're the best pilot on the ship, and one of the best officers. You're the bravest man I've ever known. You're a hero. How can she not want to be with you? Anyone would want to be with you... or be like you."

Himself surprised by the force of the boy's response, Matthew felt like he had to comfort *him*. "It isn't her fault. And honestly, I thought it was going to be a lot harder than this. I'm sad, but not really... too sad." Devastated was the word he was understating.

Trajan was trembling, not knowing quite what to make of this turn of events. He seemed as upset about it as Matthew had expected himself to be. "Hey," Matthew put a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right."

"That's good," said Trajan finally, he tried to smile, and awkwardly clapped Matthew on the shoulder, as much to say "I'm all right," as "I'm glad you're all right."

Silence ensued before Trajan, staring down at the deck, summoned his courage, and laid things out for Matthew. "Once I am inducted into Flight Core, I'm supposed to be assigned to a Master Pilot, who'll complete my training. I was hoping... I was hoping you'd keep me on, as your Acolyte."

"There is no way I will ever turn over *Prudence* to a pilot with only ninety per cent proficiency," Matthew told him. "So, I am going to keep you around as my first officer until you get it up to at least ninety-seven."

Trajan nodded. "Thank you, sir."

The least interesting part of these voyages, for me, is watching the impact on personal lives. I mean, a thousand years from now, if anybody is reading about the voyages of the Pathfinder Ship Pegasus, are they going to care who was mating with whom, or whose life was getting screwed up?

Of course they will! And let's be honest, sooner or later, Pegasus will find a colony with an intact TPT. When that happens, a certain silver and white tabby is going to find himself with either enough dirt to secure a place in eternity, or enough blackmail to live comfortably the rest of his days.

Pegasus – Independence Vivarium

Beneath peculiar trees of yellow barks and long cascades of flowery white and blue leaves, Phil Redfire and Halo Jordan bathed in warm pseudo-sunlight, trying to shake the chill of the planet still visible above the dome. They shared a bottle of wine. "How is Max?" he asked.

"Banned from flight training pending catharsis," Jordan said levelly. "They have him in a program of Sumacian martial arts and meditation. Every other day, he gets into a simulacram and beats the rotting entrails out of Equalor and Lord Manchester... triumphing over his enemies."

Redfire nodded grimly. "Did you know what happened... on Bodicéa, I mean?"

Jordan hid her eyes behind her hand. "We did know... most of it. We just didn't have time to deal with it. Two days after we rescued Max, the Aurelians destroyed the entire town and came after our base camp. We had to break for it... we spent months fighting our way north with the Aurelians dogging us most of the way before we lost them. By the time we reached the base, we really didn't have much concern about catharsis ... and besides, Max seemed to be okay." She sighed. "He's very glad you didn't kill Manchester. He's glad you beat him up, and he's glad Manchester is dead, but he's mostly glad it's not because of him."

"He a good kid," Redfire said, taking her hands. "A good, tough kid. I'd be honored to have him as a son... if you would take me back."

She shook her head. "That is not going to happen. I'm sorry."

"Neg, Halo, listen. This whole adventure just taught me that the boys need a father-figure, and I need them to anchor me. I was ready to go along with the Aurelian. I don't know whether it was the drugs, or the deprivation, or ..." Best not to mention the sex. "... or whether I thought I could trick them long enough to save the ship. When she told me I would have to prove my loyalty by killing Sam and Max... I lost it. The whole ship could have been destroyed because of me, but I didn't care. At that moment, I just wanted to kill her."

Jordan put down her wineglass. "On Bodicéa, I had to kill, more than once, to protect them. Do you know why Mercuria chose them, instead of me, or someone else?"

"I am not close to many in the crew," he said regretfully.

"Because they're children," she answered. "Aurelians hate children. Aurelians are obsessively focused on self-gratification. When you have children, they have to come first. Aurelians don't understand the concept of selflessness for the sake of another generation. Ultimately, it's why we *will* win."

Redfire set his wine down so hard the glass cracked.

"What?" Jordan asked.

"I had a vision," Redfire whispered.

Jordan sighed. She had put up with a lot of this in the past. "You're not a precog. You're not a Sumacian. You can't see the future."

Redfire was insistent. "I saw what would happen. If I chose to join Mercuria, the Aurelians would be defeated, but Sapphire would be destroyed."

"And if you didn't?"

"*Pegasus* is destroyed. We never reach Earth."

"What about the Aurelians... in that case?"

Redfire shook his head. "I don't know what happens to them. Maybe I never find out."

She caressed him lovingly. She was a much older woman now, he had to remember, and the love in her touch was almost motherly. "Phil, I know you were on a drug, and you were meditating to try to escape. Naturally, your mind created something. Do you really think the whole future of our ship, and of the Aurelian War is based on one choice? It's your ego, Phil. Your problem is you *want* some big huge, altruistic, go-out-in-a-blaze-of-glory sacrifice you can make to redeem all your sins. Hardly anybody gets that chance. The best most of us can hope for is that a lifetime of small, selfless acts will add up to enough to carry us over."

She kissed him gently on his cheek, and whispered. "You've never had any problem thinking big. Try thinking intimate. You'll never have to sacrifice yourself to save the ship, but you can sacrifice part of your life to help Sam and Max grow into strong, good men. Think about that."

Eliza Jane Change's Quarters

Eliza Jane Change rolled over in her bed.

She was not happy, and she was not sad. She still felt rotten about Matthew, and the feeling of relief that she would no longer have to pretend to be trying was not quite enough to lift her spirits.

She gathered the sheets around her, making a cocoon. *Pegasus* would not leave orbit for a few more days, and she firmly believed that any more time spent examining the data from the object Ziang had given Keeler would be wasted. If he asked her one more time what it meant, the answer would be the same. It was really nothing.

She felt a slap on her buttocks, rolled over to see Eddie Roebuck, naked, coffee-and-cream skin glistening, teeth as white as hospital porcelain. "Hey, beautiful, how 'bout just a little slap and tackle, before I knock on down to the bar..." He wrapped his arms around her. "Actually, forget the bar, it's not every day a man gets to lay around in bed with the most beautiful woman on the ship."

The third crew member we lost not as a casualty, but as a result of, in my opinion, bad personal choice.

***Pegasus* – Hangar Bay 11**

Gotobed stood before the hatch of the Aves *Leo*. *Leo* was destined to be the last Aves to fly to and from the planet Winter from the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. "I suppose this is good-bye, Commander."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Keeler asked.

"The Parliament Ball voted to conditionally endorse contact with Sapphire and Republic, but someone needs to serve as liaison. They have voted to accept me." Her eyes got hard. "There also may be one loose Aurelian down there."

"What are your plans?"

"I think it will take some adjustment. It will take fifty years for the first Phase II ships to come. I'll have a lot of time to get to know the people."

"Are you going to take on one of those ridiculous sobriquets the inhabitants of this planet have adopted?"

"After that, I've been mulling over some alternative names ... What do you think of Tess Turbo, or the Countess Margarita von Firstenbed?"

"I think your existing name will fit in fine."

"I may be exchanging it for the title of Lady Tyronius."

This took him by surprise. "Really?"

"I have always had an attraction to powerful, confident men," she purred. "The Deacon Blackthorn is going to perform a marriage ritual."

"How long have you known this guy? Three weeks?"

"If I have learned anything on this planet, it's that time is relative...a very demented relative, the kind you keep locked in the basement and don't tell anyone about."

Keeler nodded. "Ah, you've already begun losing your mind. That should help."

They shook hands and she turned toward the ship. She did not turn back. Suddenly, the voice of Shayne American came over his comm-link. "Commander, I have another passenger requesting transport to the surface. We will hold *Leo* on the pad."

He felt someone's hand over his eyes. A voice whispered, "Bob Dole thinks you're sexy."

He turned and found himself engulfed in an all-over body hug. It was Lady Goldenrod. "And just who is this 'Bob Dole,' of whom you speak."

"Figure from Old Earth mythology. Spoke of himself in the third person. Lived to be nine hundred years old and had an erection every day of his life. He's kind of a patron saint around here." A young man was standing next to her, his uniform entirely unkempt, his hair a mess, and smears of strange oils and potions on his face.

"Toto?" Keeler burst incredulously.

His pilot blushed and grinned, the kind of grin that a hard blow to the face with a shovel wouldn't have wiped off. "Flight Lieutenant Blade Toto, reporting... sir."

"Oh, Commander, your ship is incredible... and your boy... why this boy was simply *magnificent*," Goldenrod gushed. She was wearing Toto's flight jacket... and not much else.

Keeler looked back and forth between the boy and the woman.

"Blade Toto?"

"Oh, yes," Goldenrod gushed. "Trust me, Commander, he has been rode hard and put up wet. You don't need to worry about this one. When Lady Goldenrod makes a man out of a boy, they stay made."

"Indeed," Keeler said, for the first time in days, he felt like laughing. "Toto, dear, dear Toto, I fear Lady Goldenrod has spoiled you forever."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Are there any women on this ship who can ever compare?"

A look of genuine concern crossed Toto's features. Goldenrod put a hand on his chin and turned his face toward hers. "Oh, don't you fret, honey. There *aren't*." She gave Toto one last kiss, an intense, passionate lip-lock that went on longer than a bureaucrat with a speech impediment reciting the Republic Public Service Pledge. She then pulled away, and, still turning to wave and shake herself at him, made her way into the ship. When she was on board, the hatch closed.

"There go a pair of magnificent and righteous women," Keeler said.

The pilot shrugged. "I reckon I'm a man now, sir."

A few seconds later, *Leo* dropped below the deck and onto the launch rails.

As Always, whenever we leave a planet, we try to have some idea of a way forward. We want to have some idea of where a planet is going to go.

Also, our mission is one of science as well as exploration. While the Commander and the Tactical Chief were gallivanting all across the planet and Goneril Lear was licking the genitalia (metaphorically, at least, as far as I know) of people on the planet she thought were powerful and influential, cadres of geologists and climatologists were studying the 10 004 Horologium System. We found millions of datapoints on the other planets in the system, as well as its suns.

If our calculations are right, they may have to think of another name for the planet.

Climatology Laboratory – Deck 42

The subject of the lecture was “Climate Evolution on the Planet Winter.” Kayliegh Driver stood at the front of the laboratory before several hologram projections of the planet Winter. It was her job to explain to Keeler, Lear, and a few section chiefs what the ship’s Science Core had been doing while the more interesting parts of the crew had been playing out dramas on the planet’s surface and in the decks below.

“A lot of planets have ice ages,” she began. “Before the colonial area, Sapphire had several ice ages, most of which lasted several thousand years.”

“So, you’re saying Winter isn’t a permanent ice-world,” Keeler prompted, grumpily.

“I am saying it hasn’t always been. We have some recovered some fossils showing Winter was once almost subtropical. Which makes sense in context. It’s very difficult for cold worlds to develop sustainable ecosystems. From the perspective of life, warmer is better.”

Ah, thought Keeler. A scientific statement I can relate to, ‘warmer is better.’

“So, we in Science Core asked ourselves, is Winter a permanent ice box, or is it in an ice age. To find out, we have done some ice core sampling using probes, measured ion flux on Winter and the other planets, and did some solar radiation modeling. Winter’s primary star has increased its energy output 0.04 per cent over the past century. It will probably increase another 0.08 percent over the next century.”

Keeler nodded professorially, “Za, I see.”

“The climate changes are already manifesting themselves in increased surface and atmospheric temperatures. There have already been changes. This is why that colony pod...” Keeler cringed “was at sea instead of land.”

“The seas have risen that much?”

“That was a partial factor, but part of it, too, is the glaciers on the other side of the continent have melted a little bit. The continent has been slowly tilting, and this side has lowered. Basically, in another thousand years or so, Winter could be turning into Spring.”

This really shocked Keeler, for reasons he could not name. “Will the inhabitants still live forever in the new climate?” Keeler asked.

Driver shrugged. “We never established a link between the climate and the longevity of the inhabitants, or that their longevity was permanent for that matter.”

But Keeler knew it would. When Spring came, they would begin to age again. He knew this with absolute certainty in a way he could not explain. If asked, he might have said that the planet had kept them alive, somehow, as though it needed company in its long Winter’s night. As spring arrived, and life returned, it would no longer need them, and they would no longer be paying for their lives by spending it on the planet’s cold wet surface.

He might have said this, but it would have cast grave doubt on his sanity.

So, anyway, at this point, Winter is about to be left facing our ass end. Ship mostly okay, planet mostly harmless, and crew mostly all right. The question is where to point Pegasus. We had an itinerary and there were still many colonies left in this Quadrant to explore, including a bunch we got from the Indies. So, our alternatives have already been expanded. Not to mention our urgent need to re-supply at one of the Odyssey Project Way-Stations.

If we had recovered the charts from the library, we probably could have chosen from even more, or found some worlds that were interesting or dangerous. However, the possibility also arose to do something really insane and stupid that could get us all killed or permanently lost, so, what do you think the boss is going to decide?

Prime Commander’s Study

“... and so, I said to them, ‘so long, farewell, live long and prosper... well, prosper anyway, you seem to have the living long part down. Adios amigos, until we meet again, which we won’t, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Hey, what am I saying? What haven’t you guys done that I wouldn’t do?’ Then, I gave them a little chin wave, like this.” Keeler demonstrated his chin wave.

"And so concluded the captain's final official words on behalf of the people of Republic and Sapphire to the people of the planet Winter," Lear said, drily.

"Za," the Prime Commander agreed, grinning like he was back to his old self, although, in retrospect, he thought he could have done better.

"So, onto our next order of business," Lear said, efficiently. She brought up a schematic, the glassoid object passed from Ziang. "Technical Core passed several different scans through it," she explained, as though the object were hers, and as though the scanning protocols had all been her idea. "We finally hit on an ultraviolet wavelength that produced a response."

Sigils and characters appeared floating in the air above the scanning beam. The language was like nothing they had seen before, lines and slashes and curlicues going every which way.

"Another wavelength provided a translation matrix. There are two types of data on the object. Part of the data appears to be a star chart." Lear displayed it above the table.

"What's the rest of it?" Keeler asked.

"Music," Lear sniffed.

"Anything good?" Keeler asked.

"Let's focus on the important matter, shall we?" Lear snapped. "The star charts describe a point in space, whose coordinates are... about 1,340 light years from here. Lt. Navigator Change will explain their significance."

Eliza Jane Change was there, and she had unaccustomed glow about her, but was otherwise as flinty as they had all come to expect. "I've checked and re-checked these coordinates General Ziang gave you."

The Commander prompted. "And..."

"There's nothing there, Commander. The nearest star-system is 31 light years away, and it's uncharted. That spot is literally in the middle of no where, it's the most isolated spot in this entire sector of space."

"Not quite empty," Lear said. "I correlated those coordinates with the Deep Space Mapping Mission undertaken by a remote telescope outside the Republic System, sponsored by our Ministries of Science and Space over three hundred years before *Pegasus* launched."

"And..."

"Navigator Change is quite right, there are no stars in that vicinity, but there is something there, something that puts out almost as much gravity as an F-class star."

"A black hole?" Redfire asked.

Lear shook her head. "Possibly, but I don't think so. The gravimetric profile doesn't equate."

"Dark matter?" Alkema suggested.

"Possibly... a large dark matter mass could account for the readings, but why travel so far off our course to visit a clump of dark matter?"

Keeler agreed. "Za, if you want to see a clump dark matter, just let me drink a tall glass of warm salty water and wait a few hours."

In the lack of laughter that followed, Lear asked, "Did General Ziang give you any more of a clue as to what awaited us at ... Galactic coordinates 347 by 082 Perseus?"

Keeler shook his head. "Neg, he said if we lacked the hearts of true crusaders, we were not worthy of what lay at those coordinates. Then, he suggested my preferred form of sexual gratification involved small dogs with odd haircuts. I am really going to miss him."

"So, we're to alter course on the word of a madman?" Change groused.

"So what if we do?" Keeler asked. "How long would it take us to reach Ziang's coordinates?"

"It would be a long transit," Change told him. "Nearly seven Sapphirean months."

"Any colonies in the middle?"

"None that we know of. There is, however, a way-station only a few degrees off that course. It would add another three weeks to the transit..."

"... and we desperately need to restock our armaments," Redfire said.

"Damn all," Keeler cursed. "Why does everything in space have to be so damned far away from everything else in space? What would our next colony stop be if we don't go to Ziang's coordinates?" he asked.

"Ba," Lear answered.

"Sorry, I asked, but there's no excuse to be rude."

"Ba is the name of the next colony," Lear explained impatiently. "In one of the ancient Terran languages, it was the word for a mythological goddess of drought. We believe it to be a desert planet."

"Did you say dessert planet?" the captain asked, imagining sugar swept plains and ice cream ice caps.

"*Desert* planet."

"Oh, that's very different," Keeler stared at the star chart. "Let's do it. Lt. Navigator Change, plot a course to that way-station, then a course to those coordinates, and if you can, find a nice planet for my favorite tactical lieutenant to get married on." He winked. "Seven months in hyperspace can make a young man pretty randy. We better get you a wife as soon as possible."

Set by own hand

Queequeg

Encode

Log Entry: Nine Zero Nine

CodeEnt: Queequeg

Passlock: vprint, retscan, aurasense