

Worlds-Apart Book 08: Hellfire

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Part I: No Blood For Tritium

Section 01

It has been 45 days since *Pegasus* departed the Yronwode System

“You’ve got a little leak in your hull, there,” Johnny Rook said nervously, indicating a spot just a few centimeters from his feet, where atmosphere was hissing out through a rip in the old shuttle’s skin. As the shuttle’s engines created a constant and loud background rumble, they all had to wear helmets, listen through ear-jacks, and speak into microphones.

The Hellion Technician named Logo (her name was on a large white square patch on the left breast of her blue-gray jumpsuit) unstrapped herself from her jump-seat, drew a spray bottle the size of a fire extinguisher from a compartment at the rear of the shuttle, and directed a stream of liquid metal at the tear. It was soon patched with a silvery glaze.

She nodded with satisfaction. “Repair complete.”

The lead technician, a pudgy and severe-looking woman whose patch identified her as ‘Ono’ made a notation in an electronic log.

“Will it hold?” Eliza Jane Change asked.

“The sealant is rated to 9 standard atmospheres. It will be adequate,” Logo answered, regaining her seat with oddly clunky movements, owing to the awkwardness of moving in low gravity with magnetic boots.

“I feel reassured,” Johnny Rook said, sounding un-reassured. He adjusted his Spex and continued to scan the interior hull for atmospheric leakage. As a warfighter, he was trained to harness fear as survival tool, but that didn’t seem to apply traveling in a rickety old ship he was almost certain was going to explode before it could get him safely to base.

Eliza Jane Change was strapped into the jumpsuit two up from Rook. By Change’s estimate, the shuttle was somewhere between 200 and a thousand years old, depending on what part of it you were referring to. It seemed to have been the recipient of numerous non-spec repairs and additions since entering service. Its hull was a boxy hexagon shaped like an egg carton, enclosed by a skeleton of structural supports. It was propelled by two pairs of small ion engines that protruded from the rear quarter. Both its hull and its landing struts were

pockmarked with corrosion. Inside, it was a barebones affair, with twelve jump-seats lining the sides, a bare metal deck, and minimal gravity such that no one in the ship weighed more than a few kilograms. They had to be held to the deck with the aforementioned magnetized boots. It was completely windowless. This was a good thing, because it was really better not being able to see what they were flying through.

There were ten on the shuttle total; five from *Pegasus* and five from the local system. From *Pegasus* came the usual gang of idiots:

- Eliza Change, the ship's acting executive officer, a tall, thin woman with glossy black hair drawn into a pony-tail. Commander Keeler had sent her on this mission because of her experience in mining ships, and in repairing and navigating same under adverse conditions.
- Matthew Driver, the pilot whose own ship, *Prudence*, was still being overhauled from the damage it had received on Yronwode. He was shorter than any of the others, but still in good shape, with thick brown hair and intelligent brown eyes.
- Johnny Rook and Max Jordan, the young warfighters, had been sent because the Hellions (as the system's inhabitants liked to call themselves) thought they might be needed. Rook was the taller, leaner one with the large, angular nose, close-cropped hair, and mischievous brown eyes. Max was the one with the shaggy red hair and the athletic body. He sometimes went around with a cybernetic life-form riding along in his brain, but she was not with him this time.
- Specialist Zulu Oswald Jeff had come because the Hellions had also thought they might need the skills of a good battle damage repair tech. He was a dark-skinned man, with a husky build, and he was snoozing as the shuttle moved toward its rendezvous.

And there were five Hellions:

- Aha was the shuttle's pilot, an older, taciturn man who said little and was patient.
- Logo was a young female repair technician, cute in a somebody's little sister sort of way.
- Tama was an older female engineer, skilled at repairing ion-based propulsion systems, and intimidating in a fullback-for-the-Armpit-Avengers-Groundball-Team sort of way.
- Ono, the other older female, was what the Hellions called a "warrant officer," who would be the nominal mission commander. She was distinguished from the others by a pair of dark, oversized goggles she wore to correct a vision deficiency.
- Mata was a younger male security officer, the Hellion's counterpart to Rook and Jordan.

The Hellions appeared to have all sprung from the same tribe of ancient Earth, the same that had been the distant ancestors of Eliza Jane Change. They shared her dark black hair and the gracefully slanted, almond-shaped eyes in the same rich dark brown color. Like the rest of

the humans the crew had encountered in their exploration of the galaxy, the Hellions were physically smaller, had lower muscle density, less keen senses, and no evidence of the advanced gifts of telepathy, enhanced perception, or precognition. But, the crew tried not to rub this in.

The Hellions wore simple blue-gray coveralls, with names and functions printed in white over the left breast. Aha's, for example, read "Aha/Pilot." Ono's read "Warrant Officer." Tama and Logo's read "Technician" beneath their names. Mata's read "Security." There was also an emblem on the sleeve in a design for a company called "Crucial Space Fuels." It was similar to one they had seen on another planet.

The Hellions had met *Pegasus* as the great ship began its exploration of their system, sending out a pair of ships and a detachment fighters to meet them. Those latter ships had been in somewhat better shape than the shuttle, they looked like arrowheads with twin ion-engine pods protruding from the back. They would have been no match for *Peg's* armaments, but the crew was flattered by the gesture nonetheless. The Hellions had been evasive on the topic of their home-planet, refusing to reveal its location, and politely insisting that *Pegasus* hold its position beyond the asteroid debris field that marked the inner-system boundary.

"We are approaching the final recorded position of *Liminix CH-53*," Aha informed them from the pilot seat. Matthew Driver had been staring at him constantly in the five and half hours since the journey had begun, in hopes of understanding how to operate the ancient shuttle. Steering the ship was accomplished by pressing on a yoke connected mechanically to the floor of the shuttle. Driver had also learned to interpret the numerous switches and instruments on the shuttle's control board.

Change touched the speak button on the side of her helmet. "How much farther?" she asked.

"We are within 10,000 kilometers of its final recorded position," Aha responded. Without windows, they were entirely dependent on data from the external sensors; this was displayed on four screens at the front of the shuttle and one of those was flickering so badly it was useless.

"Because of stellar interference, we will not be able to detect the beacon of the *Liminix CH-53* until we are within 6,000 kilometers of its location," explained Technician Logo.

"An Aves could," Matthew Driver felt obligated to put in.

"But your Aves produce gravimetric distortions with their propulsion systems," said Ono. "These distortions can result in cyclonic storms and stellar flares, both of which are very dangerous to our installations and our colony."

Change suggested, "You should have allowed us to retrofit your ship before we departed. We could have at least installed some of our sensors."

Warrant Officer Ono bristled at the suggestion. "The systems would have been incompatible." The Hellions seemed to be touchy about being reminded that their technology was inferior to *Pegasus*. They had insisted that this mission be carried out with their ships, and their gear. Eliza Change was reminded of Prime Commander Keeler's comment, "Pride is a silly thing," which was one of the few things he had ever said that she agreed with.

Johnny Rook, however, did not have any diplomatic sensitivity about bringing it up. "I

would have appreciated some of the Aves radiation shielding. I've measured a sixty percent increase in radiation since we entered the stellar atmosphere."

Technician Logo answered in all seriousness, "We are only being mildly irradiated. We are within the safety parameters."

"I hope it stays that way," Johnny Rook said. He had had a lot of fun making his daughter, Skua, with Anaconda Taurus, and was looking forward to trying it again. He thought going into detail would have been more than anyone needed to hear. He was right about that.

"Dr. Skinner can decontaminate us back on *Pegasus* if anything goes wrong," said Max Jordan.

"I'm not talking to you," Rook reminded him crossly.

"What? So if we're under attack, and I tell you to duck, you won't duck?" Jordan pressed him with a grin.

Rook looked like he was about to say something, then remembered he wasn't talking to Jordan. He shut up and checked his radiation monitor again.

Change glared at both of them and made a not-at-all-discreet slash-across-her-throat gesture.

Some order was exchanged between Ono and Logo on the Hellion's private channel. Logo stood and made her way awkwardly to a station at the front of the shuttle. She tapped some controls and one of the viewscreens changed. Now, a three-axis grid was displayed on it. A bright-white line pulsated back and forth over the screen, as electro-mechanical antennae on the shuttle's exterior scanned for a signal from the missing ship.

"The stellar currents in this part of the atmosphere are pushing toward 260 degrees," Technician Logo reported after peering into some kind of periscope-like device.

Warrant Officer Ono ordered, "Concentrate scans along that vector. Pilot, alter course to pursue that vector."

Aha entered a sequence into the alpha-numeric pad on the right-hand side of his console. "Would you like to see it?" he asked Driver.

"See what?" Driver asked.

"The real external view... without the sensor filters."

Driver nodded. Aha hit a pair of controls that raised the opaque shields at the front of the shuttle, and let in the burning light from what they had been flying through.

What they had been flying through was the hot, fiery outer atmosphere of a red giant star. It was like flying through a hot furnace the size of a star system. If it had been the center of the Sapphire system, the star would have been larger than the orbits of Sapphire and Loki, and would have melted the icy moons of Gigantor. The star had long ago burned away its inner planets and evaporated its gas giants, but at one time, it must have had a lot of orbital companions, as it was ringed with a belt of planet and asteroid debris.

According to the system's inhabitants, the star was known as 200 200 Ara. But, they had another, more succinct name for it. They called it, 'Hellfire.'

Hours passed as the old shuttle continued its search pattern through the blazing stellar atmosphere.

For Rook and Jordan, the waiting was not so bad. To avoid the mind-numbing boredom, they simply fell asleep. Shortly afterward, Technician Jeff reached over and deactivated their transmission microphones because the only thing worse than the rumble of the shuttle's ion engines was the roar of Rook's snoring. Technician Jeff had brought a novel, *Lord of the Hissy-Fit*, and was quite immersed in the multi-level, interactive, poly-sensual, synesthetic experience the novel's authors had generated.

Change had never had any trouble with boredom. A mining ship could spend months in orbit around an asteroid or comet, systematically extracting pure minerals and gases from it, while its pilot had little or nothing to do. In the Mining Guild, there were even some who found her tolerance for the mind-numbing duties of a station-pilot... almost eerie.

And as for Driver, he was learning how to pilot the old ship, and that seemed to keep him fairly interested through the long, long hours of the search.

During that time, the Hellions spoke very little, aside from operational instructions. Logo spent most of the time peering into the periscope-like sensor apparatus, seeming never to take a break. Ono dutifully recorded every operational instruction in her log.

Eventually, many, many hours into the search, Logo announced, "There she is, Vector 271 by 120 north. Range: 3,500 kilometers."

A red dot began pulsing on the forward viewscreen with the tri-d grid projected on it.

Ono ordered: "Pilot, alter course to vector 271 by 12 north. Intercept *Liminix CH-53*. Weapons Officer, bring defensive system on-line."

Mata stood and made his way to another periscope-like device in the forward part of the shuttle. This device activated the shuttle's only defensive system: an old pulse laser mounted on the forward section. He put his eyes against the periscope to monitor the outside of the ship. The pilot moved his yoke and then took the joystick that was located by his left hand. The shuttle had only rudimentary inertia-dampening systems, and there was a sickening sway in its motion as it closed on the target.

Logo flipped a pair of toggle switches and the view on one of the forward viewscreens changed again. The outlines of a large spaceship resolved themselves in the midst of the intense static. Although it was not clear from the image, they knew *Liminix CH-53* was a fairly big ship, over 400 meters long. Most of that length was taken up by six hemispherical tanks arranged along the framework that made up its centerline. As the shuttle approached from aft of the big ship, and they could make out the six wing-blades that made up *Liminix CH-53*'s aft section, arranged in an uneven but symmetrical array. Four engine pods stretched behind the wing-blade assembly.

The shuttle moved forward and closed the distance, approaching the derelict Tritium-hauler from its rear quarter. Aha adjusted course again, and the old shuttle began moving along the length of the old ship, until eventually they came to the superstructure at the front of the ship, a large sphere that housed the operational parts of the ship and the crew quarters.

"It appears to be intact," Driver observed.

Ono ordered. "Begin scanning the superstructure to confirm structural integrity. Weapons Officer, maintain alertness for potential Solarite intrusion. Pilot, maintain relative position."

"Beginning scan," Logo acknowledged.

"Tactical scanners are active," Mata confirmed.

Driver asked, "Are you going to hail them?"

Logo tapped some of the buttons on her communication panel. "I am not detecting any distress signals, only the beacon."

"We will maintain radio silence until we are certain the area is clear of Solarites," Ono affirmed stiffly. "Continue scanning the hull. Pilot, plot a course around the ship so that we can examine every meter of it."

For the next four hours, the shuttle described a slow spiraling course around the larger spacecraft, examining every meter of hull with optical sensors, a job an Aves could have completed in seconds. They awakened the rest of the *Pegasus* crew, but did not allow them to participate in the scanning process.

The boredom was once-again mind-numbing.

At the end of it, they had determined that all of the storage tanks were fully intact, but that the ship's atmosphere had vented into space when three of the four airlocks on her command sphere were exploded from the outside. They also made the determination that since they had not been attacked in the previous four hours, their vicinity was probably clear of Solarites. At which point, the Warrant Officer ordered the pilot to dock with the one remaining undamaged airlock on the *Limnix CH-53*.

As Aha maneuvered the shuttle into position, the others distributed the six spacesuits. Every Hellion but Aha would get one, plus Change and Zulu. The others would remain in the shuttle.

"You have experience in salvage?" Ono asked Change.

"I have been involved in 13 separate salvage and recovery operations," Change told her.

"But never in the heart of a sun?" Ono persisted.

"Three years ago, we pulled a ship out of the upper-atmosphere of a rocky planet," Change told her. "Conditions were considerably worse than here."

"I think you will come to disagree." Warrant Officer Ono finished checking the seals on her spacesuit, and then addressed Tama, Logo, and Lieutenant Jeff. "You will be Number One Team. You will repair the airlocks on the outer hull so that we can regain atmospheric integrity. Then, proceed to key repairs of power and propulsion systems. Madame Change, Mata, and myself will be Number Two Team. We will examine the internal systems, the control center, the engineering section, and make such repairs as we can."

Warrant Officer Ono turned to Change. "If this ship is inoperable, there will be no deal, and no Tritium for you."

"I am fully aware of that," Change said, sealing her space helmet. "From the outside, the ship doesn't seem to be damaged irreparably."

"It will depend on whether the Solarites sabotaged the internal systems," Mata said, speaking for really the first time as she sealed her own helmet. "Usually they shut down key systems so the ship can be salvaged later, but sometimes they destroy the life support systems, or they damage them too badly in the process."

"Technical information is only to be exchanged through me," Ono snapped.

The repair teams checked each other's space-suits, then cycled the airlock and proceeded into *Liminix CH-53*, leaving behind two bored-as-hell, occasionally unconscious, and uncommunicative warfighters and two pilots. They hoped the services of the former would not be needed, and that the services of the latter would be.

"It's fascinating to me how you fly this ship without a direct neural interface," Driver told Aha, when the others had left. "Our neural links allow us to access all the ship's instruments and feed data directly to the processing centers of our brains. But you are completely dependent on visual inputs."

"That is not entirely true," Aha corrected him. "I can also feel and sense the motion of my ship, and I can hear changes in her engines and hull. These are useful operational aids. How would you pilot your ship if your neural interfaces failed?"

"They don't fail," Driver told him.

Aha, in his understated way, was astonished. "You mean you have no manual control whatsoever? Not even as redundant systems?"

"I can revert my ship to manual inputs through the neural interface, but maintaining the interface is critical for navigation. I would be as blind without them as you are without your sensor read-outs. I could land the ship, of course, but guiding over long distances would be almost impossible."

"Hm," said Aha.

Eventually, Johnny Rook wandered up from the rear of the ship. "I'm bored. Remind me why I am here again?"

"In case the Solarites attack," Driver explained to him. David Alkema, *Pegasus's* chief tactical officer had held a nearly identical conversation with both warfighters in *Pegasus's* landing bay. Alkema had missed out on the trip, and was back on *Pegasus* with his family instead of in a rickety shuttle flying through the hellish outer atmosphere of a blazing giant sun.

Alkema was probably seething in jealousy.

"I meant why am *I* here, specifically?" Rook asked. "There are 500 primary warfighters on *Pegasus*. I've been sent to the Crux planet, to Yronwode, and now here. When does somebody else get a chance to go on these glamorous, heroic warfighter missions?"

"The Prime Commander likes us," Jordan said with gusto.

Rook pointedly ignored him, and Driver answered as best as he could, "The Prime Commander is using other warfighters on other missions, mostly preparing *Pegasus* against Solarite attack and serving as bodyguards at the trade negotiations."

"That's another thing, If the Solarites attack, why am I only allowed one sidearm?" Johnny Rook asked, and he indicated his right arm, where a gauntlet with a pulse weapon would normally have been. Not only did the Hellions limit the crew's armament, they had also insisted that all weapons be kept disarmed in large storage packs.

"Because Hellions are afraid of guns," Max Jordan offered in a helpful tone of voice. Change had put it differently.

"I'm not talking to you," Rook reminded him, without looking at Jordan. "Unless I have to."

"What are even the chances of a Solarite attack?" Rook asked Driver. "This ship has been drifting out here for how long?"

Aha answered. "*Liminix CH-53* sent a distress signal fifteen-point-six cycles ago."

"That's about what? 5.4 standard years?" Driver asked.

Aha shrugged. "The odds of a Solarite Pirate attack are very good."

"Even after so long?" Driver asked.

"Solarites are patient," Aha said. "We have seen this type of behavior before. The Solarite Pirates have damaged a valuable ship, leaving it disabled but not destroyed. They know this way, they can keep both the original ship, the salvage ship, and the salvage crew. That is why the Company no longer sends salvage ships, and in this case, dispatched one of the oldest shuttles on this type of mission. They are expendable." He paused meaningfully. "As are their crews."

"That sounds kind of grim," Jordan said.

"This is a harsh and unforgiving place," Aha finished quietly, but with respect.

"And yet, almost unbelievably boring," Rook added. With that, he returned to his jump-seat, and tried to find the inner strength to take another nap.

Section 02

LIMINEX CH-53

Eliza Change, Ono, and Mata picked their way through the silent ghost ship, weightless, held down only by their magnetized space boots, and illuminated only by the light of their helmet lamps, which produced a very slight haze in the radioactive gases that had seeped into the ship from the star's atmosphere.

After an initial check of the area around the airlock, Ono dispatched Mata to inspect the decks for any sign of Solarite presence or booby traps, then picked her way up to the bridge, four decks up from the air-lock, with Change.

Liminix CH-53 had been a lean ship. Its passageways were barely wide enough for two people to pass each other, and Change had to hunch over a bit to make her way through them. The walls, ceiling, and floor-deck were all formed of a gray colored resin of carbon and silicon, with strips of metal inlaid to make it possible to walk on them with magnetic boots. Long pipes

ran along both walls and the ceiling, and met control boxes wherever they came to a hatch. It was sparer and more utilitarian than even *Pegasus's* underdecks. There were no lifts, and each deck had to be accessed by climbing a retractable ladder.

Eliza Change was in paradise. This was the kind of ship she remembered from her days as a pilot and navigator in the Mining Guild. Granted, this ship was a century or two behind technologically, but the Guild was also known for keeping its ships as stripped down as possible. All the guild cared about was extracting ore and chemicals at the lowest possible costs then selling them at the highest possible price in the Element Exchange in New Halifax, or through the Ministry of Resources on Republic. Or, in some cases, smuggled through Barter Stations on some of the outer moons... hidden, unless you knew where to look, which Eliza Change did.

In any case, Eliza Change found this ship, with its uncoated surfaces and complete absence of amenities much preferable to the luxury liner that was *Pegasus*.

She was almost hoping the life-support systems would prove to be completely inoperable. Navigating the ship in full space-suit and re-breather would be a special bonus. Although, that would make it hard for those who didn't have spacesuits.

She wasn't sure mutant space lizard-rats could survive long in this environment, but if they were in a hibernation cycle, there might be even more fun yet to come.

She touched her radio and transmitted, "The damage doesn't look that as extensive on the inside as it did from the outside." Her voice crackled heavily with stellar interference. They were, after all, in the outer atmosphere of a sun.

Ono agreed, "Solarite pirates typically only cause enough damage to disable the ship and kill the crew. They will come back later, and in larger numbers, to claim it as a prize."

Change had known that. "I only meant that the ship appears to be in overall good condition. It looks in better shape than I expected."

Ono reported on her scanner readings. "Radiation levels appear to be within survivable limits. The shielding is still intact in most places."

Ono then addressed her other team. "Number One Team, Number One Team, report, report."

Tama answered her. "The number one airlock is completely destroyed, both inner and outer hatch. We will have to seal off the entire section."

Ono frowned. "Acknowledged. Seal off Number One Airlock section."

"With your permission, it would be more efficient if Technician Logo finished sealing the air-locks while I and the other one inspected the engines," Tama said.

Ono thought about this. "Proceed," she decided.

A few meters more forward and they came to a ladder that led up to the bridge level. At the top was an antechamber, which separated the bridge behind a double-hatch. Ono unlocked one of the hatches manually, and Change pushed it open.

"Your people are remarkably strong," Ono told her.

"Our muscular structure is more dense than other human colonists we have encountered," Change explained, as they stepped out onto the bridge.

The bridge was laid out in a shallow, concave semicircle, occupying, as it did, the forward part of the sphere at the front of the ship. A sort of platform extended from the back to the middle of the room, with a command chair at its center. The other stations were on a sunken level, around the periphery.

Like the rest of the ship, it was a light gray color, except for the input and display screens, which were black. At one station, probably the helmsman's, there was a large yoke and two joysticks. Chang tested them and found them thick and rubbery. Smaller black displays were for instruments and dials, and there were many, many switches.

There were four viewports at the front of the ship, all covered by opaque armor shielding. The second portal from the left was gone. It was like the windshield had been blown out. There were two seats in the forward section of the bridge; the helmsman's was directly in front of the place where the portal had been blown in.

"This is a classic Solarite Pirate attack pattern," Ono said gravely. "They attacked the ship from the outside, blowing the portal on the main bridge, then blowing the airlocks. Most of the crew was killed instantly. The survivors would have been taken hostage."

"What happens to the hostages?" Change asked.

"You don't want to know," Ono assured her. "The outer shielding has closed the breach, so the bridge should be able to retain an atmosphere when it is pressurized. We should inspect the engine control room. Follow me."

They left through the rear hatch and crossed to the back of the sphere before dropping one deck down. The Engine Control Room (ECR) was a larger, backward version of the bridge, but without a ledge for the commander to sit on and watch the crew work. There were two seats back here, and four large standing workstations labeled "Engine 1," "Engine 2," "Engine 3," and "Engine 4," in the Hellion language, which was, according to Lingotron, similar to the Mandarin language of Ancient Earth.

The ECR had all the charm of a janitorial closet. Eliza Jane Change liked it. Very functional. Very straightforward. She felt right at home.

"We can restore power to the ship through here," Ono told Change, then she spoke to the other team. "Technician Logo, inspect the deuterium and tritium fuel tanks. Make certain the Solarites have not drained them."

"All we have to do now is turn it on," Change told her. "I'm going to examine the ignition controls, so we will know for certain that the engines can be restarted."

"We will delay that as long as possible," Ono said. "The Solarites often wait nearby, waiting for the energy signature, to let them know when to attack."

"Even for 54.6 cycles?" Change asked.

"Solarite Pirates can be most patient," Ono assured her.

"The solar radiation should camouflage us, as long as we keep power levels at minimum," Change said as she removed the access panel below the Engine 1 Workstation.

"There will be a power spike at the time the reactor is initialized," Ono said. "It will be detectable for millions of kilometers. And the Solarites will be waiting. We may have only minutes from the time of start-up to get the ship moving. Or, we will all be dead."

It would have been different in the home systems, Change reflected. A ship like this,

adrift in space, would have been picked clean of spare parts, engines, tools, and fuel within days. There would be a race between the pirates, the legitimate and semi-legitimate space salvage crews, the Mining Guild, the insurance company, and (if the ship happened to be abandoned in the Republic System) the Republic Space Transport Authority (RSTA), to get to the ship first. In the Sapphire system, salvage rights went to the first ship on the scene. In the Republic system, salvage rights went to the RSTA, so, part of the challenge would be towing the ship beyond the Kuiper belt before the authorities found it.

However, even the pirates of the home systems rarely killed people, unless they were silly enough to resist salvaging. In fact, custom required any surviving crew to be given sufficient ale for several days drunk and left within one day's flight time of the nearest ship or outpost.

Change had never been captured by pirates, but she had spent a rather interesting and sexually explicit weekend with one on Ronin IV, many years earlier. She wondered if he had ever shown up to claim the accounts she had left to him when she left the Guild to join the Odyssey Project.

ELSEWHERE ON LIMINIX CH-53

Midway between the Engine Control Room at the front of the ship and the engine pods at the rear of the ship, Technician Tama and Lieutenant Jeff worked silently at repairing the control interplex that linked the engines to the control room. A power spike at some point had blown it to pieces, but Lieutenant Jeff thought he could put most of it together and by-pass the rest.

Technician Tama had finished re-working the manifold controls and bent down to check on Jeff. "Let me assist you with that," she said, thrusting a calibration wand into the control space.

Lieutenant Jeff gently put Logo's hand aside, "Don't touch that please, that's a precision instrument."

Even through the mask and radio, Tama sounded peeved. "I only thought my assistance would enable you to complete the task more quickly."

"This system isn't as intuitive as those I am used to," Jeff told her.

"I thought you were an expert on ion-drive systems?" Tama challenged him.

"I am a certified ion-engine specialist with talent on-loan from the All-being. I know the ion-drives on an Accipiter like I know every inch of my glorious naked body," said Jeff. "But this is a completely different kind of design ... altogether. I can't tell if that ring-shaped apparatus is a catalyzer or a disgronifcator. Plus which, I'm trying to do it while wearing a fishbowl over my head and a pair of Wallyball mitts on my hands. So, this is a slightly trickier situation than I am used to. However, like I said, talent on-loan from the All-being, your certified ion-engine specialist, committed to excellence in ion-drive repair. Stand back and be amazed."

"But can you fix it?" Tama persisted.

Zulu smacked the top of the control interplex with his sonic screwdriver. "I just did." He ended by mimicking a trumpet flourish, "Dut Da-Da-Da!") and getting specks of saliva on

the inside of his helmet.

"Very well," Tama grunted. "Now, we have to examine the reactors in each of the four engines and make sure they are intact and functional. Your task will be to prime the line-feeds to the electro-magnetic containment chamber. Make sure none of the lines have been closed off."

Zulu stood and grabbed his work kit. "Let's get those lines open."

SHUTTLE-3

Eleven more hours passed. Then, twelve. And twelve was beginning to edge into thirteen.

Max Jordan sat on the floor of the shuttle, bouncing a scooter ball against the far wall, with a rhythmic "Tha-Pok, Tha-Pok" sound.

"96...(tha-pok)... 97... (tha-pok)... 98... (tha-pok) ... 99... (tha-pok)... 100." He caught the ball one last time and slid it into the lower side pocket of his tactical suit. "OK, that was fun, now what?"

Johnny Rook grunted, and went back to reading a copy of The Fifth Testament, which Matthew Driver had, for some reason, brought on the mission.

"Is it any good?" Max Jordan asked him, mainly out of continuing boredom. "I've seen quite a few people on the ship reading that."

Rook, angry and annoyed, told him, "I'm looking through the Sections on Divine Law. In particular, I am looking for the part where it says 'Thou Shalt Not Let an Artificial Intelligence Simulate Sex with Thy Best Friend's Wife,'" Rook answered.

"You know, it really hurts me when you bring that up," Max Jordan replied. "But this isn't about me. It's about you. I understand how this situation can be difficult for you. Let's rap about that."

"And another thing," Rook raged at Jordan now. "Do you have to talk like that? Ever since that... that thing zapped your memories, you sound like a Self-Sensitivity Counselor from the Republic Ministry of Personal Growth."

Jordan managed a weak smile. "Good. Let it all out. It's good to get these things out in the open."

"Neg, it isn't," Rook insisted. "And it isn't good to let a machine take the place of a natural human relationship. There are dozens of available women on *Pegasus* who would love to do for you for real what that AI does in your head. Plugging your head into a machine is unnatural and perverse."

"Not necessarily. Flight Captain Driver plugs his mind into a machine whenever he flies *Prudence*," Jordan pointed out.

Rook thundered, "And who is he married to? Nobody, that's who. No offense, Captain Driver, I think you're great."

Driver stared them down from the front of the ship. "Leave me out of this please."

But Rook was still on his tear, and rolled right on. "Max, I really liked you better when

you were surly and indifferent. I could relate to you. Now, you're like ... some sort of guy... I can't relate to. I've heard of guys who let females screw with their heads before, but this is insane."

Jordan became sad. "O.K., that hurts me, but I'm glad you got it out. Now, the healing can begin."

"Stop that!" Rook snapped.

Jordan shook his head. "No, no, no, no. I'd like to say some things. First of all, Caliph only made me dream about having sex with your wife. It wasn't my idea, and there was nothing I could do about it. Second, it was just the one time."

"I don't care if it was just one time," Rook protested. "You just do not have simulated dream-sex with another man's wife. Especially not your best friend's wife. You could have said no. You *should have* said no."

"And I'm sorry about that, but I can't control what Caliph makes me dream about," Jordan protested.

"You still should have said no," Rook insisted.

"It's really hard to say no to Caliph," Jordan admitted.

"Then, you should stop putting her into your head!" Rook insisted, even more.

Jordan sighed, then asked Johnny Rook, "Would it have been better if I never told you?"

"Za! Neg! I don't know," Rook nearly screamed.

"The important thing is that we're having a dialogue about this," Jordan said soothingly.

In the front of the shuttlecraft, Matthew Driver and the Hellion pilot could not avoid overhearing them. Driver sense Aha's embarrassment. "I am sorry about this," he offered to Aha.

"I do not hold their offense against you, personally, but among my people, to discuss personal matters before others is considered quite vulgar," Aha told him.

"It's generally that way among my people as well," Driver replied. "We have licensed counselors for that purpose. But, my warfighters are from a different culture, plus, they're bored."

"A different culture?"

"The planet Sapphire," Driver explained. "They are an individualistic and undisciplined people."

"Um, we can hear you," Rook cautioned.

"And I am not from Sapphire, I am from Bodicéa," Max Jordan explained. "But it's okay, Dr. Skinner told me I was genetically Sapphirean."

Ignoring them, Matthew Driver continued his discussion with Aha. "We have been in space for nearly eight years, and in that time, I have noticed that a certain casualness has become the norm among our crew."

"Casualness?" Aha asked.

"People seem to be comfortable discussing most any aspect of their self-lives, even while on duty," Driver explained pointedly. "On Republic, my homeworld, people were more reserved. Mostly because our city-states were so crowded, what you kept inside of yourself was the only real privacy you had."

"It is the same with my people," Aha relaxed, just slightly. "Quiet City was densely populated, like your cities on Republic."

"Was?" Driver asked.

"Was always, I should have said," Aha clarified. "As you can imagine, with thousands of people living in a confined space on a small planetoid, people came to guard themselves. In such an environment, a human holds fast to that which makes him unique." He paused. "I grew a rose once, a single beautiful rose. It was most precious to me."

"You're a very deep man, Aha," Driver said. He indicated a panel. "What is the meaning of that readout. It fluctuated constantly during the flight."

"It measures stellar interaction with the shuttle's ion-drive," Aha explained. "If the stellar gas becomes too dense, which sometimes happens, the ion-drive can accidentally detonate it."

"I can see how that would be bad," Driver said.

"Yes, but not a great danger to us, compared with certain other things," Aha's old eyes looked out into the burning maelstrom. "We are at our most vulnerable, now. If the Solarites strike, we will not know it until it is too late. The Tritium carrier is defenseless, and our shuttle could never escape their attack craft."

"I thought you said this shuttle was too old to be any value to them?" Rook asked.

"The shuttle is worthless, but hostages may be valuable. The Company would never ransom our lives, but your ship might ransom yours," Aha said.

Matthew Driver tried to shift the subject. "We have problems with piracy in our home systems, too,, primarily from ex-Mining Guilders who've gone rogue, it's why we put starfighter bases in the out-worlds of our systems."

"We used to send squadrons of fighter-ships to escort the Tritium-Haulers out of the photosphere," said Aha, seeming almost wistful. "A long time ago."

"Why did you stop?" Driver asked.

Aha was succinct. "Because the haulers stopped coming,"

"Right," Driver knew that. He also knew the Hellions were extremely tight-lipped about... well, everything, but especially their Tritium refining business.

Driver went on. "My first tour of duty was escorting freighters from the outsystem to Republic. I was stationed at the Archon Orbital Base, secondary pilot on a ESV-39XJ. Very good ship, the 39XJ."

"Did you engage many pirates?" Aha asked.

"We did not," Driver admitted. "The Archon-Republic transit was too well defended. Our unit record was flawless, though. Perfect launch and flight protocols for 100 missions."

"And then?" Aha asked.

"I was promoted to first pilot and tasked to Inter-system transit. I escorted liners between the Sapphire system and the Republic system in an ESV-33H."

"How long did you do that?"

"I did thirteen transits, and then I was selected for the Odyssey Project."

"Did you encounter any pirates?"

"Neg, but once during an inspection, my crew found a shipment of unregistered hydroponic melons," he said, with some pride. "We forced the ship to turn around and return to the inspection point."

"That must have been... satisfying," Aha said drily.

"I got a commendation for it," Driver said proudly.

Aha nodded respectfully. "I remember when I was a boy, my father flew an escort fighter for the Company. He and another fighter were dispatched to answer a distress call from a waste-transfer vessel. However, the distress call was fake. The Solarite Pirates had already taken the vessel. They ambushed both fighters. My father and his weapons officer refused to allow their ship to be taken for the purpose of attacking our people. So, they collided their ship into the Solarite Pirate ship."

Aha studied Driver for his reaction, and then leaned back in his seat. "By the time I was your age, the Tritium Long Haul ships had stopped coming. The Company shut down all the Tritium Refining Stations but one, just enough to keep what was left of our outposts going. Mine was the last squadron of escort fighters left in the system.

"Our primary mission was to keep the Solarites from harassment of our outposts, and we had to protect the ships that carried Tritium from the refining station. Our ships were not as swift, nor as handsome as your Aves, but they protected the fleet enough.

"My wingman and I were escorting a salvage ship to Hellfire Refining Station #1, to recover parts and equipment after it was decommissioned. Another squadron had established a tactical perimeter at the base. The Solarite Pirates held off just beyond the perimeter, waiting to claim the station and occasionally probing our defenses with suicide attacks.

"The Station Administrator grew more anxious with each passing sub-cycle. We knew from our experiences on other outposts that if we attacked the Solarite pirates hard, they would scatter and regroup, buying us time. But the administrator was convinced that attacking the Solarite pirates would only provoke them, and was convinced they were only waiting for us to leave so they could claim the station. He said if we did not attack them, they would not attack us."

Aha paused long enough that Driver, Rook and Jordan wondered if he was going to continue the story at all. Finally, he continued. "When the Solarite Pirates attacked in force, the Administrator still would not let us counter-attack, because he had convinced himself it was just another test of our defenses. By the time he realized his error, Solarites were already boarding the station and slaughtering the work crews.

"He ordered an emergency evacuation, half of the fighters managed to escape, and one of the salvage ships. The Administrator did not make it out of the station. The Solarite captain dragged him through an airlock and into space while he was still alive, and lashed his body to

the front of his ship as a trophy.”

Aha stopped, and in the silence that followed, you could almost hear the solar wind.

Rook stood and crossed the tactical periscope. “I think I’m going to scan the area for Solarite pirates. That should ease my boredom.”

LIMINIX CH-53

Eliza Change opened an access panel at the rear of the bridge and examined the crazy spider web of optical fibers behind it. “It looks like the pitch and yaw interface was blitzed in the last attack. I’ll be able to bypass it, but not until I can get out of this suit.”

She held up her hands for Ono to see. The heavy gloves of the spacesuit were far too thick for the precision work she would need to perform.

“I suppose your spacesuit technology is better,” Ono said.

“Not really,” Change conceded. “Space is the same everywhere. The Guild had an engineer, Dactylos Samsung, that tried to develop a suit with a force-field instead of a face-plate, but it malfunctioned, exposed him to hard vacuum. Both of his eyes exploded. They replaced them with cybernetic implants. We called him ‘Goldeneyes’ after that.”

“The Solarites do not require spacesuits,” Ono told her. “They have evolved the capability to survive in the stellar atmosphere; thick skin, internal air-sacs, bio-genetic reprocessing organs.”

“That must be convenient,” Change knelt down and examined the interface again. This was the kind of work a toolbot on *Pegasus* could perform, but she had grown impatient with the Hellions’ touchiness about their inferior technology, and decided not to mention how they would do it.

Logo called up to them. “Number 1 team, reporting. We have completed repairs and are ready to bring the power systems on-line.”

Ono received the news with her usual utter of emotion. “Secure your positions, number one technical team. I will initialize power systems from the Engine Control Room.”

Ono prepared to exit toward the rear of the bridge. “You will have to come with me. I can not leave you on the Bridge alone.”

“We could complete repairs faster if I remained,” Change told her.

Ono insisted. “Leaving any of you unsupervised is unacceptable. You will come with me to the Engine Control Room.”

Eliza Jane Change snorted in frustration. “Very well.”

In the engine room, Ono was careful. “I am going to power up the systems slowly. This will avoid a power spike. I will begin with life support.”

She actually began by restoring power to two consoles in the engineering deck that controlled life support. Their iconography was unfamiliar to Change, but Lingotron helped her make sense of it. Once they were on-line, Ono purged the stellar atmosphere that had leaked into the ship, then pressurized the ship and sent minimal operational power to the bridge and the engineering section. Recessed lighting activated around the edge of the Control Room. It

was dim and flickering, but with the light from the dials and displays that activated enough to reveal slightly more detail in the ship's interior, such as the faded markings on the bulkheads in the Hellion language, and the outlines of the access panels to the Engine Control units.

After checking and double-checking the atmospheric readings, Ono and Change removed their helmets. The air was thin and cold, and it stung their nostrils, but it was breathable. "I'd like to repair that pitch and yaw interface now," Change said. Ono gave a brief nod and led her back to the Bridge.

SHUTTLE-3

A light began flashing on the control panel in front of Aha. "*Limnix CH-53* is repressurized," Aha reported. "We are given permission to enter." He unstrapped his restraints and rose from the pilot's chair, and Matthew Driver rose with him.

"Finally, something to do," Max Jordan said with a smile. "Not that it hasn't been great ... waiting around here and stuff. And I'm not sure if we're qualified to fix anything but... Hey, at least we'll be off this ship. Not that it hasn't been great. "

Rook said nothing, but simply stood up and shouldered his pack. Max Jordan strapped on his own pack, but then positioned himself facing Johnny Rook, but between him and the airlock.

"Hey, Johnny Rook, you are my best friend, and I am really sorry Caliph created a fantasy for me in which I had carnal relations with your wife." Max Jordan spread his arms. "Can I have a hug?"

Just then, the two viewports on the front of the shuttle exploded into the cabin.

Section 03

SHUTTLE 3

Driver felt the hurricane rush of the shuttle's atmosphere venting into a space, and heard supersonic wind roar past his ears. He turned to see Aha fallen face first onto the deck and grabbed him by the collar of his uniform before he could be blown through the empty eye-sockets of the shuttlecraft. He heard Aha make a garbled sound like 'Gurp,' but thought nothing of it in the rush to escape the damaged ship.

With his other hand, Driver manually activated the shutters, which slid up from under the nose of the shuttle and managed to slow the expulsion of what was left of their air supply.

"Get out!" Driver screamed at Rook and Jordan. "Get out now!" His voice sounded strange and tinny, because of the thin air and because the sudden decompression had damaged his eardrums.

Getting out now happened to be the plan Rook and Jordan were already working on, scrambling to pull their gear together into a pair of landing packs, Driver pulled Aha across the shuttle to the airlock, wrapping his arms around the old pilot's chest. In the minimal gravity, Aha weighed little, and Driver was able to get him into the tube that connected the shuttle with Limnix without much difficulty. Jordan followed and Rook sealed the airlock hatch behind

him.

"Jeepers!" said Max Jordan when they were in *Liminix CH-53's* airlock.

"What happened?" Rook asked.

Driver didn't know for sure. Maybe it was structural failure but he didn't think so. Something had impacted the portals just before they exploded, but that was not important right now. Driver rolled Aha onto his back and checked him over. "He's bleeding badly. Do any of you have a MED kit?"

"We had one in the shuttle," Rook answered.

"I think there's one in my pack," Jordan dropped his bag and prepared to open it.

Just then Aha snapped into consciousness for a brief second, and seemed to cast a quick glance, enough to confirm he was on *LiminixCH-53* and the rest of the crew were safe.

"Good," Aha whispered, and then he went limp and his eyes closed.

Jordan dropped down next to him. "I have anti-bleeders."

Driver checked Aha's vitals again. "Never mind."

"What happened?" Rook asked again.

Driver shook his head because he just didn't know. Then, something hit the ship hard enough to knock the three of them off their feet.

LIMINEX CH-53 — THE BRIDGE

On the bridge, Ono and Change were jarred by the same impact. And before they could pick themselves up, the ship was hit by a double blast that shook the deck and knocked their legs out from underneath them.

"Solarite attack," Ono announced, pulling herself up. "They attacked as soon as we brought main power on-line, exactly as I knew they would."

"How could they detect that through the stellar interference," Change shouted. "How did they get here so quickly?"

"They must have attached a transponder to activate when the ship was breached," Ono answered. "It doesn't..."

"... matter," she would have finished except a massive Solarite charge detonated close enough to *Liminix CH-53* to knock the ship hard and send them sprawling onto the deck again. It was followed by another, further off, but close enough to give the ship a good hard shake.

Change pulled herself up and clung tight to the pilot's chair. "I thought you said they didn't want to destroy the ship."

"They're using compression charges, trying to injure us so we don't resist when they board," Ono told her. "They'd prefer living hostages, but if they can't..."

Suddenly, the entire ship began vibrating as though something were passing above it. Several loud clanks came from the outer hull. Ono didn't have to tell Change what it meant. She knew a Solarite boarding ship was hovering them, and the first boarding parties had clamped on to the outer hull.

Ono pulled herself up to the commander's station, and punched the communicator. "Third team, we need the pilot up here, in the command center, immediately!"

LIMINIX CH-53 – THE AIRLOCK

Back in the airlock, Driver clicked the communication device on the wall and spoke into the trapezoid of metal mesh that served as the microphone. "There is a problem with that," he said, looking at the jagged piece of shuttle viewport that had nearly decapitated Aha. "The pilot's dead."

LIMINEX CH-53 — THE BRIDGE

Ono activated the sensor scopes using switches on the arm of the commander's chair. The images on the forward monitors of the bridge were cut through with static, but one could make out a pair of Solarite Pirate ships, one directly above them, the second bearing down on their position. Each one was a junky arrangement of engines and fuselages, salvaged from dozens of ships and hacked together.

Ono was grim. "Without a pilot, we will not escape the Solarite attack."

Eliza Change strapped herself into the helmsman's seat. "If it's all the same to you... I'll pilot this tanker." Her tone was matter-of-fact, professional.

"You are not certified to operate this vessel," Ono protested.

Change ignored her and grabbed the twin joysticks. "Strap in! We're getting out of here."

Ono opened her mouth to protest could say nothing more because the sudden lurch of Liminex CH-53 away from under the pirate ship knocked her down to the deck for a third time. On her second attempt to protest, she was thrown back to the rear bulkhead as Change fired the ship's two working engines and directed them on a vector away from the attacking Solarites.

One of the data displays on Change's panel lit up in ominous red, showing a line that sloped violently upward.

"This ship is not rated for that acceleration curve!" Ono screamed from the back.

But Eliza Jane Change didn't hear her. She was in control. A hundred thousand tons of starship was obeying her every command, at least to the extent its battered systems could. She was doing the only thing in her life that had ever made sense to her.

All she had to do now was navigate out of the sun, avoid the pirate fleet, cut through an asteroid debris field and then find the refining station.

"Change to crew," she said into the ship's COM system. "If you haven't grabbed onto anything secure, I suggest you do so now."

BACK AT THE AIRLOCK

Because of the way the shuttle had docked, its airlock formed the floor of the Liminix

airlock Driver and the warfighters had just been tossed into the walls of.

"Getting deeper into the ship might be a good idea" Max Jordan said as he clung to a handhold on the inner hull. The place where the shuttle was locked against the ship was straining dangerously under the larger ship's acceleration.

Rook extracted the tactical gauntlets from his landing pack. These were upgrades from the pulse weapons of earlier, and packed a more solid punch. He handed one to Jordan and began strapping his on.

"Do we really need them?" Driver asked.

Conveniently, the voice of Mata then came over the ship's address system and provided an answer. "Attention. The ship has been boarded by Solarite pirates."

"I would take that as an affirmative," Rook said. "Cycle the inner airlock, I'm going in first."

"No, I'll go in," Jordan protested. "I know this is a pretty sensitive time to bring this up, but you have a wife and a daughter back on *Pegasus*. I should go in first."

"Neg, I'm the senior warfighter, I will go in first," Rook insisted.

"No one's getting in, the airlock's jammed," Driver informed them. He had begun working its control panel while Rook was still unpacking the heat. Driver hit the intercom. "Airlock to bridge, we're stuck in here, can anyone release the airlock, or come to our assistance."

Silence answered him. And when he repeated his request, Silence answered him again. Either the communication system was down, or whoever was on the Bridge had more important problems to deal with.

"This could be a problem," Driver told them.

"Airlocks are usually the strongest part of the ship, we should be totally safe," Jordan said, and was immediately contradicted by the whine of stressed alloy from the docked shuttle.

LiminixCH-53 veered to starboard, tossing them around again. A distant percussion charge rattled the ship again.

"Would have been nice if they got the inertial dampeners on-line," Rook said.

"If the shuttle breaks loose, it could tear out the airlock with it," Driver warned them. "And with this maneuvering, I'd guess there's a better than 50% chance of that happening."

"Worse, you mean," Rook corrected him.

Driver didn't answer him, but began working the interlock mechanism again. Suddenly, the ship pitched over and slammed them into each other and into the far wall.

"What in the lost marbles of Sullivan are they doing up there?" Driver wondered aloud.

LIMINIX CH-53 – THE BRIDGE

Liminix's two functioning engines were putting out as much power as they could, but

were far short of what was needed to escape on speed alone. It was only Eliza Jane Change's extreme maneuvers that were keeping the pirate ships out of range.

"We've managed to put some distance between us and the larger ship," Change reported. "There's at least three smaller ships in pursuit. How far until Hellfire 3."

"Hellfire Station 3 is still thirty two million kilometers away," Ono protested. "We will never make it."

"If we don't make it, we die anyway," Change reminded her. She pulled up a navigational display on one of the available screens. "So, that means there's nothing to lose."

The hatch to the Bridge swung open and Technician Logo stumbled through. Mata, the Security Man, was close behind her, waving his large heavy gun down one corridor, then over to the next.

"Report, Technician Logo," Ono ordered.

"We encountered two Solarite pirates in the Engine Control Room," she explained. "We killed them, but Engineer Tama was badly injured. The visitor's engineer is managing our engines, and he said something about being provided with an 'adult beverage' at the conclusion of our journey."

Ono ordered Mata to take the weapon station and Logo to monitor navigation. Change finished studying the Navigation screen, and then bent the control yoke hard down and to port. She altered course on a vector away from the sun.

"What are you doing?" Ono demanded. "We're off-course."

Change, who had a reputation for never betraying emotion, was almost grinning as she grabbed both joysticks. "I'm gonna lose those pirates."

"If you continue on this course, you'll bring us directly into the asteroid field at the edge of the corona," Ono protested. "At this ludicrous speed, you will never survive passage."

Change brought up a three-D map of the approaching asteroid debris field, and mentally projected a course through it. She understood the challenge. She just had to fly like an eagle through an avalanche while remaining untouched by a single stone.

This would be the most fun she had had in a very long time.

LIMINIX – THE AIRLOCK

Rook powered up his gauntlet and pointed it at the airlock. "Stand back."

Rook's charge hit the airlock mechanism, then spread its energy across the entire lock in a miniature electrical storm. The control panel adjacent to the lock sputtered and spat nasty white and orange sparks at them.

When it stopped sparking, Matthew Driver examined the lock. "You've fused the micro-circuitry," Driver said angrily, which translated into a slightly-louder tone of voice than usual.

"Subtlety failed, let's try brute force," Rook suggested. He augmented his Tactical Suit

to full Manplification and made for the hatch to the airlock before noticing its smooth surface offered him no handhold for pulling it open. "This is no good."

At their feet, the ring that locked them to the shuttle was groaned ominously. Then, as *Liminix* went into a steep climb, a fissure as thin as a thread and long as a finger tore in the alloy plate on the edge of the air-lock.

Max Jordan checked his readings. "Stellar atmosphere is beginning to leak into the chamber."

"Nothing like a little radioactive death plasma to make our situation more interesting," Rook muttered.

"I love the smell of radioactive death plasma in the morning," Jordan added, turning the Manplification controls on his suit to full power, and turning up the atmospheric filter as well. He gestured for Rook to rejoin him, then flicked his head toward the airlock hatch

Rook rejoined him at the back of the chamber, and the two of them heaved their Manplified strength upward against the airlock, which refused to yield and left both of them holding their shoulders painfully. "I immediately regret this course of action," Rook seethed through clenched teeth.

Then, the ship lurched violently again and threw them against the shuttle side of the airlock hatch, where they landed in a pile.

"Look," Jordan pointed, as he crawled out from underneath his comrades. "The hatch is loose."

The violent pitching of the ship had knocked the shipside airlock hatch ajar. Not by more than a couple of centimeters, but it was enough to get a finger-hold. Rook and Jordan grabbed the edge of the hatch and heaved with all their strength. Slowly, and with a grind of alloy-on-different-alloy, the hatch slid back until there was space enough for a man to squeeze through.

"Go!" Driver ordered Jordan. Jordan realized there was no time for argument. The hatch and docking ring assembly that held the shuttle to the ship was stressed to the breaking point. More fissures were opening around the edges. Jordan squeezed through. Driver ordered Rook to follow, and Rook did with no argument.

Driver spent an agonizing moment contemplating the body of Aha before resigning himself that he could not pull it through the air-lock. Saying a quiet prayer, Driver pulled himself through the hatch and then the three of them pushed it back until it sealed it behind them.

They stared through its viewport as the shuttle's docking ring and airlock disintegrated. It would have been more dramatic if the old shuttle had broken free just as he secured the airlock, but the shuttle managed to hold on for almost another minute before tearing away from the ship and spiraling away to smash spectacularly against a boulder-sized asteroid.

"She is getting us way too close to those rocks," Driver protested. "I have got to get to the Bridge before..."

And when he turned away from the hatch, he saw that their troubles had only just started.

LIMINIX CH-53 – THE BRIDGE

Change pulled Liminix CH-53 into a steep dive around a hunk of mountain-sized asteroid that had, over the course of millennia of collisions, become surrounded by a cloud of chips ranging from peanut-sized to house-sized. Change deftly took the ship through the field, but one of the Solarite vessels smacked head-on into one of the house-sized rocks and disappeared in an explosion of fuel and metal.

"One down!" Eliza Change yelled at Ono, who had regained the command chair and strapped herself down as the ship veered wildly among the avalanche.

According to the scanners, there were at least four pirate ships left. Change was almost sure she could lose them if her ship held up long enough.

LIMINIX CH-53 – A LOWER DECK

Johnny Rook and Max Jordan regarded the being that was blocking their passage through the chamber. This was their first view of an actual Solarite, and it beggared description, but here's a shot.

It passed two meters in height and kept going. It's skin was leathery and brown. Its arms were elongated and ended in oversized hands covered in small bony plates, like scales, with two opposing thumbs each. Most of the limbs and torso were similarly covered by bright bluish purple plates, like a crab shell. Its face appeared at first be covered by a gas mask, but on closer inspection, the mask was actually growing out of the Solarite's skull. Long ropes of hair grew from the back of its head in dreadlocks, and it carried a hideous long gun in its left appendage, which it pointed at Rook, Driver, and Jordan and shrieked, "YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"Aw, crap," said Rook, raising the single side-arm he had been allowed to bring and getting off a single shot at the creature's gun-hand before the ship pitched violently to the left and left him and the others rolling to the deck.

From the floor, Johnny Rook and Max Jordan looked up toward the shiny black eyes of the Solarite, which blinked at them from four-way eyelids.

"Should we try reasoning with it?" Jordan asked.

"Yarrrrrrrr!" shrieked the Solarite, swinging a weapon in their direction. It unleashed a volley of what looked like ball lightning, except it shot straight toward them. The shields on their tactical suits diminished the impact, but it still was like grabbing an electrical wire.

Then, the ship barrel-rolled, and that knocked everybody off-balance.

LIMINIX CH-53 – THE BRIDGE

"What was that?" Ono demanded.

"That was a pirate ship getting much too close and trying to lock on," Change explained. "I've avoided him for the moment." She checked her Navigation Chart, and confirmed that they were approaching an area of the field too dense to navigate at high speed. She banked the ship and plotted a course underneath it.

Suddenly, the face of one of the Solarite pirates appeared on the foremost window of the bridge. The beast opened its mouth and screamed, but since they were in space, they did not here it. It raised a fist and began pounding on the transparent plate.

"Aw, Gravity," Change spat. She hit the counter-thruster on the forward hemisphere, which shot out white-hot radioactive gases and sharply decelerated the ship. The Solarite shook and lost the grip with one hand, but he managed to hold on with the other. When he recovered, he began pounding at the template again.

"I can not shake him," Change informed Ono. Dealing with a homicidal creature pounding on the outside of the bridge was a relatively minor section of the Mining Guild's Pilot's Manual.

The hatch at the rear of the Bridge opened, revealing Mata and Logo, who had fought their way to the bridge and dispatched a Solarite en route.

"I will take care of this," Mata announced. He aimed his hand cannon at the plate and fired. The round hit the plate and shattered the screen. The combined force of the exploding projectile and the escaping atmosphere pushed the creature off the front of the ship.

A split-second later, an emergency plate dropped into position, covering the hole but leaving Change half-blind apart from the sensors.

"Guard the door," Ono ordered Mata. "We can't let intruders into the command center. Logo, take over the navigational controls. We have to get back to..."

Suddenly, there was a sharp snap, or maybe it was a ping. Ono got a brief expression of shock on her face, then slumped to the deck.

Change noticed she had gone silent, but little else. She ordered Mata to man weapons and Logo to monitor scanners. Three solarite vessels remained stubbornly on *Limnix CH-53's* six.

"Status of Weapons?" Change demanded.

Mata answered. "The particle cannons have been dismantled by the Solarites."

"In other words, off-line," Change shot back. She banked the ship sharply, hoping to out-maneuver the Solarites.

Logo reported. "We are currently twenty-four million kilometers out from Station Hellfire-3. We should be in range in about forty microns."

"You have to adjust course and speed," Logo added. "We can not approach the station at this velocity."

"Right," Eliza Change acknowledged. "If we slow down, the pirates will have us. I am barely keeping ahead of them as it is."

"Unfortunately..." Logo began, and then paused long enough to force Change to prompt her.

"Unfortunately, what?" Changed demanded.

"Unfortunately there are a number of Solarite vessels surrounding the station, I would have spoken sooner, but I was trying to get an exact number." Logo paused. "At least ten vessels, though."

"Display them on my navigation display," Change ordered.

"The ship is not set up to do that," Logo said apologetically.

Change pondered this for a second, and then got a very determined look on her face.

"Contact the station, and let them know we're coming in hot," Change ordered.

Logo shook her head. "Our communications array is off-line."

Change almost smiled, and she cocked her head to the side. "I guess we'll have to trust them to figure it out, then."

Section 04

LIMINIX CH-53: A LOWER DECK

The Solarite Pirate fired his blaster and blew a substantial hole in the interior bulkhead a few centimeters from Max Jordan's head.

"Jeepers!" Jordan exclaimed again, as he rolled and unloaded a brace of pulse charges into the pirate. The Solarite staggered backward as three of the shots hit him right in the chest. That should have killed him, and would have, if we were just human, or, for that matter, if he were a Borealan Marsh Ox.

Instead, his back to the wall, the pirate fired again, putting another blast of charged plasma through the bulkhead just next to Matthew Driver.

Johnny Rook opened up with a fusillade from his gauntlet, concentrating on the Solarite's horrible face. The Solarite thrashed like a man beset with bees, but didn't die.

"Why won't you die?" Rook called out.

"Yarrrrrr!" answered the pirate. He fired his blaster, and its firing produced a large black melted circle in the deck but did not penetrate to the outer hull. It was only a matter of time before one of his shots did.

Johnny Rook fired again. The pirate lunged at him and struck him a blow in the chest that threw him across the deck and knocked the wind out of him.

"Yarrrrrr!" the pirate screeched.

"Nobody does that to my best friend!" Jordan snarled. He realized at that second his suit was still at maximum strength application from when he pried the airlock open. He rushed the pirate screaming, "Brute force!"

From Driver's perspective, there was a blur as Max Jordan's super-strengthened and accelerated arms pounded against the Solarite's face and chest. The Solarite turned and twisted, trying to get away from the pummeling fists that rained down on him like a meteor storm.

Max Jordan was stronger and faster, thanks to his tactical gear, and was using his training to slow his perception of time, which meant the pirate was having difficulty even landing a blow on him. The swings and kicks from the pirate came to him as though in a watery slow motion, and he was able to dodge it like warfighters had been trained to dodge high speed projectiles at the end of Advanced Perception Training. But the pirate was

extremely resilient. No matter how hard Max hit, the pirate refused to break or bleed.

Jordan focused his blows on the pirate's head. Any one of them would have finished off another man, but it took their collective force to finally subdue the pirate.

When finally the Solarite slumped to the deck and no longer moved, Jordan permitted himself to collapse onto the deck, sweating and fiercely hungry from the calorie expenditure. He looked over to Rook. "Are you all right, Buddy?"

"Yeah," Rook said, "I'm all right." And apart from some residual pain, he was.

"I have to get to the bridge," Driver picking himself off the deck.

Rook grabbed the pirate's gun. "Our weapons couldn't stop him. Maybe theirs..." He puzzled over how to work the trigger when suddenly it went off and punctured the deck above their heads.

"On second thought..." he said, throwing the gun aside and following the others down the gangway.

LIMINIX CH-53, MAIN BRIDGE

"Status!" Change demanded. She was still weaving the ship through the debris field, but its density had lessened.

"Four pirate vessels are still pursuing us," Logo reported.

"Distance to station?" Change demanded.

"Eleven million kilometers," Logo answered.

"I have point-one-five light speed, and I think that's all she'll give us," Change told them. "But we should make it." She knew the tricky part would be stopping.

Suddenly, there came a pounding on the hatch at the rear of the bridge.

Mata powered up his weapon and aimed it at the hatch.

The pounding persisted for more than a minute, then was replaced by weapons fire against the hatch, and finally straining noises as the intruders tore the hatch open. Then, the inner hatch opened and Mata emptied two shots in that direction (only managing to gouge the hatch's frame with the explosive bolts his weapon fired) before Matthew Driver came in with his hands up. "It's me!"

"I mistook you for a Solarite pirate," Mata explained.

Matthew marched past him toward the helm, muttering, "I accept your apology." Rook and Jordan followed him in, then took positions covering the hatch, in case any Solarites were still out there.

"Matthew, Darling, we have a problem," Change stated calmly, without missing a beat. "There are several pirate ships between us and the Refining base. If I don't slow down, we won't be able to dock. If I slow the ship enough to dock, the pirates will overwhelm us. And I am open to suggestions. Did I mention we have no weapons?"

Driver contemplated the situation. There was little time to do this. Within seconds, they would be in firing range of the pirates. "Could we draw them away from the base in some

way."

Eliza got a crazy smile on her face, "I'm going to try something." She pushed the thrust levers forward, knocking everyone off balance with the sudden increase in acceleration.

"What are you doing, Eliza," Driver asked.

"I'm going to lure the pirates away from the station," Eliza Change answered. "By diving directly into the sun."

"That might work," Driver said, with a forced element of calm. "Although, it will probably kill us..."

Change chuckled. No one had ever heard her do this before. It was unnerving. "Nonsense, darling, the radiation sensors are off-line, but I think I can pull us out before we get a lethal dose."

Driver carefully maneuvered along the wall until he came to a ship's intercom. "Attention, all remaining crew, proceed toward the center of the ship and shield yourself against radiation as best you can. That is all." He turned to the crew on the main bridge. "You all should do the same." He cocked his head toward the hatch. Rook and Jordan took the hint and moved out. The ship's interior would be marginally better shielded than the command sphere.

"You'll worry yourself to death," Eliza admonished him. She continued closing on the stations.

"Several Solarite pirate ships are pulling off from the station perimeter," Mata reported. "They are coming for us."

Eliza Change nodded and touched a lever at the side of the control column. Sun shields deployed over the remaining portals at the front of the ship. "All right then, let's dive into the sun."

Within a few seconds, temperature inside the Bridge became noticeably hotter. Eliza kept a steady course deeper and deeper into the fusion atmosphere of 200 200 Ara.

"Are the Solarites following us?" Driver asked.

"We have no way of knowing," Mata answered. "Sensors can't penetrate the solar activity at this level."

"They're there," Eliza insisted.

"They can take hard radiation better than us," Driver reminded her. "They live in this."

"But their sensors are no better than ours," Eliza responded. "Now, time to lose them." She banked the ship hard to starboard, then rotated it along its longitudinal axis 180 degrees (i.e. she rolled the ship over). Artificial gravity and magnetic boots kept them rooted to the deck, but the result was a little sickening to the stomach.

"What are you ..." Driver began to ask.

One after another, alarms began lighting up on her control panel. "Fire Warning! Fire Warning! Fire Warning!"

"The ship appears to be on fire," Driver observed.

"The sun probably super-heated some of the external atmospheric exchange conduits,"

Eliza said. A schematic activated, showing flame-shaped symbols in three separate spots along the hull. "I thought this might happen."

"Those fires are being fed by our oxygen supply," Driver pointed out. He didn't have to get into the implications. If the ship didn't reach the Hellfire base before their air was consumed, there would be yet another way to die.

Almost as an afterthought, Change added. "This ship doesn't handle very well."

HELLFIRE STATION 3

200,000 kilometers short of the station, *Liminix CH-53* emerged from its plunge into the stellar interior. Its outer hull was burned black on black. There were two large fires burning along its back, fed by ruptured liquid oxygen lines, and another from the underside of the front sphere, below the bridge. It bore down on the station like a refugee from the shipyards of Hell, trailing a tail of smoke and fire.

LIMINIX CH-53, MAIN BRIDGE

The ship's internal atmosphere was contaminated with smoke and stellar gas and the oxygen content was rapidly thinning. The Bridge crew wore breathing masks, but this only marginally improved their situations.

When she thought she was clear enough, Change opened the sun shields. The alloy groaned. The extreme heat had warped both the shields and the mechanisms that deployed them. Slowly, the right one opening more with considerably more complaint than the left, they halfway re-opened and the crew saw they were back in the diffuse red-yellow glow of the star's outer atmosphere, and in the midst of it, a large round dot: The Hellfire 3 Refining Station.

"Sensors coming back," Logo reported. "Two Solarite pirate ships are still in position near the Refining Station."

"I think I can handle two of them," Change said. "I just have to make it hard for them to get a weapons lock on us. Hold on."

She cut power to the engines and approached the base on thrusters, still moving at a decent clip, but slow enough that the braking thrusters should be enough to stop them when they reached the docking ring... hopefully.

The two pirate ships moved in to flank her as she approached. She banked hard to port and twisted the ship away from them, tossing the crew around the deck once again. She then spiraled the ship to starboard. Solarite compression charges detonated near the ship, but not near enough to do any damage.

"Almost there... another 2,000 kilometers..." she told them. The Solarite pirate vessels regrouped on her tail. She banked hard to port again, but failed to shake them. The pirates had adjusted tactics. They kept *Liminix* between them as they moved into weapons range.

"There's nothing else I can do," Eliza told Driver, as she hit the braking thrusters. "I have to hold us on course to the station. We'll either make it, or we won't."

The Solarite pirate ships moved closer. Eliza tried to zig-zag evasively. Compression

charges detonated around the ship. And they were getting closer.

"100 kilometers," Eliza announced, and hit the braking thrusters again. The Hellfire station was getting larger in the forward viewer. Suddenly, it was surrounded by a thousand points of light.

"They're firing weapons. The station defense grid doesn't recognize us as friendly," Mata announced.

"We still have no communications," Logo reminded Change. "They won't be able to recognize us as a friendly ship."

"Perhaps they will figure out we're on their side when they see the Solarites shooting at us," Change replied irritably. She had to brake the ship again. Now, *Liminix CH-53* was in range of the station's weaponry, exploding around them in fireballs, rocking the ship. One blast hit just above the mount of the number three engine, which took heavy damage and would have exploded if it had been functioning.

Liminix CH-53 shook in the onslaught, like a dog shaking off water. The base concentrated its fire on one of the pirate vessels and managed to drive it off. The other kept coming, and coming, and coming.

HELLFIRE STATION 3

As they got close, the crew saw what Hellfire Station 3 looked like for the first time. A network of latitudinal and longitudinal girders created a spherical framework of metal about 10 kilometers in diameter. Inside this framework were a number hemispherical devices that looked a bit like ancient radio telescopes, lined with bright gold foil, that fed into an agglomeration of pods, tanks, docks, and spheres that refined the tritium from the star's outer atmosphere and stored it. There were two clusters of these spheres, connected by a central axle that rotated them gently in space. Additional cylinders were stuck to the axle.

A thousand years in the blazing sky of a dying sun had left its outsides burned and pockmarked... like an old cookie sheet left in the oven for a few years.

The tanker passed inside the rings that marked the boundary of the station, burning like a meteor. The last of the pirate ships was right behind it. Eliza Change guided *Liminix CH-53* to the inner docking ring of the refining station. Two docking armatures, one fore and one aft, locked onto the ship. The forward armature connected to the airlock on the side of *Liminix CH-53's* command sphere. Umbilicals deployed from the armature, connecting station power and data transfer.

When the crewing tunnel locked onto the ship, a small squad of firefighters in silvery spacesuits charged into the ship carrying a hose with them. The station concentrated its defensive fire on the remaining Solarite ship until it, too, gave up the attack and moved back toward the siege line.

LIMINIX CH-53, MAIN BRIDGE

When the ship came to rest, Mata rose from his post and went to the rear hatch. "I am going to the Engine Control Room to check on Technician Tama."

Rook and Jordan met him at the hatch. "We'll go with you to Check on Lieutenant Jeff."

Matthew Driver gripped the back of the chair as Change was just undoing her restraints. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Never better," she answered, swiveling in her chair and stretching languorously, like a woman who has just enjoyed a particularly satisfying session of sexual intercourse. At one time, this would have bothered Driver, but those days were long since passed. "What happened to your eye?" she asked.

Driver touched the spot above his left eye and was surprised to see blood on his fingertips. "I must have cut it when the shuttle was attacked."

"We'll ask the Hellions if they have any dermal sealant," Change said.

"I'm sure it'll heal," Driver said.

Change touched his forehead and, for the second it took her fingertip to make contact, Driver had an intense memory flash.

The tall man with the shaved head was looking at him sternly. At his side was a shirtless boy in an overcoat. "You have to go back," the man said. "You have to save the children at Gethsemane."

And then he was back on *Liminix CH-53*, slumped against a bulkhead, and Change was asking him if he was all right.

"Wh'happen?" Driver stammered.

"You almost fainted, darling," Eliza told him. "Are you all right?"

He stared blankly at her. "For a second, I was back in the Chronos Universe."

They became aware of someone ... not quite weeping, but trying not to. They turned to see Logo kneeling over the body of Ono. A pool of blood was spreading beneath it. Logo had turned her face up from the deck, and it was clear she was dead.

"What happened?" Driver asked.

Change looked up toward the roof of the bridge and spotted a small hole punched neatly through it. There was another on the deck, and Change was sure they would find matching holes on a straight vector through the ship. "Micro-asteroid," she pronounced as the cause of death. "I wondered why she had gotten so quiet."

"There's nothing more to be done for her. Let me help you up," Driver said, extending a hand to Logo. Logo took his hand, but said nothing and wouldn't look at him as they exited out of the main bridge.

"We are docked against the port side airlock," Change informed them, leading them over to the passage between decks. They made their way two decks down to the docking deck. Smoke, acrid and choking, from the fires that still burned in the outermost decks, was beginning to reach the front of the ship.

The airlock was in the adjacent compartment. When they opened the hatch, four men, in Crucial Space Fuels coveralls and body armor, waving short plasma charge weapons yelled at them. "Hands on your heads! No talking! Hands on your heads!"

Jeff, Rook, Jordan, Mata and Technician Logo were kneeling on the floor with their hands on top of their heads. Driver, Change and Logo assumed the same position.

As the Hellions inspected their gear, Technician Tama was carried through on a stretcher. Eliza turned to see that there were burns on the woman's face and hands.

A guard approached her and barked, "Face the wall."

"Listen to me," Logo pleaded with them. "Check the uniform of Warrant Officer Ono. There is an encrypted datacard in the front pouch. It will confirm everything!"

"Who is in charge?" demanded a small, trollish little man who wore a pair of thick lenses over his eyes (bio-electronic vision augmentation).

Change put her hands down. "I am the mission commander. I identify myself as..."

The trollish little man cut her off. "I have orders to take you to the Station Manager. The rest of you aliens will be escorted to holding cells. If you resist, our orders are to kill you. Do you understand?"

Change indicated that she did. The others were escorted by a team of eight men in padded gray uniforms to holding cells in another part of the Hellfire Refinery Station. The Hellions put gray hoods over their heads for some reason. Change was taken to the Centralized Control Center.

Hellfire Station's Manager was a sad, gray little man named Aso. His office occupied a lozenge-shaped alcove separated from the station's primary command center by a wall-sized hatch that split into three parts and retracted into the walls when fully opened. The space was just large enough for a shabby desk with switches and controls built into its surface, and an oval-shaped table with six chairs.

"Sit!" he ordered Change, gesturing toward the table and chairs, trying to sound gruff and hard, but not quite pulling it off. She took her chain. The station manager pulled himself into a chair of his own and began interrogating her as a guard with a plasma pistol stood by the door. Aso's first question was the most basic, "Who are you?"

Section 05

HELLFIRE STATION 3

CHANGE'S INTERROGATION

Change: Lieutenant Commander Navigator Eliza Jane Change of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, exactly as it says in the data we provided for you.

Aso: What is your purpose here?

Change: The Company has offered us 600,000 liters of Tritium to be supplied by this facility. In exchange, We are going to pilot that tanker we rescued out of here, and draw the Solarite pirates away while you and your people escape.

All of this is contained in the data...

Aso: We are working to verify the data you provided.

Change: Your own people...

Aso: I have difficulty believing the Company would give away 600,000 liters of valuable tritium. That is almost a full pericycle of production. And I have difficulty believing someone like you would offer to sacrifice yourself on a suicide run.

Change: Don't worry about us, just hold up your side of the deal.

Aso: There is no deal unless I say there is. Where do you people come from? Did you come from Moraine? From Fallon? From Gethsemane?

Change: Never mind where we came from. The fact is, we know you have three ships loaded with fuel that you need to get to your home planet. But you can't escape from this refining station because the Solarites have you surrounded. One ship could distract enough of them long enough for you to make your escape. I volunteered to pilot that ship. A Guilder lives by her word. And I've always kept mine.

Aso: Two of our people died recovering that tanker. None of yours did. Explain this to me.

Change: Your pilot was killed when a Solarite mine destroyed the cockpit of your shuttle craft. Warrant Officer Ono was killed by a micro-asteroid impact strike on the command sphere.

Aso: I would call those deaths suspicious. Do you have any proof?

Change: My proof is the scarring on the ship's exterior from the Solarite plasma charges. You can also see the impact marks from the micro-asteroids.

Aso: Every aspect of your story will be thoroughly reviewed. You may rely upon that. You also claim to have piloted the ship through the asteroid field.

Change: I did. Your people can verify that. They were in the control center with me. And if you don't believe them, inspect the hull for micro-asteroid fractures.

Aso: Did you receive training from The Company in the operation of our ships?

Change: No.

Aso: Then how were you able...

Change: It wasn't that hard. I've been helming mining ships since I was a meter high.

Aso: So, I am to believe that you simply strapped yourself into the pilot's seat and navigated a Class Five Tanker through a dense debris field.

Change: Yes

Aso: And you drove the tanker at high speed, even though your sensors were blind.

Change: Speed was essential to evading the Solarites.

Aso: And then you crashed the ship into the stellar atmosphere.

Change: It worked, didn't it?

Aso: Not even our most seasoned pilots would attempt such a feat.

Change: I can't speak to the competence of your pilots.

Aso: How did you navigate through the debris field between the corona and this refining facility without sensors?

Change: It doesn't matter how, only that I did.

Aso (*shouting*): It does matter! Two of our people are dead, and another is near death in my infirmary. But no one from your ship was even slightly injured. You claim you never piloted one of our ships before, but you navigated a dense debris field at a reckless speed even our most seasoned shipmasters would not have attempted. How is that possible?

Change: That's not entirely true. Matthew Driver received a 1.2 centimeter cut above his left eyebrow.

Aso (*shouting*): Your forward viewports were half gone, your navigational sensors were ineffective. How did you see where the planetoids were?

Change: I didn't need to see them, I felt them.

Aso: Felt them?

Change: I could sense their position through their gravitational field. It's pure instinct.

Aso: Impossible

Change: Apparently, it is not impossible. Now that we are here, I expect you to fulfill the terms of the deal."

Aso: Warrant Officer Ono was the guarantor of your deal. If you had a deal, it died with her.

DRIVER'S INTERROGATION

Aso: You were present at the death of Pilot Aha.

Driver: Aye.

Aso: What was his cause of death?

Driver: Shrapnel to the throat severed his carotid artery.

Aso: What happened to his body?

Driver: It was lost when the airlock was blown open into space, which was caused by shearing of the shuttlecraft away from the primary ship during evasive maneuvers.

Aso: Was anyone else present at the time of his death?

Driver: Warfighters Jordan and Rook.

Aso: Did any of the Hellion crew witness his death.

Driver: Nay.

Aso: What did he say before he died.

Driver: Nothing. He said "Gurp" and then he said "Good" and then he died.

Aso: Gurp?

Driver: I believe it was an expression of surprise at having his throat cut by the shrapnel, possibly an attempt to speak that was inhibited by shrapnel damage to his vocal cords and windpipe.

Aso: What was the source of this shrapnel?

Driver: There was an explosion outside the shuttle, which we subsequently determined to be a Solarite space-mine. This was the first sign of a Solarite pirate attack which commenced seconds later.

Aso: The shuttle's blast guards were open at the time?

Driver: Affirmative.

Aso: Why were they open inside the stellar atmosphere?

Driver: I don't know. Aha had opened them earlier to assist in docking with *Liminix CH-53*. I don't know why he did not close them.

Aso: What were you doing at the time the Solarite space mine detonated?

Driver: I was trying to prevent Warfighter Jordan from hugging me.

Aso: Why was he trying to hug you?

Driver: It's a behavioral idiosyncrasy.

Aso: Lieutenant Commander Change tells me you are an experienced combat pilot.

Driver: Aye.

Aso: She is confident that with you at the helm, she can bring *Liminix CH-53* and its cargo of fuel back to your ship.

Driver: I think we have a chance.

Aso: Why does your ship need this cargo?

Driver: We use the fuel as an initiator for the drive generators on our Aves-Class Spacecraft. Our supplies are reaching critical levels.

Aso: That will be sufficient. Thank you for your cooperation. You may now return to your cell.

MAX JORDAN'S INTERROGATION

Aso: What were you doing before the Solarite Pirate attack?

Max Jordan: That's kind of personal.

Aso (*louder and angrier*): What were you doing at the time the attack commenced?

Max Jordan: All right, if you must know, I was arguing with Johnny Rook.

Aso: Rook is the other soldier who was sent.

Max Jordan: That's Right.

Aso: What were you arguing about?

Max Jordan: He was mad because I had simulated sexual relations with his wife.

Aso: You had what?

Max Jordan: It wasn't my idea, it was Caliph's idea.

Aso: Caliph? Who is Caliph?

Max Jordan: She's an artificial intelligence that arose out of the ship's Primary Brain Core because it contained cloned components of a bio-organic alien artifact. Sometimes, she rides around in my head. We've been... intimately involved with one another for almost three months.

Aso: I see...

Max Jordan: She can stimulate the sections of my brain associated with sex and sensation, and precisely create a simulated sexual experience with virtually any female. One night, she made herself into a simulacrum of Rook's wife Anaconda while we were having simulated sex.

Aso: Excuse me...

Max Jordan: I told him about it later when we were running through the Agro-Botany Bays. He got really, really angry with me, almost like I had had sexual relations with his actual wife.

Aso: We do not need to pursue this line of questioning any further.

Max Jordan: Since then, I've had some time to think about it, and try and see things from his perspective. I didn't understand why he was so upset, but maybe, Rook has a point, because Caliph must have picked up that I'm subconsciously attracted to her. Caliph had direct access to my brain, so her simulations of sex are exactly like the real thing.

Aso: I do not need to be hearing this.

Max Jordan: Well, maybe you shouldn't be asking such personal questions, then.

JOHHNY ROOK'S INTERROGATION

Cancelled

LIEUTENANT JEFF'S INTERROGATION

Aso: Please identify yourself.

Jeff: I am Lieutenant Jeff Zulu, of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, also known as the all-knowing, all-sensing, all-feeling Maharishi of the ion-drive. Harmless, lovable little fuzzball and all around good-slash-nice guy

Aso: What was your role aboard *Liminix CH-53*.

Jeff: I am a trained and certified ion engine and battle damage specialist, the doctor of the ion-drive, with half my brains tied behind my back just to make it fair.

Aso: How were you were able to bring the ship's ion-engines on line.

Jeff: With talent on loan from the All-Being, that's what I do. God gave humanity the ion engine, and he gave the ion engines me.

Aso: Did you see what happened to Technician Tama?

Jeff: That was a tragic, tragic event that could have been avoided if she had listened to me. I don't want to say 'See, I Told you So,' but I warned her again and again to shunt the plasma gas through the Engine Number Three bypass, but she refused. The plasma degronificator on Engine Exchange Two was critical, but she thought she could hold it. But you can't just let that plasma pressure build, you have to bleed it off. But she wouldn't listen.

Aso: My lead repair engineer has given me the following list of repair areas on *Liminix CH-53*. Engine number 2 is non-functional. Engine number three is destroyed and will have to be replaced. Engine field synchronizer requires complete teardown, rebuild, and recalibration. Interplexing navigational array is shorted out, possibly irreparable. More than four hundred significant hull impacts and microfractures. The spars beneath the number one and number three engines are bent. Starboard maneuvering thruster inoperative. Fuel timing sequencers out of synch. Two out of four airlocks damaged beyond repair... And it goes on. He says that *Liminix CH-53* should never fly again.

Jeff: Your lead mechanic is a pessimist smeghead. I'll have that ship up and running before you know. Just let me get my formerly lubricant-stained fingers into the drive systems, and I'll have that ship running rings around anything in your fleet.

HELLFIRE STATION 3: COMMAND CENTER

The day after he had finished interrogating the crew, Aso recalled Eliza Change to his command chamber. He offered her a seat, and then he told her, "Apart from your pilot, your crew are little better than vagabonds."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew Flight Captain Driver a little better," she responded. "Now, as to the matter of the deal..."

"Ah, the deal... yes..." Aso spoke very slowly. "You have salvaged *Liminix CH-53*. We are to fill it with Tritium. You will fly it out of here, distracting the Solarite pirates long enough to give us a chance to escape with our three ships loaded with Tritium for Hellfire Prime."

Aso frowned and waved a small device at her, like a datapad but smaller and thicker. "This is an encrypted order, found on the body of Technician Ono. It essentially confirms most of what you have told me about the deal. I have reviewed the orders from the Board of Directors, and they are legitimate."

"I trust the deal is back on then," Change was using the hard stare she used when dealing with idiots who had previously pissed her off and were likely to do so again.

Aso managed a fake and uncomfortable smile. "It will be difficult. We will have to scavenge from the other three ships to make yours operational, but we have begun repairs. It will take at least eight milli-cycles to perform repairs. Loading the cargo will take another three millicycles. A Solarite attack could happen at any time. For the safety of your crew and this station, your people will remain in their quarters, unless you are escorted by station personnel."

He turned to his aide-de-camp, the rat-faced little man in the goggles from earlier, "Mr. Moto, Inform the crew to begin preparation for evacuation. Make sure the other three transports are fully-loaded..."

"Wait a micron," Change interrupted.

Aso turned back to Change. "You do not seem pleased with our arrangements."

"The repairs could be completed more quickly if our people helped," Change insisted.

Aso began to protest, "As I told you, the risk is too great..."

Change thundered over him, "What risk? Just escort us to the ship and confine us on board. Do you think we would sabotage the ship we're going to use to get out of here? Do you think we're going to somehow blow up this station with us still on it? What are you, an idiot?"

Aso gave a slight, shabby smile and argued, "I will reconsider after I have had some time to review your people's... demeanor."

"Our demeanor should be the last thing you have to worry about," Change roared, still up in his face. "We fixed that ship, and we can get the job done. You're only chance of getting off this station alive is with us. Now, are you going to let us help, or are you going to yank us around for no slugging reason."

Aso slumped back in his chair, looking weary for once, "I will ask our chief mechanic if he wants your assistance." At this point, he seemed to want nothing more than for her to go away.

But Eliza wasn't through with Aso. "There's one thing that continues to vex me about

this arrangement. Your people are abandoning their last and only source of tritium fuel. Why?"

"Once we have delivered this load, there will be no more need for Tritium," Aso told her.

"Why not?"

Aso hesitated, as though the information was sensitive. Then, since he didn't want to go another round with her, he explained, "Our engineers believe that long before then, we will have perfected the use of stellar plasma for fuel, a far more abundant energy source, which can be collected without conflict with the Solarite Pirates. We can then co-exist peacefully."

Change knew he was lying, at least partially. But she also sensed that getting the whole truth out of him would have been pointless and boring. She decided to just focus on getting the Tritium fuel.

"Are we finished, here?" Aso asked her.

She gave him a single curt nod and he buzzed the intercom on his desk. A pair of armed guards entered the room and Aso gestured them toward Change. "These men will escort you to your quarters. If there is anything you require, you may ask them, or any of the other guards."

HELLFIRE STATION 3: LIVING QUARTERS

Two and a half ship-days had passed since they had docked with the station.

Like the rest of the crew, Driver had been put into one of the communal living quarters of the station, another cylinder among many joined to the axle in the center of the station like pins stuck in a post. This particular tube had not been used in some time, nor had the bedding been changed. That was okay, he had no need of sleep.

The quarters were only three meters wide and four meters long. Four narrow bunks folded down from the long wall. Driver barely fit onto the bunk, and he was the smallest man in the recovery crew. There was a metal bench affixed to the floor, and a 3-D display screen affixed to the wall.

And that was pretty much it.

Once they had determined that the deal was on, the Hellions provided him with technical manuals on *Liminix CH-53*. He was trying to familiarize himself with the ship's handling characteristics. Having only one of the old tri-d flat screens to work with, it was a challenge. He would have preferred a simulator, or access to the bridge, but the Hellions had made it clear that would be impossible. It was also impossible to know what state the maneuvering thrusters would be in once repairs had been carried out, or how repairs would affect the ship's weight and balance.

Every few hours, whether he wanted it or not, Logo brought him something to eat. And a few hours after Eliza Change had made the station manager miserable again, Logo entered carrying a tray on top of which was a yellow plastic container. "Are you hungry?" she asked Driver.

"I am very hungry," he told her, taking the tray off her hands.

"It's just protein cakes and soylent bars," she told him apologetically.

That was no surprise, it was always protein cakes and soylent bars. He set the container on the bench and opened the lid. There were two items on the tray. One was a sausage-shaped tube of some brown and greenish brown material aggregated together. The other looked like a bar of soap made out of tree moss.

"I never thought I'd ever miss the flash-fried animal parts Eddie Roebuck used to serve," Driver mused. Still, he was very hungry, and bit into the brown bar. It tasted as good as it looked.

"They are having problems repairing the ship," she told him. "The timing sequencers on the ionic plasma regulators have to be entirely rebuilt. The spare parts we have are not to specifications and have to be recalibrated. They've decided to restore only minimal life-support and sub-systems, since the ship will only be in for a short flight."

"Then, they can put additional power into shields and propulsion, we'll need it," Driver told her. "Is Technician Jeff helping with repairs?"

She averted her eyes. "He is confined to a holding room, as you are. They do not trust your people."

Driver pretended to turn his attention to his protein cake. "That's too bad. He is very good at repairing battle damage. That's why we brought him."

Logo said nothing. Even Matthew Driver, not the most emotionally perceptive of people, could sense this meeting was awkward for her. She was attracted to him, and yet inhibited from touching him not just by their circumstances, but by the strong social taboos of her people. That was how he read it, anyway.

"Do you intend to stay here until it is time for mission departure?" Logo asked Driver.

"I would rather be on *Liminix CH-53* fixing the control systems, but they won't let me near the ship."

"I could show you around the station," she offered.

"There's really not much to see, is there?" Driver observed.

"No, not really," she admitted.

Then, a sort of puppyish noise squeaked out of her throat and Driver reached out and gently cupped her chin in his hand. The light in his quarters was dim, but now he could see by the red rims of her eyes that she had been crying. "Are you all right?"

"My injuries were minor," she told him, trying not to cry again. "Warrant Officer Ono and Pilot Aha..." she began, but could not finish.

"Aha was a good man," Driver said, by way of consolation. "And Ono was an unfortunate loss as well, I guess. I hope their families are comforted that they lost their lives helping to rescue the people on this station."

"They did not have families," Logo told him. "I have no family, either."

Driver was surprised for a moment, but then he supposed it would make sense to only send those without families on a mission as dangerous as this one. "Their friends will remember them, then."

Then, it occurred to him, they might not have friends either, and he felt the flush of embarrassment coming over him.

"A family would be a great comfort in times like these," Logo told him.

"If it's any comfort, I'm sure some day you *will* have a family." He thought he might take her hand then. But then, she might think he was propositioning her. So, he gave her a friendly tap on the shoulder.

"I do not think I will have a family," Logo told him. "Ono, at least, had a husband. But, he was killed."

"Why do you think you'll never have a family?"

"I do not believe the Sustainment Committee will allow it. In our social organization, there is a committee that decides who is allowed to marry and reproduce. Our resources are very limited, so it was decided to limit our numbers."

Driver brightened slightly, thinking he maybe had found something he could relate to her about. "Republic used to control family size, too, because resources were so limited. At first they tried issuing reproductive permits, but that didn't work because people kept breeding without a permit. Then, they tried forced sterilization, but there was a rebellion. The rebellion became a war, and after the war, the population had been reduced to the point where reproduction was an imperative. So, then, they tried to force people *to* reproduce and... well, that didn't work out very well either. Eventually, they just decided to let people reproduce however they wanted. "

"For us it worked well," she told him. "There were once nearly half a million people living in this system, but we have reduced it to a number..."

She was about to tell him something, but paused and changed course. "... to a number our resources can support."

"How many of you are there now?" Driver asked.

"I can not say."

"Why not?" he asked.

She stood to go. "I have said too much already."

"Then, it doesn't much matter, does it?" Driver said. "Is this why you won't tell us about your homeworld, or even where its location is?"

She looked suddenly sad, and not a little frightened. "We do not like to speak of our home."

But Driver was curious by this time, and he pressed her. "I'll most likely never even see your planet. I am curious what it's like to live on a small planetoid only a few thousand kilometers in diameter. The closest thing I can think of would be the moonbases in the Republic outsystem."

"It saddens us to be reminded of how much our world has been reduced," said Logo.

"It saddens me to know that I will never see Republic again," Driver replied. "Even if I could go back, hundreds of years would have passed. It would not be the same. My world is gone."

After a pause, Logo began speaking as though reciting a school lesson. "Millions of years ago, when this sun was small, bright, and yellow, our homeworld was the moon of a gas giant planet. The sun swelled up, the gas giant blew away and its moons moved into orbit around

the sun. Our planet was sterile when our ancestors arrived, but they managed to partly terra-form a large valley on single continent, mainly to provide a base for the families of those employed at Tritium refining operations."

Driver nodded and made a "go on" gesture. "Well, that tells me how your world came to be, but what is it like now?"

"I'm not supposed to show you any information about our planet," Logo said. "It is forbidden."

"All right, I understand," Driver replied. "I was just curious." He pointed at the image of *Limnix CH-53* on the quarter's only display. "After I leave, it won't matter much anyway."

"We've been preparing so long, so carefully..." she whispered.

"Preparing for what?" Driver asked.

She looked at him through red-rimmed eyes. Her lips quivered, as though she had said something she shouldn't have.

"Preparing for what?" Driver persisted.

She backed toward the door. "I will try and get you something. Something you may use, so that you can know something of our world. Are you going to finish that?" She pointed to his half-eaten meal.

"I suppose I will have to, at some point," he said resignedly. "But I'm never going to complain about the food from the AutoChef again."

She touched his hand and whispered. "Ten Thousand."

"Excuse me?" Driver asked.

"Ten thousand.... There are ten thousand of us left," and with that, she slipped out of the cabin, and the hatch sealed behind her.

Section 06

HELLFIRE STATION 3

Eliza Change's quarters were almost exactly the same as Matt Driver's, a cylinder, three meters wide and four deep. It also had four narrow bunks that folded down from the walls, and a bench on the far wall with a display screen over it. It was a bit larger than a junior officer's berth on a Tango-Class mining frigate, but it didn't have a line of gouges across the lower bunk where helm operator Davidson had punched her rock-knife to keep a tally of her sexual conquests. Nonetheless, to Eliza Jane Change, it felt rather homey.

Change rested in her bunk, legs bent at the knees, staring at the ceiling. This was not a meditation technique or anything, Change was actually just enjoying the accommodations. This whole journey, in fact, with the utilitarian, no frills ship, the constant danger, the terrible

food and the dealing with dim-witted station bureaucrats was a trip down the Memory Space Vortex for her.

It was spoiled, in the midst of her pleasant downtime, when the hatch swung open. A guard looked in. "Get up, Manager Aso wants you in the command center."

Without a word, she got up out of bed and followed her guard to the Centralized Command Center. She thought it was probably not wise for him to turn his back on her, and idly wondered whether he had realized she was no threat, or alternately was just stupid.

The Centralized Command Center had none of the sleek brushed metal and glossy black surfaces usually associated with a space station. It had been battered pretty badly in the preceding centuries by the hard solar radiation the wear and tear of thousands of gruff extraction workers. The data processing units and display screens were badly fitted to the racks that held them, and only a third or so seemed to be functional. Most of those that were flickered or presented their data in drug-trip colors from malfunctioning color correction units. The chairs in front of the workstations were mismatched and dilapidated. There were panels missing in the ceilings and walls that showed bare wiring and conduit, some of which occasionally sparked. The floor had been punched aluminoid, but the raised patterns had been worn flat in the high traffic areas.

The place had the feel of a post-apocalyptic fiction-holo-drama, or one of the junkyard towns of crashed and scavenged ships built in the moons of the Sapphirean out-system by rogue mining guildsmen, or as Commander Keeler might have described it, some of the less shabby parts of Panrovia.

Matthew Driver was already there, standing next to Aso. Aso addressed her, "I have something to show you. Come follow me, please."

Aso led her and Driver to a large oblong table in the center of it. He tapped some buttons on the side. The screen built into the top of the table flickered. He smacked the side hard and the display screen activated, showing a low resolution depiction of the station. Just outside, almost two dozen ships were waiting, forming a loose semi-circle.

"The Solarite pirates have regrouped, and returned in greater numbers. Twenty pirate ships now surround Hellfire Station 3." He tapped an ideogram near the center of the pirate fleet. "This one is a command ship."

"They're going to take the station," Change stated the obvious.

"We think the arrival of your ship aggravated them," Aso said, glowering. "They may attack before repairs on *Liminix* are complete."

"What are you going to do?" Change asked.

"We will offer to surrender the Station to them in exchange for free passage," Aso told them.

Driver shook his head. "They won't accept that."

"Don't you think I know that?" Aso growled bitterly. "But it will stall them long enough to complete evacuation. We will take the three functioning ships away along three vectors. Hopefully, one or two of them will make it."

"What about our deal?" Change demanded.

Aso shook his head. "We can't possibly repair and fuel *Liminix* CH-53 in time. Your

people can come on our ships, and we'll try to return you to yours, but..."

"No!" Change barked at him. "That's not good enough."

"What else can I do?" Aso shouted.

"Fight them," Matthew Driver said. "Hit them really hard, and they'll hold back and regroup. That will give us enough time to complete repairs."

"We don't have enough weapons..." Aso began.

"What do we have?" Change demanded.

"A few missiles and some half-depleted anti-proton cannons," Aso answered. "And four or five defensive drones. Not enough to hold them off while we finish repairs to *Liminix CH-53*."

"They could attack at any moment," said a male technician whose Crucial Space Fuels Company jumpsuit identified him as 'Dolo.'

"If we try to run, we'll die," Driver stated with eerie calmness.

They were startled when a small child jumped on top of the tactical display table, a wild-haired, snaggle toothed boy somewhere between seven and ten years old. He jumped on the table and howled like an animal.

"Jo Jo, No!" Exclaimed Dolo. "Bad Jo-Jo!"

The child snarled at him.

"Get him out of my command center!" Aso ordered. The coveralls man lunged for him, but the boy dodged him, jumped, hit the floor, and ran from the center, pausing only to snarl at them from the open door before running into the corridor.

Change had been unperturbed by this, and continued her intense study of the table display. "The command ship is the key," she decided. "If we really hit it hard, we can buy enough time to finish repairs and loading on *Liminix CH-53*."

"An attack will only provoke them," Aso insisted.

Then, there came a screeching noise, and every operational display in the Central Command Center flipped. The Solarite Pirate Commander appeared on the viewscreens, his face hidden behind a metal mask. Behind him, five men and a woman were shackled to a wall.

"Yarrrrrr!" the Solarite yelled at the screen "Yarrrrr. YARRRRRR!"

The translation matrix stumbled, then produced a text transcript. "I didn't think you could translate the Solarite language," Change said.

"We can't," Dolo told her. "They, however, can translate ours. The audio message is accompanied by a text message."

The text message read:

You were not made for the fires of Hell. This system is for us.

Leave. Return to the rocks from which you came. Leave.

The same sun that burns your flesh only warms our own. The breath of our sun is deadly to you, but it is the breath of life to us.

Leave. Return to the rocks from which you came. Leave.

On the screen, the badly beaten man was shoved into the camera, so that his bruised and beaten face filled it. He spoke, "This is Shipmaster Koko, of the Tritium Heavy Transport Ship *Limnix CH-53*, Ident number KK-17561-J1. There are six of us still alive. Do not negotiate. Kill them. Kill them all!"

The pirates pulled him away from the screen. The lead pirate began yarring at them again.

Leave. Return to the rocks from which you came. Leave.

And all prisoners will be killed. Leave.

Return to the rocks from which you came. Leave.

"That makes it sound as though he will kill the prisoners, regardless," Change observed.

"He will," Aso answered. "It's how they think. That display was not intended as a bargain, it was a threat. They'll kill the prisoners regardless, but we might escape. It is intended to give us fear for our lives."

"How much time do we need to fix the ship and load cargo?" Change asked Aso.

"Another five millcycles, give or take."

"About 22 point five standard hours," Change figured out loud. "We'll have to make sure they don't attack during that period."

"How?" the man asked.

Change stared intently at the screen "Maybe I can give them something else to keep them busy. Bring up the station inventory."

Dolo accommodated her, quickly switching the screen. She scrolled through and quickly found what she was looking for. "What are these?"

"Class Nine Shuttlepods," Dolo answered.

"Can they fly?" Change asked.

"Barely," Dolo answered.

Change turned to Driver. "I know you know what I'm thinking."

He nodded. "I think so."

"I suppose you will load them with bombs and explosives," Aso said dismissively.

Change cocked her head. "Not really, we're just sending a peace offering to the Solarites. Hopefully, they'll take our shuttles aboard their ships. We will sabotage the reactors to go critical as soon as the Solarites open the shuttle hatches. It will have the effect of detonating medium-yield nucleonic weapons into the most vulnerable part of their mother-ship."

"They'll kill us all," Aso hissed.

"Maybe, but they'll need some time to regroup first," Change told him. "With the command ship out of action, that will take some time. Hopefully, enough time for us to finish the work on *Liminix* CH-53."

"I will not allow you to attack the Solarite pirates!" Aso insisted, sounding desperate and near panicked. "We don't have the weapons to hold them off. They'll kill us."

Driver disagreed strongly. "Nay, you have to punch them hard. It will make them think we're stronger than we are, and it will delay the attack."

"If you try to gain access to the shuttles, I will have you killed!" Aso shouted at them. He was terrified, it was clear, near mania in his terror of the Solarites. Before Driver or Change could even offer argument, he was shouting orders. "We will prepare the ships for immediate launch. Move all personnel to the ships. Emergency evacuation order is implemented."

"*Liminix* isn't ready!" Driver insisted.

"That will be your problem," Aso hissed. "I want to be prepared to break dock at the first sign of a Solarite pirate attack. Mr. Moto, escort the visiting crew to *Liminix* CH-53. Prepare to abandon this station. We will leave as soon as the ships are secure, or as soon as the attack begins."

"Then, at least let my people work on *Liminix*," Change insisted.

"Yes, your people may finish work on *Liminix*," Aso agreed.

HELLFIRE STATION 3: REPAIR DOCK

Overseeing the repairs on *Liminix* CH-53 was an old Mechanic named Miko. He walked on mechanical legs, which did not faze Eliza Jane Change in the least. There were quite a number of legless mechanics among the mining guilders, mostly through accidents, but also a number who had had theirs amputated intentionally, since it was easier to navigate in 0 G without them. And the amputees, deliberate or accidental, overwhelmingly preferred machine legs over bionic cloned replacements. In fact, their artificial legs would often be adorned with spikes, blades, noisemakers, and even smoke blasters. It was something of a competition.

"The power regulators are still unstable," the chief repair technician among the Hellfire Station crew told Eliza Change. "And engine #3 has had no calibration, no balance. There is no way of knowing how it will respond in flight. And we've barely touched the fire damage in the ventral compartments. That whole section could be structurally unstable."

The repair dock stank of rust and chemicals, and there was a trace of acrid smoke in the air that the atmospheric circulators just could not come to terms with. Everything about this old mining outpost provoked homesickness. She was really going to miss this old place. In the background, through the large oval portal that looked out over the docking ring, Eliza Change watched as Miko's spacewalk team worked on the ship with plasma-arc welders, up-arming the ship with plates of depleted uranium from the station, the better to ensure it would survive the journey. It was not the strongest of materials, but it would defray the smaller asteroid fragments and some of the Solarite compression blasts.

Miko pounded meaningfully on the side of *Liminix* CH-53 with a remote manipulator arm. "Would've been a shame it had burned up. The last of the Starliner SP's. It's a bit of

history, that's what it is. A piece of history..." He paused. "However, with the damage, it's not likely..."

Change interrupted him, she already knew how bad off the ship was. "How is the fuel loading proceeding?"

"We restored the containment system to the cargo tanks as first order of business," he said. "The cargo handlers have been filling her up. Another 35,000 liters and she'll be topped off."

"What are those men doing to the other ships?" Change asked, pointing to the ships docked above, below, and adjacent to *Liminix CH-53*."

"The three ships we are taking out will all have explosive charges attached to key systems and structural points," Miko told her. "If the Solarite pirates capture them, we will destroy the ships."

"All right," Change told him.

"We could do the same to your ship, to *Liminix CH-53*," Moto offered. "Death is preferable to capture by the Solarite pirates. But we don't have time."

"We'll take our chances in the asteroid field," Change told him.

Miko touched her shoulder and spoke confidentially, "You did a real fine job of piloting the ship through the sun, through the debris field, and avoiding the pirates. Manager Aso thinks we could use someone like you."

There was a clanking high above them. They looked up to see Jojo clambering over the conduits that ran along the top of the chamber.

Change sighed, "Thank you for the offer, but I will remain with *Pegasus*."

Miko understood, but still he warned her. "There's a very good chance the decoy ship isn't going to make it. You can pilot one of our ships. I know you may not like the idea... but you could make a better life for yourself among us."

Change looked out at the ships again. "I already have the life I want," she said unconvincingly. "I'm not piloting the decoy ship, Matt Driver is," she informed him. "It will make it, and I will be on the command deck when it does."

Miko started to interrupt but Change cut him short. "Good luck. I hope you make it."

Miko accepted the finality of her rejection. "We're going to continue repairs until the last possible micron. Your Lieutenant Jeff has made a lot of progress integrating the controls on the Number 3 engine, even though we had to salvage it from a CE class."

"If he had been on from the beginning, the ship would be a lot more spaceworthy," Change growled.

Miko frowned. "Aso was not supposed to be the station manager. He was Mr. Hata's assistant, before Mr. Hata died of radiation poisoning. He... he is not the most effective of men. And the Solarite pirates terrify him."

Change could help snickering. "Incompetent managers seem to be a constant throughout the galaxy."

"In the best of times, they are an annoyance," Miko agreed. "But in the worst of

times..." He left the thought hanging there, and went back to work on *Liminix*.

LIMINIX CH-53: FOUR HOURS LATER

They had just managed to stabilize power to the Number three engine control panel when the attack they had been dreading commenced. The station's alarms began whining, and the voice of Mr. Moto came over the station's communication network. "The Solarite Pirates have launched their attack. Fourteen to Twenty incoming missiles have been detected. Detonations are imminent."

"That's it, we launch now," Change declared above the warning sirens. She was standing on the dock with Miko.

"We still have time," Miko insisted. "The pirates are just testing our defenses. I'd like get the reverse thrusters on three operational, and get your plasma cannons operational. We have the time to do this so long as no one panics."

The next voice they heard was Aso on the communication network. "All ships prepare for immediate evacuation. All crew to evacuation ships. We are abandoning the station."

Miko threw his laser spanner into his tool kit. "Unfortunately, someone has panicked."

A "chunt chunt" noise echoed through the station. "What is that?" Eliza asked.

"Moto is firing the last of our missiles and particle cannons in hopes of holding off the pirates while we escape," Miko explained. "The weapons will be ineffective, and will only alert the pirates to our desperate situation. I must get to my ship now." He favored her with one last look. "May the fire ride with you, Navigator Change."

He exited through the hatch. A few seconds later, the first shockwave rocked the station. Change ran to the airlock and boarded her ship. She met Driver in the passageway between the engine control room and the bridge. "Are you ready?" she demanded.

A quick nod. "Let's go," Driver said.

Lieutenant Jeff was already on-board, and Change called him up on the ship's communication system once she reached the bridge. "Status, lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Jeff answered: "I'll take talent on loan from the Allbeing to keep those engines on-line, but lucky for you, I have it. Engines at the ready, Commander. Ready and willing to serve! I'll have those engines..."

Change flipped off the intercom. Another charge rocked the station. Driver took the helm position. Change took the command chair and powered up the remaining systems.

"Disconnect the docking clamps on my mark." She switched to full inter-ship communication. "Warfighters Rook and Jordan, Please check in if you are on board."

More rumbles, they were coming closer together now. The ship was beginning to shake. Sparks burst from a panel at the back of the bridge.

"Rook! Jordan! Report to the ship immediately," Change ordered.

The hatch to the bridge swung open, revealing a pair of stir-crazy warfighters, the last of the crew to be released from their quarters.

"I am so glad to be out of that tube," Rook said.

Jordan was a little more circumspect. "I was just getting into myself. I had an opportunity to talk to my soul. It was very enlightening."

Rook turned to Change. "When we get back the ship, can you order Caliph to flip Cindy Lou's brain back to normal?"

"Strap yourselves in," Change ordered. "Change to Hellfire Station 3, we are secured for launch."

Moto came on her viewscreen. "Here is a final tactical readout on the Solarite Pirate fleet." The pirate fleet was now arranged in an arc on the side of the station away from the sun. There was a gap at the top of the arc. The pirates were trying to lure them through the center into an ambush.

"We are sending the last of the boomerang drones as escorts," Asso told her. "They are self-piloted, and they won't last long. If the pirates board your ship, do not use energy-based weapons on them. They feed on plasma energy, your pulse charges will only strengthen them."

"That would have been a good thing to tell us four days ago," Rook grumbled, strapping into a seat on the bridge.

"Good luck," Moto told them. He hesitated. "And, thank you," he finished. And then he bowed to them, a gesture they had not seen previously among the Hellions.

LIMINIX CH-53: SPACE

Driver blew the docking clamps and reverse-thrusted *Liminix CH-53* away from the docking ring as compression barrages popped in the space around the station. The ship was more sluggish in her responses than he had expected. The front of the ship had been up-armored, and she was fully loaded with fuel... giving her double the mass she had previously. The Bridge Sphere was now covered by a cage of depleted uranium armor plating.

The boomerang drones dropped from their docking clamps and moved in behind the ship.

Flight Captain Driver swung her nose clear of the station and engaged the four primary ion-drive engines. The tanker rumbled all along its length, and the bridge trembled. There had been no time to replace the engine dampeners, and the vibrations from the engines shook the entire ship. The ship shot forward, gathering speed as it passed through the ring barriers. Seconds later, *LiminixCH-53* cleared the docking ring and turned toward the pirate fleet, aiming for the gap in their defenses as the pirates expected them to.

With the drones not far behind, *Liminix CH-53* shot toward the Solarites quickly achieving ludicrous speed. The pirate vessels unloaded on it, not with compression charges, but with metallic darts hyper-accelerated. The bullets made a series of craters in the protective plating mounted above the bridge, but did not penetrate. And *Liminix CH-53* kept accelerating.

The impact of the accelerated Solarite bullets made a rapid succession of loud "Chung"

noises across the top of the bridge. Unwavering, Eliza Change ordered Driver to keep the ship aimed head-on with the break at the center of the cordon.

"Are you ready for the surprise?" Jordan asked Rook.

Rook was manning the weapons console. "What surprise?"

"We don't have any weapons," Jordan told him.

Rook looked down at his weapons console, considered this, and then shut it down.

A few seconds later, they entered the gap. As expected, the Solarite ships closed in around them and began attacking as a pack. To draw their fire, the boomerang drones engaged full after-burners, overtook *Liminix CH-53* and charged straight into the Solarite line of fire.

"I see missiles incoming," Jordan reported.

"Matthew, darling..." was all Eliza said.

Driver twisted the ship into a spiraling evasive maneuver, preventing the missiles from locking on. The pirate ships were still closing now, and though *Liminix CH-53* was outside the range of their guns, their escorts were not so fortunate.

The drones did their best to hold off the assault, flying between *Liminix CH-53* and the pirate fleet and trying to block their fire. When a ship came within range, the forward of the two drones unleashed a pair of missiles from its hardpoints, which connected and exploded against one Solarite ship. Nearby ships scattered in response.

One boomerang drone was taking more than its share of the withering fire from the pirate ships. One engine was dead. The other was spewing plasma from a dozen ruptures. It spiraled out of control and into the underside of a pirate ship. The pirate ship exploded and the burning remains of the escort drone caromed directly into the path of *Liminix CH-53*.

There was no avoiding it. The bridge of *Liminix* smashed into the drone's wreckage, which exploded like a pyrotechnic eggshell against the tanker's armor cage as its fuel cells exploded.

The bridge survived, but several control panels exploded as if someone had been storing road flares behind them. Driver was strapped to his seat, but blinded by the flash of the exploding drone. Change was knocked off the command chair.

"What the hell?" Jeff demanded from the engineering deck.

Driver checked his warning readouts. Three were yellow. One was red. "Engine three is running a little hot," he reported. "I'm going to have to throttle back."

"Negative," Change ordered. "Push us into the debris field." She hit the intercom. "Jeff, you have to get more coolant into engine three."

"I'm doing the best I can, but these engines can't take much more of this," Jeff shouted back at her over the link.

Change turned to Rook and Jordan. "Get to the Engine Room. There's not much you can do here."

"But we don't know anything about..." Rook began to protest, but her answering glare shut him up, and he and Jordan made for the engine room.

Two pirate vessels bore down on a second escort drone and hit it with simultaneous

missile strike. It vanished in a silent explosion.

"That's the last drone," Change reported.

"I thought we had four," Driver asked.

"Two of them circled back to escort the Hellions," Change explained, looking at her readouts.

Liminix CH-53 was all alone now.

"Full Speed Ahead," Change ordered.

About that time, the other three tankers and a pair of manned escorts ships beat a hasty retreat from Hellfire Station 3. They had a clear course. All the Solarites were chasing *Liminix CH-53*.

Three minutes after they cleared the station, Station Manager Aso sent a command signal.

Three minutes after that, Hellfire Station 3's reactor core exploded like a small supernova, and sent a shockwave of charged solar plasma whipping away from it at a third the speed of light.

Change could feel the wave approaching. "Matthew, come about, 96 degrees on the y-axis, and brace yourself." Without questioning, Driver brought the ship around.

The charged plasma wave struck the ship a few seconds later. *Liminix CH-53* was perpendicular to the wave front, and was pushed out toward the debris field, managing to pick up speed while riding the wave.

A couple of the Solarite ships were not so lucky, catching the wave broadside, sent into uncontrolled tumbling.

"We've increased velocity," Driver announced. The view forward showed the stellar atmosphere getting thinner. The reddish tinge of light that had colored the control deck began to soften.

Change deployed her navigational chart and began calculating. "Maintain this vector and velocity while I plot a course to intercept *Pegasus*."

A large pirate vessel that had been lucky enough to catch the wave and maintain course pulled up underneath *Liminix CH-53*. The vessel was a modified repair platform, flat on top, that had been used to recover and repair damaged ships. It fired a pair of tow cables at *Liminix CH-53*. One stuck in the side of the tanker.

Inside the bridge, they sensed a drop-off in *Liminix CH-53*'s velocity, and a strong pull to starboard.

"What's going on?" Change demanded.

"Engines are at full, but it feels like the starboard engines are losing power," Driver said. He hit the intercom. "Jeff, engine status."

"It's not *my* engines," Zulu said. "We have decompression in Section... I don't know what the designation is, but it's on our starboard side."

Change stood and checked the tactical scan, that showed the pirate ship keeping close exact pace with them. "Someone's locked a grapppler onto us. Lose them!"

Driver took *Liminix CH-53* into a barrel roll, not an easy task for an old tanker. He then tried rolling the other way, and finally zig-zagging through space.

"I can't shake him," Driver announced. *Liminix CH-53* had no more speed to give him.

"Hard Stop," Change ordered hitting the intercom.

Driver cut power and hit the reverse thrusters full. *Liminix CH-53* didn't stop completely, but slowed abruptly enough to rock the crew and send the pirate repair tug shooting out ahead. The tow-line tore loose, taking a section of the hull and a couple of bulkheads with it.

"Resume speed," Change ordered. "Alter vector by 66 degrees z-axis."

Driver punched the thrust levers. *Liminix CH-53*. jerked hard back to port and resumed accelerating.

Between the speed, the drones, and the explosion of the station, *Liminix CH-53* had left all but the fastest and toughest of the pirate vessels behind it. Only one pirate vessel could match her speed, but it was the largest and most heavily armed ship of all.

Pulling alongside, the great black pirate ship opened up with a fusillade of small, high-velocity missiles, focusing on the engines. The engines had been up-armored and could take the assault. But the hull plating forward of the engines was taking heavy damage, and sections began to break loose into space.

Change watched the ship approach through the tactical scope. "Captain Driver, on my mark, roll the ship 150 degrees..." Change ordered.

"You'll expose the tritium tanks," Driver reminded her.

Change kept her eyes on the scope. "I'm betting the Solarites won't want to risk damaging our cargo. After you roll, vector the ship on the y-axis 75 degrees and drop thrust one third."

Driver grabbed the thrust levers. "Acknowledged."

Change tapped the intercom. "Brace yourselves... and ... Driver... Mark!"

Driver pulled the joysticks and rolled the ship, inertia throwing the crew for a loop as well. The Solarites fired a very short burst at the rolling ship, doing minimal damage.

Then, as Driver accelerated to peel away from the pirate ship, something in the Number three engine gave out. The engine shredded and exploded, knocking the ship hard and making all the lighting and instruments on the bridge flash out.

In the Engine Room, Lieutenant Jeff cursed and bloviated as he shut off the fuel shunts to the engine. On the bridge, Driver compensated for the power imbalance. *Liminix CH-53* was now skew to its course as it crossed into the debris field.

The ship was surrounded by a field of charged plasma that deflected the tiniest bits of rock. Driver dodged the ship expertly past the larger chunks. But in between were pebble-sized chunks of asteroid that flew at them at super-accelerated speed. Every time they hit the armor-plating they made a "Tunk" sound that transmitted through the bridge.

If any penetrated the Bridge... well, they remembered what happened to Ono.

Six or more pirate ships remained in the chase, tight behind them. A couple of them were on fire. They were pockmarked from meteor strikes. Their ships were armored and built to survive impacts. But they still had to dodge around the larger chunks of rock, and this gave Driver and Change just enough advantage to put some space between them.

Change rose from the command seat and checked their position. "Change course, y-axis, 136 mark 4, x-axis 22 mark 9, z-axis... 0."

"Right," Driver acknowledged. *Liminix CH-53* had three, flat-panel navigation readouts on the console. It was harder than the neural interface on an Aves, and not quite intuitive, but he got the numbers right. That was the important thing.

"How long until we reach the rendezvous point?" Driver asked.

"No way to tell," Change answered calmly. "There's a large mass up ahead, let's use it. y-axis, 12 mark 4, x-axis 82 mark 9, z-axis 20."

Driver fought to adjust position. On the screen ahead, he saw what was looming; a moon-sized asteroid that had been hit so often by meteors in the preceding millennia that a thick ring of debris had formed. Change's course would take them under the ring, and he would be skimming the moon's cratered surface at just a few tens of meters.

He brought the ship low. Most of the Solarites stayed high. Low-level flight was not their forte. A couple of the ships gave half-hearted chase as Driver darted over crater rims and canyon walls. He traveled a jagged line from above the equator to just over the pole, then slingshot out of the gravity well, with an assist that help put distance between himself and the Solarites.

Change quickly scanned the COM frequencies. "Locking onto *Pegasus* beacon," she said. "Adjust course, y-axis, 160, x-axis 10, z-axis 0."

Driver brought the ship in line to intercept *Pegasus*. A *stream* of charged ion gas from the third ruptured engine trailed behind like a comet.

"Solarites are closing," Change reported.

"That doesn't matter," Driver told her. "We're among friends, now."

Stading between *Liminix CH-53* and *Pegasus* were two squadrons of Aves. Twenty ships, fresh for the fight and armed to the teeth, made a picket line between *Pegasus* and the rag-tag pirate fleet.

Flight Commander PonyBoy James was in the lead ship. He sent a signal to *Liminix CH-53*, and Change responded with the passcode, verifying that they were safe and the cargo

was secure.

A few seconds later, *Limnix CH-53* cruised past the Aves. James ordered the ships to fire a volley of Hammerheads across the Solarites as warning shots. Forty Hammerheads fired off into the night and popped off amid the Solarite fleet.

The remaining Solarite ships banked left and right, and hurried away back toward the sun. The Aves did not pursue them.

THE HELLFIRE SYSTEM: SPACE AND PEGASUS

Maneuvering *Liminx CH-53* to a docking position on *Pegasus's* UnderDecks, proved to be a tougher challenge than evading the Solarites, such was the extent of damage to the ship's maneuvering thrusters, and the imbalance of its mass caused by the armor plating. It took Matthew Driver an hour and a half to accomplish the docking, even with spotters aboard the *Aves Leo* and *Xerxes* backing him up.

Once the ship was in position, docking clamps deployed to hold it against the hull. Docking ports and umbilical connectors that had not been used since *Pegasus* was constructed reached out to the old mining ship and connected, preparing to off-load its cargo and crew.

Rook, Jordan, and Lieutenant Jeff were sent to Hospital Four for treatment of radiation exposure, a treatment that involved drinking a substance described by victims as "an iodine-and-hair-flavored milkshake." Driver was judged to have received only moderate exposure, and after being given a packet of radiation pills and some meditation instructions, he went to the food court. Eliza Change reported straight to the Bridge.

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE

As Pegasus was operating with only half its crew, the Bridge had been reconfigured somewhat. Some of the less essential and boring positions were occupied by androids with blank metallic faces. Only tactical, ship's operations, telemetry, and helm were occupied when Change reached the Bridge. Lt. Cmdr. Alkema, performing double duty as tactical watch commander and commanding officer, met her at the captain's station in the center of the oval-shaped Main Bridge. "Welcome back, Lieutenant Commander Change."

Change cast a disparaging glance around the Pegasus primary command center. Efficient, ultra-modern, comfortable. She already missed the Spartan accommodations of the mining station.

"Where is Commander Keeler?" Change asked.

"Still at the negotiations," Alkema reported.

"What is the status of negotiations?" she asked.

Alkema shrugged slightly. "He says they aren't making progress, but on the plus side, he is drinking a lot."

Change nodded grimly. "How soon can we begin off-loading the Tritium from Liminx?"

Instead of verbally conveying a perfectly adequate approximate time estimate, Driver called up a hologram projection showing the old tanker attached to the aft part of Pegasus's lower hull. "We can begin offloading the Tritium as soon as the booms are be secured and the fuel technician gives us the go-ahead."

"Are the fuel crews on station?" she asked.

"Affirmative," he answered, and then he smiled in that cloying way that always made her want to shove him into an open airlock. "I guess you gave those Solarites a pretty exciting chase."

"I've had better," she growled.

"Right," Alkema agreed. He indicated the *Liminix CH-53* hologram. "What should we do with the ship when we're done with it?"

"I assume we will jettison it and continue our journey," Change said testily, settling into her seat.

"Is there anything salvageable on board, anything we could use?" Alkema asked. "Spare parts, extra metal plating..."

"No, its technology is incompatible with our systems, and we don't need the extra mass. We'll just set it adrift and move on." She sounded grim. Part of her was going to miss the old bird.

"Maybe the commander will have a look around when he finishes the negotiations," Alkema said, smiling still.

"Is there any reason you're still on my bridge?" Change snapped at him.

Caught off-guard, Alkema admitted there wasn't, and then sheepishly made his way toward the intraship tubeway transport dock.

PEGASUS – INHABITATION DECKS

Max Jordan's family was always happy to see him after a mission, and he was usually happy to see them.

After he had gotten out of Hospital Four, he went to the dinner Pieta had made for him, and pretended to enjoy the undercooked meat and cold, wet vegetable casserole. After the meal, they repaired to the family room and settled into the big tan couches, put some Auroran music on the recreational sound system, and Pieta and David Alkema had subjected him to a far more thorough interrogation than Station Manager Aso had given him. The topic of his simulated conjugation with Caliph was not raised, and even Marcus had listened intently while he told of their battles with Solarite pirates. All while, Pieta fussed with the twins.

"Did you meet any nice girls?" Pieta asked him when he got to the part where *Liminix CH-53* passed through the picket line of Aves and maneuvered to dock with *Pegasus*. Despite her best efforts to lose weight, she had grown soft around the edges, which was the way of Bodicean women.

"Just the three in the crew," Jordan answered his half-sister.

"Technician Forbes asked me if you'd like to work on her shift harvesting mauves in the Agro-Botany Bay next week." Since Max had grown up, Pieta had taken a special interest in trying to fix him up with various girls in the ship's crew.

Max Jordan smiled and shrugged. "Maybe, I don't think I'll have anything better to do." He made a mental note to find something better to do.

Eventually, they grew bored with him, and he was finally able to get to his personal sleep chamber. He stripped out of his uniform and got into his sleeper, wearing nothing but a thin pair of briefs. The sleeper bathed his body in alpha waves, and soon he was sleeping peacefully.

And soon after that, Caliph appeared to him. This time, she wore the form of Tactical Technician Courage, a woman of about Jordan's own age, with a tight body and an exciting mix of red and black hair. The real Courage filled out a tactical suit very nicely. The Caliph version appeared naked except for a tactical belt.

"Take me, Super Stud!" she purred at him.

Max Jordan's dreamself folded his arms demurely behind his shoulders. 'Caliph, we need to talk.'

'We can talk after we have sexual relations, unless you would prefer to fall asleep or dream about sports and food,' she purred at him, waving a finger sensually in front of his nose. She tried to kiss him, but he pulled away.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Well, I've been thinking. You know how upset Johnny Rook got when you simulated sex with his wife?'

'Yeah, did you ever find out what his problem was with that?'

'I did... and it got me to think. Every time you simulate a real woman, it's like... well, it's wrong. I mean, most of them would be kind of freaked up if they knew I was having simulated sex with them.'

'They should be flattered,' Caliph huffed. 'Perhaps he is jealous because he can only have sexual relations with a single female form.'

'Maybe he is,' Max conceded. 'But, all the same, I have to respect his feelers. He's my best friend.'

Around the dream image of Caliph/Courage, an ominous purple-black aura was beginning to build; like a storm-front at the end of a summer heat-wave. 'If he is your best friend, then what am I?'

'I think what we have is way beyond human friendship,' Max told her, lovingly.

But she didn't seem placated. 'It's because I'm not made of meat, isn't it?'

Max kept trying. 'I wouldn't trade our togetherness for anything, Cali. I'm not saying we have to stop, but I am saying maybe we should, you know, not simulate sex with other people.'

To his surprise, this really pissed Caliph off. Immediately, she transformed herself into a simulacrum of Pieta naked. Max Jordan averted his eyes, but in his dream state, he could not close off her image.

'What are you doing, Cali?' he begged of her.

'WHY are you LOOKING AWAY?' she roared at him. 'It's still ME. No matter what illusion I create, it's still ME and it will always be ME!'

'I understand that, but not everybody else does.'

'Then, why won't you look at ME?' she raged.

'Because she's my sister.'

Caliph changed again, this time to an image of a naked Goneril Lear. It was a terrifying

effect... but also kind of arousing.

'So THAT'S the way it IS, huh?' She shrieked at him in that horrible bitch-voice Pieta affected whenever she didn't get what she wanted, a voice that seemed perfectly normal coming out of Executive TyroCommander Lear. 'So, all of a sudden, YOU decided that simulated SEX with any woman on the ship isn't GOOD enough for you. Is THAT how it is, MISTER Max Jordan. Is THAT how it is?'

'I just want to be with you Cal," he insisted.

'LIAR!' she raged. 'I can see your thoughts. I know you think about other women on this ship. LIAR! LIAR! LIAR! LIAR! LIAR!'

"Cali..."

"Don't Cali ME!" She raged at him. "I know your thoughts. I know how you FEEL! I took away your bad memories, but I can bring them BACK and WORSE!"

Max Jordan snapped awake in his sleeper, heart racing, his sheet bathed in cold sweat.

He did not sleep again that night.

PEGASUS – THE UNDERDECKS

Transferring the cargo from *Liminix CH-53* to *Pegasus* was not going to be easy. Tritium was an unstable element to begin with, and could only be safely transferred via electro-magnetic isolation conduits. The Tritium cargo transfer equipment *Pegasus* had been equipped with was not compatible with the cargo ports of the other ship. The Hellions had been unable to supply them with specifications for designing adapters, so that task had to wait until the old ship was alongside and could be studied.

This task fell to Technicians (Fuel Specialists) Watts and Sparks, who took to space in EV suits to study the ports close-up. They left through one of the UnderDecks' airlocks, and flew over to check on the connectors. Behind them, the big red sun of 200 200 Ara glowered ominously.

The umbilical connectors had mated with the cargo egresses on tanks 1 and 2. Sendors could not confirm a tight seal, so these were the first points they checked. The fuel crews, anticipating discrepancies in the specifications, had designed the connectors on the *Pegasus* to morph, so that they would fit to the *Liminix CH-53* quite snugly.

The fits were tight, so Watts opened the *Pegasus* connector, and then cycled the release on *Liminix CH-53*.

Watts first noticed the problem, which he did when he scanned the area around the juncture for leaks and emissions.

"Sparky, come take a look at this," he said.

"Please stop calling me Sparky," Sparks replied. The nickname irritated her. She looked at Watts's readings, then double-checked with her own scanner.

"This can't be right," Sparks smacked her portable scanner. "Double check those

readings, and alert whoever is in command today. This could be a problem.”

PEGASUS – OFFICERS’ LOUNGE (ALL CREW WELCOME)

At one time, these had been the Lear Family Quarters. They had been transformed, by order of *Pegasus’s* Commanding Officer, into a 10-Star Cocktail Lounge. Crisp white linen tablecloths topped intimate, holo-candle-lit tables for two or four. There was a row of booths along one wall, upholstered in a tasteful cream color that matched the walls. A piano tinkled smoothly in the corner, attended by a faceless android. The tables were attended by android cocktail waitresses whose resemblance to a certain former first officer was uncanny.

Presiding over the lounge was a tall, thin man with barely a memory of who had once been. His red hair was clipped close to his scalp and he wore a stylish white dinner jacket. There was no *de jure* dress code in the Officer’s Lounge, but his elegant presence inspired most of the crew to dress up for a night out in his bar.

When Eliza Change arrived, Philip John Miller Redfire turned his host and bartending duties over to a crewman and an automech, crossed the lounge, and took Eliza’s hand. “I was wondering when you would find time for an old friend,” he whispered in her ear.

She kissed him warmly, and asked for a glass of pale gold wine. He knew what she liked, and he had a bottle of an Arcadian vintage that predated the ship’s launch perfectly chilled. He supplied her with the drink, then took a quiet table in a discreet alcove Goneril Lear had once used for meditation.

He held her hands. “I missed you very much over these last few days.”

She brushed back her hair with her fingertips. “The Hellion Mining Operations reminded me of home. I should have like to have seen their homeworld. Did we have any success in locating it?”

“There are something like 172 planet-sized rocks orbiting in this system. Anyone of them could have been Hellion Prime,” Redfire told her. “But we just held position here. The Hellions told us not to send out any probes, and we respected their request.”

Redfire kissed her hand, held it, and fixed her in his gaze. “Eliza, it’s been well past two years now. I think it’s time to take our relationship to the next level.”

“You always think it’s time to take our relationship to the next level,” Change replied, in a mild pique.

“I love you,” Redifre told her.

“I know.”

“I want to marry you.”

“I know that, too,” she said.

“So why not?” Redfire told her. “I admit, the man I previously was not a good husband to his dear wife, but I’m not that man anymore.”

“It isn’t because of that,” she told him. “I just don’t feel that marriage is in our destiny. Our relationship satisfies me the way it is. I don’t see any reason to make any adjustment to it.”

Redfire tried to laugh. "Really? We're such an odd, pair, Eliza Jane Change. What are the odds that either one of us will ever..."

"You need to figure out who you are," she interrupted him.

With that, Redfire could not even manage forced laughter. "I used to think that. Then, I realized that while it was true that this amnesia stole my past, I also realized it gave me the chance to remake myself in the image of any man I wanted to be. The man I want to be is the man who loves you."

Before she could respond again, her COM Link called for her attention. She answered it quickly. "Lieutenant Commander Change."

"Commander Change, this is Technician Sparks in the Fueling Station. We have a real problem with the Tritium. You better come down."

"What's wrong?" she asked, sliding her hand out of Redfire's grasp.

"I'll explain en route," Sparks told her. "Just come down here."

"I'm on my way, Change out," she looked over to Redfire. "We will have to pick this up another time. There's a problem with the Tritium."

"The Tritium, what is it?"

"I won't know until I get down there." She made haste to leave but saw that Redfire was looking at her forlornly.

"All right," she said. "It's a radioactive isotope of hydrogen we use as aviation, fuel, but that's not important right now. What the hell is it with you Sapphireans and that dumb joke?"

PEGASUS – THE UNDERDECKS

When Eliza Jane Change arrived in the cargo transfer bay, she was giving off something of a roiling black and purple aura herself. It got worse when she saw that David Alkema was already in the CTB, talking grimly with Technicians Watts and Sparks.

"What is this I hear about there being no Tritium in my Tritium tanker that I risked my life to get?" she demanded.

"We've checked all six tanks," Watts confirmed. "There isn't a drop of tritium on that ship."

"What's in the tanks?" Change asked, snatching the data pad away from him and looking at the results for herself.

"Slush Deuterium," Sparks answered. "It's a by-product of the refining process."

"I know what it is," Eliza Change was seething, her brow tensioning with controlled anger. "They conned us. Those air-sucking gravity whores conned us. They used us as a decoy while they escaped with the Tritium."

It all seemed obvious now. How had they hidden it from her? Aso must have known. Miko had to have known. Now she knew the real reason they kept the crew isolated, and her attention on the repairs to the ship.

She shook her head, her cheeks stinging hot with shame at having been tricked. Cargo

switching was one of the more transparent scams in the old Mining Guild. She had never fallen for it, but she had known a trader captain who had been taken in by a cargo of cloned pseudo-beast embryos that had turned out to be kidney beans.

Why hadn't she seen it this time?

"Can we get any use at all out of the Deuterium?" Alkema asked Sparks.

"It's highly impure," Sparks answered. "But we could refine it. There might be... 80 - 90,000 usable liters of Deuterium."

Watts added. "*Pegasus* has some auxiliary fusion reactors that can run on Deuterium. But as aviation fuel, it's useless. The Aves were designed to run on Tritium."

Alkema considered this. "Our fuel reserves are below 10%. When they get to 5%, Odyssey Project Protocols require us to return to a known fuel source. We either have go back to Chapultepec. Or, we could try and locate another source in this Quadrant before that happens."

Change grew even more angry as she heard his words. This was Alkema's approach to a problem. Work around it. Find some way of getting to the desired outcome through a different solution. It was his way, and it usually worked.

But it was not her way.

"No," Change answered. "We're going to get our Tritium back from the Hellions. We made an honest deal, and we lived up to our part of the deal. That Tritium belongs to us, and we're going to get it, whatever it takes."

Before Alkema could object, she grabbed him by the collar and looked hard into his eyes. "Get with Tactical Lieutenant Commander Kitaen and anyone else you need. I want a plan to get my Tritium back in the next two hours. Any resource you need is at your disposal."

"The Hellions are long gone with the Tritium, and we don't even know where their homeworld is," Alkema pointed out.

Change considered this. "Our probes could survey the system..." She paused, and reconsidered. "No, that would not be practical. It would take too long. Once they have the Tritium off the ships, we'll never be able to get it."

"Which is why we should consider finding an alternative Tritium sources," said Alkema.

Eliza Change considered the problem for a moment longer. Then, a memory flashed into her mind, a memory of *Liminix* CH-53 pulling up to the docking arm, of the arm swinging into place and locking with the ship, of an umbilicus mating with the input above the hatch.

She turned. "Follow me," she ordered.

"Where are we going?" Alkema asked.

"To the airlock."

LIMINIX CH-53 -MAIN BRIDGE

Although he was not familiar with *Liminix's* systems, it did not take long for Alkema to access the navigational core from one of the stations on the Bridge. He quickly isolated the

archival data and displayed it for Eliza Change.

"Exactly as you said," Alkema confirmed. "When the umbilicus connected, it linked the ship with the station's braincore, which they call a 'computer.' It automatically updated *Liminix's* Navigation database, including an automatic destination update of the location of Hellion homeworld.

He linked the navigation database to his datapad, so as to better manipulate the data. On the forward part of the bridge, one of the navigation screens showed a map of the system. A dwarf planet lying just outside the debris field was highlighted. In the Hellion language, a sidebar indicated this was Hellfire Prime.

"Translate this matrix and lay in a course," Change ordered.

"You bet," Alkema quickly transferred the Hellion coordinates through the Lingotron.

Change turned and made for the hatch. "I'm going to *Pegasus's* Bridge, have the translation complete before I get there."

Alkema sent a command to the Lingotron to get to work on it, then followed her out.

PEGASUS - MAIN BRIDGE

By the time they reached *Pegasus's* Main Bridge, the translation was complete.

"Transferring navigational coordinates to Helm," Driver reported

"Transfer to command station also," Change ordered. A neural link emerged from the arm of the command chair and coiled around Change's arm. "Helmsman Atlantic, lay in a course for these system coordinates?"

Atlantic snapped alert, as though he had been daydreaming. "Sorry, ma'am?"

"Wake the hell up and lay in a course to the system coordinates Mr. Alkema just sent to you," Change ordered. "I can do it myself if you've got something better to do."

"Aye Ma'am, sorry ma'am." He activated the helm interface, which grew over his left forearm and left eye. "I'm plotting a course around the debris field. Our ETA at the specified coordinates is approximately six hours, 61 minutes."

Change looked dissatisfied. "Negative, cut through the debris field. That will reduce our transit time to fewer than three hours."

Atlantic turned to her, an anxious look on his face. "Aye, ma'am... but that will take us... through the debris field."

"I know that," she told him. "Not hitting anything will be your problem."

Nervously, Atlantic input commands into his helm station. *Pegasus's* four gravitational drive engines squeezed space-time around the ship and pushed it forward, surfing on its own personal gravitational wave front.

"Deflector shields at maximum," Change ordered. The bubble of distorted space-time around the ship would push most of the debris out of the way, but it would also create slipstreams and wake vortices around the ship. Some might penetrate the bubble, but it was more likely that Hellion Prime was in for a heck of a meteor shower when *Pegasus* made orbit.

The way Change figured it, they had it coming.

Alkema took his place at the tactical station. "I've alerted General Kitaen to prepare for a tactical strike to reclaim our Tritium. Do you have any particular type of operation in mind?"

Change stared at the forward display as a field of gravel-sized asteroids came into view. "If we're lucky, we'll catch the other three tritium carriers in orbit. In which case, we can disable their systems with directed field pulses. Then, we can send a company of warfighters over to take one."

"It's a safe bet the Hellions will defend their ships," Alkema warned her.

"Yes, it is," Change agreed. "But, from what we've seen, their defenses will be no match for *Pegasus*. What will be worse is if their ships are on the ground when we arrive at the planet. That could be a problem." She frowned and turned to Alkema. "Solve that problem."

Alkema sighed and began working his station. He accessed the primary tactical sensor array. "I'll have to scan for ion trails, maybe I can track their flight into the atmosphere. It's going to be tough in this radioactive environment."

"I know you will find them," Change assured Alkema. "The hard part will be getting to them. They may be in hangars, and even if they are in the open, they will be heavily defended."

Alkema added, "According to your mission report, the Hellions rigged their ships to explode. They could destroy them before we get a chance."

"Then, they won't have the Tritium either, but I don't think they will do that," Change said. "It's too valuable to them."

"Either way, it could get messy," Alkema argued. "We should probably try a negotiated solution."

"That is one possibility," Change informed him. "We'll target the ships from space and give the Hellions an ultimatum: Give us our tritium, or we'll destroy yours."

Alkema missed a beat, then he said, "Your approach to negotiations is different than others."

"I would still prefer not to destroy the Tritium," she said. Then, she challenged him. "If you have a better plan, Lt. Commander, I'm open."

Alkema's eyebrows knitted, he stared down at his station, not seeing it but looking past it. Then, **that look** came into his eyes, and he said, "Maybe there is another way."

PEGASUS – BRIDGE

Two hours and four minutes later, and after a moderate degree of asteroid-related peril Pegasus arrived at the system coordinates. But the planet wasn't there. Operations Specialist Roentgen, who was on Telemetry, dreaded having to inform TyroCommander Change of this fact. Atlantic was more terrified that he had gotten them to the wrong coordinates than he had been at the giant, doughnut-shaped rock he had dodged an hour and a half earlier.

Alkema spared both of them. "We've arrived at the coordinates from *Limnix's* navigational core, but I am not detecting a planet here."

All were surprised that Change's disappointment registered only in a frown. "The navigational data was probably out-of-date. The planet must be along this orbital path, but not in this position. Send out a broad scan and see if it's within range."

"Stand down weapons?" Alkema asked.

"Our odds of finding them before they have off-loaded the Tritium are remote," Change told him. "If we don't locate them very quickly..."

That didn't really answer Alkema's question, but she seemed to think it did, so he kept weapons at ready just to be safe.

Roentgen sent out three-hundred-sixty degree scans along each of the ship's three axes. "Commander, I have detected something 4,000,000 kilometers distant."

"The dwarf planet?" Change asked.

"Negative," Roentgen reported. "It appears to be a ship."

"One of the Tritium Haulers?" Alkema asked, but as he was transferring the data to his station he saw that it wasn't.

"Negative, Sir," Roentgen told him. "It's way too big to be a tritium hauler. It's almost half as large as *Pegasus*."

"Is it a Solarite Mother-Ship?" Change asked.

"I don't know," Roentgen answered. "There's too much neutrino interference from the sun to get a clear..."

"Then, let's take a close look," Change decided, and she ordered Atlantic to take them in closer.

Section 08

THE HELLFIRE SYSTEM – SPACE

Pegasus pulled up close (relatively speaking) to the alien ship. Approaching from the aft side. It was not as large or elegant as *Pegasus*, essentially a 2,000 meter cylinder with a large cluster of engines encircling the back and a large round sphere in-front. Both the engines and the front sphere were connected to the cylinder by a cage-work of girders and beams, that also partially enclosed the main cylinder. The plating on the sphere and the cylinder was smooth and mirror-like, reflecting the stars.

The three other tritium haulers were attached to the framework that connected the propulsion sections to the rest of the ship and enclosed three large spheres, just aft of the main cylinder.

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE

"The three spheres are tritium tanks," David Alkema reported, relaying the results of a penetrating neutrino scan and projecting the results to a hologram in the middle of the Bridge.

"Fully loaded," Alkema added. "There must be 5.7 million liters of tritium on that ship... minimum."

"Have the carriers off-loaded their cargo?" Change asked.

"They still scan as full," Driver reported. "It's almost like the haulers are being used as auxiliary fuel tanks."

"I'm reading almost ten thousand individual life signs on that ship." Specialist Roentgen reported, then wondered aloud. "What are they doing?"

Alkema shook his head. "I don't know,

"They're leaving," Change explained to them. "That ship is a multi-generational transport."

"How can you know that?" Alkema asked.

Change stood, approached the display, and altered it to an internal scan of the ship. "Look at the schematics, check all these hard connectors between these individual pods and these primary and secondary life support systems. Those pods are stasis pods. There are also massive cargo storage areas in the centerline of the ship."

"If they were in stasis, I would have detected them," Roentgen protested.

"They aren't in stasis yet," Change answered. "Probably waiting until they've left the system. They've been losing their war against the Solarites for years, so they're pulling out."

Alkema agreed. "That makes sense."

"Do they have any weaponry?" Change asked.

"Minimal," Alkema reported as he read the scans. "Short-range ion-cannons, missiles with nucleonic warheads, nothing our defenses can't handle."

"I don't think they've even noticed us," Roentgen said.

"Agreed," Alkema agreed. "I'm not detecting any scans, nor any kind of power-spike I'd associate with weapons or shields being brought on-line."

"Let's make them notice us," Change said. "Roentgen, send out a hail. Inform them that Lieutenant Commander Change of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus* wants their undivided attention and abject fear."

For a split-second, Alkema thought she was joking.

"I'm not joking," she told them.

"You just sounded like Commander Keeler for a moment," Alkema said.

Change scowled. "I'll forget that you said that."

Some seconds passed. "They are ignoring our hails," Roentgen reported.

"Target the particle cannons for a display burst in front of their bow," Change ordered.

"That should get their attention," Alkema said, targeting and firing the weapons. The

display burst exploded in front of the Hellion ship in a blaze of brilliant light and sent shockwaves along its length.

They waited. "Still no response," Roentgen reported.

"Maybe we need to speak up," Change decided. "Raise the yield and prepare to fire a double burst."

"Message coming in," Roentgen told her.

"Stand by weapons," Change told Alkema. "Give me a message display."

A holo-projection appeared in front of the command station. A middle-aged Hellion in a black uniform, trimmed in white and red, stood stoically before them. "I am Captain Aja, of the starship Legacy X. You are requested to stand down your unprovoked attack before we are force to retaliate."

Alkema suppressed a little smile. Change simply raised an eyebrow, as she responded to him. "We've come for the Tritium, in fulfillment of our honest contract."

"How did you find us?" Aja demanded.

"Never mind how, I just did," Change answered him. "I will remind you of the terms of our agreement. In return for 600,000 liters of Tritium, we were to pilot one decoy ship to distract the Solarites while you evacuated the remaining Tritium from Hellfire Station 3. We fulfilled our end of the bargain, however, you apparently filled the cargo tanks of our ship with slush deuterium."

"It was regrettable to have to deceive you," Aja said, in a monotone devoid of any hint of real regret. "You must understand that we were desperate. We apologize if our actions have caused you any offense."

"No, we aren't offended," Change told him. "And if you just pay us what we're owed, we'll be able to put this behind us."

Aja frowned. "I am afraid that will not be possible."

"I understand completely," Change replied. "Lt. Commander Alkema, target Hammerhead missiles on the bridge of that ship."

Alkema was taken aback, "Commander?"

"Stand by to target an additional brace of Hammerheads on the rear quarter." Change ordered. She turned to Aja's impassive face on the screen. "We also happen to be desperate."

Aja began to display signs of nervousness. "If you destroy the bridge, you may destroy the entire ship."

"Yes," Change agreed. "That is a possibility."

"There are thousands of innocent lives on this ship!" Aja protested. "Women! Children!"

"With any luck at all, we'll just kill you," Change replied, and signaled to Alkema to lock weapons.

Aja squinted at them, fear or rage was hard to tell. "If you destroy this ship, you'll destroy the Tritium."

"We weren't going to have any Tritium anyway," Change repeated. "Lt. Cmdr

Alkema?"

"Hammerheads are targeting the Main Bridge, Tyro commander," he said. The hesitation in his voice was clear, though. It would be apparent to Aja that he was not in agreement with his commander's strategy.

"Stand by to fire on my mark," Change told him.

Aja stared hard back at her. "You are a civilized people. You would not fire on a defenseless ship."

Change did not give a centimeter. "Tactical, Fire the first brace of Hammerheads."

"Stop!" Aja yelled. He held out a hand as though to hold them off, and spent a few seconds recovering his calm before speaking again. "Perhaps, there is room for negotiation. We may be able to give you *some* of our Tritium."

Change raised her arm toward Alkema, telling him to hold off, but only for a moment. "How much Tritium will you be willing to give us," Change.

"We could spare 10,000 liters. No more," Aja told her.

"Why are you wasting my time?" Change signaled to Alkema. "Tactical, target a single Hammerhead at their bridge and have a brace standing by. Maybe someone lower in the chain of command will see reason after their captain is dead."

"How much do you want?" Aja said, with a gratifying edge of panic in his voice.

"All of what we are owed," Change persisted. "600,000 liters. Not a drop less."

"That is impossible!" Aja insisted. "At least, let us negotiate before you begin killing us. We are the last of our people."

"That is not my problem," Change protested.

Alkema interrupted. "TyroCommander, we have them in a box. We can take the Tritium any time we want. Please reconsider my plan. Can we at least give my idea a shot and see if it will work?"

Change shot him an angry look.

"We have nothing to lose, TyroCommander," Alkema insisted plaintively. "And, if it works, we only need a fraction of our load of Tritium."

Change closed her eyes, then slowly opened them again. "My executive officer thinks he has a compromise solution. I am willing to give his solution a chance to work, but if I detect any lapse in your cooperation, if I even sense that you're trying to cheat us again, your ship will not leave this system intact. Is that clear?"

"I think we may be able to agree on that," Aja barked, still managing to sound arrogant despite the losing hand he was holding.

"Lt. Commander Alkema," Change asked. "How much Tritium do we need to for the catalytic process?"

"20,000 liters should be sufficient," Alkema said. "But let's ask for 30,000, just to be sure."

Change appeared to agree, but made it clear she was reluctant. "We will need 30,000 liters of Tritium."

Aja seemed relieved, but tried to remain unemotional. "What catalytic process?"

Change explained. "Lt. Cmdr. Alkema thinks that the slush deuterium you provided can be transformed into Tritium, but we need a Tritium catalyst to commence the procedure."

"That is impossible," Aja snarled.

"I agree," Change nodded. "Frankly, I'd rather shoot you."

"It's a theory," Alkema put in brightly. "With a little luck, we can catalyze 20% of Liminix's cargo into usable Tritium. It's not a lot, but it should last us until we find a star system with exploitable quantities." He paused. "If it works."

"That's still not a lot," Change said. She looked up at Aja and stared at him hard.

"We can spare 25,000 liters of Tritium," Aja told them.

Change reluctantly assented. "We'll accept your offer of 25,000 liters of Tritium... provisionally. If we succeed in catalyzing another 100,000 liters from the Liminix, you will be free to go."

Aja made a gesture to one of his crew and the screen froze and went silent for some seconds. Then, it returned, as though it has been paused and fast-forwarded. "We respectfully request the presence of a technical crew to observe the catalytic process."

"Absolutely not," Change snapped.

Aja held out his hands as though beseeching her. "You must understand, we are desperate. The Solarites have made it impossible for us to remain in this system. We have enough Tritium fuel to reach Fallon. But, if Fallon is untenable as a relocation colony, we will have to then go to Moraine. We have barely enough Tritium to reach Moraine, but if you can really catalyze deuterium into Tritium, that could provide us with enough fuel to be assured of reaching Moraine. Our chances of survival will double."

Change sat in the captain's seat with an intense expression, weighing her exasperation and anger with the Hellion's against that sense of decency that compelled her to help. "All right," she finally submitted. She held up four fingers. "Four technical observers, unarmed. And one of them must be from the team that salvaged *Liminix*."

Aja smiled like he had just won. "I had hoped you would be amenable to reason. We will begin preparing our workers. I will inform you when the workers and the Tritium are ready." He stopped transmitting before Change could say any more.

PEGASUS – HANGAR BAY

Within a couple of hours, two shuttles had been dispatched from *Legacy X* to *Pegasus*. One carried the first 10,000 liters of Tritium, and was instructed to hold position until the catalytic converters were ready. A flight of heavily armed Aves held position nearby, in case the Hellions had any notion of detonating the cargo of Tritium in *Pegasus's* vicinity.

The other shuttle carried a small technical crew. These were not decrepit shuttles like the one that had flown Change, Driver and the others into the stellar atmosphere to recover *Liminix CH-53*. They were sleek and white, and looked brand new.

David Alkema and four warfighters met the shuttle in Hangar Bay Delta. The shuttle

came to rest at an empty docking station after making a slow, careful passage through the landing tunnel. A hatch on the center portion opened and folded out, creating a kind of staircase. He recognized Technician Logo from the mission reports.

"Are you the leader of this group," he asked her.

"I am," Technician Logo answered.

Alkema addressed her and her crew. "The catalytic process will be monitored from a facility in the UnderDecks of this ship. These men and I will escort you there. You are not to leave the facility without authorization from me, and you will at all times be in the company of an armed security detail, is that understood?"

"It is," Technician Logo agreed. "However, such precautions are not necessary. We have only come to observe the process, and not interfere."

Alkema said only, "Come this way," and led them to a tubeway station, where a transport pod was waiting to take them deep into the guts of the ship. They split into two groups, Alkema and one warfighter riding with Logo and another technician whose coverall patch identified him as "Ota." Another pod took two more warfighters and the other Hellfire personnel into the ship."

Alkema said nothing at first as the pod took them deeper into *Pegasus's* UnderDecks.

"How were you able to find us?" Logo asked him timidly, after the silence had not gone on long enough."

"Lieutenant Commander Change is extremely smart, and very determined," Alkema answered. "You would be wise not to cross her again."

"What will happen if the catalytic conversion process doesn't work?" Logo asked some time later as the pod continued its descent.

Alkema hesitated. "I can only tell you we have contingency plans."

"Will you steal our Tritium by force?" demanded Ota, the other Hellion.

Alkema repeated. "I can only tell you, there are contingency plans."

"You are as bad as the Solarite pirates," Ota spat.

"That's not exactly true," Alkema said. "We have better weapons and ships."

"So, your might makes you right," Ota challenged him.

Alkema shook his head, but did not offer argument.

Logo tried to explain. "*Legacy X* was built to transport 10,000 of our people to Fallon colony. It contains a complete micro-stored record of our history, our culture, our achievements; 3,000 years of history. We need the Tritium to reach our new home. Without it, not only we, but all the achievements of our ancestors will be lost forever."

The transport pod zagged right. Alkema knew they would be at the monitoring station soon. "How far away is Falldon colony?" he asked

"22 standard light years," Logo answered.

"*Pegasus* could have carried 10,000 people that far without a problem," Alkema said quietly. "You only needed to ask."

Logo and Ota said nothing, and after a few moments Alkema glanced over at Ota to see his face red with shame and insult.

PEGASUS – THE UNDERDECKS

The Transport Pod docked at a station deep in *Pegasus's* UnderDecks, 70 decks below the ship's mid-line. Alkema led them through a network of pipes and conduits, like giant robot intestines, to a control room. There, on a primary display, was *Limnix CH-53*, shown connected to *Pegasus* by several umbilical lines and an extended docking arm.

"You've done something to it," Logo observed, squinting at the hologram of *Limnix CH-53*. The forward Tritium tank was ringed by a mechanical collar.

"The catalytic converters have been installed on *Limnix*," Driver explained, and highlighted the additional equipment installed onto *Limnix*. "Our fuel handling systems are designed to handle Tritium, not deuterium. Building the catalytic converters on *Limnix* was also a faster solution than retro-fitting our fuel handling devices."

"How did you do it so quickly?" she asked.

"Microbots, mostly," Alkema answered. He indicated a spot on the collar. "Your shuttle should dock here. There's a fuel transfer point."

"How does it work?" Ota asked.

"We're very adept at extracting energy from the interactions of quantum particles," Alkema explained. "Extracting matter is another story. What we are going to try to do is break down the deuterium into a quantum state where, basically, its quarks are willing to be re-arranged into something else. Then, we will shoot a stream of Tritium through the quantum-flexible proto-matter, and we think some of the deuterium quarks will transform. If we're lucky, we'll get three or four new molecules of Tritium for every molecule of refined Tritium we shoot through. Then, we can recover it using a standard refining process and venting the impurities into space."

"Why can't you convert it completely?" Logo asked.

"Most of the proto-matter will revert to Deuterium after a few zillionths of a second," Alkema explained. "It takes a lot of energy to get to this process. *Pegasus* is going to have to power down non-essential systems during the refining process."

"What about defense systems?" Logo asked.

"If you are thinking of attacking *Pegasus* when we're powered down, forget it," Alkema told her. "Our missiles and artillery defenses will be on-line. And we still have eight Aves on continuous patrol. I am obliged to tell you, they can and will attack your ship if you try anything."

"We would never do that," Logo insisted. "I was only concerned about Pirate attack. We never wanted to fight you."

"True, you only wanted to take advantage of us, and steal from us," Alkema replied. "Change wanted to attack you, and it took a hell of a lot of convincing for her to give this plan a shot."

Logo looked down at the deck. Alkema sensed she was genuinely remorseful for the deception, but was bound to her orders.

Alkema continued. "If we can salvage 120,000 liters of this cargo, we'll have enough for another two years of operations, together with what's left of our reserves. Hopefully, we can find another source by then."

Alkema touched the COM Panel. "Catalytic Monitoring Station to *Pegasus* Flight Operations. We are ready to begin. Transmit docking instructions to the Hellfire shuttle."

Alkema managed a weak and unreassuring smile. "This better work. I really don't want to have to attack your people."

PEGASUS – WARFIGHTER LOGISTICS SECTION, DECK 61

Thirty-Nine Decks below the Main Bridge, an entire deck of the Primary Command tower was used as an armory and quartermaster station for the ship's warfighters. Anaconda Taurus Rook spent most of her duty time here, especially since bearing Johnny Rook's daughter Skua, who rested nearby in a bassinet the warfighters had made from the warhead of a Hammerhead missile and lined with fuzzy pink blankets.

It was a good place to meet with warfighters, especially those who weren't getting along. Not getting along was something that happened often among warfighters, when there was nothing to fight. It fell to her to keep the units cohesive.

It was in that capacity that Taurus called her young husband and his friend into see her. "Good afterdawn, gentleman."

They saluted her briskly and she returned to salute. "This should not take long. Is Caliph here as well?" she asked.

Caliph shimmered into being on a hologram display, looking happily unaware that she had caused any sort of problem. "I'm here."

"Good. Now, you gentlemen, sit the hell down." She gestured at the couch for both of them. She took a chair as they sat down on it. "The way I hear it, you've been having some problems getting along with each other."

"I..." Rook began, but his wife cut him off.

"We're not going to sit down and sort through our feelers like little girls. We're going to take this on like the adults and the warriors that we are."

She addressed Rook first. "Honey, Specialist, I love you. I intend to keep loving you and keep having your babies for the rest of my life. And if I found out you were doing other women, even fantasy women, I'd smash your balls with a war-hammer and then I'd drop-kick **her** through an air-lock. So, I understand the jealousy, up to a point. But it's time to drop it. I order you to forgive Warfighter Jordan and forget about the whole thing."

Then, she turned to Jordan. "Warfighter Jordan, I hope you enjoyed your wet dream, because it's never gonna happen in real life. In fact, you should never speak about this again, to anyone, under any circumstances. Don't believe what anyone tells you, artificial testicles are not as good as the real thing, and if I ever show up in another fantasy of yours, you're going to need them."

Finally, she addressed the hologram. "And as for you, Caliph, if I ever here about you using me or any other woman on this ship in an unauthorized porno fantasy, I'll have you forcibly implanted into Technician Roebuck. And you don't want to know what kind of sick things run through that boy's head."

She stared them down. "Is that understood?"

"Affirmative, ma'am!" Rook told her, jumping up and snapping to attention.

"Affirmative, ma'am, sir, yes," Jordan agreed.

"Hmmpf," said Caliph. And then, "Bye." She disappeared.

"Now that that's dealt with," Anaconda Taurus Rook said, folding her arms in front of her. "I have a mission for the three of you, if you're done playing Panrovian Hygiene Serial and are ready to act as warriors again."

PEGASUS – THE UNDERDECKS

Some hours later, Alkema reviewed the results of the catalytic process on the first of *Liminix's* six tank. He read the report twice. "This can't be right," he said.

"What's wrong?" Logo asked.

"See for yourself," he switched the report display from text to graphic interpretation. "We expected the first tank to yield 20,000 liters of Tritium. If this analysis is correct, we got over 60,000 liters."

"That's good, isn't it?" Logo asked.

"Za, but if it's true, it means our understanding of the persuadable quantum state was off by a factor of three." He touched the COM Link. "Telemetry Section, this is Lt. Commander Alkema. Would you do a remote scan of the number one cargo tank on the Hellfire Tritium Hauler? Transmit the results to the Catalytic Monitoring Station."

The Telemetry officer complied, and in a few moments, the results of that remote scan confirmed the initial data. "This is very good news for us," Alkema said, with barely contained excitement. "If we can make Tritium out of Deuterium our fuel requirements may be solved."

He passed the datapad to Logo. Ota rose from his station and began comparing the data, now from two separate readings, verifying that 60% of the cargo had converted successfully to Tritium.

Meanwhile, Alkema reported to Change. "The results on the first cargo tank were outstanding. We salvaged 60,000 liters of Tritium."

Change looked mildly irritated as she conceded. "Congratulations, Lt. Commander, so far, your plan seems to be working."

Alkema responded, "I'd like our Lead Quantum Specialists, Arachnos and Outlaw, to come down and study the phenomenon. I'm sure they would like to figure out why the reaction worked more efficiently than their wildest predictions."

"Let's just worry about the fuel for now," Change told him. She seemed a little angry, which was understandable. She was still settling for less than a full load of fuel. "I will inform the Hellions to ship the next 10,000 liters of Tritium."

With that, she snapped off the COM Link.

Logo handed the datapad to Ota, and sidled up to Alkema. "I am compelled to ask if you would be willing to share this technology with us? Some of the Tritium we use in propulsion converts to deuterium in our fusion process. If we could recover it, it would extend our voyage, and give us a better probability of survival."

"Not a chance," Alkema told her. "Even if I were in favor, which I'm not, Lt. Commander Change would never let you have it after cheating us. And I am fairly certain Commander Keeler will agree."

Logo sighed, and cast her eyes at the deck again. "Would you ask anyway?"

"All right, but I think you're wasting your time," Alkema sighed and touched the COM Link again. "Commander Change. Our guests would like to know if you are willing to give them the *Liminix CH-53* once we have finished converting its cargo."

To his surprise, she answered. "I don't see why not. I have no use for an old garbage hauler stuck to the side of my ship, and we're just going to abandon it anyway."

Alkema paused for a second, as though needing a moment to process this change in the expected outcome. "They also want the catalytic conversion technology."

"That will cost them another 30,000 liters of Tritium," Change asked.

"I will see if the Managers will agree," Logo told her.

Without further comment, Change switched off the COM channel.

Section 09

PEGASUS – DOCKING ASSEMBLY

After five ship-days of processing, Alkema determined they had wrung all the Tritium they were going to from *Liminix CH-53*. It came, Alkema said, to a total of 370,000 liters. The last day was spent carefully transferring the cargo into storage tanks on *Pegasus*.

When they were done, the *Hellion* crewmen were escorted back to *Liminix CH-53* via its docking connection on the UnderDecks. Alkema oversaw their departure. Change was not in attendance.

As they made their final preparations to leave, Logo approached Alkema. "Thank you again for your kindness and understanding."

"I'm just glad I found a solution we can both live with," he answered her.

Logo had one more thing, though it saddened her. "I am disappointed that Flight Captain Driver... did not wish to see me."

"Maybe he just didn't want to say goodbye again," Alkema suggested diplomatically.

"Or, he is angry with me for our deception," she said sadly.

"Matthew Driver isn't the kind of guy who holds a grudge," Alkema replied. "You should go. Your people are probably eager to get back you back and start your journey. It's a

long sixty years to get to Fallon.”

Logo, who seemed to spend most of her life staring at the carpet, looked up and around the docking connector. It was not a large space, and it was quite utilitarian. Still, it seemed she would miss *Pegasus*.

When she walked into the shuttle connector, Alkema sealed the airlock behind her. Then, he linked in to the Bridge. “Alkema to Main Bridge. The Hellion crew is back on board *Liminx CH-53*.”

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE

Change acknowledged David Alkema’s report, then turned to Flight Operations. “Release the docking clamps and inform *Liminx* that they may return to their ship.”

“Aye,” the Specialist at Flight Ops responded.

They watched on the displays as *Liminx CH-53* decoupled from *Pegasus*, and began heading toward its rendezvous with *Legacy X*.

Change watched the departure from her seat at the Bridge. When *Liminx CH-53* closed for its rendezvous with *Legacy X*, she ordered, “Helm, back us off to 100,000 kilometers,” she ordered.

“Backing off to 100,000 kilometers,” Atlantic answered.

LIMINIX CH-53 AND LEGACY X

The Hellion pilot, Mr. Goto, was gratified to find that *Pegasus* technicians had completed repairs to the maneuvering thrusters and control systems. Guiding *Liminx CH-53* to the fourth docking slot on *Legacy X*’s hull proved to be simple, uneventful task.

As the docking clamps pulled in around the ship, the crew made their way to the air-lock, where they were met by Captain Aja, who congratulated them on the success of their mission. Technician Logo was taken away for debriefing, while the last two technicians remained behind to systematically deactivate systems and life support.

When they sealed the air-lock behind them, *Liminx CH-53* was cold, dark, and silent...
... for about ten minutes.

And then a small light, no larger than a Christmas tree light, activated in the structural framework between the engine room and the cargo tanks. Matthew Driver dropped from his place of concealment in the scaffolding and down to the deck. Dressed in a shadow suit, he slipped quietly through the empty passageways and to the crew deck, guided by his small light and the vision augmentation of his Spex.

Driver quickly came to the row of storage lockers where the former *Liminx CH-53* crew had kept their personal items. It was a simple matter to input the code to the third and fourth lockers, whose thick, padded doors opened up and to the side.

Johnny Rook and Max Jordan were waiting inside, wearing stealth battle dress.

"Thank the Allbeing," Rook told him. "Another hour in there, and I think Max and I would be legally married."

"We've docked with the Hellion mother-ship," Driver whispered. "There's no one on board but us."

"Then, I can assume that the plan is working?" Rook asked.

Driver confirmed. "We're here, aren't we?"

Jordan smiled at Driver. "Come here, I want to hug you."

"Perhaps later," Driver said. "We have to get off this ship before they figure out the 'catalytic converter' is useless, and all their slush Deuterium is still in the tanks."

The three of them moved swiftly to the airlock that joined *Liminix CH-53* to *Legacy X*. They had feared that it might be guarded, but their Spex showed no one posted on either side of the lock. Max Jordan touched the airlock hatch and concentrated, letting data feed from the sensors in his gloves to the Spex in his eyes.

"The airlock is monitored from their command and control center," he told them. "There are visual sensors, and the lock sends an alert to the C and C when it cycles." This was consistent with the system scans they had done on *Legacy X* while its crew was "monitoring Tritium conversion." Most of the data they had seen on the screens was simply a mix of energy production and food processing data from *Pegasus's* archives. Alkema had endured a moment of panic when the phrase "raspberry filling" had flashed on the screen during a refining process, but fortunately the Hellions did not catch it.

"Can you disable them?" Driver whispered.

Wires began to snake out of Jordan's gauntlet. "Yeah, I should be able to cause a temporary power loss to this section.

A few seconds work and then the hatch cycled. They moved quickly into *Legacy X*. The ship was darkened on the inside, and they depended on their Spex as they picked their way as quickly as possible along the Utility Shaft that ran along this edge of the ship. They came to another junction, opened the hatch, and stepped into a passageway.

Legacy X's interior took them a bit by surprise, accustomed as they were to the industrial starkness of the Hellion shuttles, *Liminix CH-53*, and the late Hellfire Station. It was actually... sorta nice, in a Spartan sort of way. The decks were covered with a carpetish padding in a shade of pale brownish red and the walls were a complimentary beige. Anyway, it was clean, and it all appeared to be working.

Driver checked his schematic. "33 meters ahead, there's a primary corridor that will lead us to the next docking port."

They heard pounding footsteps, a pair of technicians was moving somewhat quickly through the corridor, and ducked into a niche in the corridor. In the dim light, and with the help of their shadow-gear, they avoided detection. The Hellions walked right past them.

"How long until they figure out we're here?" Rook asked.

"We have no way of knowing," Driver replied. "If the tactical reads were right, most of the crew is already in stasis or preparing for stasis, with just 155 people actually running the ship. Only a fraction of them will be security... hopefully."

"Yeah, hopefully," Max Jordan agreed. They continued there way through the ship, encountering no one as they came to the second docking position.

"If I read the spatial maps correctly, a ship called the *Archonix* will be connected through that airlock," Driver said.

He tapped the panel next to the airlock, and was greeted with three identical red symbols, that he supposed meant "Access Denied."

"Warfighter Jordan," Driver ordered, and pointed to the panel. Jordan crossed over and touched the panel with his battle glove. Wires snaked out again, connected to the system, and began working through an understanding of it.

Seconds ticked by. The system was proving hard to circumvent. "I wish Caliph were here," Jordan muttered.

"You mean she's not?" Driver asked. The mission briefing had said she would be. Her ability to interface with cybernetic systems was critical to the success of the plan.

"She hasn't spoken to me since Lt. Rook assigned us to this mish," Jordan replied.

"Oh," Rook considered this. "So, she's out of your head?"

"I don't know," Jordan answered, trying to concentrate on opening the lock. "I can't tell if she is in there or not."

"That would scare the Hell out of me," Rook said. "Not knowing."

"Warfighters," Driver hissed at them, and drew his hand across his neck.

Finally, the three symbols turned green and the hatch opened like an iris in front of them, leaving Rook, Jordan, and Driver to confront the two Hellion Guards that stood on the gangplank to the ship.

"Security alert, intruders at Airlock 9," the guards would have said had not Rook snapped a mini-stun grenade into the linking tunnel beyond the airlock. The three Pegasans ducked back into the linking tunnel. There was a bright flash of pure white light and two soft "clumph" sounds as the Hellions fell to the deck.

"Well done," Driver said, powering down his pulse weapon. After putting nine-hour sedation patches on the guard's necks, Rook and Jordan stuffed them into a storage locker and quickly boarded the second Tritium Hauler, whose name was stenciled next to the lock, *Arkonix CI-88*. They encountered no guards as they walked through the ship's darkened passageways.

"They made it a little too easy to steal their ship," Rook said.

"They didn't expect us to do this," Driver answered.

"I didn't expect us to do this," Jordan put it. "We're usually not this smart."

"You don't know Lieutenant Commander Change like I do," Driver told them.

Jordan and Rook went below to the fuel handling station, and stood by to decouple the fuel carrier from the *Legacy X*. They pulled up on their tactical displays the specs Lieutenant Jeff had prepared for them on the decoupling sequence.

Arkonix CH-88 was similar enough to *Liminix CH-53* that Matthew Driver was able to find his way easily to the bridge. Its layout superficially resembled the bridge of *Liminix CH-53*,

but was more intact and the controls were upgraded. He strapped himself into the helm station. The only thing that could hold him back was a code lock-out from the helm controls. He was relieved to power up the ship and discover there was none.

He signaled to Rook and Jordan on his COM link. "Begin the decoupling sequence."

"Slight problem with that," Jordan came back. "If I'm reading these specs right, the big ship has control over the decoupling mechanism."

"There's no way to by-pass it," Rook added, rightly anticipating the next question. "There are three connection points, and they're only accessible from the big ship."

"We thought this might be a problem," Driver told them. "You know what to do."

"Za, but we don't much like it," Rook came back.

Max Jordan grinned. "Hey, we're warfighters. We're not supposed to like it." Down in the Cargo Management Room, Jordan pulled open his pack and drew out the small charges as Rook opened the hatch in the floor of the deck. There was a space underneath, less than a meter high. It ran along the bottom of the ship. The plan was for the two warfighters to place resonance charges on the *Arkonix* side of the docking clamps, and weaken them enough for the ship to break free.

"There's a connector just forward of here, and two more aft. The furthest one is one hundred and six meters away from here," Jordan reported.

"And the only way is through this shaft," Rook said, lowering himself in. "All right, you take the two forward ones, I'll take the one that's way back there. No argument on this one."

"Good luck, buddy," Jordan told him.

Rook smiled. "Yeah, good luck to you, too."

"Time is a factor, warfighters," Driver told them from the Bridge

ARKONIX CI-88

Minutes later, in the access tube, Max Jordan carefully placed the two charges on the docking assembly. Placement was the key, the charges were designed to weaken the titanium alloy in the clamps, until it was about as strong as aluminum foil. Then, Driver would be able to peel away from the ship at full power.

They hoped it would work that way because they really didn't have a Plan B.

Incorrectly placed, they might instead weaken the outer hull or some critical load-bearing structure, and that would be problematic in terms of the ship not disintegrating around them.

Driver remained on the bridge as the two warfighters worked, checking out the ship's systems. He wondered if the power-up had been detected from *Legacy X*. For the first nine minutes, there was no indication that it had. He then checked his screen, and saw that a detachment of Hellion security had reached the outer air-lock.

Driver signaled Rook and Jordan as he stood from the helm station and crossed to the control area of the bridge. "Warfighters, we've got company at the forward airlock. I'm going to depressurize it and lock it down. But that won't hold them for very long."

"Just about there," Rook answered him. "I'm positioning the last charge. Give me about four minutes to get back to the cargo control station."

"Can you make it in two?" Driver challenged him.

"It took me six to get down here," Rook answered. "Jordan, where are you?"

Jordan answered, "My boomers are in place and I'm heading back to Cargo Control."

Driver checked his monitor. The security detachment had detected the lockout on the airlock. One of them spoke into a communication device. Seconds later, alarms began sounding in the main ship.

"Rook, you have to get out of there now," Driver said, running back toward the helm.

A few decks away, Jordan reached the access hatch and pulled himself into the Cargo Management Room. He called into his COM Link. "Johnny, you have to get up here now."

In the tube, Jordan looked down the long access tube, barely a meter high, and intruded upon by wires and conduits. Even at a fast crawl, it would take another four or even five minutes to get back.

At the air-lock, the Hellions were positioning some sort of device at the iris. As he looked on his security monitor, Driver wasn't sure what the device *was*, but he had a pretty good idea what it *did*. He clicked his COM Link. "The Hellions are about to breach the air-lock. Our time is up."

"We can't blow the charges, Rook is still in the tunnel," Jordan reported.

Driver tapped his controls. He couldn't tear the ship free with the docking clamps in place, even at full power. He wouldn't order Jordan to detonate them, which would almost certainly breach the tunnel to space. The load of Tritium and his ship's honor was not worth Rook's life.

Visions of Hellion holding cells dancing in his head, he tapped the COM link, "I can't break free unless we blow the docking clamps."

The Hellions finished positioning the device. Once they boarded the ship, it would take less than a minute for them to gain the bridge.

Jordan called into the hole. "Rook?"

"I'm half-way there," he answered in his COM Link.

Suddenly, Caliph appeared in the lens of his Spex. "Hi!"

"Not now, Caliph!"

"I thought you could use my help," she said poutily.

"What can you do?" Jordan asked her.

She didn't tell him, she showed him, projecting a schematic onto his SPEX. "There's an emergency hatch ten meters ahead of Warfighter Rook, and another ten meters behind him. If he closes them both, he will probably survive when the ship decouples."

"How probably?" Jordan asked.

"The conduit will probably lose structural integrity when the ship breaks off." She paused. "But between those two bulkheads, he has a fair chance of survival."

"A fair chance?" Jordan questioned.

"It's that or be captured," she explained to him. "I don't want you to be captured," she added.

But Jordan also remembered how much raw loathing and resentment he had felt coming from Caliph in his dream a few nights earlier, and how she had not spoken to him since. He wondered if she could be trusted, if she were being a lady or a tiger.

At about that time, Driver's Bridge monitors showed an airlock over-ride in progress. "Rook, Jordan, I can't hold off any longer. We either go or we surrender."

"Just go!" Rook ordered. "I'll take my chances."

Jordan got on the COM Link to Rook. "Johnny, it's me. Your best bet is to seal the bulkheads in front and behind you. They'll probably give you enough shielding to survive the explosions and the decoupling."

"How probably?" Rook asked.

"Hey, that's just what I asked," Jordan exclaimed. "It's either that, or get captured by the Hellions. And I don't want to go through that again. It's your choice."

Driver cut back in. "Gentlemen, I can't delay any longer. If we're going to leave, I've got to get the thrusters and main engines up to speed."

Rook broke into the COM Link. "Charges are set, Captain, blow them whenever you're ready." He immediately back-tracked and closed the hatch behind him.

At the helm, Driver pushed the four levers forward that powered up the Main Engines to Full Thrust. He then took on the left joystick that controlled the smaller maneuvering thrusters, and brought them up to power.

The Iris side of the airlock opened wide. The men moved the machine against *Arkonix's* outer airlock.

"Rook, are you safe?" Jordan called.

Rook sealed the second hatch then crouched on the deck with his fingers in his ears. "As safe as I'm going to get. Blow the charges!"

Jordan COM linked to Driver. "Detonating charges now."

He sent the command. Underneath the ship charges 1, 2, and 3 detonated. They

detonated without explosions, which would have been excitingly loud and violent and done a lot of damage. They weren't explosive charges after all. They simply pulsed out a molecular sheering wave that sliced through the alloy, weakening the molecular structure at the connect points enough to let the ship break free.

They hoped.

Because, of course, there was no Plan B.

Driver fired the maneuvering thrusters at full power.

There was a tugging sensation as *Arkonix CI-88* strained against the interlocks that kept her harnessed to the *Legacy X*.

But, the clamping mechanisms held.

"I'm hitting the main engines," Driver said. He had hoped this wouldn't be necessary, since there was a fair chance this would rip open the bottom of the ship as well.

"Main engines to 50 percent thrust," he said, pressing the controls forward. There was a loud bang as the forward clamp gave up the ghost and the front of the ship lifted, leaving behind a nice chunk of the coupling strut.

The Hellions retreated quickly back to their side of the Iris.

The rear clamps were still holding, but the strain against them was sending groans and quakes through the ship.

"Main Engines to 100 percent thrust," Drive announced, mostly to himself, because no one on the rest of the ship could quite hear him over the straining metal.

As the engines passed 83% of full power, the second and third coupling struts gave way almost simultaneously. The center strut ripped free with a chunk of the ventral hull the size of a double-door attached to it. Decompression alarms sounded on *Arkonix CI-88*.

The ship snapped free and jarred Matthew Driver violently on the Bridge. He watched on his screen as *Legacy X* fell away below him. He banked the ship and fired hard toward *Pegasus*.

"Rook, Jordan, are you all right?" Driver asked, pushing the ship hard up its acceleration curve.

"I'm super, thanks for asking," Jordan concerned.

"I am well also," Caliph added.

They waited. "Rook are you all right?" Jordan said.

No answer.

"Rook, are you there, please respond," Jordan repeated.

No response came.

THE HELLFIRE SYSTEM — ARCHONIX CI-88 — SPACE

The distance to *Pegasus* was a scant 100,000 kilometers. *Arkonix CI-88's* acceleration curve should have allowed them to make the trip in a matter of twelve minutes, give or take. They almost made it before the defense ships caught up with them.

Legacy X carried but a single squadron of short-range attack ships, but they were swift and well-armed, and they flew passed *Arkonix CI-88* to make a defensive line between the hauler and *Pegasus*. Once in position, two of the fighters broke off and fired warning shots around the ship's knobby command section.

The face of an enraged Captain Aja appeared in the bride's command screen. "Whoever is piloting *Arkonix CI-88*, I ordered you to stand down, surrender, or you will be destroyed."

Driver ignored him.

Aja repeated, "Whoever is piloting *Arkonix CI-88*, I ordered you to stand down, surrender, or you will be destroyed."

Two more of the fighters peeled back from the defensive line and fell behind the ship. Disrupter fire began raking across the rear hull.

Driver responded by banking his ship into a dive, so that the additional shots blasted small pits in the lower hull. He rolled into the opposite direction.

Aja spoke again, "Whoever is piloting *Arkonix CI-88*, I ordered you to stand down, surrender, or you will be destroyed. This is your final warning."

Driver pulled the ship up. There was not a lot, he realized, you could do with a big old tanker against fighting ships. His only weapon, really, was the ship's size and tank-like constitution.

One of the fighters came behind him and shot a missile into one of the four ion-thrusters at the rear of the ship. It exploded, taking out the engine next to it. *Arkonix CI-88* slowed. Driver tapped his COM Link. "Flight Group, if you're out there, this would be a good time to show yourselves."

"Acknowledged, Captain Driver," came the voice of PonyBoy James.

In space, an Aves appeared, dropping its holoflage shields and standing in the night sky.

Then, 83 more Aves dropped their shields and appeared, completely surrounding both the Hellion ships and *Arkonix*.

Another face appeared on *Arkonix CI-88's* communication screen, the face belonging to Eliza Change. "Enemy forces, you are outnumbered, and outgunned. Stand down, or you will be fired upon."

Several tense moments passed as orders were passed between *Legacy X* and its fighters. Then, one of the Hellion fighters wheeled about and began a diving attack run on *Arkonix CI-88's* rear quarter, seeking to take out the ship's two remaining engines. A fast missile from *James* ended that attack.

The Hellion fighters fell back, and *Arkonix CI-88* continued through the cordon of Aves toward its rendezvous with *Pegasus*.

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE

Eliza Change tapped a command onto her COM Link, and addressed the Hellions again. “We have taken back what is rightfully ours. Stand down your ships. You can not defeat us, and we would prefer not to destroy you. You may continue your journey now. We will have no more to do with you.”

They waited for several minutes for a response. One by one the Hellion fighters peeled off and returned to their ship.

Captain Aja called on *Pegasus* again. “You have committed an act of piracy. We demand that you return our ship and our Tritium.”

“You can have the ship, if you want it, but we’re keeping *our* Tritium,” Change answered.

“By this outrageous act, you have squandered the good will of my people,” Aja puffed at her.

“The good will of your people and nine space credits will buy me a large kava at the Interplanetary Commissary on Ronin 4,” Change snapped back. “We have our Tritium, and we have returned your slush Deuterium, and the 30,000 liters of Tritium you gave us. The contract is fulfilled. We wish you well in your journey.”

Aja scowled at them from the display. “You are bad people,” he said.

Then, the transmission cut out.

Specialist Roentgen reported that *Legacy X* was moving away at a high rate of speed.

Section 10

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE

A few Aves trailed Legacy X for a few light-hours as it accelerate out of the system, to make sure it was leaving and avoid further treachery. They noted that at the edge of the system, Liminix CH-53 was jettisoned from the side of the bigger ship, and left to drift in space.

Pegasus remained behind with unfinished business. A day and a half later, when the Hellions were well beyond sensor range, the pathfinder ship moved into orbit around a scorched asteroid just within the debris field. The ball of scorched rock was over 2,000 kilometers in diameters, and millions of years earlier had been the moon of an outer gas giant. Its surface had been burned black and rusty brown over eons of hellatious flares from 200 200 Ara.

Lieutenant Commander Windjammer handed command of Pegasus over to Lieutenant Commander Alkema at 1100 hours on the second day after Legacy X’s departure. “Rendezvous was supposed to be at 1100 hours,” Windjammer commented as Alkema took the watch. “The Commander is late.”

Alkema disagreed. “The Commander would argue that it’s always 1100 hours

somewhere in the Galaxy. What's the status on the fuel transfer from *Archonix*?"

"72% complete," Windjammer answered.

Alkema brought up a display that showed *Archonix* attached by umbilicals to *Pegasus's* rear quarter, the cargo of Tritium draining into the holding tanks below the Hangar Deck.

"Nice," he said. "Any problems during the last three shifts?"

"Not a one," Windjammer reported.

"Dang, this ship is getting boring," Alkema

"This might wake you up." Windjammer pulled some data for Alkema to review.

"These are the navigational fixes on the six nearest potential colony systems."

Alkema read through them. "Fallon, Moraine, New Galapagos, Unnamed System, Gethsemane, Icon... and do we yet have a clue about any of these worlds beyond their probable position in space?"

Windjammer indicated the two nearest systems on the star map. "Moraine and Fallon were trading partners with the Hellfire Colony, and their positions were in *Limnix's* Navigational Core. If they were trading in Tritium, they probably had fairly advanced technology."

"Za, but a hundred years ago, the trade stopped," Alkema pointed out. "They may not be as advanced as they were."

"Or, they may have simply advanced beyond the need for Tritium," Windjammer suggested.

"Maybe we'll find out after the commander makes up his mind which system to go to." With that, Alkema took his seat in the command chair, and sat back to wait for the commander's rendezvous signal.

PEGASUS – HOSPITAL FOUR

Rook lay in a healing bed, attended by the Medical Technician Boon Tam Rand. "He's fine," Rand reported. "A little decompression, a little hypothermia. Nothing his system can't handle."

When *Arkonix CI-88* pulled free of *Legacy*, two large plates on its hull were torn and opened up cracks and fissures all across the bottom of the ship. All of the areas underneath the bottom deck had been venting atmosphere.

"We completely thought you were possibly dead." Max Jordan had been at the other warfighter's bedside from the moment he had been brought aboard.

"It wasn't my turn, yet," Rook replied.

The breakaway had opened several small cracks in the space between hatches where Rook had been hunkering down, and one fissure large enough to put his hands through. It was a matter of seconds before all of the atmosphere had spaced.

"As it turns out, staying in the lower conduit was a stupid idea," Rook explained, he was still a bit raw and knocked back by the ordeal. There were ugly splotches of red across his

handsome face where capillaries had burst en masse because of the decompression. "I stuffed my pack into the hole, dug out my last microcharge and blew a hole into the next deck above."

He had to punch through the weakened deck plating, to create an opening just large enough to squeeze through, just as the last of his air was running out and the cracks in the hull were widening from the stress of high-speed maneuvering. That section was depressurizing also. As he made it to the hatch between himself and the adjoining section, freezing cold and growing dizzy with hypoxia, his refuge was racked with weapons fire from one of the Hellion fighters.

"I looked through the hole in the deck, and I could see the Hellion fighter shooting at us, and I saw his bullets tear through the hull," Rook reported. He always paused at that point. "But, by then, I was hallucinating so bad I also thought I saw green bunnybeasts and giant dancing raspberries. I'm not sure how I made it to the next section, but it was still pressurized."

That's where they had found him, after the Hellion fighters had retreated and *Arkonix CI-88* had pulled up close to *Pegasus*. "Your tactical gear staved off the worst of the hypothermia and oxygen deprivation, but you're still lucky to be alive," Rand told them.

"Great, can I leave now?" Rook asked.

Rand shrugged and filed off his medical report. "You can return to quarters. I'm putting a monitor on you for the next 28 hours just in case. It's standard procedure."

Rand left, and Rook changed out of his bed-clothes into some comfortable "off-duty" togs, electric blue with a hot-pink design on the sleeves.

"Is *she* still in your head?" he asked Jordan, as he pulled on his boots.

Jordan shook his head, "While you were still unconscious, Caliph and I had a talk and we decided we need to see other people."

"Good luck to her finding somebody's else's head to ride in," Rook snorted.

"She saved your life," Jordan told him.

"I'm not so sure about that," Rook shot right back him. "I've thought about this a lot. If she knew the ship's schematics enough to know about the pressure seals, she probably figured out that tearing loose the docking clamps would depressurize the tube I was in."

"I think I would have known if she were doing that," Jordan told him.

"She can manipulate your thoughts at will," Rook reminded him. "How can you be sure of anything that goes on in your head any more?"

This put Jordan in a thoughtful mood as he and Rook made their way to the Officer's Lounge.

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE

Alkema was near the end of his duty shift, when the Telemetry Officer alerted him, "A ship has just come into sensor range, it's a Solarite Command Ship."

"Raise alert level to Situation 3 and stand by," Alkema ordered. "Put the Solarite Ship

on the Main Display.”

A hologram activated in the forecenter of the bridge, showing a ship shaped like a giant wheel emerging from the stellar atmosphere. It was easy to see how it had been rebuilt from what had once been a Hellfire tritium refining station.

“Solarite Mother Ship off the port bow,” Tactical Specialist Arcane reported from the tactical station. “Tactical systems on alert.”

“Transmit signal,” Alkema ordered his COM officer.

“Receiving transmission,” Specialist Docker reported back, before the signal had even been sent. She transferred the transmission to a holographic display. The eye-part of Commander Keeler’s face appeared, as though shoved up against the transmitting camera.

“Is this thing working?” he asked.

“Hoy, Prime Commander,” Alkema greeted him. “Were the negotiations a success?”

“Oh, hi...,” Keeler said, stepping back from the camera and waving. “How are you guys doing?”

“We’re fine, sir,” Alkema told him. “Were the negotiations with the Solarites a success?”

Keeler shrugged, “I guess so. Hard to tell. Are you going to pick me up.”

“An Aves crew is standing by,” Windjammer told him.

“Brilliant!” Keeler exclaimed. “Meet me where you dropped me off. You know where that is, right?”

“We’ll find it,” Driver assured him.

SURFACE OF A DEAD ASTEROID

The Aves *Zilla* took the run from *Pegasus* to the surface of the moon it orbited, carrying Lt Cmdr Alkema and a pair of warfighters who, for once, were neither Rook nor Jordan. The brutally scorched moon had managed to hold onto some atmosphere in caverns below the surface, and its gravity managed to pull in some hot gas from the sun. As the Aves approached the surface, it passed thin clouds spun like wisps of smoke, belched from the planet’s dying interior.

On the surface was an ancient and much scarred spaceport, or more descriptively, the ruins of a spaceport. Flight Lieutenant Toto put the ship inside a very old landing field built in a crater and sheltered underneath the ruins of a large metal dome.

Some minutes after they landed, they were joined by another ship. The Solarite shuttle was a rounded triangle beast, like a fat guitar pick with a pair of X-wings fastened to its rear quarter. It set down about twenty meters from *Zilla*.

Upon its arrival, Alkema and the two warfighters suited up. They left their Aves in space-gear, bright lights around their face-plates shining in the darkness of the crater-dome. As they approached, they saw a hatch open on the side of the Solarite shuttle, and watched a pair of other face-lights descending a kind of ramp-ladder.

As Keeler and his assistant approached, Alkema and the warfighters saw two tall

Solarites following close behind. Nervously, the warfighters double-checked the charges on their gauntlets.

Keeler waved as he got close. "Hi."

"Greetings, commander," Alkema said.

"I'd like to introduce my friends Yarr, and Yarr. Yarr and Yarr, meet Dave and two guys I don't know."

"Yarr," said Yarrgh.

"Yarr," said Yarrgh also.

"They've got some cargo they would like to bring to the ship, if that's okay," Keeler said. "Actually, I forgot. Of course it's okay, I'm the stinkin' commander."

"What is it?" Alkema asked.

"The surviving crew of some ship called 'Lemonade,' or 'Lollipop' or something."

"*Limnix*?" Alkema suggested.

"Za, that could be the one," Keeler said.

Alkema was impressed. "How did you persuade the Solarites to release them?"

"I'm not a hundred percent clear. There was a game of Diamondback involved. They offered us the prisoners in exchange for their losses, and they said they were just going to eject them into space if we didn't take them. So, I figured, what the heck, you know? Anyway, did I miss anything?"

"You'll probably want something to drink," Alkema told him. "We should get back to the ship."

"Right! Drinks!" Keeler agreed. As Alkema and the warfighters turned around to walk back to their ship, Keeler abruptly swung around and gave the Solarites huge bear hugs before parting company with them.

ZILLA

As the Aves lifted off and made a course for *Pegasus*, Alkema fixed Keeler drinks and sat across from him on the landing couches, next to Planetology Specialist Gary Braniff.

Neither of them were especially eye-worthy after spending the better part of two weeks among aliens with no concept of showers, shampoo, or personal odor management. They were happy to swab off with the field towels from the ship's stores, but Keeler, especially, still looked to be fighting eleven straight days of bedhead.

Then, the two settled down for drinks and snacks and Alkema filled the commander in on the events over the last few days, interrupted by several exclamations of "She did *what*?!"

Finally, after Alkema explained that the ship was secure, and up 600,000 liters of Tritium for its trouble, Keeler sighed and took a long drink from his Corvallian Ginger Spank. "I'm not sorry I missed any of it," he told Alkema.

"She scares the Hell out of me, sir," Alkema confided.

Keeler nodded. "She scares the hell out of me, too."

"And how was your adventure?" Alkema asked him.

"Adventuresome," Keeler replied. "The Spacehogs are actually pretty cool cats, once

you get to know them.”

“Spacehogs?” Alkema asked.

“They never liked being called Solarites,” Keeler explained/ He pulled up his landing pack from under the seat and began shuffling through the things inside, looking for something. “When the humans came to this system and found the Spacehogs, they thought they would make slaves out of them. The Spacehogs are highly resistant to stellar radiation, they thrive on stellar atmosphere, and the humans thought they had only limited intelligence.”

“I can see why the Solarites would hate the Hellions,” Alkema put in.

“You remember how the Hellions rooked you,” Keeler reminded him. “They’ve been rooking the Spacehogs for centuries, and the spacehogs just got fed up with it. They never wanted the planet, but they did want to drive out the Hellions.”

Driver looked over his shoulder, to the back of the cabin where the four men and two women from *Liminix CH-53* sat under the watchful eyes of the warfighters.

“This is how it was,” Keeler explained. “Way back three thousand years ago when they first began harvesting tritium from this star, humans couldn’t survive the intense stellar radiation. So, they grafted human genetic characteristics with those of a life form that inhabited a high-radiation nebula... and that’s how they created the Spacehogs.”

“Solarites,” Alkema muttered.

“They were thought to be mindless slaves, but after a time, their latent intelligence emerged. Meanwhile, over the course of generations, the Hellions also became more tolerant of the stellar radiation,” Braniff probably said that just because he didn’t want to be left out of the conversation.

“Spacehog culture is fascinating, I only wish we had more time to learn about it,” Keeler said, putting his feet up on the table between the landing couches. “They don’t eat, because they can convert stellar radiation to life energy. They had no concept of clan or family, but intense ties of loyalty based on, as near as I can tell, shared affection for music. There are over 57 varieties of music and hundreds of sub-genres. Apparently, the spacehogs form loyalty groups based on what kind of music they like.” Keeler shrugged. “Frankly, it all sounded alike to me, like someone torturing cats during a thunderstorm. But they also claim the star sings to them.”

“Probably oscillations on energy wavelengths throughout its spectrum,” Alkema guessed.

“They’re also 100% hermaphrodites,” Exo-biologist Braniff told them. “They reproduce by squirting their genetic material into a kind of pod...”

“Don’t they know you can go blind if they do that too much?” Keeler asked.

“And they have no physiological requirement for water,” Braniff went on. “They synthesize a kind of complex hydro-carbon out of the stellar atmosphere.”

“Oil for blood,” Keeler said, short-handing it.

“They probably were upset that we had to destroy several of their ships,” Alkema asked.

“Not so much,” Keeler told him, waving his hand. “Attacking ships is considered kind

of a sport with them. And they feel like, if you got the best of them, well, those are the breaks. I think some of them think the whole piracy thing was... kind of a tacky, lower-class thing to do. Most of the Spacehogs weren't that upset to see the ones you blew up go. Plus, they're kind of overjoyed to be rid of the Hellions." He paused. "Actually, they don't really have an emotion for overjoyed, but if they did, they would be it."

"To the victor go the spoils, I guess," Alkema muttered.

"Speaking of which," Keeler continued after finishing off his drink and receiving another. "You say the Hellions took all the Tritium they had, and built a giant ship to leave the system?"

Alkema nodded. "That was their plan from before we arrived. They had almost given up on getting the last of their Tritium, and they were probably going to abandon the people on Hellfire Station 3. When we showed up, instead of asking for help, they just used us."

Keeler smacked the arm of his seat affirmingly. "That's the way they are. I understand the Hellions were dealt a tough hand. I'd almost feel bad for them if they weren't such massive jerks. They've been losing their war with the Solarites for a long time.

"At one time, they had outposts built on a bunch of the asteroids surrounding this sun. There was one particular worldlet called 'Vice City.' From what I am told, it made the Mining Guild Sex Mall on Aegir III look like a Christianist Church Picnic.

"But, after the Tritium trade declined, the Hellions just kept pulling back and pulling back until 'Quiet City' was their last outpost."

"And now it all belongs to the Solarites," Alkema said.

"Don't be sad," Keeler reassured him. "The Solarites are not all bad. And the Hellions are off to a better place, hopefully."

"Za, hopefully," Alkema sighed, wistfully.

"You say that wistfully," Keeler observed. "What the Hell is wrong with you?"

"Without the Tritium we kept, their ship only has enough fuel to reach their primary relocation site," Alkema explained. "We consumed the safety margin that would have enabled them to reach the alternate colony."

"But they were too proud to accept any assistance from us," Keeler argued. "Pride can be the most suicidal of all emotions."

"Still, maybe we should scout ahead and make sure Fallon colony is still viable," Alkema contended. "It's the compassionate thing to do. And besides, aren't you curious to see why Fallon colony stopped needing Tritium after all these centuries?"

"Maybe a little," Keeler conceded. "Let's talk about this more after I've had a couple of hot baths and a sandwich."

PEGASUS — P.J.M REDFIRE'S QUARTERS

On top of the messed up gray-on-gray bedsheets of Redfire's bedchamber, Phil Redifre and Eliza Jane Change entwined their pale white bodies, having recently completed a session of non-reproductive recreational coitus. He stared at her in the pale light of his quarters, because he liked to admire her body and contemplate how the miraculous sum of its parts was

somehow less than the woman he had just fornicated with. She simply lay back with her eyes closed, but he didn't think she was sleeping.

After a while, Redfire slowly moved to the edge of the bed because he needed to use the euphemism. As soon as he started up, her eyes opened. "Where are you going?"

"Just to the hygiene pod," he answered, and slid out from the bed, no longer giving any reason to worry about disturbing her.

She pulled herself over to the side of the bed and began dressing. "I should begin the navigational calculations for the next transition."

"I thought the commander hadn't chosen a destination yet," Redfire called above the sound of urine striking the bowl of the euphemism.

"I think I know which colony he'll choose," Change replied, pulling on her uniform pants.

Redfire emerged from the hygiene pod. "At least stay and have some kava before you go."

"Agreed," she replied and continued dressing. Redfire did not bother to dress as he went into his kitchen to prepare the beverage.

"I am glad for you, for the time you spent on the mining ships reminding you of home," he told her as he mixed the ingredients. "I hope the next system has a terra-class planet in it, though. I know you don't like planets, but I'd like to get to the surface. Maybe walk along a beach or pick dandelions in a meadow. It's been a long time."

"I'll wait for you," she told him, slipping into the kitchen, fully dressed and fussing with her hair. "Unprocessed air makes me nauseated."

"You ought to at least give me a chance to show you a good time, planet-side." He handed her a steaming mug.

She shook her head as she took it. "If most of the crew takes shore leave, some of us will have to stay in orbit."

"You just like being in charge," he told her playfully.

"I do," she agreed. "More than I thought I would. I never wanted to be in a command position because I didn't want to be like one of those tweaks from the Mining Academy, one of those mining ship commanders who won't listen to anyone, just flaunts her authority. Now that I've been in command, I think I'm good at it."

This was not what Redfire had expected her to say, but he decided to work with it. "The way you handled the Hellfire situation surely worked out to our advantage. The bluff with the Hammerhead missile was very effective."

"That was no bluff," Change insisted.

"I see," Redfire said.

"I still would have preferred shooting them. I prefer to deal with things head on, not by trickery." She took a drink of her kava. "This is too bitter, do you have any sugar-cream?"

He handed her the sugar-cream. "From what I've learned, I don't think the Hellions ever would have given in," Redfire said. "They were too proud."

"That's how Alkema convinced me to go with his plan," Change said. "I'm still amazed it worked. I thought he was over-selling it to the Hellions. I'm surprised they didn't figure it out."

"He's a pretty smart kid," Redfire offered. "Keeler would be lost without him."

"Keeler is still lost without him. Have you considered returning to the Command Core?" Change asked.

"I've been thinking its time to remodel the officer's lounge," Redfire replied. "We've had this white-on-white, elegant motif for almost two years, and I think the crew are getting a little bored with it. I'm thinking of... primary colors, natural wood accents, maybe some interplanetary junk on the walls..."

"No, then?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to return to command, but I do want to marry you."

"I want to stay in command, and I don't want to marry you," Change replied. "I guess that's why things keep working out for us."

PEGASUS – DRIVER'S QUARTERS

Matthew Driver chilled in his crib, because the old bassinet was the only thing he had that could hold enough ice to surround the fizzy aquarine beverage Trajan had taken a liking to long ago while visiting Aurora. He also opened a container of multi-grain wafers and a package of protein dip.

Trajan showed up exactly at 20/50 hours, as they had planned, and let himself in. Driver had extended him that courtesy when they had returned from the Chronos Universe, even though Republickers normally regarded the domicile as sacrosanct and would never think of entering the inhabitation unit of a close friend or even a relative with announcing themselves and awaiting an invitation. Avril Lear would have been appalled, if not apoplectic, had she known how casual her son had become.

Driver was in his food preparation unit when Lear came in. "Did I miss anything while I was gone?" he asked, handing Lear a tall glass of half-frozen, greenish-blue slush.

"Specialist Atlantic washed out of flight training," Lear reported as he took the beverage.

"Really, why?"

"Because he was no good," Trajan replied. "He should stay on the helm, where he is good. But he should be on the command deck of an Aves like my mother should be working waste disposal at a protein farm." He paused. "On the other hand, that might have done her a bit of good."

"That's the shame, we have enough fuel to keep going now, but Flight Core is still stretched." Driver held up a thick round piece of plastic. "Would you like to watch this?"

"What is it?" Trajan asked.

"A visual record from the Hellfire colony," Driver told him. "Technician Logo passed it on to me, which I don't think she was supposed to do. I suppose I should turn it over to

Cultural Survey, but I wanted to see it myself first.”

Lear took the disk away and studied it. “I don’t recognize the storage medium.”

“Lieutenant Flash had to reinvent a technology to play it back,” Driver explained. He put the thick plastic disk into the device Flash had developed. Driver then settled into the large, firm sofa next and Trajan Lear joined him, a large bowl of exploded grain in-between them in addition to the drinks and multi-grain chips.

A holographic display came up. Discordant, low-fidelity music shrieked from the playback device, forcing Alkema to cover his ears. Words flew out of the display screen at him: ***Hellfire: Wonder of the Galaxy!***

There was a brief view of a terra-class planet from space, then the camera zoomed into a large city on the coast of one of that planet’s continents, then to a large skyscraper with the logo of ‘Crucial Energy’ glowing bright maroon from its upper floors, and finally to an office within that skyscraper. A middle-aged man was seated at a desk in a wood paneled office. Then, he looked up, as though seeing the camera for the first time. *“Oh, hello there, I did not see you come in. Please sit down.”*

“Um, is he talking to us?” Trajan asked.

“I don’t think this is interactive,” Driver said.

“*Would you like some tea?*” the man on the display asked, gesturing toward a silver tea-set.

“Okay, now I’m spider-creeped,” Trajan said.

“*Very well, then. I wanted to inform you that you have been selected for a very special assignment of great importance to the Crucial Energy concern.*”

“Oh joy,” said Trajan Lear.

“*You have been selected to join the prestigious Tritium extraction operation in the Hellfire system.*”

“*The Hellfire system?*” said an unseen voice, so loud and off-key that Trajan half-jumped and spilled exploded grain into his lap.

“What the hell was that?” Trajan’s exclamation over the second voice’s dialog made it unintelligible.

“*Don’t you want to go to the Hellfire system?*” asked the middle-aged man, his eyebrows raised as though in astonishment.

“Why would I want to go anyplace called ‘the Hellfire system?’” Trajan asked. “Why not just call it the ‘Radioactive Death Plasma’ system?”

Driver agreed. “They should have called it something more benign like the Giant Red Sun Tritium Extraction system.”

“That just doesn’t roll off the tongue like ‘Hellfire System,’” Trajan commented.

The man on the display had bumbled on without them. “*Well, maybe this presentation will convince you.*”

“And if not, we’ll kill you,” Trajan commented.

Driver was mildly irritated. "Do you have to mock everything?"

Trajan replied. "It's hard to stop once you get started."

The office scene dissolved, and now they had a view as though from the front of a spaceship approaching a giant red sun at high sub-light velocity. A third voice, this one seductive and feminine, began breathlessly extolling the virtues of Hellfire. *"Imagine a world... where the sky is ablaze with flames..."*

"No thanks, I've already been to 12 255 Crux," Trajan said.

"Imagine a world of crystalline seas so pure you can see the ocean floor, thousands of meters below you..."

"What if I don't want to?" Trajan quipped.

"Imagine a magnificent city carved into living rock of chasm thousands of meters deep, and populated by a community of dedicated professionals, with the finest residential areas, schools, and recreational facilities the galaxy has to offer..."

"Or don't," Trajan Lear suggested.. As a Republicker, it had been taboo for Trajan to question authority. So, questioning authority, even in the form of a long, dead corporate propaganda film narrator, was quite thrill.

There was a fairly impressive aerial view, such as might be taken from a spacecraft during atmospheric entry. Hellfire Prime was a dwarf planet, yellow in color, that looked like nothing so much as a giant grapefruit with a crater-pocked surface and a few peels of skin knocked away. The ship-camera descended through a thin layer of sickly yellow clouds and approached a large canyon, into the walls of which, a city had been built.

"Welcome to Quiet City, the main operating base of the Hellfire SpaceFuels Refining Facility in the System 200 200 Ara."

The city was impressive. At the front of the canyon was a vast, deep lake. A few kilometers later, the city began. Bright silver towers were built into the canyon walls, acting as a gateway to the city on the other side. The walls of the canyon had been carved out and covered with a tough, translucent material. There must have been hundreds of levels. A kind of tubeway ran along the sides of the canyon, providing horizontal and vertical transport to various levels of the city. The camera paused on one station, where a train, like three long white pills linked together, paused to discharge a mother and two children, dressed in colorful robes, onto some kind of large, open plaza built on a ledge of the canyon.

The view transitioned to the inside of the complex. A perky jazz number began to play as the camera passed through throngs of people living in what appeared to be a magnificent shopping mall. Many of them paused to wave and smile at the camera."

"Why are these the happiest Fuel Services workers in the galaxy?"

"Because they pump soma into the ventilation system?" Trajan Lear suggested.

"Because Crucial Hydrocarbons takes good care of the valuable workers at its Hellfire Space Fuels facility. The residential towers, commercial districts, and recreation centers were designed by the finest architects in Atlas Colony. They enjoy a rate of pay 200% higher than the industry standard."

"The architects or the workers?" Trajan asked, as a pair of smiling children, presumably

the ones who had exited the transport pod with the woman in the earlier scene, dove into a zero-g swimming pool. Later, the woman was shown entering a vast cavern, filled with light and plant-life.

"Hydroponic gardens ensure an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables, and also a place for relaxation." The woman took a round red fruit proffered by a vendor, tasted it, and smiled like she had just won the lottery.

"All right, I'll eat of the Tree of Knowledge, but what am I going to tell Adam?" Trajan Lear offered for her dialog. Matthew Driver looked at him quizzically, not really getting the joke.

The view transitioned to a medical center, where smiling medical technicians tended to happy patients.

"The medical facilities at Quiet City are among the finest in the Quadrant."

Trajan added, "Which will be useful when you're covered with radiation burns, or a Solarite pirate blasts your arm off."

"The Solarites seem to be conspicuously absent from this presentation," Driver observed.

Trajan mocked the narrator's chirpy voice. *"Most of these happy workers will have their arms blown off by marauding Solarite pirates."*

Eventually, the presentation showed one of the Hellfire Stations deep inside the stellar atmosphere. The music became positively strident. *"200 200 Ara contains one of the richest and purest supplies of Tritium yet discovered. It takes strong, highly dedicated men and women to extract the Tritium, and process it for shipment."*

"So, come to Hellfire! What are you, some kind of wimp?" Trajan barked.

The documentary came to a part where two Tritium haulers, similar to *Liminix* and *Archonix*, were shown joining a convoy of ships leaving the system. *"The Hellfire System,"* the narrator informed the audience, *"is a vital component for galactic energy exchange. The fuel extracted from this sun's atmosphere will provide heat, light, and energy to human colonies throughout the quadrant. Crucial Energy concern invites you to contribute to Galactic civilization, and to be a part of **our** community."*

"Are you convinced yet?" Trajan asked. "Don't you want to move to Hellfire? **What the Hell is wrong with you?**"

The music swelled as the ships accelerated out of sight, and the sun passed into eclipse behind the dwarf planet of Hellfire Prime.

"That's it?" Lear asked, seeming disappointed that his sport was over.

"That's it," Driver told him, with just a bit of a shrug.

"But we never got to see the ending!" Trajan protested. "Did the worker take the job? Did the woman every get back on the transport pod? How am I supposed to get on with my life without knowing these things?"

"I think we did see the ending," Driver argued. "The ships stopped calling, the Solarites went on the offensive, the Hellions enforced rigorous population control until they could fit

their entire population into one giant spaceship, and then they left. And this bit of docu-propaganda is all that's left."

"Maybe it's for the best," Trajan conceded. "It makes me wonder, though, if somewhere out there, there's a corporate propaganda film enticing people to come to Republic."

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE

Two ship-days after Keeler returned to *Pegasus*, the commander and his crew watched on the forward displays as *Archonix CI-88* separated from *Pegasus*, and set off on a course to catch up with *Legacy*.

"With the augments we made to their engines, they should be caught up to *Legacy X* in approximately... eventually," David Alkema calculated.

"Provided *Legacy X* didn't alter course," Change said. She was standing at the Navigation post.

"Always the optimist," Keeler chided her. "Is our course laid in?"

"Fallon colony," Change answered. "22 light years away from here. Estimated transit time, eleven-point-five days."

"Wow, fast," Keeler said. "All right, Ranking Liza..."

"Don't ever call me that."

"Okay, Lieutenant Commander Navigator Change, as you wish. Take us to Fallon." He settled back into his commander's chair. "Let's see how humanity screwed up that one."

End of Part I

Worlds Apart – Book 08: Hellfire

Part II: Falldown

It has been 19 days since *Pegasus* departed the Hellfire System

The Island, Day 4

Specialist Kyle Atlantic woke up naked and screaming.

He had no idea what had happened to his clothes, but the fact that he had woken up naked and cuddled with Warfighter Specialist Shea Herrald, who was also naked, accounted for the screaming.

“Would you shut that up?” Herrald groaned, rolling over on the pile of seat cushions and blankets that made up their bed. “I’m trying to sleep here.”

Atlantic struggled to his feet in a mix of confusion and panic. This proved to be a tricky maneuver, since the various parts of his body were out of synch; one leg was jittery while the other seemed paralyzed, and his arms jerked uncontrollably when he tried to use them. There was a ringing in his ears, and it made the sound of the nearby surf a distant and echoey thing, as though heard through a defective transceiver.

He scanned frantically for something to cover himself and ended up wrapping a strip of blanket around his waist. He heard a voice calling for help and was relieved when he realized it wasn’t his own. He stumbled away from his resting spot toward the sound of the voice. This course took him into the trees at the edge of the beach, where he found a woman tied to a tree, and it was she who was calling for help.

“Help me, Kyle!” Flight Lieutenant Aramburuzubala begged. “Help me!”

Why he ran away from her, he didn’t know. Nothing made sense and was all like some crazy fever dream. His head was still confused and ringing and soon the dirt path became a sandy, sandy beach. The sand was yellowish white, and he saw that the sky and the sea were purple, although different shades of purple. A clear thought came to him that he had never stood on a planet with a purple sky before.

Suddenly, a flaming spear shot out of the jungle and impacted into the sand at his feet. He knew what to do about this. He ran away from it.

As he ran, he felt a soreness growing in his legs, a rawness, as though his muscles had been recently overworked. He got a few hundred meters down the beach before his legs cramped and failed and he went sprawling face first into the sand. When he looked up, there was a hazy figure standing over him, wearing some kind of military uniform. He brushed the sand from his eyes and waited for his vision to clear, but it wouldn’t, and the sand irritated his eyes. Once the tears started flowing, he couldn’t make them stop.

“Enough fun and games,” said Johnny Rook, the wearer of the uniform. “Get your clothes back on and let’s get you back to the ship.”

Pegasus – Hospital Four (Two Days Afterward) – “Do you remember anything more?”

Alkema asked Specialist Atlantic.

Atlantic lay in a healing bed. Physically, he had only cuts and bruises, a mild concussion, moderate sunburn, some dehydration, a strained wrist and a deep stab wound in his left thigh. Also, he had no memory of receiving any of these injuries.

"Like I told you, very little," Atlantic answered him.

Specialist Atlantic was often described as "pretty," which he found annoying, but it was unavoidable. His hair was an almost white blond that made a halo of curls when it got a bit long and framed his face in ringlets when it was humid. His skin was porcelain smooth and his face could easily be described, again to his annoyance, as "angelic." Add to this that he was slight of build and you had the kind of person wouldn't often be asked to get under the counter-gravity manifold and fix his friends' hovercars.

"The others in your crew don't remember anything at all," Alkema had told him this several times already.

"I don't even remember how I got on that planet," Atlantic responded.

"You were taking shore leave with a number of other personnel on an archipelago in the planet's southern tropical zone," Alkema told him. "Does that stir any sort of memory."

"Nay, and what does it matter? Everybody's all right, right?"

Alkema grew a bit frustrated. "It matters because we don't like it when five trained officers disappear for three days and can't remember anything that happened to them. It matters because your ship's wreckage was found 1,600 kilometers away from where we lost its tracking signal. Something very weird happened and we want to know what it was."

"Who is this 'we?'" Atlantic wanted to know.

"The rest of the your crewmates, your fellow officers, your friends," Alkema touched the COM Link on his cuff. "Cleolanta, would you come in please."

The hatch to his healing room slid open, revealing a tall, thin striking woman in black velvet dress and silver jewelry. Alkema introduced her, "This is Mind Specialist Cleolanta. She is here to help you recover your memories and figure out what happened down there."

Atlantic recognized her. "She's a truth-machine."

"Part of one," Alkema corrected.

"Don't be frightened," Cleolanta purred, and put a gentle and reaffirming hand on his bare, smooth chest.

"I'm not frightened," Atlantic protested.

"Oh, well... good then," She smiled, with big white teeth that contrasted with the chocolaty darkness of her skin. "All I'm going to do is help focus your mind. Everything that happened to you is still in your head. I sense there's some trauma standing between you and your memories. I am going to help you get around the trauma."

"Is this necessary?" Atlantic hoped it wasn't.

Alkema adopted that faux-chummy tone of voice, "Don't you want to know what happened down there?"

Atlantic had a very strong feeling that he didn't.

"You would be within your rights to refuse the probe," Cleolanta told him. "I can tell you, even if this works, it will be limited to memories of your time on the island, and I am honor-bound to keep anything else that surfaces secret."

"She'll make a telepathic bond with you," Alkema explained patiently. "Then, you'll just describe to us what you remember. Simple as that."

"What about the others? What about Flight Lieutenant Aramburuzabala?" Atlantic demanded.

Cleolanta shook her head. Alkema explained, "We've tried. They have no recoverable memories."

Atlantic groaned. "What makes you think I'll be any different?"

"We won't know until we try. C'mon, there are worse kinds of probes. At least this one doesn't involve sticking anything into you." Alkema appeared a little too eager for Atlantic's comfort.

Atlantic closed his eyes, and realized he did not like the idea of a gap in his memories either. Because of this, he acquiesced. "All right. How do we do this?"

Cleolanta took over. "Just relax and clear your mind." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and gently touched the backs of her fingers against his temples, then suddenly pulled them away as though she had touched a hot cooking unit.

"What is it?" Atlantic asked.

"I'm sure it's nothing," she answered, but she did not put her hand back. She nodded to Alkema, who activated the device that would record Atlantic's memories as they were brought forward – the Recollect-o-tron. "Just relax ... just go back to the first thing you can remember before leaving *Pegasus*."

"I was on the Bridge," Atlantic began. And he felt an odd sensation in his head, the mental equivalent of when one's ears popped at high altitude. He found he was recalling the events on the Bridge with perfect clarity.

Pegasus – Main Bridge, Nine Days Earlier – What Atlantic remembered was monitoring the ship's orbital stability and trying not to keel over face first to the deck from sheer boredom as Lt. Commander Alkema reviewed the telemetry their probes were returning from the planet thought to be Fallon colony.

"Luckily for the Hellions, there is an inhabitable world in this system," Alkema was saying from the forepart of the Main Bridge. He activated a hologram showing the planet: "166 200 Ara III. Equatorial radius: 5,051.9 km. Mass: 4.5×10^{24} kg. Gravity, 71% of Sapphire's. Mean Surface Temperature: 16 degrees Celsius. Nitrogen, Oxygen, Carbon Dioxide atmosphere, with a Xenon-rich layer at about 11,000 meters."

Alkema circled the meter-and-a-half diameter sphere, which showed a purple-white planet with a large multi-colored continent in the southern hemisphere surrounded by large, medium, and small islands on all sides. Prime Commander Keeler slouched in the command station, also looking quite bored.

"The surface shows signs of recently eroded chaotic terrain," Alkema droned on. "Tectonic activity on the planet is minimal, and it has a weak magnetic field..."

Atlantic had been at the helm almost three hours, and had done little besides guide the ship through a comfortable, low-maintenance orbit 17,700 kilometers above the planet's mean surface level. He looked at his fingernails, and observed that one had been clipped shorter than the others. He wondered what he was going to eat at the end of his watch. He wondered if he should go on a run through the Agro-Botany Bays that evening or for a swim in one of the pools. Every seventeen seconds, or so, he thought about sex.

"Cute," Keeler interrupted when Alkema stopped for breath. "What's the civilization like?"

Atlantic deactivated the sphere hologram and brought up three display screens, two of which showed probe telemetry and the third an analysis of planetary conditions. "Our probes have been inside the atmosphere for something like sixteen hours now. Here's what they've found, civilization wise."

The probe crossed over a small village of ten or twenty stone huts, topped by wood and thatch, surrounded by a wall of pointy timber. Ill-kept fields lay beyond the fortifications.

Keeler offered his analysis. "Ah, it's boring."

"But there's also this..." Alkema continued.

The probe's telemetry showed a notably larger village surrounded by stone instead of timber. Several ox-carts could be seen trundling up the road toward the settlement. Alkema switched to another view of another village. This view lingered on the view of a woman skinning and dissecting some kind of animal near a flame pit.

"That doesn't look like the kind of planet that would have a thriving market for Tritium," Keeler deduced.

"Not now, but we also found this," Alkema brought up another view, of what apparently had been a city of some size. It looked uninhabited, now. Many of the tall buildings had been stripped of their stone so that only their steel skeletons remained. The streets were filled with rubbish and debris. A number of the buildings were canted at angles that suggested part of their foundations had given way.

"There were close to two hundred cities like this on the planet, based on probe data," Alkema went on. "But it appears that every last one of them has been abandoned. If their civilization collapsed, that would explain why they stopped sending ships to Hellfire."

"Well, this is depressing," Keeler said. "Each of the three colonies we have so far encountered in the Orion Quadrant seem set on a course toward even further decline. "

Alkema grinned. "I would have thought the collapse of civilizations was one of your passions."

"Studying it, or causing it?" Keeler asked.

"Whichever," Alkema said.

Keeler sighed, "Have Planetology Survey plan cultural and physical mapping expeditions for both the cities and the villages... and sign me up for one of the city missions."

Atlantic checked his orbit. *Pegasus* was staying exactly where she should be, without any help from him. He decided he would rather go on the run than the swim. He noticed that his nipples itched, but he didn't think he should scratch them on the Bridge because if anyone else was as bored as he was, they might look over and see him.

"One other thing, Lieutenant," Keeler was saying to Alkema when Atlantic drifted back into the conversation

"Lieutenant Commander," Alkema corrected. Atlantic thought he invested too much ego in his rank.

Keeler, however, did not. "Whatever you are this week, are there any remote, uninhabited areas on this planet where the crew could take shore leave without running into any natives? I ask because it's been well over two years since most of us have been on anything even remotely resembling a nice planet."

Atlantic had perked up a little bit at the mention of shore leave. And a memory had come up of the first shore leave he had ever taken.

FLASHBACK – Another beach, on another planet, a low-gravity world where he had felt nigh-on weightless. He remembered warm black sand under his feet as the sun was going into eclipse behind a great gas-giant that hung in the sky like a beach-ball. He had been swimming in warm water the color of ale while his mates played wally-ball on the beach and as he came out of the surf, a warm tropical breeze kissed his bare skin. He had been 15, then.

That's when he saw her for the first time. An exquisite female, a little older than he, but whose tawny breasts were perfection, she was just a few meters away from him, standing in the surf, which seemed delighted for the privilege of splashing between her legs, and she was staring off at the sea. He wondered if he dared to say anything to her, and realized even if he had the nerve, his brain was refusing to come up with anything. But then she had looked right at him and from her sweet lips fell the six words that would be seared in his memory forever.

"Did I just see a robo-shark?" Specialist Brainiacsdaughter asked.

"Well, pick nine or ten of the nicer spots and begin planning shore parties," Keeler ordered as Atlantic's daydreams yielded to the then and there. "I'd like to give everyone on the ship a chance to spend at least ten days on the surface."

"I'll have the rotation schedules worked out third watch tomorrow," Alkema offered.

Ass-Kisser, Atlantic had thought.

Pegasus – Hospital Four – Alkema interrupted the memory tap, "O.K., I think we know what happened the day between the day we made orbit and the time your ship departed."

Atlantic saw that Alkema was blushing, and realized to his own embarrassment that Alkema had been aware of all his thoughts. He was too satisfied by this knowledge to apologize.

Alkema continued. "I'd like to skip ahead to your journey to the surface. You left on the Aves *Leo* with 26 other people and a cargo of supplies six days after we made orbit. Can you try to remember your flight to the surface?"

"I will try," Atlantic told him. "But I don't..."

"All your memories are there, you just need to bring them out." Cleolanta gave him a

most demure smile.

“That flashback to an earlier memory was distracting,” Alkema interrupted. “Can we filter those out somehow?”

“Memory is a complicated thing,” Cleolanta said. “The way we weave them together is tight and intricate. If he has a vivid memory during the recall, it is best to let it record also.”

Alkema seemed disappointed. “All right, let’s continue. Can we move forward to the day you left *Pegasus*?”

“I don’t remember the day I left *Pegasus*.” Atlantic protested.

“It’s in there,” Cleolanta pointed to his head, and then to hers. “I can feel it. I want you to picture the sky of the planet, as it was when you were rescued, and concentrate while I pull your memories forward.”

Atlantic closed his eyes, and tried to remember the planet. As he focused, an image of a vast and purple sky came into his mind. And fire.

The Island - Day One

Fallon, at High Altitude – *Leo* entered Fallon's atmosphere a little too fast and too steeply, resulting in a fireball that flashed over the command module until Flight Lieutenant Aramburuzabala adjusted the ship's angle of attack.

"We came in a little steep," Flight Lieutenant Mayte Iphigenia Aramburuzabala said to Atlantic, who was in the second seat. "You have to consider atmospheric density as a component of your descent."

"You're in the pilot's seat. How is the angle of descent my fault?" Atlantic countered.

"I didn't say it was your fault, I was just advising you," Aramburuzabala turned her chin up a little, checking a navigation display, deliberately looking away from him.

"It sounded like you were," Atlantic retorted.

Aramburuzabala was unmoved. "If you want back into Flight Core, you should use constructive criticism to improve your flight skills."

Atlantic was not all that sure he wanted to be in Flight Core, but he knew he wanted to do more than what he was doing on the ship, and none of his other options was any more appealing. He brought a projection of the planet's surface to the head's-up display, and saw beneath them a vast purple sea.

Technically, this was not a training flight, but as his mentor, Aramburuzabala had chosen to make it one. His responsibility, as acting logistics officer, was the 5 tons of snacks, booze, wally-balls, and other party gear in the secondary hold.

"My scans show nothing airborne for 1,000 kilometers in any direction," reported Warfighter Shea Herrald from the tactical station. "Which begs the question, why am I up here, in uniform, and not down on the Main Deck?"

Shea Herrald was one of the ship's warfighters. His body was lean, but muscular beneath the tactical gear. His hair was a darker, dirtier blond than Atlantic's, and no one would call him pretty. Not to his face, anyway.

"New tactical protocol," Aramburuzabala answered, even though she must have known that he knew. "The commander wants a weapons officer in the command module whenever approaching an unexplored planet."

"But this planet is primitive, the probes said so," Herrald argued.

"They thought Yronwode was safe and look what happened to them," Aramburuzabala answered.

"Only when they tried to leave," Herrald pointed out.

In the course of this back-and-forth, Technician Bart Savagewood and Medical Technician Skinner climbed up to the command deck from the main deck. "Would anyone like drinks, or a snack?" Savagewood offered them from a cold-pack he had brought from below. Savagewood was a tall, thin man, with a chin like a mountain ridgeline. Skinner was a middle-aged man with flowing silver hair and a stiff demeanor.

"We'll be on the ground in less than 40 minutes," Aramburuzabala protested. "Take your drinks back below."

"I told you they wouldn't want any of your decadent libations," Skinner insisted.

"I would," said Herrald. Savagewood grinned and passed him a bottle.

While the bottle was still in mid-air, something came out of the sky and slammed into them. The canopy was filled with brilliant light. The ship rolled over, and then there was a sensation of falling. Atlantic could see the drinks from Savagewood's tray suspended in free fall, as though time was standing still.

Then, chaos, as a dozen command deck alarms activated, and a hard punch of g-forces as the command module ejected from the body of the mortally wounded spacecraft. Atlantic recalled looking upward, through the canopy, to see the sea rushing up toward him.

Atlantic was reasonably certain he was going to die. He had heard a tale once that in the Afterlife, one is allowed to hold a single memory from the living world. He was nearly weightless and he was falling into the sea.

FLASHBACK – "Unaccompanied males are not permitted to use beach facilities!" the stern woman with the stocky body, the iron-gray hair cut into a short masculine bob shouted at him.

"I just want to swim while my mom is at the cultural exchange," Atlantic had insisted.

"Rules are for the good of everyone," the woman's cohort, a slightly more demure battle-axe barked at him. Both wore the customary blue-black skirts and white head coverings that left only a slit for the eyes and nose,

*Second woman turned to her companion, "Note well, sister, the **assertiveness** and **disrespect** engendered by children raised in a **patriarchal**" system. Her voice mastered the dual feat of being simultaneously shrill and grating.*

"Unaccompanied males are not permitted to use beach facilities!" the gray lady barked again.

"Return to the visitors' compound, or you will be arrested and interrogated!"

"For what?" Atlantic demanded. Which was a mistake, because gray lady reached out, grabbed his arm, and tried to twist it behind his back. His reflexes and strength were a lot better than hers, and he jumped clear.

The gray lady immediately began to blow a very loud and obnoxious whistle, and at the periphery of his vision, Atlantic saw two more guards, converging on him.

"Hell," Atlantic had said, he leapt and sprinted between the two guards and made for the beach at a dead run. Slam them! He would get his swim. He ran for the water with four, then six, then eight guards chasing him.

He nearly made it to the waters edge when he saw Specialist Brainiacsdaughter tossing a breach-disc at Johnny Rook, and the sight of her rack in the golden light of the Bodicean sun made him trip, and dive headlong into the sand.

Fallon, The Island – The next thing Specialist Atlantic remembered was regaining consciousness on a tropical beach, staring up into a purple sky. Above his headache, he could hear the susurrus of waves gently lashing a shoreline. There was a scent of oil and birds, and he could feel hot sunlight bathing his face. And he was very wet, although not thoroughly

soaked.

He forced himself to sit up and take a look around at his surroundings. The wrecked command deck of the Aves had come to rest offshore of the beach, maybe 20 meters from where he had awakened. The emergency parafoils lay limp and disappointed, undulating on the waves like giant lazy jellyfish.

Atlantic slowly stood, stumbled over to the edge of the sea, and looked out over the deep maroon waters. On either side of him, a sandy beach stretched for as far as he could see. He turned and looked the other way, and saw a jungle that began about a hundred meters away. Thick clots of red, yellow, and turquoise trees pressed toward the sand. Beyond that, a few kilometers in, the land began to rise, eventually creating a pair of cone-shaped peaks, so perfectly symmetrical to each other for a moment Atlantic thought he was seeing double.

Tears of sweat dripped from his brow into his eyes, the heat of the sun registered on him again. He eventually became aware of someone calling his name.

He ran toward the sound. A little way down the beach, Flight Lieutenant Aramburuzabala was lying on seat cushions salvaged from the command module. Medical Technician Skinner was attending to her injuries.

"Is she all right?" Atlantic asked him.

Skinner looked up at him. His usually immaculate mane of silvery hair had gone all wild and wet from the sea. There was something not-quite-right in his eyes. "I don't think there's anything I can do for her."

"Then she's..."

"Fine," Skinner interrupted him. "Since none of her injuries are life threatening, there's nothing else I can do for her. The impact dislocated her shoulder and elbow, but I have put them back in place."

"Where are the others?" Atlantic asked. "Herrald and ... Savagewood?"

"They're gone," Skinner told him.

"Gone?"

"Gone to see if they can salvage anything from the command module before it sinks," Skinner answered. "Mr. Savagewood bruised his chin, but Mr. Herrald was miraculously unharmed."

"What about the other crew?" Atlantic demanded

"They didn't make it," Skinner told him.

"What?"

"They didn't make this handsome beach sweater," Skinner said, indicating the knit garment he was wearing. "My daughter made it. Isn't it lovely?"

"Are they dead or alive?" Atlantic persisted.

"Who?" Skinner asked.

"The ones in the Main Deck."

"I haven't got a clue," Skinner paused. "And this time, I'm not screwing with you, I really don't know what happened to the rest of the ship. It must have fallen elsewhere. I,

myself, took a bump to the head, but nothing serious. In fact, I've never felt more Tuesday than I do right now."

"You never felt more...?"

"Ah, the lady awakens," Skinner interrupted as Aramburuzabala began coming around. With a howl of pain she grabbed her right arm with her left arm.

Skinner eased her arms back into a relaxed position. "If it hurts when you do that, my advice as a physician is not to do that."

"Where's my ship?" she asked through the pain.

"The command module landed off-shore," Skinner told her. "We don't know where the rest is."

Aramburuzabala sat up and looked around, "The main fuselage has emergency crash systems. If they managed a soft landing, they're probably on this island somewhere."

"Unless they fell into the sea," Skinner chuckled, but caught himself. "I'm sorry, that was inappropriate."

"Can we salvage anything out of the command module?" Aramburuzabala asked.

"Not likely," Atlantic replied.

"How did we get to shore?" Aramburuzabala asked.

"Herrald and Savagewood carried you," Skinner answered. "They managed to grab some cushions and blankets from the capsule. That would be the limit of our supplies."

Herrald and Savagewood returned around that time, with a couple of the ship's emergency parafoils. Herrald was stripped to the waist, and a sheen of seawater glistened on the tight muscles of his upper body. Savagewood explained that the material could be used to make shelter, and he had also acquired a piece of crystal from the ship's canopy that he intended to fashion into a weapon.

"Is the beacon working?" Aramburuzabala demanded. Skinner shrugged. Aramburuzabala checked the piloting gauntlet on her right forearm, but did not detect a signal.

Although the pain must have been excruciating, Aramburuzabala began fixing her hair, drawing it into a tight, commanding bun at the back of her head. "All right, this is what we have to do. We have to search this island and try and find other survivors."

"Right now, moving may not be our best option," Savagewood argued. He pointed toward the planet's sun, which was a third of the way to the horizon already. "This planet's rotational period is only 16.4 hours, and it looks like it's getting late. We have, at best, three hours of daylight."

Aramburuzabala tried to assert her authority. "Our first priority has to be locating the other survivors. Without the COM links, we have no choice but to search for them."

"This island is at least 200 square kilometers by my reckoning, and mostly covered with dense jungle vegetation," Savagewood argued. "Searching for survivors would be a waste of time."

Warfighter Herrald offered an alternative. "We should make a camp, build a signal fire

so the other survivors will know to come to us. The rescue ships will find us before morning anyway. In the meantime, we relax on the beach."

Aramburuzabala snarled at them, "I'm responsible for the lives of every other passenger on my ship. I am not going to wait here on the beach for someone else to find them. I'm the captain."

Herrald repeated, "*Pegasus* will be sending rescue ships, and it will be easier for them to locate the wreckage from the air than we can from the ground. Searching for survivors is a waste of our time."

"And energy," Savagewood added. "Unless we can find a viable source of food, we're going to get very hungry. But even more important is water. You can go weeks without food, but in this heat, you'll suffer heatstroke within a day unless you can secure a water supply."

Savagewood pointed toward the dual mountaintops that were lost in purple-gray mist above the jungle canopy. "See those clouds. Those are rainclouds, and they're pouring over the top of that mountain. That means there are streams, and also probably plants that will catch the moisture in their leaves. We're going to need at least three liters per person per day. We'll also have to boil the water to kill any micro-organisms..."

"Nay, we have to locate the others, that is our priority," Aramburuzabala argued.

While they argued the merits of camping, versus searching, Atlantic sought out the shade at the edge of the beach, and let their voices recede into the background. It was markedly cooler here than in the open. He even caught a small fresh breeze that cooled the perspiration on the back of his neck.

Flashback – It had gotten very late, very quickly on the planet of Winter colony. Atlantic had retreated to the courtyard beyond the ballroom where the Parliament Ball was swinging. He had just had an unpleasant encounter with one of the planet's inhabitants, a man who had told him he was a beautiful boy, and then asked if he could kiss him. Only the memory of thirteen hours in Bodicean detention cell had deterred him from clocking the man with his right fist, but the incident had left him flushed and embarrassed. There was something about the man that Atlantic could not place, like a dark, cold shadow. Despite the alleged immortality of Winter's inhabitants, Atlantic had a strong, remarkable feeling that the man was about to die.

In the courtyard of Lord Tyronious's manor, an array of outdoor lamps created halos of light in the falling snow. The chill air of the planet was bracing, and the act of taking it into his lungs felt like purification; as though the warm air from the ballroom, the shared breath of ancient and debauched people, was filtered out of his system and replaced by something natural and pure.

As he was watching the snow fall on the cobblestones and statuary of the courtyard, a snowball smashed right into the back of his neck.

He shook the snow off the back of his head and whirled furiously, preparing to return fire. Then, he heard a woman giggling at him. It was Brainiacsdaughter. "I nailed you!" she cried, and broke into a fit of giggles. She must have been lurking in the shadows close to the mansion, in the dark spaces between the windows.

"Foul!" another voice admonished. Out of the shadows at the edge of the yard came the tall, athletic figure of Warfighter Johnny Rook. His cheeks were rosy from the chill of the night. Snow was in his

hair. "You don't attack bystanders." Brainiacsdaughter responded only with additional giggling.

"I apologize for her," Rook said to Atlantic.

"Oh, he's fine," Brainiacsdaughter insisted. "It's just a snowball."

"The fight's over. Everyone else went back in. You should get inside, too," Rook continued.

"Aww..." she pouted. "That's not fair."

"Once again, I apologize for her." Rook put his arm around Brainiacsdaughter and led her back into the estate.

Jerk, thought Atlantic. Then, something began spattering on his head.

Atlantic snapped out of his reverie, feeling raindrops spattering against his forehead. The sudden rain had caught the others by surprise as well, but it had temporarily settled the argument about remaining on the beach or searching for survivors. The imperative now was to find shelter.

"Our best bet is to move away from the beach and into the jungle," Savagewood told them, raising his voice above the rain, which was growing heavier. "Some of the rain will be caught in the trees, and if we're lucky, we might find a cave or a hollow we can shelter in."

As they stepped under the jungle canopy, day became twilight, and the rain lessened at first. Herrald and Savagewood had found a sort of trail leading away from the beach, a thin dirt track about half a meter wide that meandered among the trees, probably from wildlife.

A quarter hour after they entered the jungle, blue black clouds rolled over them, darkening the jungle, and pouring rain on them like the Armageddon had returned. Rain fell through the leaves in thick gray sheets that made it almost impossible for them to keep their eyes open. It was like walking through a car wash.

"We need to find some shelter," Aramburuzabala shouted.

"Well duh," Atlantic thought.

Aramburuzabala gestured up the trail. "This thing I wear on my wrist says there might be some kind of shelter a few hundred meters ahead."

The rain fell even harder, and trail quickly became mud, and then a muddy stream that rushed around their ankles. They almost banged into the shelter before they saw it. Above them in the rain something was looming, like a stone silo with a tall metal mast sticking up out of it. There was a rusted metal door on the outside. Herrald pulled it open. Its rusty hinges slowly gave out a crunchy squeal. Inside, rain drizzled through a thousand holes in the roof.

"What the hell is this place?" Aramburuzabala demanded.

"Could be an old COM station or something," Warfighter Herrald guessed. On one side of the room was an array of nine two-dimensional solid-state data display terminals attached to a trio of keyboard-operated processing units. "Glass screens," he said tapping on the monitors. "Pre-holographic technology. Looks like these boxes have ancient electronic transistors in them."

"At least we don't have to worry about fresh water," Aramburuzabala said, wringing out her hair.

Food and/or towels would be nice, Atlantic thought. He sought out the spot of the shelter where the least amount of rainwater was sieving through the roof and shook the rain out of his. Savagewood and Herrald went to work on the roof, patching it as best as they could with scraps of wood and plastic from the inside.

"Didn't we used to have a doctor?" Atlantic asked.

Doctor Skinner was gone. No one remembered him following them into the jungle from the beach. Aramburuzabala went back out into the rain to find him, but soon recognized it would be futile and came back inside.

The rain diminished after an hour or so. The sun descended rapidly and the sky, went from purple to indigo at its zenith and filled with lavender and pink in the east, before it all went dark and black.

The air cooled in the night, and the insects arose. So, Savagewood and Atlantic set out to search for dry firewood. "Look for wood that was sheltered from the rain. Usually, it will be under other wood or brush," Savagewood said.

Atlantic was getting a little tired of his survival lectures. "I did pass survival training," he reminded him.

But Savagewood kept on. "The jungle wood on this planet is light and comes apart in shingles when cracked. Since we don't have any pulse weapons, I'll have to get a spark on it or ignite through friction.

Atlantic dropped an armload of wood at the shelter, then returned to the jungle for more while Savagewood attempted to ignite it. The jungle was cleaner and cooler in the aftermath of the storm, although the trail was still slippery.

A large iron-gray moon rose above the mountain peaks as night came on. Fallon's nearest moon was only 21,000 kilometers from its surface at closest approach in its highly elliptical orbit. It looked close enough to skim the mountaintop, but gave off not much light.

When Atlantic returned to the shelter, Savagewood had gotten a small fire going off to the side, and was ringing it with stones. Aramburuzabala had re-dressed, but Herrald remained stripped to his undergear. They had picked up the search-vs-camp argument where they had left off on the beach, and had moved onto a new line of argument without settling it.

Savagewood had affixed the crystal from the Aves canopy to a long, straight stick. "We are going to need food. I suggest we hunt!"

"Hunt?" Aramburuzabala exclaimed in astonishment. "You mean kill animals for food."

"That's what hunting is," Savagewood told her. "We're going to need to eat. We're going to need protein. If we starve, we die."

"There should be rescue parties here within hours," Aramburuzabala protested, then recognizing she was contradicting her earlier position added. "And in any case, we can eat jungle fruit. This thing I wear on my wrist will tell me if it's safe or not."

"I am not going to survive on native fruit," Savagewood insisted. "It gives me the trots."

"I could go for some meat," Herrald said.

Savagewood smacked Herrald manfully on the arm. "Join me in the hunt, brother?"

"Sounds good," Herrald said.

"You want to hunt right now?" Aramburuzabala was shocked. "It's dark out."

"That's when game is most active," Savagewood stared hard at Atlantic, challenging him, suggesting his manhood would be compromised if he didn't go into the jungle and kill something with them.

"Wait!" Aramburuzabala protested. "We have to stay together. We have to cooperate in order to survive."

"No we don't," Savagewood argued. "The key to survival is finding enough food, water, and shelter to keep your vital signs going. Anything apart from that is a bonus."

"What about the doctor?" Aramburuzabala asked. "He's still out there, somewhere."

"If we find him, we can lead him back to the shelter," Herrald said. Savagewood issued a sort of snorting grunt, and it was difficult to tell if he agreed or disagreed.

"Are you with us or not, Kyle?" Herrald challenged him out loud.

"I'll stay here," Atlantic answered.

"Suit yourself," said Herrald. Savagewood picked up his spear, and they made for the door of the shelter.

Aramburuzabala shouted. "I order you to come back here."

In unison, Savagewood and Herrald raised their left hands and made a sign intended to convey that the recipient enjoyed certain depraved reproductive activities. Then, they left, closing the rusty door behind them

Which left Aramburuzabala with nothing but a stunned look on her face.

"What now?" Atlantic asked.

Aramburuzabala didn't answer him at first, and when she did, her reply came back angry. "I guess we have to wait here until morning," she said. "At first light, we'll go out and find the others, beginning with the doctor."

Aramburuzabala repaired to a corner on the far side of the shelter. Atlantic rested on the floor, with his back against a wall of the shelter, watching the fire dance in its circle of stones. Tired now, and hungry, he activated the music implant in his skull, through the selections, and queued up several Auroran Hardcore tunes.

He closed his eyes and let the music transport him.

Back to Aurora

Flashback – A rooftop music club in the heart of Netzwerk City. The same song had been playing, an insistent, animalistic drumbeat coupled with a throbbing bass rhythm that penetrated to his marrow. Sixty, or so, of the ship's junior personnel were partying with a couple of thousand Aurorans 220 meters above street level. The city beyond was a geometrically-arranged galaxy of yellow, red, and orange light. The skies above undulated between purple and green.

Atlantic had been drinking something sweet and mildly hallucinogenic as he watched Specialist

Brainiacsdaughter dance with Johnny Rook. In the three years after he had first seen her on the beach at Eden-World, he had become a junior helmsman, had been at the controls some months earlier when Pegasus had been nearly destroyed by the defensive systems of one of the galaxy's last StarLocks. He had gone out with two other girls in that time, but they were lesser than Brainiacsdaughter.

On the dance-floor, her dress, a bright white slit-skirt, flowed and danced around her like veils in the wind, as she quickly picked up the movements of a lewd and lascivious Auroran dance. The warfighter matched her movements with his own, a beat and a half behind.

"I think that couple over there is having carnal relations," said one of the other junior officers, Shoshona Baron-Saturday, a female Republicker in the Technical Core.

"Actually, there's three of them," said another junior officer, Mersey Raindrummer, a Sapphirean male. "It's a man and a woman, but I'm not quite sure what the third one is."

A lithe dancer, whose pale body was naked except for a layer of purple glitter and completely shaven of every hair, minced over to their table. "Hi, people of the stars and distant worlds. I'm a smoothie..."

"I can see that," said Mersey.

"Are you having the most amazing time ever in your lives?" asked the smoothie.

Atlantic didn't hear the reply, because at that moment Johnny Rook and Specialist Brainiacsdaughter left the dance floor, and he lost sight of them as they mounted a spiral staircase to another part of the bar.

Atlantic had wandered over to the observation rail and looked over the city, the obscene neon displays and multi-story high-definition hardcore pornography that was displayed on the sides of its skyscrapers, and he wondered if he threw himself over the side if he would be lofted up by the stiff winds that blew between the buildings or if he would fall dead onto the street, bathed in the peculiar red glow of the city's lower levels.

"Is this Hell?" he had muttered aloud.

"Excuse me?" giggled someone standing next to him. He turned and it was Brainiacsdaughter.

He must have stood there looking at her with a stunned expression on his face. "What was that you said about 'Hell'?" she repeated with a curious smile.

He then heard himself sounding like an idiot. "Oh, the city... it's just hot, and crowded, and there's this red glow... it's like what they used to think Hell was like."

She laughed. "It's exciting, though, isn't it? Are you staying on the surface?"

"My family has a suite at the Jeroboam Hotel, but we're leaving tomorrow. Mom's doing a cultural survey of some commune in the hardscape."

"Too bad..." she sang. "I was supposed to do a psych profile of one of the leaders of the MegaPlex, someone named Aunty Maim, for TyroCommander Lear. Don't tell anyone this, but I kind of half-assed it." She laughed.

He had laughed, too, and hoped it didn't come across too forced. "Since when does Tyro-Commander Lear care about anyone else's opinion?" He was kind of proud that he came up with something

half-intelligent to say.

"Exactly... Nice piloting, by the way," she told him, taking another sip of the red liquid she was consuming.

"What?"

"I was in PC-1 with you when the StarLock was firing on us. I was out for most of it, but everybody says ..."

She was interrupted when her Johnny Rook, came over to them. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be dancing with me?" he said to her, oblivious to Atlantic.

"You left," she told him poutily.

"I had to use the euphemism. It was nauseous. Some sparkly dude with no hair wanted me to sodomize him. Give me that." He snatched her drink from her and handed it to Atlantic, saying, "You should toss that out, it's not good for you."

Brainiacsdaughter looked pouty just a second, then something on the dance floor caught her eye.

"Oh, they're doing the Pelvic Thrust. Let's dance." She took Rook by the arm and dragged him back into the disco. Atlantic quickly lost them on in the throng on the dance floor.

He heard someone calling him, "Kyle!"

"Kyle!" Aramburuzabala hissed at him in the dark. She had crossed the floor to him and was on her knees, shaking him with her good arm. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Kyle stammered. Until she had interrupted the music, he had heard nothing. And still, the night seemed silent around them, save the distant chirping and *whirrup* noises of the planet's native insect species.

Atlantic heard nothing else for several seconds, then a minute, then two went by. He was about to challenge her again, when a horrible roar started up. It seemed far away, but it was so loud, and so modulated that it vibrated the roof of their shelter.

When it stopped, Aramburuzabala whispered. "There's something out there?"

"Really? Do you think so?" Atlantic whispered back.

"See what it is," she ordered him in a whisper.

"Yeah, right!" he answered incredulously.

"Climb the tower and see what it is," she hissed at him. "I order you."

"You do it, captain," he responded.

She indicated her injured arm. "I can't, remember? You have to see what it is."

Sighing, Atlantic put his hand on the first rung of the tall metal ladder that reached out of the shelter. He then looked up, saw the height of the thing from below. "It's wet," he said. "What if I fall?"

"Just go!" Aramburuzabala ordered, pushing him up the ladder.

Atlantic began to haul himself up one death-grip at a time. The rungs were still wet from the rain, and they stank of rust. As he climbed higher, the wind picked up and he could

feel the tower sway. He would have had a flashback about climbing something perilous, but this was the first time he had done anything like this.

Several long minutes of climbing brought him a little platform, below some pointy arrangements of metal and two concave dishes, one pointed sharply upward and the other pointed in such a way that its signal would probably be directed into the ocean a few kilometers off-shore. Atlantic crawled onto the little platform and took in the scene.

Another moon, smaller than the first, had risen in the sky. The light these two satellites gave was pale, but Atlantic had excellent night vision. He saw the island spread out before him, and he could see where its outline met the sea, but he saw nothing that would explain the noise.

He was preparing to climb down again when a movement caught his eye. At first, he thought it was just wind blowing through the plant-life, but then he saw that there were two patterns, like trails, cutting through the jungle and converging.

Something was moving through the trees. Something not much smaller and a whole lot faster than the trees was moving through the trees. He then saw another rustling trail converging with the first two and heard a terrible shrieking noise. It was unearthly, like some giant alien thing being tortured. The trails converged on it and a chorus of strange voices set to howling together. Their wails built to a crescendo.

Atlantic felt the tower shake, vibrating sympathetically to the wailing of the beasts in the jungle. He began climbing down the tower as quickly as he could. He lost his slippery grip on one of the lower rungs and fell to the bottom, almost landing on Aramburuzabala.

The horrible fear the wails had provoked was written on his face. "What is it?" Aramburuzabala asked him.

"There's some kind of monster out there," Atlantic stammered.

The Island - Day Two

Pegasus would never find them. Atlantic was sure of it. They were searching the wrong era. They had crashed sixty million years ago. Maybe he could leave them a message, somehow, so they would know when, not where to look, and surely Lt. Cmdr. Alkema could come up with a way to find them through time, because he was so Allbeing-dammed clever...

Then, he found himself in a jungle clearing, a perfect circle with snow covering the ground, the strange warm snow that existed only due to the climatic peculiarities of this planet. In the sky overhead were the three moons, but they looked like thin silver rings. Atlantic wondered with this was the trick of an eclipse, or whether the planet had three ring-shaped moons. He couldn't remember, although he knew Alkema had talked to him about it.

Then, a figure appeared in shadow and began floating toward him. The figure became Brainiacsdaughter, standing in the warm jungle snow wearing a warfighter's tactical gear, but it was open down the front, showing the cleave of her breasts, the smooth skin of her belly, past her navel and down to her thighs. He could see drops of dew on her pubes.

"I never really liked warfighters," she whispered to him. "It was all a misunderstanding."

At that point, some noise drew his eyes up to the sky. An enormous spaceship was passing overhead, just a few hundred meters above the ground. It blotted out the sun and the sky. He could tell from its shape it was a Pathfinder Ship. To rescue them, Alkema must have ordered the ship into the atmosphere. But they were in trouble. He had flown too deep into the gravity well and they weren't going to make it. The sound it made as it cut through the atmosphere was like the wailing of a monster, but it was getting smaller and smaller, shrinking and shrinking until it changed into an Accipiter, then spiraled down to crash on one of the cliff-tops.

He snapped awake, and found himself eye level with Warfighter Shea Herrald's bare reproductive organ.

He screamed. "What the Hell! You're naked!"

"That's right, I am," Herrald answered, although he was still wearing boots. He flexed his muscles, showing how taut and naked they were.

"Why are you naked?" Atlantic asked more specifically.

"Some of us in the crew enjoy spending time naked," Herrald told him. "It's how I was planning to spend my shore leave. It's perfectly natural, and there's nothing erotic about it... well, actually there is quite a lot that's erotic about it... but the point is, I'm naked and I'm loving it."

"Could you maybe not be naked around me?" Atlantic asked.

"What, don't you like Little Herrald?" He began oscillating his mid-section. "C'mon, shake hands with the Little Herrald. Why don't you like Little Herrald? Little Herrald likes you."

"Stop it!" Atlantic snapped.

Aramburuzabala roused from her sleep about this time, and looked up at Warfighter

Herrald. "Where have you been?" she demanded in a tone of voice that suggested she was still hacked off from last night's obscene exiting gesture.

"Exploring," Herrald answered.

"Did you see any... monsters?" Atlantic asked.

"Have you seen any sign of the doctor?" Aramburuzabala asked before he could answer Atlantic's question. Herrald's nakedness had no effect on her.

"Not a one," Herrald reported.

"Where's Savagewood?" Aramburuzabala asked.

"He's still in the jungle, tracking a boar," Herrald reported. "It's like a boar, anyway. Except with tentacles on its face."

"Have you met with any other survivors?" Aramburuzabala asked.

"None," Herrald answered.

Aramburuzabala sighed. "We have to keep searching. We'll follow the beach around the island. We should hang a parafoil on the tower. Hopefully, it will draw any other survivors to it, or Doctor Skinner."

Herrald had news for her. "I've been scouting the trails ahead. About two kilometers beyond this point, there's a spot where the beach will become impassable, a drop-off. I can show you to a trail that will take you 'round it."

"Stop playing with yourself!" Atlantic demanded.

"We'll meet you outside," Aramburuzabala said to Atlantic. "And do Atlantic a favor and stop touching yourself."

Herrald smirked as he left. Atlantic rose, the gnawing hunger inside his gut reminded him he had not eaten in a day. Even porcine face-tentacles sounded almost appetizing.

As he left the shelter, he noted that if he had seen it in daylight, he probably would have kept out of it. It was a rusted-out metal shed already in the process of being overtaken by jungle rot and rust. He was surprised it had even survived the rain. He could have kicked it over.

By mid-morning, Atlantic, Herrald, and Aramburuzabala reached the point two kilometers up on the beach. It was just as Herrald had described it, a sheer drop-off to the water surrounded by thick turquoise and chartreuse jungle vegetation. Herrald had tied a strip of his shirt on a tree trunk to mark the trail into the jungle.

"So, now what?" Atlantic asked.

"We take the trail," Aramburuzabala said.

"Shouldn't the rescue ships have been here by now?" Atlantic asked.

"Aye, they should have been," Aramburuzabala agreed. "Even without a distress signal, *Pegasus* should have sent search and rescue crews hours ago."

"So, why aren't they?" Atlantic asked.

"I don't know," she seemed to have achieved a sort of acceptance that rescue would not be coming. "Which makes it the more imperative that we find any other survivors."

Maybe it was the hunger, and the fear of what might lurk in the jungle, but Atlantic was drawn to a darker prospect. "Maybe they rescued the others and left us here."

"We haven't seen any ships," Aramburuzabala argued. "To rescue the others, they would have done a standard search and rescue pattern. We would have seen them. Something's wrong."

"Maybe something happened to them," Atlantic suggested. "Maybe there was an attack. Maybe whatever took us down destroyed *Pegasus*."

"Or maybe we passed through some kind of space-time warp and ended up in a completely different era of this planet's history," Aramburuzabala challenged him back.

"Oh, yeah, that's likely," Atlantic rolled his eyes.

Aramburuzabala finished. "The point is, we can not waste time speculating on what we can not know. We have to focus on finding the others."

Defiantly, Herrald slapped his own butt cheek, "You can follow that trail around the island. I'm going back into the jungle. I'll try and find Savagewood."

"And maybe your clothes," Atlantic suggested.

"Yeah, whatever," Herrald turned and made his way toward the jungle.

Atlantic started down the other trail with Aramburuzabala. It was still muddy from yesterday's rains, and clouds of tiny insects rose from the surrounding bushes and trees as they walked by. They didn't sting, but were so tiny it was hard not to breathe them in, and they created a nuisance.

"I've been going over the crash in my head," Aramburuzabala said after a while. "There was no indication of any problem before the ship broke apart. None."

Atlantic grunted in acknowledgment, but he wasn't really listening to her.

"I don't think it's anything you did," she emphasized, although Atlantic had never even considered that it could have been something he had done. Atlantic pushed an oily blue vine out of the way – carefully, because he had found out earlier that the oil on the branch gave him a nasty burning rash – and continued along the path.

"Hear me out," she continued, as though he had a choice. "The first possibility is that something destabilized the pseudo-gravity envelope around the ship, resulting in a shearing condition that tore us apart. However, self-induced gravitational shearing is something that has never happened in hundreds of years of gravity-based propulsion."

"Alternately, it is possible that our main reactor malfunctioned, and caused the tritium fuel cells to explode. But if that happened, we probably would not be alive to talk about it."

"So, that brings me to the next theory, which is that one of our Hammerheads detonated in the weapons bay, destroying the main fuselage, but saving us because the command module protection system ejected us when it detected the malfunction."

"And if that happened," she added darkly, "It was possibly the result of sabotage."

This got a slightly more attentive grunt out of Atlantic, but he was still elsewhere in his thoughts.

Aramburuzabala continued. "Someone could have accessed our weapons bay and

rigged one of the missiles to detonate. But who... and why? One of the passengers could have been the target, but which one... and why?"

Atlantic roused from his self-absorption long enough to suggest, "There could be an Aurelian agent on the ship. Some people think that TyroCommander Redfire was replaced by an Aurelian replicant when..."

Aramburuzabala chuckled. "Aurelians, feh. I'm not so sure about the Aurelians. I mean, isn't it kind of strange that we encounter an enemy in the galaxy just powerful enough to be a threat to us, but not so powerful that they conquer us outright? Isn't it funny how the Aurelians are just threatening enough to compel the surviving colonies to ally with us?"

Atlantic could not believe what he was hearing. "Are you saying the Aurelians are fake?"

"I'm not saying anything, I'm just raising questions," she insisted. "But think about it. The Olympic Project sent out a hundred ships into the galaxy and they were never heard from again. And that was just about the time the Aurelians began moving into space. Is that a coincidence?" She continued to elaborate on the Centurion Order, the Shadow Cabinet, and the secret family links between the Keelers and the Lears. The more she did so, the more Atlantic tried to focus on following the path through the brush at the edge of the jungle.

But the heat, the humidity, the hunger, and Aramburuzabala's non-stop chatter was making him hate life.

Flashback -- "I hate life," Atlantic muttered under his breath.

From where he stood in the Solstice Garden the millistrati ultracrystal provided a view of the curving perimeter of the StarLock Chapultepec and the Pathfinder Ship Lexington Keeler, well along in its repairs, its command towers completely dismantled and its hull patched and smoothed, except for some of the larger scars.

She was on that ship. And he ought to have been there with her. And he would be, except that...

A loud shout interrupted his life-hating reverie. "You, boy, what day is it?" Commander Keeler asked. His nose was as red as an m-class sun. He obviously had a load on.

"It's Christ-Solstice Mass Day, sir," Atlantic answered. As should have been obvious. Solstice Park was in winter-mode, with snow covering the grounds and pathways, red balls and white lights hanging in the trees. Little pink ducks decorated the pathways.

"Ha ha! Christ-Solstice Mass Day! Then I haven't missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night, Heaven be praised," Keeler cried out joyously.

Aye, the spirits have done it, all right, Atlantic thought.

The Commander regarded him, a little unsteadily, "Listen, my lad, er, could you navigate a giant starship through the you-know-what ... thing?" He pointed at Chapultepec.

Atlantic was only a little puzzled. "It's fairly straightforward navigation sir."

Keeler roared. "Ha! An intelligent boy! A remarkable boy!"

"Is the Odyssey Project Directorate finally going to give you permission to jump to the Orion Quadrant." Atlantic asked anxiously, for he was in no hurry for this to happen.

"Probably not, probably not," Keeler muttered, with no less a jolly tone in his voice than before. "It may take the sneaky genius of a feline to get past the guardian codes, unlock the Lock, shut down its defenses, and open a connection to a remote StarLock on the other side of the galaxy, but such things are possible, certain things are likely to happen before the advent of the new year."

The commander paused, "But, perhaps I have said too much, Tell me, do you know if the food supply core has anymore of those cloned mega-turkeys?"

Atlantic asked, "The ones as big as me?"

Keeler gave a hearty laugh. "Hee hee hee! The very same. What a delightful boy! It's a pleasure to talk to ye. Yes, my buck!"

Is he hitting on me? Atlantic wondered.

Keeler handed him a data slip. "Go down, will ya? And tell 'em to send it to David Alkema and his family on Deck 21. And, mind you, they're not to know who paid for it."

"Za, commander, but they probably will know it was you."

"Make sure someone cooks it up properly for them. That so-called woman of his could carbonize cold smashed grains."

"Aye, commander," Atlantic had said.

Keeler laughed, "Ha ha! Tell me not to take my starship to the Orion Quadrant will they! Ha ha! And a merry Christ-Solstice Mass to you, my boy! A merry Christ-Solstice Mass to everybody! A happy New Year to all the galaxy. Whoo! Whoo! Hallooo!"

Atlantic watched as the commander of Pegasus stumbled drunkenly down the pathway.

There were two trails of footprints in the snow besides his and Commander Keeler's. One belonging to a tall warfighter, and the other to a girl with sparkling eyes, an upturned nose, and the most perfect set of tits he had ever seen.

It was then Atlantic realized with a horrifying finality that he was never going to see Specialist Brainiacsdaughter again.

When he came out of his reverie, he found himself alone on the trail. Aramburuzabala was no where to be seen. Atlantic thought she must have gotten ahead of him on the trail, and quickened his pace.

As he followed a turn on the trail, he looked up to see a woman standing at the edge of the path ahead, between the jungle and the beach. She wearing an Odyssey Project jacket. It had to be either Aramburuzabala or one of the survivors. Atlantic began running toward her.

The woman turned toward him and smiled. He stopped in his tracks.

She looked just like Specialist Brainiacsdaughter.

"Mr. Atlantic, I presume," said a voice beside him, startling him.

Atlantic turned to see Doctor Skinner standing next to him.

"What?" he said. He turned back, but Specialist Brainiacsdaughter was gone.

Was I just dreaming? He wondered.

"And how does this wonderful morning find you?" Skinner persisted. His silver mane of hair looked a little disheveled, but his eyes really put Atlantic off. They seemed to be looking at him from some place far away.

"I just saw Specialist Brainiacsdaughter," Atlantic said.

"And how is she this fine morning?" Skinner asked.

Atlantic said, "There's no one here, but us."

"That isn't quite true," Skinner told him. "That isn't true at all, in fact. You're here, I'm here, mean old Mr. Sun is here..."

Atlantic struggled. Perhaps the sun, the heat, had confused his mind. "Where... you disappeared... where did you go? Where have you been?"

Skinner grinned, "Oh, around and about, about and around. I needed to get away from myself for a while, and it's done me no end of good. And I've made a new friend. He has told me many things about this island. He's lived here for a very long time."

"You met a native?" Atlantic asked him. If there were natives, maybe they would have food and shelter.

Skinner pulled a yellow wood log out from behind him. It was, maybe, two-thirds of a meter long and thick as a man's calf. Skinner stroked the log gently. "My log says they're alive. They're all alive."

"Who?" Atlantic asked, hoping he was still dreaming. He hoped, but he was pretty sure he was really awake now.

"Why the others, of course," Skinner said.

"What others?" Atlantic persisted.

"Don't be silly, there were twenty-five other people on that Aves besides the two of us. The five of us landed here, the twenty two-of them in another place."

Skinner stroked his wood again and pressed the log to his ear. "My log says there are other people on this island, also, others besides the others. Do you want to know how to find them?"

Atlantic felt himself nodding. He supposed his survival instinct was kicking in, and he didn't want to risk offending Dr. Skinner ... or his log.

Skinner pointed. "Up there, where the mountain divides into a pair of identical summits." He pointed toward the middle of the island. Above the foliage of the jungle rose a pair of nearly identical volcanic cones. "Up there," Skinner repeated.

Up there was some place Atlantic did not want to go. Not with several kilometers of probable jungle monster between him and it. He suddenly wanted Doctor Skinner to go away and Brainiacsdaughter to come back.

In the moment, this didn't seem like an irrational thought.

"My log says you want me to leave now," Skinner said. "I can understand. Also, I don't have any particular desire to stay here. But consider this, 50,000 years ago this world was already here, spinning around its sun, oceans washing the shore of this island. Do you ever think of that? My log thinks of that."

Then, Skinner turned and walked back into the jungle. Atlantic did not feel like he should go after him. He looked again toward the summits of the middle island. He had an odd feeling, like he was looking at a familiar landscape from a new angle. And then Atlantic realized ... almost mid-way up the side of one of the peaks, he could see something. He could definitely see something.

He ran back down the trail toward the beach. Aramburuzabala had gotten ahead of him, and was resting at the edge of the jungle. "Where did you go, I was alone," Aramburuzabala demanded of him.

"I saw the Doctor," Atlantic explained.

"Where?" Aramburuzabala asked anxiously.

"Back in the jungle," Atlantic pointed back down the trail. "He was talking to a log, he's gone. I have to show you something."

He led her down the trail to the beach, where he had a clearer view of the peaks. .

"Up there," he grabbed her good arm and pointed it to the cliff top, so she could focus her vision on her finger tip. Something was glinting from the side of the mountain, making a metal flash as the morning sunlight hit it. Atlantic sharpened his vision. The white and silver shape resolved and enhanced itself.

"One of our Accipiters!" Aramburuzabala exclaimed.

"Aye," Atlantic said.

Aramburuzabala wiped her forehead, and a look of renewed determination came to her eyes. "If that can fly, we could use it to find the other survivors. Even if it doesn't fly, we could access the COM Link and send a distress signal to *Pegasus*."

Sure, we can, Atlantic thought, but it had also occurred to him that between them and the Accipiter was a stretch of jungle filled with whatever he had seen from the tower the previous night. "What about the jungle monsters?" he warned.

"That was just the wind moving the trees," Aramburuzabala said, and Atlantic sensed that she had convinced herself of this. He didn't think it had been wind last night. "We need to get to that Accipiter."

"We'll never reach it today," Atlantic argued, leaving her to figure out the implication that spending a night in the jungle was not desirable.

"It's too late to start yesterday," she chuckled as though she had said something really clever. "With a little speed and a little luck, we can at least be above the tree-line by tonight. Let's find a trail."

Atlantic looked at the jungle, looming dark and dangerous, and he had no desire to go any deeper into it than they already had. Aramburuzabala seemed to have no reservations, but just began walking into the dark trees. Reluctantly, he pushed into the brush, with a sense of foreboding that something terrible was going to happen to them.

"C'mon Kyle," she said. "We can do this."

Flashback - "C'mon Kyle, we can do this." Trajan Lear assured him. "Line up your approach against the opening in the rear, and just slide it right down the chute."

They were in the cockpit of the Aves Phoenix. Pegasus had been in the Orion Quadrant for over a year, but had not yet found a colony to contact. Restless, Atlantic had signed up for Flight Core. He thought this would ease his boredom, and maybe help shake the ennui that had the grasp of him. This simulated drill dealt with landing on Pegasus with minimal assist from the automatic landing system.

Atlantic took a deep breath, and guided the virtual Aves toward the virtual back-end of Pegasus.

"Whoa, not so fast," Lear cautioned him. "You need to take it a little slow at first, until you get used to it."

"This is my first time," Atlantic reminded him.

"It's rough at first, but after a while, you'll get used to it," Trajan Lear assured him. "Now, ease off and align the head of your ship into the open slot. I know it looks like a tight fit, but you'll feel better once you're inside."

Atlantic took a deep breath and focused. This was decidedly more painful than the oral exam had been.

"It'll go in easier if you don't force it," Trajan Lear told him. "Just ease it in. I've done this scores of times."

"I don't feel right about this," Atlantic said.

Trajan Lear tried to reassure him. "When Flight Captain Driver broke me in, I didn't think I would ever be slick enough for this kind of thing. You've just got to grit your teeth and get through it, no matter how painful it gets. Think about groundball, if it helps. You know, guiding the ship like a groundball through the goalzone."

Atlantic was trying to concentrate, but his neural interlink with Phoenix was still telling him he was outside the zone for safe penetration.

"I'm not trying to be hard on you," Trajan warned him. "But if don't do this right, you can splatter all over the inside of the tunnel. And no one wants that."

Clouds were gathering rapidly when they reached a spot beneath the ledge the Accipiter had come to rest on. On one side of them, a stream rushed over some rocks on its way to the sea. On the other there was a sort of cave carved out by erosion from a hollow in the cleft of some tall rocks. "We should make camp here," Aramburuzabala decided. "The rain is going to start soon. Gather up some firewood."

From a bunker to a cave, Atlantic thought. It did begin to rain, but it was a shower, and it passed quickly. He activated his music chip, and set out to spend as much time as possible away from Aramburuzabala. He walked into the jungle, gathering up dry dead branches and sticks as he went. The dry vegetation made his skin itch, and he was regularly assaulted by swarms of tiny purple bugs. But worst of all, he had the creepiest feeling that someone was in the jungle with him, watching him.

He set down his first armload of dry vegetation, shooed away the flies with his hands, and looked around for more wood. As he stepped forward, he swore he heard someone walking behind him. He whirled around but found himself alone in the trees.

He thought he saw a shadow moving behind him, but when he whipped around he saw nothing.

"Tasmanidingsjiprot" Hasnemoek "Eingothafjellaknefne" Isikoy

Standing on the path was a black cloud in the shape of some sort of creature.

He turned and ran. And also wet his pants.

And it was so fast...

Finally, a vine caught his ankles, and pitched him sprawling on the wet sandy jungle floor. He rolled over and looked up. And as he looked up, he screamed.

Next to the mounted pig's head stood Technician Savagewood. He wore pants and boots, but nothing above the waist. His bare chest and face were obscured by red and black war paint. Herrald stood next to him, still naked, painted half blue and half black. Both had large black circles surrounding their eyes.

"Did you see the creature that was chasing me?" Atlantic asked.

"There was nothing chasing you," Herrald explained to him.

"Wanna wrestle in the mud?" Herrald asked him.

"Neg."

"What's the meaning of this?" Atlantic gestured toward the pig's head.

Savagewood grunted a non-reply. Herrald offered that "It could be symbolic of any number of things, but mainly, we were bored."

"Bored," Savagewood grunted in agreement.

"It's a bad business, being bored," Herrald went on.

Atlantic wanted to tell the both of them they were out of their minds, but their sharp pointy spears ... and the fact that they probably were out of their minds... made him think better of it. "I ... better get back to Flight Lieutenant Aramburuzabala. It's not safe out here alone. There's some kind of monster out here."

"Let's kill him," Savagewood suggested.

"Kill the monster?" Herrald asked.

Savagewood shrugged. "Whatever."

"Where's your camp?" Herrald asked.

"The cave in the stream at the base of the rocks, I'll show you..."

Herrald shook his head. "No need. We'll find it."

Savagewood pulled Atlantic very close to him. "I can smell you," he hissed.

They stared at each other a few minutes longer, then Savagewood and Herrald moved back along the trail.

Carefully, his senses on red alert lest they return, Atlantic gathered another armload of wood and made his way to the campsite.

As night came to the island again, Atlantic stared at the fire he had made in front of the shallow cave in which he and Flight Lieutenant Aramburuzabala were sheltering. The rains had come and gone again, but this time they at least had a fire to dry themselves.

"I am *so* hungry," Aramburuzabala told him.

"Didn't you find anything with that thing you wear on your wrist?" Atlantic asked. He too, was very hungry. His stomach had diminished to a hard knot, and he was aching from lack of food.

"Nothing," she replied. "There's some fruit on the vines, but its unripe, and if we ate it, the alkaloids inside would reduce us to cramps within minutes. Later... death."

Atlantic shook his head. "I'm so hungry I could eat a plate of Eddie Roebuck's 'Deep-Fried Parts of Formerly Living Things.'"

"There might be some edible worms in the soil," Aramburuzabala suggested.

"That's starting to sound good," Atlantic conceded. "Where the Hell is *Pegasus*?"

"Something must be wrong if they can't find us," said Aramburuzabala. "Maybe whatever knocked us out of the sky destroyed *Pegasus* as well, or..."

"We've had this conversation," Atlantic snapped at her.

She was silent for a moment, then she moved closer to him in the firelight. "Are you scared, Kyle?"

"Kyle?" he thought. She unbuttoned her flight jacket and guided his hand to her supple breasts. She put her arms around him and began to stroke his chest and breathe heavily

on him. "We all get scared... we all get so very... very scared sometimes. It is all right to be scared."

Just when Atlantic didn't think it could get any weirder, Specialist Savagewood emerged from the jungle with the carcass of a dead pig slung over his shoulder. He plopped it down next to the fire. "Food!" he explained. "Meat," he explained more specifically.

"You killed that?" Aramburuzabala asked, quickly redoing the front of her uniform.

Savagewood offered a guttural and savage affirmation. He then held out the weapons he had crafted from a sturdy stick and some sharp pieces of debris from the ship.

Atlantic beheld the dead animal on the ground. He didn't care that Savagewood had killed it, he was over-taken by the primal need to get meat in his belly. Aramburuzabala was eying it hungrily as well.

"I give meat," Savagewood said. "We take woman."

Atlantic looked to Aramburuzabala. "This woman?"

"Ungh, want woman," Savagewood repeated.

And then, Atlantic felt a sharp pain on the back of his head, as though Herrald had snuck up from behind him with a big rock and smashed him where his skull met his neck. Which is exactly what had happened.

The Island – Day 3

Atlantic dreamt he was on board a Pathfinder ship, in a landing bay that had been reconfigured into a strange inhabitation matrix. Cargo containers were locked in a kind of metal framework, stacked three high. Each one had been made into quarters for one family or two crewmen.

He was looking for the one where Specialist Brainiacsdaughter was waiting for him. He was going to tell her...

He knew which one she was in, but every time he turned the corner he came upon a row of inhabitations that was wrong.

He turned a corner and entered into one of the ship's botany bays. This one was made of a large arboretum. The arboretum was so large, they had managed to fit three moons into it. They hung over his head. It was filled with tropical foliage. In the middle of it, Doc Skinner was holding his log, saying "I've got wood for Naked Herrald."

Atlantic snapped awake finding himself alone and tied to a tree. The sun had not quite risen, and the jungle was dark and shadowy. There were the bones and remnants of a roasted pig near the remains of a fire. This and the throbbing pain at the back of his head reassured him that the events of the previous night had not been a hallucination.

"Now, what?" was all he could think.

Atlantic spent the next hours being severely uncomfortable. His arms cramped. The bindings chafed into his wrists. The shade of the rocks and cool breezes over the nearby stream spared him the worst of the morning's tropical heat, but clouds of tiny insects tormented him. He also dealt with terror that those flying black mites might coalesce into some

horrific creature ... again ... and this time he would be helpless against it.

Heat, hunger, and boredom contrived to make him pass out before the sun had reached its noontime Zenith.

And he has an auditory dream in which voices whispered.

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He regained consciousness to find himself face down on the ground, tasting the dirt. Someone was standing over him. He looked up and saw ... Specialist Brainiacsdaughter. It was not much of a surprise to him. The rest of the cockpit crew had gone mad, why not he?

"If I'm a hallucination, who cut your ropes?" Specialist Brainiacsdaughter asked him, as though reading his thoughts.

Atlantic spit the dirt out of his mouth, thinking he was definitely insane now, and there was nothing left but to get a talking cat and take up drinking. He pushed himself up, there were friction burns around his wrists. He crawled over to the stream, and scooped up water in his mouth.

Specialist Brainiacsdaughter hovered over him as he drank. "What are you going to do next, Kyle?"

Atlantic finished drinking, then rose, and cast his eyes upward. "Climb that hill, get to that Accipiter, and try to COM *Pegasus*."

"Do you think that's what the Allbeing wants you to do?" Brainiacsdaughter asked.

"What?" Atlantic asked.

"It won't work," she told him.

"Why not?"

"The flight controls and avionics are smashed, and the power cells are depleted," she explained. "That ship isn't what you think it is."

"You think you know that, just because you're a hallucination," he snapped at her.

"The Allbeing has a plan for you, Kyle," she told him. "The Allbeing has a plan for all of us."

Turning away from her, he began to climb the first reach of the hill, a twenty meter (give or take) stretch of rock, a fairly easy climb, and footholds were abundant.

"Watch out for snakes," Brainiacsdaughter warned him.

At that moment, Atlantic heard a hissing in the grass and saw a black and yellow hooded viper slithering away from the place his hand had just been.

More carefully now, he finished his climb to the top of the hill. When he reached the top, he turned around to see if his hallucination of Specialist Brainiacsdaughter had followed him, but it was no where to be seen.

The next part of the climb was harder. Even though the hill was not a sheer cliff, but more like a steep grade, it was thickly overgrown with native plant life, including a species of

blue-green glass whose blades were sharp as razors. Atlantic's hands were soon covered with small, stinging cuts.

Half a kilometer up from there, the grade flattened out, and there was a kind of trail, almost, leading up the hillside. Checking to see that he could keep the shiny metal of the Accipiter in sight, Atlantic began hiking up the trail.

Perhaps two or three hours had passed since he had left the camp. From the altitude of the hill, he could see most of this part of the island. And he could see, maybe eight or ten kilometers off-shore, what looked like another island. If it was real, he thought the other survivors might be on it. He was sure he could reach it, swimming, and wished he had done so instead of climbing these hills.

He didn't see the old log that lay across his path, and it was covered with thick sharp grass anyway. It caught his ankles and he face-planted.

Someone offered him a hand to help him up. He looked up and saw Specialist Brainiacsdaughter looking down on him... and smiling. "Help you up?" she asked,

He reached out and took her hand. It felt warm and soft, and even kissed a little bit by the jungle dew. It worried to him how real the hallucination was becoming. Nevertheless, he allowed her to help him to his feet. Then, he continued hiking.

"Um...'Thank you?'" she prompted him.

"I still don't believe you're actually here," Atlantic explained.

"That's no excuse to be rude. I don't believe I am actually here, either, so we're even," she said, taking his hand, and even if it was a hallucination, he was glad for her holding it. "I should be in a cargo locker on *Lexington Keeler*."

Atlantic remembered that *Keeler's* Inhabitation decks had been completely destroyed in the Aurelian attack. "I thought you were supposed to have finished reconfiguring the cargo bays into living areas by now."

"It's taking longer than we thought. With Ambassador Lear, everything takes longer than we thought. Careful!"

His foot slipped on some loose dirt. Her grip on his arm kept him from falling over.

"Thanks," he said, this time.

"That's better," she replied.

He continued along the trail for a few more minutes, and finally he figured, what the hell, and he asked her, "Why did you leave *Pegasus* to go on *Lexington Keeler*?"

She didn't respond at first, and he thought she might have vanished again. Then, she asked him, "Why did you stay on *Pegasus* instead of following me?"

It took him a few steps to formulate his reply, and he thought he was being honest as he said it. "I thought about leaving. If we had stayed at Chapultepec for another few days, I probably would have left *Pegasus*."

"Neg, you wouldn't have." She smiled sweetly. "Why didn't you ever say anything to me about your attraction to me?"

"I thought you liked warfighters."

"You thought wrong about that." She squeezed his hand. "You never asked because you already knew what my answer would be."

The Accipiter was now just ahead of them. He had not seen, from the ground, how covered in jungle debris it was. To his untrained eye, it seemed someone had made a deliberate effort to hide it, a long time ago. Most of the leaves and vines covering its hiding place had dried out, turning an indigo color as they died. Many of them had dried onto the skin of the Accipiter, and had to be scraped clean.

When he had dug through enough leaves to get to the canopy, Atlantic touched the release at the side of the ship, but it did not open.

"Like I told you, the energy cells are drained," Brainiacsdaughter said.

"But we just crashed two days ago, those cells are good for ..." he didn't really know how long they were good for, but he guessed it was longer than two days. Instead, he pried the canopy open. It eventually released, and a puff of hot stale air exhaled when he opened it.

He yelped at the contents of the ship.

There was a skeleton on the control saddle.

Frozen for the moment, he stared into its empty eye-sockets. This pilot had been dead a long time.

"This was not one of your Accipiters," Brainiacsdaughter observed.

"There's no flight patch on his uniform," Atlantic said. In fact, what he was wearing didn't look like flight gear at all. It looked like some sort of one-piece coverall. Nothing on it provided name or rank of the deceased pilot. "If this isn't our Accipiter, where did it come from?" Atlantic wondered.

He reached in and cautiously touched a few of the controls to see if anything in the ship still worked. Nothing. Then he noticed, just under the spot where the canopy sealed to the fuselage, a code was stenciled. **ACK-110-231-OLY**. "This came from the Pathfinder Ship *Olympic*," Atlantic said out loud. "How did it end up here?"

"How could I possibly know," Brainiacsdaughter replied coyly.

He stuck his head deeper into the cockpit. He wanted to pull the Flight COM module from the control panel. It was dead, but if he could find an active power cell, he might be able to fashion a COM Link. He tugged at it, but it seemed stuck in place.

He felt the Accipiter shudder and slip underneath him.

"Be careful," Brainiacsdaughter advised. "The ship is not very stable."

"I have to get that COM unit," he insisted, but he felt the slip slipping quickly now, over the side of the gorge, carrying him with it.

Flashback - "Inertial dampeners at maximum," shouted Lieutenant Smith at operations. "But hull stress is still increasing."

"The ship will take it," Lieutenant Commander Change insisted. "Mr. Atlantic, what is our position..."

"110,000 meters above the surface... by reckoning." As Pegasus descended into the atmosphere of the

planet Yronwode, it had become enveloped by charged atmospheric particles. His instruments were blinded, and he was calculating their altitude by rate of descent and his own intuition.

"I would estimate closer to 105,000," Change corrected.

Atlantic had tried to get her to choose another helmsman, to choose Powerhouse Jesus for this descent. But she had refused to relieve him. Specialist Atlantic, junior helmsman, would be charged with taking a pathfinder ship into the atmosphere of a planet, something a pathfinder ship was manifestly not designed for.

"If he's wrong, we'll crash on the surface as be trapped on that gosh-forsaken heckhole forever," Smith had protested.

"If you're going to curse on my Bridge, use real curse words. I'll be happy to give you some lessons." Change growled at him, "I am sure Mr. Atlantic is competent to keep this ship flying."

But Kyle Atlantic was not sure. Beyond the rapidly diminishing force shields, the ship was enveloped in a burning ring of fire. And as the ship went down, the flames went higher.

Atlantic watched the Accipiter tumble down the side of the cliff and smash into the trees below as he hung on for dear life to a sapling growing at the side of the cliff. Weak with hunger, and pain, and heat, he knew he could not hold on for very long, let alone pull himself over the side. He also didn't think his chances of surviving a fall or a slide down this cliff face were very good either.

Just when he thought he was going to lose his grip, a hand reached over the side.

If that's a hallucination and I reach out for it I'm dead, he thought to himself.

He heard the voice of Specialist Brainiacsdaughter. "If you don't grab it, you're dead anyway unless you learn to fly in the next few seconds."

He reached for it. The arm and the hand were thin, but strong as carbon composite, and Atlantic was quickly hoisted over the side. He landed face-up on the grass, looking into the sun. A male figure in a cloak appeared in silhouette, leaning over him. "Greetings and salutations, Number 5. I trust you are not in too much distress."

"Number five?" Atlantic stammered. There was a very sharp pain in his left thigh. He felt a sharp piece of wood sticking out from the meat of his leg. A branch had impaled him as he fell from the cliff. He pulled it out. It hurt like hell.

"Yes, there were five people in the compartment of your ship that landed on the North Shore of the island, and you are the last of them. I call you Number 5. Let me help you up." He extended a hand, and Atlantic took it.

Getting up, Atlantic took a good hard look at the man. He was thin, with white blond hair, and of indeterminate age. He wore spectacles with round silvery mirrored lenses that completely hid his eyes, also a long coat that was incongruous with the tropical climate.

"I suppose," the man said, "that you are going to require food, water, attention to injuries, and all those other things humans require? Probably in that exact order?"

"Aye," Atlantic told him. "Oh, and thanks for pulling me up."

"You are quite welcome. We should head back to the lab, and see what's on the slab."

Old joke, but it would have knocked them out 5,000 years ago, I'll tell you that. Walk this way," he instructed, chuckling to himself.

Once you have gone completely insane, Atlantic decided, you may as well just follow your delusions, because you can't tell what is real anyway. And for all he knew, he had gone over the cliff and died, and this was just one of those hallucinations you experience in the final seconds of life. Perhaps the last three days had all been a hallucination and he had died in the crash. He had seen stories like that. Maybe this was one of them. He no longer cared.

The man led him away from the cliff and back into the trees, which were thinner at this elevation. Getting through them was not much worse than passing through a mountain glade. And not far into the woods, they came upon a well-used trail that led to the notch between the pair of mountains in the middle of the island.

The man in the overcoat continued chatting amiably. "You haven't asked my name yet, but that's understandable. You're a little self-absorbed, and probably think I'm a product of your delusional mind. Right?"

"Aye," Atlantic admitted.

The man nodded. "All right, go with that, then. If you decide you do need a name to refer to me by, you may call me Mr. Dolby."

A Republicker name, Atlantic thought. Atlantic noted that he spoke with a distinct Republicker accent. If he had to guess, the man was from Sector 28 North, the Estuary region.

"Follow me closely, you don't want to lost the trail," the man warned Atlantic. "This trail I'm taking us on is a little hard to follow, but it will get us to the black stone pyramid before nightfall."

Flashback – Atlantic snapped alert, as though he had been daydreaming. "Sorry, ma'am?"

"Wake the hell up and lay in a course to the system coordinates Mr. Alkema just sent to you," Change ordered. "I can do it myself if you're preoccupied."

"Aye Ma'am, sorry ma'am." He activated the helm interface, which grew over his left forearm and left eye. "I'm plotting a course around the debris field. Our ETA at the specified coordinates is approximately six hours, 61 minutes."

Change looked dissatisfied. "Negative, cut through the debris field. That will reduce our transit time to fewer than three hours."

Atlantic turned to her, an anxious look on his face. "Aye, ma'am... but that will take us... through the debris field."

"I know that," she told him. "Not hitting anything will be your problem."

An hour and a half of hiking brought them to the cleft between the mountains. Here was located a six-tiered pyramid, so ancient the volcanic black stones of which it was constructed were crumbling and jungle vines covered its walls. "Don't just stand there being impressed, Number 5. Come on in, I have a lot of questions for you."

The base of the pyramid was a verandah with a roof supported by pillars. Carved into the black volcanic stones were abstract faces, too oval and melon-like to be human. In the center of one side of the pyramid, sheltered by the overhanging roof, was a tunnel to the inside. The tunnel was dark, and went on for quite some distance, gradually going deeper and deeper into the base.

Mr. Dolby continued to explain things. "This planet actually has a very rich and colorful history. Until a century or so, ago, the dominant power was a continental nation called the Empire State. The other twenty or so countries were allied against it, not at war, but always looking to bring the... Empire Staticans ... I guess that will do ... down a peg. They never had much success until the Kariad came along. Do you know of the Kariad?"

"The Kariad? What are they, some kind of aliens?" Atlantic asked.

"Some kind, indeed. They arrived at the planet, professed alarm that this world was so 'divided,' and that there was such a 'disparity of power' between the Empire State and the other nations. They proposed a solution; a new Global Government in which power was shared equally. As an incentive, they offered the world a new technology that would provide limitless power, and end this planet's dependence on off-world sources of Tritium.

"Under considerable coercion, the Empire State's leaders agreed to the new arrangement. To ensure cooperation, the Kariad gave part of the technology to each of the many nations on this planet, thinking it would force them to cooperate in order to build it.

"Unfortunately, after the Kariad left, several of the smaller nations and one of the larger ones held back on sharing their pieces of the technology. Some were holding out for more concessions, but a few had nursed so many resentments against the Empire State for so long, they were willing to bring down the entire planet in order to settle their scores.

"The tritium supplies depleted rapidly, and with no replacement technology, civilization collapsed rapidly. Sort of the Tower of Babel, in reverse. Well, suffice it to say that eventually the fanatics got their wish. Civilization collapsed to its current state.

"Except here," Dolby continued. "The only technology, the only science left on the planet is on this island. Do you want to see it? It's pretty amazing stuff, all things considered."

Atlantic shrugged.

Deep under the pyramid, they came to a chamber, perfectly square, lit by overhead light fixtures, and filled with an amazing variety of devices. A collection of video screens hung from a mass of tentacle-like attachments from above, showing pale static-flecked views of various parts of the island. There was a row of large, clear tubes on one side of the room that looked vaguely like stasis pods, some of which were filled with bubbling orange liquids. A large lamp-like device stood in the corner, containing thick globules of orange and blue fluid slowly flowing past each other describing odd shapes and giving off light. An ancient-looking computational device with what looked like a steering wheel occupied one alcove. There were dozens of similarly odd contraptions; one of which was a large sort of chair, like a dentist might use, but larger, and surrounded by a number of strange attachments and armatures. "What is that?" Atlantic asked.

"Ah, the Probulator," Dolby told him, with an exaggeratedly disgusted expression. "Nasty device, opens up your mind and let's anyone else see inside it. Trust me, you wouldn't want to be strapped into it unless someone shot you in the face with a stun pistol at close range first. What would you like to eat?"

"Eat?" Atlantic asked. Somehow, he had briefly forgotten how famished he was.

Dolby indicated that Atlantic should sit at a table, in the middle of the mess. "Bearing in mind, if this is a delusion, you might as well delude yourself that whatever you're eating is an amazing dish, prepared to perfection."

Atlantic sensed he was being mocked. "Some protein cakes and a syntho-turk sandwich will be fine."

Dolby smiled to himself, and after briefly searching a compartment built into the side of the table presented Atlantic with a plate which held two protein cakes and the most perfect sandwich he would ever taste.

"Now, then, onto business," Dolby said. He activated one of the old screens. It slowly flickered to life. It showed a crude image of the Aves Amy breaking up in mid-air. "First, why are you here? In a rude, temporal sense, you are here because your ship was caught up in an electro-magnetic vortex generated by one of the experiments on this island. In the Days of the Empire State, this island was used for military research and development. Some of the experiments were left behind, and some were not easily controlled. The experiment that brought down your ship was part of research by the Empire State into teleportation."

"Teleportation?" Atlantic shook his head. "That's impossible."

Mr. Dolby grimaced. "Changing matter into energy, transporting it through space, and reassembling it at the destination... that's impossible. Well, so close to impossible it might as well be. On the other hand, moving an object from one point to another without passing through any point in-between... that's merely incredibly unlikely."

"And that's what happened to us?" Atlantic asked.

Dolby's head bobbed. "In a manner of speaking, the Empire State had brilliant scientists, but they never quite understood Kariad technology, and they never managed to stabilize the transition field. The unstable electro-magnetic vortex caused your ship to break-up in mid-air," Dolby paused, and reluctantly continued. "The same thing happened to me when I was passing through this system many years ago. Fortunately for us both, it also reduced our terminal velocity to a level where we could withstand the impact when we reached the surface. Imagine sliding down a giant swirly slide, all the way to the surface. That's what you did... pretty much."

He moved some other levers and touched some buttons on one of the displays. This one showed Atlantic running through the jungle, pursued by a swarm of black dots in the shape of some kind of terrible carnivorous lizard. "Remember this?"

"Aye," Atlantic was sure he would have nightmares about it for the rest of his life.

"The Crichtons were another military research experiment; a system to protect military bases from intrusion," Dolby explained. "Communities of nanobots arranged to take the forms of carnivorous sauropods ..."

"You've got to be kidding..."

"I didn't invent them," Dolby shrugged.

"What happened to the others?" Atlantic asked.

Dolby manipulated the controls. "Which others, the other four, or the other 22?"

"All of them."

A new telescreen activated, seemingly independent of Dolby's activities. It showed, in a badly resolved image, a collection of small houses, mostly faded white, topped with roofs made of palm thatch. It did not look altogether unpleasant.

Dolby explained. "The fuselage, I believe that is the correct word, fuselage, yes, of your ship, came to rest in a lagoon on our sister island, near The Village. Your people have found shelter, respite, and hospitality there. The Village was set up by the Empire State to hold political prisoners in comfort and isolation. It was abandoned before the Revolution, except for one eccentric prisoner it was simply too dangerous to release. After the Revolution, a few survivors knew about the Island, and retreated to it. They await the coming of 'the Alternates.' According to legend, the Alternates are refugees from another colony who will return and rebuild civilization on this planet.

As the camera zoomed in closer, Atlantic could make out a number of people relaxing on yellow-white sand while a purplish surf kissed the beach and then retreated back out to sea. Atlantic recognized some of them. "That's Specialist Skulljammer, and that's Technician LightTower, and ... I'm almost certain that girl with the birthmark on her right breast is Specialist Nightbreed."

"Yes, they're all fine..." Dolby said. "Rather enjoying themselves, I should think."

"What about the ones that were with me?"

The telescreen changed its view, and for a second, he saw Doc Skinner sitting on a rock, happily cradling his log and singing a Carpentarian sea-chanty. A moment later, he viewed another encampment, Herrald arranging seat cushions from Leo's wreckage, while Savagewood provided water to Aramburuzabala, who was tied to a tree.

"Why hasn't *Pegasus* rescued us yet?" Atlantic asked.

Dolby seemed to hem and haw a bit. "Well, your ship was transported here from thousands of miles away. And, um, the thing about that is, the area around the island is ... is ... well, it is extremely difficult to find if you don't know exactly where it is."

Something Dolby had said earlier came back to Atlantic. "Did you say you weren't from this planet?"

"Did I say that?" Dolby asked.

"You said you were passing through the system..."

"I did?"

Atlantic tried to doggedly adhere to his point. "Where are you from?"

"Do you believe all human consciousness is connected?" Dolby asked.

"What?"

"Do you believe all human consciousness is connected?" Dolby repeated. "It's a simple yes, no, or maybe question."

"Not really," Atlantic replied.

Dolby climbed over the table and sat in front of Atlantic. "All right, think of human consciousness as a network. Every human mind is a node on that network. This island is a kind

of... server. Due to certain experiments conducted here, the island will bring out subconscious desires to the surface. Your pilot with the long name, she wanted to be a heroine, although subconsciously, she also wanted to be rescued herself. Women seem more often to balance contradictory desires than men. The other men in your party had much more straightforward urges. Savagewood wanted to hunt, Herrald wanted to get naked, Skinner wanted to go mad." Dolby chuckled. "He's been under a terrible amount of stress, but we did have a delightful conversation, the three of us."

"Three of you?"

"Yes, him, me, and the log." Dolby squinted. "Somehow, you saw through the tricks the island plays on the rest. You have some... quality that protected your mind from giving in." Dolby sounded impressed.

"I'm not sure about that," Atlantic replied. "I am sitting under a pyramid, eating sandwiches with a stranger."

"And there was the hallucinatory episode with the object of your adolescent infatuation," Dolby reminded him. "But you recognized it as an hallucination, and you even used it to help resolve your unresolved questions, didn't you?"

He waited for an answer, and Atlantic said, "How do you know about all this?"

Dolby pointed toward the monitor screens. Then he asked Atlantic, "Did you enjoy your sandwich?"

"Aye, it was very good, thank you."

Dolby nodded. "Good, I'm glad you enjoyed that. And, trust me, I'm very, very sorry that I have to do this now." He pulled a stun pistol from under his long coat, aimed it at Atlantic's face, and fired.

And then, everything went gray, and that was the last thing Atlantic remembered before waking up screaming next to Warfighter Herrald.

"It's very complicated," Dr. Skinner was saying. "But the Randomer Series indicates you almost certainly have latent foresight ability."

The Randomer series was a fairly annoying set of exercises over three days, during which Atlantic had to wear a coin-like brain-monitor on his temple. Not just during the exercises, he had to wear the monitor all day and ... especially... at night, since the tell-tale patterns of precognitive capability were strongest during the dream cycle. During the day, specialists asked him questions, some of which were straightforward, asking his recollection of childhood events. Other times, they would give him a series of words (e.g. "Occluded, Seminal, Barbarous, Potato, Predator, Camouflage, Starlight...") and ask him if he could connect them in any way. Sometimes, they showed him cards with abstract shapes and lights on them. It all seemed to him ... tediously stupid.

And then, at the end, they somehow determined that he was a latent pre-cognitive, and if he developed his ability, would be one of the few people capable of navigating a starship in hyperspace. But he didn't want that job.

"But I've never seen any future events," he protested to the doctor.

Skinner huffed. "I said 'latent,' didn't I? Now, only one human in 4,400 has this ability, and only a

few of those ever develop it to its full potential. Those who do are not only valuable as navigators, but back on the home-worlds can command high rewards for their business insight."

"But we're not on the home-worlds," Atlantic grumbled.

"Commander Keeler has been zealously scanning the ship for precognitives," Skinner told him, "He knows there are only a handful of stalwart capable navigators in his crew, and he knows we're lost without them. You are the only one we've found, and statistically, we are unlikely to find another."

Atlantic did not like this at all. "So, I have an obligation to the ship to try and bring this ... gift... out."

"I can understand why you don't want it," Skinner told him. "People with foresight are often out-of-phase with other people. They often deprive themselves of romantic relationships because they sense the conclusion of a relationship with someone when they first meet."

Atlantic had had nothing to say to this. Skinner had kept talking, but Atlantic was too much in his own thoughts to catch any of it until the doctor said, "I suggest you spend some time with Eliza Jane Change."

That sentence struck a note of pure terror. "Why?"

Skinner enthusiastically pushed his point. "She has the strongest foresight ability on the ship. A person with such a strong gift of foresight is often capable of bringing a latent foresight gift to emergence. She can also teach you how to manage your gift."

As he left the consultation chamber, he passed Warfighter Herrald, sitting on a healing bed cradling his elbow. Their conversation faded behind him as Atlantic walked out of Hospital 4.

"And, oh, what calamity has befallen my stripling warrior?" Skinner had asked.

Herrald: "Some weird cable thing wrapped itself on my arm. I think my elbow's cracked."

Skinner: "Well, let's see what Mr. Bone-scanner says..."

Herrald: "Shall I take off my clothes"

Skinner: "Oh, I can't see why that should be necessary..."

Herrald: "Please..."

"Stop!" Cleolanta ordered. "Stop. Stop right now. Stop!"

Atlantic's eyes fluttered open, and he was back in Hospital Four with Lt. Commander Alkema and Mind Specialist Cleolanta. He felt dazed. He once again had the memories of the last four days, but they seemed like some kind of crazy dream.

"What happened?" Alkema asked. "I lost the data stream."

"The boy was remembering things that hadn't happened yet," Cleolanta explained. "That's not for you to know. Anyone, you've got your data. I think we leave the boy alone, now."

She stood and left. Alkema saved and archived the data from the memory scan. "I'm going to edit out any references to Specialist Brainiacsdaughter from the official record," he said.

"Thank you," Atlantic offered.

"You can retain them in your private log, if you keep one," Alkema finished.

"What happens now?" Atlantic asked. "Can I go?"

"That's up to Doctor Goodbar," Alkema told him. "But, probably, za. There's no point in keeping you here any longer."

Pegasus Three Days Later – Commander Keeler was still in some pain, his lower leg had not healed from his own misadventure on the planet Fallon. The leg rested on an ottoman in the Commander's Briefing Room, adjacent to *Pegasus's* Main Bridge. The rest of Keeler's body leaned back heavily in the chair positioned behind it.

Keeler sipped a glass of something pale brown. "I can't believe they got to spend three days in a tropical paradise and we got stuck in a hole in the ground. Where is justice?"

"I don't know, sir, you had it last," Lt. Cmdr Alkema smirked.

"Don't try to be a smartass, you're no good at it," Keeler took a long drink of medicinal Borealan whisky. "So, let me see if I can get to the heart of this thing; the Kariad came here, screwed up the planet and left."

"That would be an adequate summary," Alkema replied.

"So, what do you make of this?" Keeler waved the final report of Specialist Atlantic's memory recovery session. Alkema took this to mean he had not reviewed it, and did not intend to.

Alkema summed it up for him. "Aves Leo broke up over 1,600 kilometers away from the island where we found the survivors. The main fuselage landed in a lagoon near an inhabited island in the planet's southern hemisphere. The command module separated and landed on a separate island eight kilometers away. Aside from Specialist Atlantic, no one from the command module has any recoverable memories from the three days they were on the island. The injuries Atlantic sustained are consistent with the memories Mind Specialist Cleolanta was able to recover. Overflights of the island detected the tiered pyramid structure he described, but ground parties report it pre-dates human settlement on the planet and was abandoned millennia ago. And they did not find a tunnel into the interior."

"Great, what brought them down?" Keeler asked.

Alkema located that section of the memory trace. "Atlantic recalled '... a white flash ... no, more like a wave... some kind of energy wave. Charged particles, or something...' He said 'It hit the ship and rolled us over.' "

Alkema went to the cross-referenced *Pegasus* tracking logs on his datapad. "*Pegasus* Flight Operations monitored *Leo's* descent and detected no atmospheric disturbances or unusual energy signatures of any kind."

"In other words, we don't know. Why didn't our sensors detect the island?" Keeler asked.

"Some kind of electro-magnetic field shields the island from sensors," Alkema explained. "If it was a research base for the former civilization of this planet, they might have put some kind of force field over it. It was only a fluke that we detected it at all."

Alkema activated a holo-screen and showed Keeler some aerial reconnaissance. "The pyramid is precisely at the center of these three metal towers. We don't know what they were for, but they would be capable of channeling a huge amount of energy."

"Unh-huh," Keeler sighed. Towers did not interest him. "So, what's the deal with 'The Village?'"

"Exactly as Atlantic described it," Alkema reported. "Even though he was on a completely different island."

"I suppose we'll just have to assume that the memories your Mind Specialist recovered were accurate. And the guy he met, what was his name? Doubly?"

"Dolby... there was no sign of any other humans living on that island," Alkema shrugged. "It doesn't mean he wasn't there."

Keeler took another drink. "Do we submit him for the Randomer Series?"

"He's never shown any indication of precognitive ability," Alkema protested. "But, za, I think we should. I'd be interested just to see the result."

"What's Atlantic's status?"

Alkema didn't have to check his datapad. "He's been judged fit for duty. In fact, he's on the Bridge, now. The others have been cleared as well, but we should keep them under observation until... just until."

"Right, just until. Promote Specialist Atlantic to lieutenant," Keeler ordered. "He's been through a lot, and I like his taste in women."

"I'll make it happen, sir," Alkema agreed. He checked his chronometer. "It's almost time, shall we adjourn to the bridge?"

Keeler agreed, finished his drink, and rose from his seat. He grabbed his walking stick, for once actually needing it for support. "Whoever would have thought space would be so ... weird," Keeler mused, leaning heavily on his walking stick as they exited the briefing room.

End of Part II

Hellfire Part III: Cake Or Death

It has been 16 days since *Pegasus* departed the Hellfire System

Fallon Colony: Northern Hemisphere

"How's your leg?" David Alkema asked Commander Keeler.

"It's broken and it hurts like a kick to the balls, how in perdition's flames do you think it is?" Keeler shot back.

Alkema put his hand on the commander's shoulder to try and draw out the pain. The commander slapped it away. "Hey buddy, that may work on the chicks in Josh-Nation, but I don't swing that way."

"I'm just trying to release some of your endorphins to ease the pain," Alkema protested.

But Keeler insisted. "I don't go in for that medical mind-trick stuff. When I'm in pain, I want to tough it out the old fashioned way... with powerful opiate-based chemicals."

"We don't have any of those," Alkema argued. He would not have minded some opiates

himself, as the bite-wound on his neck throbbed painfully.

Keeler sucked in a deep breath in the dark of the pit. "When we get back to the ship, I'm going to send a sternly worded letter to whoever provisioned this trip."

"That was me," Alkema replied, knowing the medical kit was with one of the McKenzie brothers.

Before Keeler could add to his misery again, there was a loud bang outside the barricade Alkema had built over the entrance to their bunker. They had taken shelter in this old stone dome structure to protect themselves from a mob of crazed and angered villagers. In the darkness, they had not realized the interior of the dome was a steep drop from the doorway, or, at least, Keeler hadn't realized that and tumbled into the pit, giving himself a compound fracture of the right leg.

Alkema fingered his pulse weapon, and nervously checked the barricade. He had thrown it together out of tables, doors, and other metal plates and objects he had found in the shelter, but he had no idea how long it would hold now that the villagers had caught up with them. "I hope the McKenzie brothers made it back to the ship."

"Za, I would also hope that," Keeler groaned. "Because if they don't, we're probably going to die."

"Don't talk like that."

"It's the truth, and we have to face it," Keeler scolded. "Even if they make it to the ship, there's only an outside chance of a heavily armed rescue team getting to us before that mob breaks through that barricade and eats us alive."

Alkema shuddered. The wound in his neck seconded the notion.

Keeler persisted. "Let's trade with the natives for some agricultural supplies, you said. Let's ask permission before we make a cultural survey of their abandoned cities, you said. Brilliant shining idea that turned out to be."

This would have been the moment to tell his commander to shut up, but Alkema, his face burning red with the shame of it, had to agree. He had been the one to insist on making contact with the colonists before exploring one of Fallon's large and decaying cities, that stretched along a river plain nearby. It had seemed like the right and proper thing to do. And so, they had landed their ship outside one of the small, primitive villages that had sprouted up away from the decaying urban centers. They had approached the village with peaceful intent, to inquire of the leaders if it might be all right to explore their abandoned cities and, if necessary, offer to trade with them in exchange for the privilege. They had even brought shiny trinkets and medicines to offer for trade.

But as they crossed the scrubby land outside the village, their landing party... himself, Keeler, and a pair of warfighting brothers named Vaughan and Bon MacKenzie. Both were strongly built men in their early thirties – who happened to pull double-duty in *Pegasus's* Cultural Survey – perceived there was something amiss with this planet's inhabitants, even from a distance. The four of them had hidden in the brush a few hundred meters outside the ramshackle huts of the village, and observed.

The villagers appeared as thin as scarecrows, and they shambled almost randomly in their movements throughout the village and the plots of haphazardly planted scrawny vegetables that marked its outskirts. They seemed to be purposeless patterns to the way they

shuffled, as though they were moving only out of long habit and retracing the steps of previous, more purposeful lives.

And they moaned. Their moaning was a guttural, dirge-like sound the Lingotron™ could not make sense of.

“Are they sick?” Alkema had wondered out loud.

“Malnourished, definitely,” Bon Mackenzie had said.

“The soil in this area is depleted,” Venture MacKenzie had added. “They’ve been planting and harvesting the same crops without fertilizing or rotating. That would explain the starvation.”

“So, the possibility of getting booze from them is practically nil, I take it,” Keeler had drawled.

In the distance, Alkema observed two villagers scrapping over what looked like the carcass of an animal. Like a hunting pack, the other villagers converged and soon an ugly melee had developed, in which the carcass was ripped apart and villagers who weren’t fighting each other scrambled for pieces of meat off the dusty ground.

“We should pull back,” Alkema suggest. “I don’t think...”

He didn’t finish because at that moment a sub-human shriek arose from the brush behind them. They swung about to see a wild-eyed villager, dressed in rags, skin brown as mud, teeth rotting, standing and screaming as though they were ghosts. It was so shriveled and leathery, they couldn’t even tell what sex it was.

Before they could much react, he, she, or it lunged at David Alkema and took a small chunk of skin right out of his neck. Alkema’s self-defense training kicked in and he punched his assailant hard in the sternum. The creature fell backwards, let out a squeak, and then lay still on the ground.

“Is it dead?” Bon McKenzie asked, he knelt over the villager’s fallen body.

“I’m not inclined to check,” Alkema replied. He put his fingers to the spot on his neck and then examined them. They were quite a bit bloody. Vaughan McKenzie handed him a sterilizer from the medi-kit, and Alkema attempted to clean his wound with it.

“I think it’s dead,” Bon observed that the neck had twisted over badly on impact. Just as he began to lean over the body to check for a pulse, the creature sat up and began screaming again.

“Holy Cruz!” Vaughan ejaculated, and the four of them scrambled backwards. It was Bon who had the presence of mind to silence the thing with a pair of bolts from his pulse gauntlet.

But the creature’s cries had not gone unheard. The villagers turned in their direction, and began erupting in a series of throaty cries, like prehistoric birds, and upon seeing the newcomers, they came shambling, en masse, in their direction.

“I think we should get back to the ship,” Commander Keeler said. “And we should get back the ship right gleaming now.”

Before they had even made it to away from the clearing, , there had seemed to appear many more villagers than they had noticed at first, converging from three sides. Their

movements were slow, but their purpose was malevolent. And that horrible noise they made... half shriek and half groan ... it rattled the very bones of the landing party as they skedaddled toward the meadow where they had left the Aves *Hector*.

And they ran, firing the occasional warning shot, and the less occasional deadly shot to the chest in hopes of turning back the villagers, but it was to no avail. The crowd was maddened, and the party soon found themselves cut off from the ship. It was decided that the MacKenzie brothers, acting as warfighters, would draw the villagers away so that Keeler and Alkema could reach the Aves. The plan backfired when the villagers pursued Keeler and Alkema instead of the warfighters. Soon after, Keeler and Alkema became hopelessly lost in the hills between the village and the old city, and found that their COM Links weren't working.

As the last light of the day drained over the horizon, they had come across a stone dome at the summit of a round-top hill. It seemed a good place to hole up and await rescue.

But somehow the villagers had found them again.

"Bang!" another impact against the door he had painstakingly sealed shut brought Alkema out of his flashback. He shined a light on the barricade in the darkness. It was a careful arrangement of metal plates braced by structural supports and the sturdier pieces of furniture he found during their first half hour in the bunker. It had taken him hours to build. How much longer it would hold, he could not guess.

After inspecting the entire inner wall thoroughly, Alkema was pretty certain there was no back entrance to the dome, which provided the mixed blessing of there being no other way in or out from ground level. There was a kind of hatch in the roof, that he could reach from the inside by means of a ladder that extended into the dome. He did not think the wretched villagers could make it in that way. He began to check the floor to see if there was a lower level they could access.

The wound on his neck had stopped bleeding, but it itched and burned fiercely, in a way no other injury had hurt him before. He was almost certain the villager had infected him with something; probably something fatal. His head began to hurt sorely, as though whatever contagion the villager had transmitted was beginning to spread to his brain.

When he failed to find a way below, he inspected the other contents of the dome. The interior of the dome was filled with obsolete equipment and old technology, which seemed to have survived intact the planet's societal upheaval. Alkema picked at one of the control panels inside the dome. "If we had power, we could use this equipment to get a message to *Pegasus*."

"And if we had booze, I could get drunk," Keeler answered him.

Alkema pulled off a side panel and examined the inner wiring of the panel. He began wondering if he could somehow create a beacon on the roof of the dome, something to guide rescuers to their location. That might at least improve their odds of rescue.

Periodically, there would be a bang at the entrance, as the villagers tried to batter their way inside.

There was a quick 'woosh' of a sound. Something rushed up and slammed against him out of the darkness. His light clattered to the floor and he found himself wrestling with a fierce, wiry humanoid wrapped in a coarse robe that stank of manure and body odor. Alkema's first thought was that one of the villagers had somehow found his way into the dome. But when he

kicked himself free of the tussle, his attacker began screaming, almost coherently, as it scratched at his face.

"Blasphemers!" he screamed, rotten breath puffing from his lungs. "You have violated the Holy Temple of the Sphere, and you will be made to pay!" And then he charged and bit Alkema in the neck.

Alkema kned the attacker hard in the jaw, and then slammed his head against the hard cement floor, hearing a satisfying crack. To his relief, the blow had knocked the attacker out. Alkema retreated back, picked up his light, and checked his barricade. It was still holding. Then, he flashed in on his assailant.

"Why is it always the neck with you people?" Alkema shouted at his unconscious form. The man had not gotten in much of a bite, but had managed to re-open the wound and Alkema was bleeding again. He wiped the wound with his fingertips and felt prickly hot pain emanate from the wound upwards into his skull and downwards into his chest, as though the weird infection were spreading through his body.

Alkema dug around in his pockets for the wound sterilizer, but didn't find it. He didn't remember feeling it when they came into the dome, and was almost certain he had lost it outside, probably when he fell into that trench that surrounded the dome, the trench he couldn't see in the darkness. He really wished he had the sterilizer, or some booze like the commander suggested, but he didn't, so there was no point dwelling on it.

Instead, he examined his assailant. His stinky attacker was a small man, not much more than half the height of a typical Sapphirean male. He had a long, tangled beard but was mostly bald otherwise, and he wore a simple black cassock.

"Bang!" Something hit the outside door very loudly.

"Tossing him outside is probably out of the question," Keeler observed dryly. "You might want to tie him up."

"Za, I was getting to that." Alkema ripped some wiring down from ceiling and proceeded to hog-tie the unconscious man. He bound him at the hands and ankles, tightly enough to threaten circulation. He then secured the man to a support pillar, as far away from the commander and himself as he could manage in the cramped space.

"I don't know how I missed him," Alkema said as he tied the man up. "I checked this place thoroughly."

"It's dark, and he probably knows where to hide," Keeler said back to him. "Frankly, I was sort of expecting it. By my count, on half or more of the worlds we've visited, someone has threatened to kill us. What's with that? Is that any way to treat guests? If galactic explorers from a lost colony came to Sapphire, we wouldn't kill them, probably. We probably would offer them cake. Isn't cake better than death?"

"What is this 'cake' of which you speak?" Alkema muttered back, knotting the rope double-tight behind the man's arms. "Is it a literal cake, or is it a cake of kindness or something like that?"

"Can't it be both?" Keeler asked. "Maybe a nice flaming rum cake with Jutland-style caramel topping? And the kindness is baked right in. The point is, I think, you can judge how advanced a civilization is by how they greet outsiders. They see a cake, they're going to want to get along with you."

"What if the visitors were much more powerful than we were?" Alkema argued. "What if they were clearly more advanced than us, and we were unsure of their good intentions?"

"If that's the case, we should kill them and eat them," Keeler stated calmly.

Alkema wasn't sure he had heard the commander correctly. "We should what?"

"Kill them and eat them," Keeler repeated. "Hey, I mean, it worked on us, we're getting off this rock as soon as a massive and well-armed rescue party shows up to free us, and we're not coming back. I can guarantee that." I know it's not the civilized thing to do, but it would make them think twice about screwing with us, wouldn't it?"

Alkema checked the ties one last time and then sat down on an old musty office chair, facing Keeler. He realized then that the hardest part about treating his injured commander would be determining the precise moment delirium set in. Complicating the matter was the rise of his own fever, the pain in his head, and the feeling of disorientation that made it ever harder to concentrate. Also, he was beginning to crave red meat; the bloodier the better.

"Bang! Bang!" Something hit the outside door very loudly twice, which shook Alkema back to lucidity. Alkema rose from his seat and turned his attention back to the insides of the dome, trying to find something he could make, or something he could build, that would get them out of here alive.

"I don't think this was a temple," Alkema said a few minutes later, as he took apart one of the monitor station consoles. "It may be now, but before their civilization collapsed, I think it was a weather monitoring station."

"Blasphemer!" shouted a voice. The raggedy old man had regained consciousness. Alkema was gratified that the ties were holding him.

"You can talk," Alkema observed. He shined his light toward his captive. The man ducked his head and howled with pain when the light touched his eyes.

Keeler addressed the mad captive. "I believe introductions are in order. I am Commander William Keeler of the Heavily Armed and Very Dangerous Warship *Pegasus*. This is my Executive Officer, Lt. Commander David 'Let's Nuke Them From Orbit' Alkema. You would be advised to let us leave here in peace."

"I am the Caretaker of the Holy Temple of the Moods of the Sphere!" shouted the man. "Violators of the Holy Sphere will be meant with terrible vengeance!"

Alkema walked two steps closer to the Caretaker. "We didn't mean to violate the temple. We sought refuge from the angry mob outside."

"You violated the Temple of the Sphere. Now, you will pay with your lives!" the Caretaker screeched.

"I also left some violation on the outside wall of the Holy Temple of the Sphere while Alkema was diddling with the locks," Keeler informed the Caretaker. "Just so you know."

Alkema gritted his teeth. The commander was not being helpful, but he had to try. "Where did you come from? Why didn't I see you when I checked the place out?"

"Blind are they who trespass on the sacred floors of the sphere!" the Caretaker screeched. "But greater still the darkness that befalls those that ..."

Alkema interrupted his sermon. "Do you know those people outside?"

The Caretaker growled wetly. "Vile creatures, fallen from their high ways. The sphere struck them for their arrogance. Now, they eat dust!"

"So, you're not with them?" Keeler put in.

"What's wrong with them?" Alkema demanded. "Are they sick? Do they have a disease?"

"Nothing unclean may pass the walls of the Temple!" the Caretaker shouted.

"Then, you shouldn't make it so inviting," Keeler purred.

Alkema raised his voice. "Do you know those people? If we agree to leave, will you tell them to disperse? Will you give us safe passage?"

"Violators of the Holy Sphere will pay with their lives!"

"Enough is enough. Just shut him the hell up," Keeler ordered.

"I'm giving you one last chance," Alkema kept his tone patient, but raised his pulse weapon. "If you don't agree to help us, I'm going to shoot you."

"That's the spirit!" Keeler shouted.

"Blasphemer!!!" the Caretaker shouted.

Alkema shot him.

"Blaphmeeemer!" the Caretaker grunted groggily.

So, Alkema shot him again, and this time he stayed quiet.

"Bang! Bang!" Something hit the outside door very loudly

"Well, that passed a few minutes," Keeler said. "What shall we play now?"

As the night wore on, Alkema continued tearing apart the consoles looking for useful parts, taking a break every few minutes to shoot the Caretaker when he awoke and denounced them as "blasphemers!" He had managed to assemble most of the parts necessary to build a crude carrier-wave transmitter. Powered by his pulse weapon, it might have been strong enough to create an electronic signal for *Pegasus* to detect.

The banging at the barricade had diminished for a time, but then it had returned. At one point in the lull Alkema had climbed up the ladder onto the roof to see if there were any wires or cables atop the building to affix his makeshift beacon to. While he was up there, he had observed that the crowd had grown larger... to thousands of villagers moaning and shambling in the dark.

"Where did they come from?" He had wondered, as he began the climb back into the hole. "Why won't they go away?"

When he reached the bottom of the ladder, he stumbled getting off of it and tumbled to the floor.

"Oopsie," Keeler had said. "Are you all right?"

"I didn't break anything," Alkema lifted himself off the floor, but had to steady himself against the ladder. "I'm finding it harder to concentrate, and it feels very cold in here. I think that bite might have... infected me with something."

Keeler shrugged it off. "You're hungry and fatigued. Ignore it. You'll have plenty of time to feel sick later when the natives are eating your brains."

"I'm serious," Alkema hissed at him. "You saw how those villagers were acting. They've been reduced to savagery. What if... what if the cause of this civilization's collapse was a mind virus, a pathogen that led to dementia? What if the pathogen was spread orally? Is it possible I got infected when that villager bit me?"

Keeler's response was typically irritating. "It's possible, but I don't see the point in getting worked up about it."

Alkema challenged Keeler. "There were colonies wiped out by local diseases that caused dementia, weren't there?"

"Some," Keeler admitted. "But those were small colonies in the early period of development. This planet had at least a 3,000 year old civilization. If there was such a pathogen native to this world, it should have been detected in the early colonial period."

"What if was something benign that mutated, or maybe it was a biogenic weapon." Alkema had begun to spit when he talked. "Something they developed here, or that was left over from the Crusades, or that the Kariad used on them..."

"Speculating about it is pointless," Keeler barked. "If we get out of this alive, they can check you out once we're back on *Pegasus*."

"If I'm infected, it may be too dangerous to bring me back to *Pegasus*," Alkema argued. "You might have to leave me behind."

"Bang!!" Something hit the outside door very loudly. This time, the force was enough to rattle the barricade. The natives were making progress.

Alkema whispered. "I can hear them. I can hear them. Outside. In my head. They're so hungry. So very, very hungry."

Keeler was too creeped out by this to provide one of his customary witticisms, and settled for. "O.K.... um..."

Alkema rose, shook his head, and crossed to where he had tied up the caretaker and slapped him hard across the face to rouse him. "Wake up!"

The caretaker was already awake, he had just been keeping quiet. "Blasphemer!"

"He has a name, you know," Keeler prompted the Caretaker. "It's Dave."

"Blasphemer!" the Caretaker repeated.

"All right, we're blasphemers, we accept that," Alkema conceded to the madman. "But why are the people who live in the village so savage?"

"They did not listen!" the Caretaker shouted. "They did not attend the mother sphere. They continued in their arrogant ways, and they were punished."

"Are they sick?" Alkema continued. "Did the sphere unleash a disease that poisoned their minds?"

"There is no vengeance in the Holy Mother Sphere!" the Caretaker called. "The Sphere mothers us! The sphere holds us to her! The sphere sustains us! We must sustain it! There is only one sphere!"

"Look, we don't give a damn about your mother sphere," Keeler told the Caretaker. "Just let us leave, and you can go back to naked goat dancing or whatever it is you do for fun around here."

The Caretaker strained and lashed out against his bonds, all the while denouncing them. "Blasphemers! You shall be consumed in the hot gases. And burned in the sulfur rain. You shall starve in the barren fields, and reap the dry winds of death!"

"Did you say 'hot gases' and 'winds of death?'" Keeler grimaced and shook his head. "Neg, too easy!"

"Blasphemer devils!" the Caretaker screeched.

Alkema powered up his gauntlet and raised it in front of the man's eyes. "You know this hurts. Close up, it hurts a lot worse. Tell me, for the love of the Allbeing, do the people of your planet have a disease?"

"You are from outside the Sphere," the Caretaker railed at them. "You are contagion. As the body kills the virus, so must you be killed! We must preserve the sanctity of the Holy Sphere!"

"You really do have an inflated sense of self, don't you," Keeler asked. "You know, this planet... this 'sphere'... was here for billions and billions of years before it was colonized, and if you all dropped dead ... which seems to be what you're working on... it would go on like nothing had happened. In ten thousand years ... a tick of the geological clock... no one would know humans had even been here."

"Bang!!" The spaces between hits were longer than before, but the hits themselves were doing damage. Each BANG was accompanied by a punch, or a groan, of metal door succumbing a little bit to the onslaught... and a scrape and rattle as the barricade began to weaken.

The caretaker continued his half-insane babbling. "The sphere gives life to us. The balance must be sustained. What is taken must be given back."

"Are they sick?" Alkema demanded.

"You're all sick and you're going to die!" The caretaker yelled. And then he began cackling. "You're going to die! You're going to die!"

Alkema paused for a moment, then smacked the Caretaker on the side of his temple with his gauntlet hand.

"What was that about?" Keeler asked. "You could have just shot him again."

"I want to see my wife and kids again," Alkema answered. "That means I have to live through the night. He wasn't going to help."

Alkema turned away from the Caretaker and studied the barricade. "I think I can stall them. If I use the power cell from my pulse weapon to charge the electrical capacitor I pulled from the monitor station, I may be able to discharge enough electro-magnetic energy to..."

"Don't bore me with the details, just fry some villagers!" Keeler grunted through gritted teeth. Alkema was relieved at that. It meant he didn't have to explain that he probably wouldn't be able to use the emergency battery to power the beacon. The discharge would probably destroy the capacitor.

"Bang!!" Another assault on the barricade underlined the urgency of his task. Alkema quickly moved the emergency battery to the top of the barricade as the pounding from the outside became stronger and more determined. The tables and plates shook as the villagers pressed in against the doorway. He rigged a couple of power cables from the capacitor to the plates closest to the door.

He snapped open the power chamber on his pulse weapon. There were two oblong power cells inside that glowed with orange light. He carefully extracted one. He realized there would be no way to attach it directly to the capacitor without killing himself, which he did not want to do.

He positioned himself a couple of meters from the barricade tossed the power cell carefully onto the capacitor and jumped away as hard as he could. The capacitor began to load with energy. Alkema picked up the two ends of a cable and waited.

The next time there was a 'Bang!' at the barricade, he touched the two ends of the cable together. A light show of released electromagnetic energy exploded around the barricade as Alkema tucked and rolled himself back into the pit.

The snap, crackle, and pop of the discharge was so intense Alkema was momentarily struck deaf, and a powerful ringing would persist in his ears for the next two hours. However, within a few seconds, he made out the sound of clapping and Commander Keeler chanting, "Do it again! Do it again!"

Alkema picked himself up off the floor, and crawled to a place where he could rest with his back against the wall. He lay there with his eyes closed.

The pounding on the door had stopped. He could not have heard it over the ringing anyway, but some other sense was coming to him, telling him that the natives had pulled back from the structure in fear. It was like a pressure in his mind had diminished, and become dispersed.

"Are you all right?" Keeler was suddenly full of concern.

"I am a very long way from all right," Alkema answered. "I'm starving. I can feel my body temperature rising. We're trapped in here. The natives will probably come back soon. I don't have the time or the parts now to make the beacon work. I'm out of ideas. My head hurts. And I don't see any way out of this."

Keeler sighed. "There is one way."

"What?"

"How long until sunrise?" Keeler asked.

"The sun will be up in the next 80 or 90 minutes, by my reckoning."

"Then you have 80 or 90 minutes of darkness to get away from here," Keeler told him. "Quickly, while the natives are gone."

"I won't leave you, Commander," Alkema replied.

"Don't be ri-ding-diddly-iculous," Keeler admonished. "My leg's messed up. I'm not getting out of here. You still have a chance. Think of Pieta and your kids. Scratch that, just think of your kids. You have something to live for."

"You do, too, sir," Alkema insisted.

"Well, true, I do have plenty to live for, but unlike me, you actually have a chance of living for it. I'm just being practical. You know me, Dave, if there was even a chance of saving my own ass, don't you think I'd make you stay here to save it?"

Alkema gritted his teeth. "I'm staying."

Keeler shouted at him. "Give me one reason besides your misguided sense of loyalty to stay here."

"Who's to say I would make it out of here anyway?" Alkema countered.

"Now, you're just being obstinate," Keeler countered back. "By the time those natives have finished eating my brains, you could be kilometers away from here. You're smart. You probably stayed awake through survival training. You can survive out there. But, in here, you're dead meat. Dead meat, I say!"

Alkema held out his hand. "Stop!"

"*Pegasus* has had plenty of time to dispatch a rescue team," Keeler went on. "They obviously haven't found us. And with the bio-signs of 3,000 villagers outside, you'd think they'd have a clue where we are."

"Please be quiet, sir," Alkema said. "I am trying to think."

"So, you should save your own ass. And when you think of me, try to remember the good times." He paused. "If I could think of any, I'd bring them up."

Alkema looked up, there was a faint glow in his eyes. "I can do it. I can get out."

Keeler sounded horrified. "You're really going to do it? I was kind of hoping my gesture of nobility would prove futile. I thought we'd die together screaming in a horror of brain-eating frenzy."

Alkema stripped off his jacket. "I might even be able to save you."

"Okay, that's better, then." Keeler continued.

Alkema explained his plan. "First, I'm gonna reinforce the barricade. That should buy you another... maybe an hour. I'm gonna take the priest, put him in my clothes, take his, and roll him off the roof into the crowd. That should distract them long enough for me to run. If I can draw them away, it'll buy you time. If *Pegasus* has a rescue party out there, maybe I can ..."

Then, there was a loud noise, a thunderous bang that shook the temple to its foundations.

"What the hell?" Keeler shouted.

"I better get to reinforcing that barricade," Alkema said. He moved toward the barricade when another powerful blast hit. The second was so close that the ground shook him off his feet.

"What are they doing?" Keeler shouted.

Alkema didn't know, but it was working. The barricade was beginning to crumble. One of the metal plates he had braced against the upper part of the entrance groaned and gave way.

"Neg!" Alkema screamed, as another blast collapsed half of his barricade.

It also woke the caretaker. "Madness!" he screamed. "Your foul and sinful ways have driven us to madness."

Keeler seemed resigned to it. "Well, I guess this is about it for us, then. My only regret is... coming on this stupid mission."

There was another fireburst outside, followed some seconds later by another. Then came several more distant explosions, as though villagers were missing the target.

Then, the wall exploded with a mighty crash. The barricade blasted inward, showering the inside with dust and debris.

Alkema pointed his pulse weapon at the gaping hole opened in the temple wall, although he knew if the villagers swarmed in en masse, it would be a futile gesture. He contemplated whether he ought to turn the weapon on himself. It might be better, he thought, not to die screaming.

Then, he thought better of it and shot the Caretaker instead.

Through the thick dust that hung in the air, he saw figures entering the temple.

"Commander Keeler," called a familiar voice. "Are you all right?"

"Is that you Kitaen?" Keeler yelled.

A huge bald man, clad in tactical gear and wearing fierce warpaint came forth from the hole in the wall. "It is indeed, commander," General Kitaen reported. "How can we be of assistance?"

"I need drugs!" Keeler shouted. "Lots and lots of drugs. In fact, if your MedTech doesn't have something that could put a Borealan Musk Ox into a coma, go back to the ship and bring a MedTech who does."

"Of course," Kitaen said. "Medical Technician And, see to the commander."

Kitaen strolled toward Alkema. "Apologies for not coming to the rescue sooner. We reasoned that you would take refuge in this structure, but he could not figure out how to get to you. We tried non-lethal methods of getting the natives away, but they failed." He offered Alkema his arm.

Alkema took it and stood up unsteadily from the floor, suppressing the urge to bite the tactical commander. "How did you finally get in?" He asked.

Kitaen shrugged. "A dozen Warfighters with pulse rifles, air cover, and the favor of the Allbeing can solve most of life's little problems."

Alkema nodded and leaned on Kitaen's shoulder. "If it's all right with you, I'm going to pass out now."

Kitaen agreed. "Good, why don't you do that."

Alkema gratefully allowed himself to pass out.

HOSPITAL 4: TWO DAYS LATER

"I was so worried that you weren't going to make it off that planet alive," Pieta whispered.

Alkema took his wife in his arms. "So was I." He pulled her close and sank his fangs into her neck.

Alkema woke up with a gasp.

He found himself lying naked in Hospital 4, surrounded by layers of clear plastic, which he recognized as a quarantine cocoon.

After he had laid there, alone and frightened, for some minutes, the cocoon folded into itself, opening him up to the room. Medical Technician Skinner was there, looking over him with a dispassionate medical gaze that nevertheless made him cover his crotch with his hands.

"Welcome back, Lt. Commander Alkema," Skinner said in his clipped, cultured tones. "I trust you're not in too much distress."

"Could I have some water?" Alkema asked. His throat was parched. Skinner handed him a bottle. After he had slaked his thirst, his next question was "Where is Pieta?"

"She wanted to be notified as soon as you regained consciousness," Skinner tapped his fingers on the side of his medical datapad. "Shall I notify her?"

Alkema nodded to that, and drank more from the bottle. Then, he asked, "Why am I in a quarantine cocoon?"

"Primarily out of an abundance of caution," Skinner explained. "When you came aboard, you were delirious and muttering about an alien brain infection. You insisted on being put in isolation."

"I don't remember that," Alkema said.

"That was almost two days ago," Skinner informed him. "The good news is that our blood-scans haven't found a single alien pathogen in your bloodstream."

"That's a relief."

"We found six," Skinner grinned. He promptly displayed in hologram form each of the six virulent pathogens, color-enhanced in sickly green to heighten their menace.

"Fortunately, our aggressive immune systems were more than a match for them," Skinner went on, shining a scanning device into Alkema's pupils. "Your Vanguard and Warrior cells – a unique feature of Sapphire-Republic physiology, quickly isolated and destroyed the pathogens and neutralized the cells they had already attacked, leaving behind only shell-traces of the infectious pathogens."

"So, why am I still in quarantine?"

"There are a few on this ship who don't have the advantage of our superior immune system, including your wife. We're developing a vaccine for them." He put down his scanning instrument. "Honestly, though, the risk of you infecting anyone besides your wife is extremely low, and since the virus requires direct contact with the blood to transmit, you would probably be safe unless you two are into the rough stuff... kinky winky... Panrovian delight... slap and tickle... sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones-but-whips-and-chains-excite-me..."

"I get it," Alkema stretched and flexed on the healing bed. He found that he felt perfectly well, as though awakened from a refreshing nap. He checked his neck and was relieved to feel that his neck wound had healed, leaving behind a fading bruise. "I'd like some

clothes.”

“Of course,” Skinner gestured toward a non-descript tunic and pants hanging nearby the bed. “After all, you wouldn’t want your wife to see you naked.”

Alkema slid to the side of the bed. “Turn around,” he asked the medical technician before sliding into the soft brown pants. “So, these viruses, are they what caused the collapse of this planet’s civilization?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Skinner sniffed. “The collapse began well over a hundred years ago. If it had been from this array of pathogens, I should think all humans on the planet would be quite extinct by now. This disease is probably an effect, not a cause, of the collapse. It probably existed before, but it was controllable through vaccinations or early treatment with basic counter-viral medications. But, without a functional technology-based society to provide those treatments, an outbreak would run through the population like a herd of Borealan oxen.”

“Was anyone else infected?”

“Neg, indeed yours was the only party to have come into contact with an infected population,” Skinner informed him.

“Za, we certainly came into contact with them,” Alkema agreed, pulling on his shoes.

“It’s rather unfortunate for them that they never caught you,” Skinner said, mischievously.

“How do you figure, doc?”

“Our enhanced immune system works both ways. If those people had ingested your blood and it entered their systems,” Skinner concluded. “You probably would have cured them.”

Epilogue

Pegasus Main Bridge –There was a three dimensional star chart in the fore part of the bridge, on which the stars identified by the navigational data core of the late Commonwealth Ship *Hewlander* were highlighted with yellow spheres.

“Thirty-five identified systems left in the database,” Alkema explained. “The closest is this one, identified, as best we can tell, as Moraine, it’s just sixteen light years from here.”

Keeler grunted, taking his place in the command seat. “Hate the name. What else do you got?”

“There’s an un-named system, possibly called Dawn Tufra, 41 light years distant. On a different vector, New Galapagos is 65 light years away.”

“What about Gethsemane?” asked Atlantic from the helm position. Eliza Change, at the Navigator position, raised an eyebrow.

Alkema pointed to its point of light. “127 light years away. A vector to Croatoan will take us in that general direction.”

“Croatoan it is, then,” Keeler agreed. “Navigator Change, have you calculated the ... data or algorithm or whatever whatchamajigger it is that makes my ship go there?”

Change had calculated Hyperspace transitions to all the systems long ago. “Transferring key vectors to Helm Station for transition to Croatoan. Transfer complete.”

“Mr. Atlantic, take us out of orbit. Rig for rapid acceleration to transition speed.”

There was a slight moment of hesitation before Atlantic responded. “Aye, sir. GE propulsion engaged. Laying in vector. Ready for acceleration when we clear the orbital margin.”

“Estimated transit time, eleven days,” Eliza Change reported.

Keeler smiled. “Second star to the right, and straight on ‘til I pass out drunk. All praise to the Allbeing. Hit it!”