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EVENTIDE: CHAPTER ONE

611 days have passed since Pegasus left the Gethesemane system (after remaining in the system for 170 days). After 114 ship-days in hyperspace, Pegasus has just re-entered the normal universe at the edge of system 257 557 Circinus ... the Eventide system.

Passing over the ship on the dorsal side, it is striking that Pegasus is not as brightly lit as it was upon previous emergences. Several decks and sections of the giant starship are dark. Hull plating is absent in many spots across the hull. Other areas of her golden hull have been patched with bright platinum. Looking upward, the part of the primary tower where the Main Bridge is located has been encased in a bulge of thick platinum armor.

From the ship's dark and battered underside, a pair of bright flashes marked the launch of long-range probes. Large and dart-shaped, they flew on ahead of the great ship and bore down on the small red sun, and the two planets Pegasus had already detected.

PEGASUS COMMANDER KEELER QUARTERS – Naked, wet, and furious, Commander William Keeler slapped the COM panel in the hallway outside his hygiene pod. When it failed to activate he slapped it again, and then again. Finally, it lit up. He heaved an exasperated sigh. “About gleaming time! Commander Keeler to Technical Core.”

There was a brief pause that grew into a sustained pause. Keeler rolled his eyes. “Lord love a duck... Excuse me. Hello. Is anyone there? This is Commander William...”

He was interrupted by a pleasant female voice. “This is the automated Technical Core COM Link response system. Please tell me why you have chosen to contact the Technical Core.”

Keeler rolled his eyes. “Allbeing on a unicycle,” he muttered.

“I do not understand that request. Could you restate it differently?”

“My bloody shower doesn’t work!” Keeler thundered.

There was a short pause – not long enough for Keeler to elaborate – then the female voice returned. “I understand there is unwanted bio-contamination in your shower. Is this correct?”

“Neg, there’s no bloody hot water! Again! This is the fourth time in the last five ship days I have had no bloody hot water in my bloody shower!”

“Stand by,” the voice instructed. The voice returned, with a much more condescending tone. “Have you tried manually adjusting the water intermix ratio?”

"You mean did I forget to turn on the hot water, you stupid bint?" Keeler raged against the machine. "Za, I turned the bloody hot water on!"

The voice chirped at him. "Please wait while I run a localized system diagnostic."

"You've done that every day for the past five days," Keeler seethed. "Let me tell you how this is going to work out" The diagnostic will show my water heating unit has malfunctioned and you promise me a priority repair..."

The Artificial Intelligence interrupted him. "The diagnostic shows a localized malfunction in the water heating unit. Technical Core will give this matter a Priority Status. You will be informed when personnel are dispatched to your quarters. Is there anything else I can do for you at this time?"

Keeler made a suggestion.

"I regret that I am not programmed to perform that action," the AI voice replied.

Giving up the Commander slapped the COM Link off. "It was not like this when I ran this ship," Keeler seethed. He scruffed a warm towel through the disarray of his hair. During the previous two years, he had stimulated the follicles in his chin to produce a distinctive, bushy beard flecked with gray. His hair had also taken on a steely gray appearance, giving him much more the appearance of an old-time sea captain.

Keeler mentally inventoried his current inconveniences: Busted shower. Busted lighting. Busted COM Panel. What the hell was this? A three-star Panrovian hotel. "Cat!" he yelled.

Queequeg hopped onto one of the occasional chairs. "What?"

"Can you fix any of this?"

"Not without parts," the cat replied. "Just like I told you yesterday and the day before. Also, could you put on a robe or something?"

Keeler looked down at his dripping wet self. "Maybe," he conceded, then turned back toward the hygiene pod long enough to reach into a side closet and pull out a burgundy robe embroidered with five-pointed blue and yellow stars on the front and the words "Regency Hotel, Presidio Capitat" on the back. Just about that time, the entrance chimes to the front hatch sounded. At least they still worked. Keeler crossed the main room of his quarters and hit the hatch release, which also fortunately still worked.

Alkema stood outside with a teenage boy at his side. The boy wore a brown, Technical Core jumpsuit and carried a box in his arms. "Good afternoon, Captain," Alkema greeted him.



Keeler squinted and stared at the boy. "I know I've been wrapped up in writing my book, but I didn't think your kids were that old."

Alkema managed a wary smile. "My kids aren't that old. Since Technical Core is overwhelmed, I persuaded Specialist Saranac to use some of his free-time to repair your water heater."

"Now, that's more like it should be," Keeler with wan enthusiasm. "Come on in."

"Saranac, go install the new water heating unit in the commander's hygiene pod," Alkema instructed the young man, who gave a single nod and then quietly disappeared into the hygiene pod.

"Allbeing help you if anything happens to my rubber ducky!" Keeler called after him.

Keeler studied his young officer for a few moments. He also seemed to have aged more than the previous two and almost a half years in transit would have suggested. Once the youngest of young officers, Alkema was now closing in on thirty actual years of age on a ship where nearly three out of four personnel were under twenty years old. He had a family of five children of his own and three adopted children from the doomed planet of Gethsemane. He had also spent much of the last three years overseeing the massive reconstruction of *Pegasus* from the damage it had suffered in its climatic, heart-pounding battle with things that may or may not have been demons from another dimension. The boyishness was entirely gone from his face, and his cheeks were no longer ruddy. The spirit in his eyes he had summoned to meet every challenge in their journey so far had dimmed. There was a slouch to his shoulders, worry lines around his eyes. Keeler wondered whether it was the strain of months of summoning near impossible repairs to vital systems that had been damaged in the Battle at Gethsemane, or the stress of dealing with acting captain Eliza Change on the Bridge and then going home to "Princess" Pieta after his duty shift; poor kid never got a break.

"Sorry for not coming sooner, sir," Alkema said to his commander.

"That's what your wife said last night," Keeler answered, wiggling his eyebrows, but not with a lot of enthusiasm. He sighed. "Why is my ship still falling apart? In fact, why is the falling apart of my ship accelerating?"

"Your ship is a little overstrained," Alkema replied. "To get that water heating unit, I had to re-route one from a cargo loft renovation. Are you still taking wet showers? Most of the crew has switched to ionic wave scrubbers." He went on to explain that since the Battle of Gethsemane, *Pegasus's* water processing systems were only 66% operational, and had to serve a population of over 12,000... almost four times the number they had when they arrived in the Orion Quadrant.



"I traded my recreational passes for wet shower credits on the Exchange," Keeler explained. In order to allocate ship's resources more efficiently, Alkema had set up a trading exchange for allotments of non-critical goods, like hot showers, recreational passes, non-essential transport pod access, alcohol, and luxury goods. It was an efficient, self-regulating way to ration non-essentials among the ship's growing population. "Actually, it was Queequeg who exchanged them for me. I got twenty-two hot showers in exchange for a pair of tickets to the Air Hockey Championship."

"I gave you those tickets as a birthday gift," Alkema reminded him.

"And aren't you glad I put them to good use," Keeler replied.

Alkema sighed, pulled out a small lift-ladder, and went to work on one of the overhead lighting panels that had been flickering.

As he repaired the lighting unit, Alkema informed Keeler. "We transitioned out of hyperspace 2 hours and 46 minutes ago. All systems are functioning at the designated reduced levels. Astro-navigation will have a system fix within the hour."

"Thank you," Keeler said. Since he was technically no longer in command, these updates were a courtesy to him. He was more or less indifferent to them, but he appreciated the effort.

"You might think about having these quarters renovated," Alkema suggested, reconnecting some short filaments. "We could rehabilitate all of your systems. The work would take about three weeks. You would have to be elsewhere for the duration."

Keeler grunted negatively. He had no interest in living outside of his quarters for the length of time a full rehabilitation would require. The overhead lighting unit achieved a steady, sustained glow. Alkema checked it with a scanning device, then fine-tuned the power inputs until he was satisfied.

Keeler went to the wet bar and offered Alkema drink, but Alkema refused. Instead he asked, "How goes the book?"

Keeler grunted. "I have finished the section on Yronwode," he exclaimed proudly. "And I finally have a title." He activated his workstation and pointed proudly at the display.

Hello, Sailor: A Guide to the Worlds and Peoples Met by the Pathfinder Ship Pegasus.

"Very nice," Alkema said. "Is this a good stopping point for you? I mean, for your day's work?"



"Why?" Keeler asked.

"You've spent most of the last two years sequestered in your quarters writing that book," Alkema said. "You haven't been out and around your ship at all, except for occasional visits to the Officer and Crew Club."

"I've had no need," Keeler replied. "It isn't my ship any more. And very little of interest has happened during our passage"

Alkema's cheek twitched slightly. He must have been too busy to notice how uninteresting the last two years had been. "You still have no thought of returning to command."

"Not unless I am needed, neg," Keeler replied. "And as time goes by, it seems I am needed less and less."

Alkema received the news grimly. He had repeatedly attempted to convince Keeler to return to command, but had never been successful. "All right, be that as it may, I would like to invite you on a walk with me. A tour of sorts."

"Why?"

"The premise of your book is anthropological, sociological, and historical, correct?"

"Za."

"Well, sir, while you've been locked up in here, there have been anthropological, sociological, and historical developments on your own ship that you might find at least as interesting as those on former colonies of the human race."

"A fair point," Keeler agreed. He stood up from his chair and straightened his thick burgundy bathrobe. "Let's go. Perhaps we can swing into the Officer and Crew Club on the way back."

"Are you going out like that?" Alkema asked.

"Of course not," Keeler answered. He pulled a yellow towel off the top of his work-desk and wrapped it around his shoulders. "Now, I'm ready."

Alkema was sorry he asked.

Keeler jerked his thumb toward the hygiene pod. "Can I trust the kid in there?"

"Za, Saranac is very reliable and scrupulous," Alkema confirmed.

Keeler shouted into the bathroom. "I'm counting the silver when I get back."

And with that, the two of them exited his quarters. Keeler had retained his commander's quarters during his sabbatical, these comprised a single-level habitation pod set off from the other ones on Habitation Deck 23. Most of the



surrounding pods... actually, angular, modular buildings arranged in a park-like setting ... were inhabited by Core Chiefs and senior officers. The ship's current commander did not reside in this section, preferring more Spartan quarters on Deck 21. Keeler encountered only two of his neighbors on the brief walk to the transport dock, and they greeted him politely.

The transport pod arrived, a pill-shaped vehicle tracked to the intra-ship transportation system. "Tertiary Habitation Area, Section J," Alkema requested after he and Keeler had climbed in. The vehicle silently pulled off the dock and into the tubeway.

"What's Tertiary Habitation Area J?" Keeler asked.

"For you, probably, the most interesting part of the ship. You really should see this, at least once," Lt. Cmdr. David Alkema told Prime Commander Keeler.

TERTIARY HABITATION AREA, SECTION J - DECK 20 -- Most of the Gethsemane refugees – predominately children and teens – had settled into the open habitation area that had been left vacant at launch, designed to accommodate for growth in the ship's crew. The ship's botanists had tried to landscape the settlement with native trees salvaged from Gethsemane colony before the smash-up, but it still looked mostly like the generic deck it had been before. Four stories of modest inhabitations overlooked a broad concourse lined with market stalls. Light-posts between the shelters and the market stalls were decorated with long saffron-colored banners, bearing a red design like an elongated letter z with five spines across its middle. The same design was hung higher on the massive arches that supported the hull high above the enclave.

The ship's hour corresponded to late in the afternoon. On a starship, however, there was no astronomical noon. And, to save power, the ship only projected simulated skies over the inhabitation areas for three days out of every seven, and this day was not one of those days. Nor was it, to be even more nit-picky, technically a "day" at all.

"The Crew calls it 'Little Gethsemane,'" Alkema explained after he and Keeler had stepped off the transport and onto the primary docking station. "Fifty-four hundred refugees live here. There's another 'Little, Little Gethsemane in what used to be cargo space in the UnderDecks. There's another eight hundred living down there."

"UnderDecks?" Keeler asked. "I didn't think people could live there. I thought it was all machinery and systems."

"And cargo," Alkema added. "We've consumed a lot of the cargo stores while situating the Gethsemanians."



Keeler looked around. There will several hundred people in his line of sight, maybe a thousand. And they were all so very young.

Keeler observed a woman negotiating the sale of some mauve fruit. After a brief haggle, both the woman and the vendor produced small devices and pointed them at each other, completing the exchange.

"We had to create a currency-based market economy," Alkema said. "Even by the time we left the Gethsemane system, we knew just distributing food, clothing, medicine wasn't going to work. We worked out a system based on a unit we call the kek. The Geths and our own crew are paid in keks, and that's how we ration non-essential food and supplies."

"Pay them to do what?" Keeler asked.

"A lot of them worked on repair crews in the beginning," Alkema explained. "Now, those that haven't found spots working in the ship's regular crews work in the artifactories and the botany bays. Before the attack, they were fully automated. When we restored them, we created opportunities for human labor inputs. With human labor, we've gotten much more of the ship's industrial capacity on-line than we would have been able to otherwise."

"Indeed," Keeler said quietly as he scoped out the crowd. While many of the Gethsemanians wore a variation of the ship's standard crew jacket, but with a broad saffron stripe running the length of the right sleeve, most of the others wore simple casual clothing of an earth-toned tunic and coordinated pants. A pair of transport pods pulled up to the dock and fourteen men and woman in one-piece industrial-worker type coveralls got out.

From some of the stalls, raucous music played from small sound strips. News of the ship's possible arrival in colonial star-system displayed on information kiosks, but only a few people were interested.

Keeler observed all this. It reminded him of some of the student slums in New Cleveland. "Remarkable. They knew little of their culture, except that their planet was about to be destroyed, but they are still carving out a distinctive culture instead of adopting ours."

Alkema took Keeler on a walk past where the inhabitation structures ended, and toward a large open space that had been set aside for future development as a recreational area.¹ Some boys were playing a game of long-wickets on one of the fields.

¹ Long back when the final designs for *Pegasus* had been finalized, it had been calculated that population growth among her crew and the possibility of additional crew in the form of potential additions from advanced colonies would lead to a probable doubling of the ship's population in the first thirty years of flight from 7,000 to 14,000 or 15,000. The designers had deliberately kept areas in the vicinity of the tertiary and quaternary habitation areas open for use as recreational areas.



"We tried to teach the refugees Calvinball," Alkema explained. "But they seemed to have trouble picking up the subtleties of the game. We had more luck with groundball and wally-ball, but they created their own 'Gethsemane Rules' variants. We've tried to set up mixed leagues, but it's been problematic, we have higher muscle density and better endurance than the Gethsemanians do. Although, some of their best wrestlers can hold their own against us."

"Do they speak our language, or do they depend on the Lingotron?" Keeler asked.

"They almost all speak the Common Language now," Alkema answered. "It was part of the assimilation strategy we put in place. My wife, Pieta, became an assimilation counselor, based on her experience coming to this ship as a refugee. She helped the Gethsemanians blend in, designed the education programs, and still meets with social groups almost every day."

"As long as it keeps her from cooking," Keeler muttered. He felt a pang of guilt for not having participated in the reconstruction of his ship. He had not lifted a single chunk of rubble or applied color to a single wall. On the other hand, it was probably best that he had stayed out of the way. He remembered his attempt to remodel one of the guest houses at the Keeler estate. He remembered the bonfire intended to cover up the results. They had roasted marshmallows.

"It hasn't all been smooth," Alkema admitted. "There's about 500 of them that just refuse to assimilate. They won't work, they won't train, they just take their basic rations and quarters. But they do complain... a lot!"

"We should put them off at the next inhabitable world, then," Keeler suggested. "We can't have people consuming ship's resources without contributing."

"It's worse than not contributing," Alkema added bitterly. "The worst among them have been involved in theft, assaults, vandalism. We have 45 locked in the long-term brig we had to set up in Deck Minus 45."

"Why not just freeze them?" Keeler asked. "Then, as I suggested, put them off at the next habitable planet."

"That would be problematic, sir," Alkema explained patiently. "We don't want to foist off our problem on some other inhabited colony. Also, the Council doesn't want the lowlifes to be separated from their clans."

Keeler had an easy answer. "Send their clans to the planet with them!"

"It's just not that simple, commander," Alkema sighed.

"Freezing is simple," the Commander reminded him. "Takes half a second... and they get the most remarkable expressions on their faces."

"The Council thinks cryostasis is cruel and unusual."



“Right, which is why we only do it to people who break the law,” Keeler said, then he backtracked. “What is this Council? I don’t remember any Council.”

Alkema explained patiently, though he had reported to Keeler multiple times on the establishment and activities of the Gethsemanian Advisory Council. “The Gethsemanians have a Council of 12 representatives to help govern themselves and coordinate with Lieutenant Commander Change.”

“Does the rest of the crew get a council?” Keeler asked.

“The rest of the crew are here voluntarily, the Gethsemanians aren’t,” Alkema reminded him. “But three seats on the Council are from our ship’s crew.”

Keeler made a disgusted face. “It sounds like we have politics.” His tone of voice was like that of a physician saying, “It sounds like we have leprosy.”

Alkema had to agree. “This has all been a very complex and interesting time for us. We’re still working our way through it.”

They watched the boys throw the ball from wicket to wicket and then clash violently in the center of the field. A few minutes later, some short of bell... or gong or something ... began sounding in the air above the inhabitation level. Keeler asked what it was.

Alkema anticipated Keeler’s question. “They are being called to the Temple. You should really see this, Commander.”

Some of the boys put down their wickets and moved off the field, stripping their helmets and pads as they went. Alkema led Keeler to the other side of the inhabitation zone, an area under the forepart of the space-dome where the Gethsemanians had created a kind of garden-park, lined with Gethsemanian fig trees. Its central feature was a recessed, five-sided plaza, over which girders had been joined in a shape that resembled a sliced-off pyramid.

It took a moment for Keeler to connect this with something he had seen in the past. “A Sumacian Temple?”

Alkema nodded. “Indeed, it is, sir. The Warriors will be gathering for the evening ceremony.”

Alkema went on to explain how many of the Gethsemane survivors had embraced the Sumacian Warrior Path. The four hundred and some ‘ferals’ – the wild youth that had lived in the wilderness so long they required bio-electronic devices to remain civilized – who had been taken into the Warfighter Core had soon come to embrace the discipline and purpose the warrior life had demanded, and had influenced others to join as well. Over a thousand Gethsemanians served, full or part time, in *Pegasus’s* Warfighter ranks.

Most of them were striding into the plaza at that moment. None of them were marching, exactly, but they had a way of walking, hard upright, with eyes raised,

that gave them a martial bearing. All wore the black-on-black jumpsuit of the Sumacian Warrior Priesthood, but with a small saffron Z-symbol at the shoulder.

Alkema led Keeler down toward the recessed gathering place. Keeler felt underdressed, but then, he had had no idea he would be attending a warrior ceremony. He straightened his bathrobe and felt acutely embarrassed.

"Prime Commander in the House!" called one of the Sergeants-at-Arms guarding the passage into the temple as Keeler passed. The entire assembly immediately silenced.

Keeler held up his arms. "Please, please, not on my account. Relax."

Alkema nudged him. "Sir, they're just reminding everyone not to discuss any of the Hidden Precepts of Sumac, or any other secret matters in the presence of a ... a non-warrior."

"Oh," Keeler said. "Well, I have to respect any club that has enough sense not to have me as a member."

"I suggest we sit near the back," Alkema tried to usher Keeler toward one of the high benches at the rear. But Keeler would have none of it. He strode directly toward the front row and took a seat in the center.

The space of the temple filled up rapidly with warriors. Some sat with their wives and a few jostled infants on their legs. *They look so young*, Keeler thought. There had been something of a baby boom aboard *Pegasus* in the past two years; 440 infants born to crew members and Gethsemanians alike. He guessed the crew had to do something to break the monotony.

The warriors engaged in some rhythmic clapping and stomping. Someone suggested they sing a war hymn, and they broke into a song about battle and glory and defending those who would not defend themselves. They all seemed to know the words without the need of hymnals. It was the most raucous religious ceremony Keeler had ever attended apart from the Panrovian Festival of Virgins which was, at best, only arguably religious.

After about twenty minutes of singing and rhythmic chanting and stomping, General Kitaen, in full battle dress and war paint, also a cape, strode manfully through the temple to the raised platform in the middle, flanked by a stony faced young man and young woman. His warriors stood and greeted him with cheers. Kitaen flung down his cape on the floor as the crowd fell to silence. He raised his battle-staff and led them in a raucous recitation of the Sumacian Warrior's Oath, shouting, "We believe in the Allbeing! the Father Almighty, the great Creator and Sustainer of the universe and all the worlds in it."

The warriors repeated, "'We believe in the Allbeing! the Father Almighty, the great Creator and Sustainer of the universe and all the worlds in it.'"

Kitaen continued, "We believe in the Allbeing, master of time, space, and dimensions, of things visible and invisible."

The Warriors repeated after him.

Kitaen shouted, "We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; in his Sister, the Lady Vesta; and in the Holy Twins; and in all the true prophets and the true saints."

The Warriors repeated after him.

Kitaen raised his arms up high and his battle-staff above his head. "And we believe in the Great Prophet Sumac, Guardian and protector of the world whose warriors defend the chosen from the unholy."

"Defend the Chosen from the Unholy," the warriors shouted, and broke into a hymn, their voices rising strong into the air of the temple. Another glorious song of duty and fighting, it also incorporated acknowledgment of the Allbeing and the Savior of Mankind.

Kitaen gave a look of stern approval to the assembly, then dropped his battle-staff in a gesture that brought the raucous numbers of warriors... and even their infant children ... to a complete and respectful silence.

Kitaen lifted and swung his battlestaff as he addressed the congregation, "Warriors of Sumac, you are set apart by your discipline and steel. Our strength as warriors is in the muscle we train for combat, it is in the steel of our weapons, it is in the sharp blades of our minds, it is in the harmony of our fitness and purpose, but without the Spirit which gives us fire these alone will not prevail. Our joyful obligation, as warriors who have received a gift of fire, calls us to defeat evil, to give death to the evil that would take life – to exterminate it. To purge from our spirits any base or sinful thought that leads us from the true warriors' path. This is the battle we must fight continually, and our own strength is not enough, but we must call upon the strength of the Allbeing who gives us life and his intercessors who give us purpose.

"Mark my words, warriors... the time will come when our steel is tested in fire. We must approach the fire as unblemished steel, with our spirits purged of undiscipline and desires to gratify the self. Our path is into the cleansing fire, and it is a path few mortal will know. But we must march into the fire without fear. We must never fear the fire!" Kitaen's voice rose to a shout!

"WE MUST NEVER FEAR THE FIRE!" the warriors shouted back.

General Kitaen picked up a brown bottle of liquid from the female warrior at his side, took a long drink from the bottle, then spat it out while holding an igniter to the stream, creating a blast of fire that brought cheers from his congregation.

"Guy knows how to work a room," Keeler admitted.

The ceremony continued. Prayers were offered. Warfighters were recognized for their achievements in training. A young initiate was called forth to bear tribute and testimony. With large eyes, he spoke of his hopes and aspirations for doing honor to his unit and defending his ship against all enemies. After he spoke, a war hymn was sung. Then, two scantily clad female warfighters demonstrated knife-fighting skills in a sparring exhibition. General Kitaen offered a prayer, led a chant, and the meeting concluded.

Keeler and Alkema departed before the final war prayers and made their way back toward the travel pod. Alkema explained how *Pegasus's* main engines were still operating at only 45% efficiency. Keeler mentioned how much he enjoyed the knife-fighting exhibition.

They ended their walkabout at the crew and officer's club. Keeler spotted a familiar face sitting at the clavier as soon as they walked into the room. "Hail and Well Met, Ranking Philp."

TyroCommander Redfire did not stop playing his tune. He was dressed in a white suit that imitated the cut of his regular uniform, but still signaled that he was off-duty. "Good afternoon, Commander. It's been many days."

"Many days," Keeler agreed. He dispatched Alkema toward the bar. "What have you been doing with yourself, Ranking Phi?"

"Overseeing repairs to our tactical systems," Redfire replied, as though the subject bored him.

Keeler settled behind a table next to the clavier. "I am told we have just arrived at a new star system."

"Eventide," Redfire answered. "It was one of the colonial systems in the navigational charts we got from the shipyards at Gethsemane."

"Do we know anything about it?" Keeler asked.

"Not a damned thing," Redfire replied, crossly, pounding a bit harder on the notes he was trying to get out.

"When did you start playing," Keeler asked.

"About a ship's year ago," Redfire worked over another phrase. "Trying to find a new outlet, I guess. If I can ever master this great and terrible instrument, I may start composing."

Keeler knew what he meant. "I have arrived at the middle of my life. I know I need to do something with the rest of it, but I don't know what."

"I have some clarity on that," Redfire replied. "I am just looking for a way to keep myself sane and occupied until my moment arrives."

"That's... cryptic," Keeler knew that Redfire had come out of his experience at the Gethsemane gateway with a renewed sense of purpose, but he also knew it was something Redfire did not much like to speak of.

Alkema soon returned with the drinks. Keeler was able to persuade Redfire to labor his way through some renditions of Armpit Avenger Fighting Songs and drinking songs from the taverns of his youth. When Alkema announced he had to leave for dinner with his family, Keeler left as well, returned to his quarters, and finally had his shower.

PEGASUS – MAIN BRIDGE: Eliza Jane Change stood her Command Watch over a restored, and much redesigned, Main Bridge.

The Original Bridge had been destroyed in the Battle at Gethsemane. The rebuilding of Primary Command 1 (Deck 100) had been a priority of the ship's reconstruction. Instead of rebuilding to the original specifications, Lt. Commander Alkema had presented a completely new design which was intended to enhance efficiency. (Privately, it was also much cooler looking.) With backing from Redfire, Kitaen, and Operations Chief Paragon, Alkema had persuaded Commander Change to allow the major redesign to be implemented. He had developed the new layout after consulting for hours with the crewmen who worked on the bridge.

The new bridge was longer and sleeker than its predecessor. The Inner Bridge was no longer a separate space, but now consisted of four command positions situated at the rear of a raised runway-style platform that projected into the middle of the Main Bridge. The Inner Bridge contained four command seats for the commanding officer, an executive officer, a tactical officer, and an additional discretionary station. Five stations surrounded the runway in a U-shaped pattern 40 centimeters lower than the Inner Bridge. To the commander's forward right were the Helm and Navigation combined stations. To her near-right were Telemetry and Communications. To the left were Ship's Operations. To the forward left was the Secondary Tactical Station. Each station held seats for two officers. Flight Operations were set in an alcove off to the right. An additional alcove to the left offered enhanced tactical and battle coordination, but could be switched to enhanced planetary telemetry or other functions with a simple station reset.

Overhead, the support girders were combined with holographic displays to create the illusion of a canopy surrounding the bridge (instead of being encased in armor as it actually was). On verbal command, the entire Bridge could switch to Tactical Command and Control Mode. The holographic displays would reconfigure to present real-time tactical data. The Ship's Operations workstation would switch to a Tactical Mode for handling shields and battle damage. All

bridge stations would switch to tactical modes for faster weapons deployment and evasive maneuvering. And there had been a few enhancements in those areas as well.

Alkema had recognized after the Battle of Gethsemane that *Pegasus's* system of energetic shielding was prone to failure because under continuous attack; the feedback of energy into the system overloaded the emitters that enveloped the ship in force fields intended to deflect or blunt attacks. He ordered redundant emitters installed over key areas, in particular, the command towers, the habitation decks, and the weapons installations. He also designed the primary emitters to cycle out and transfer shields to auxiliary after their power to absorb hits reached a certain threshold. The emitters would go into a recovery cycle until they were restored to full capability or until a secondary emitter reached a critical failure point.

Secondary functions had been re-assigned to the Auxiliary Bridge between the bases of the two command towers. Functions for Life Support, Sensors, Energy Distribution, and other Secondary Systems were controlled from the Secondary Bridge and appeared as status updates on the Ship's Operations station on the Main Bridge. Either Bridge could assume the other's operations in the event of catastrophic failure. The Auxiliary Bridge was also used for training, and there had been an accelerated program to increase the capabilities of the Gethsemanians in supporting ship's operations.

Also, the color scheme for the carpet and walls on the Main Bridge had been changed to a design of dark blue with gold trim and gray accents that was set off nicely against the glossy black of the deck and station displays.

Only a handful of the more mature Gethsemanian refugees had logged the requisite hours to qualify for duty on the Main Bridge. One of them, Seren of Abanaki, was manning the Telemetry Station as *Pegasus* cruised into the system and the first detailed telemetry began coming in.

The system's primary was a K type Red dwarf star. They had detected three planets in orbit around it, two of these being terrestrial type planets, one forming a moon around the other. In the outer system was a huge gas giant, the largest they had so far encountered.

"And the most dense," Seren reported from her station. "Astronomical Survey says it's not only a very large planet, but its mass is very high, too."

"Its equatorial diameter is 932,000 kilometers," Specialist Hera Washington (she was from Sapphire) reported from the adjacent Telemetry station. "Astronomical Survey says it's the largest gas giant we have ever discovered."

"What's its mass?" Eliza Change inquired.

"1.5277 times 10 to the 28th kilograms," Hera relayed.

Change was surprised. "That's very dense for a gas giant of that size. What about moons?"

"None detected, sir."

That was also surprising. "A gas giant of that size with no satellites? That is unusual. Have Astronomical Survey plan a reconnaissance mission."

"Will do, sir."

Change noted her disappointment in her duty log; attributing it to her concern over not having satellites to mine for vital ship's resources. Privately, though, she simply loved mining the moons of gas giants; ripping them open and tearing out their precious metals. It made her feel at home. "What about the gas giant itself? Anything useful? Tritium? Helium 3?"

"We are reading rich concentrations of Helium 3 and Tritium," Seren confirmed. "They are sequestered in deep layers of the outer atmosphere. They would be tough to extract."

Change reviewed the data as she lectured the bridge crew. "Raw Tritium is never easy to extract. But there are a variety of methods we could apply. Deep atmosphere scoops. Particle siphons. Gravity harvests." She made a note to task Alkema to find means of extracting the delicious Tritium and Helium 3 from the gas giant.

Hera began receiving additional telemetry. "The inner planet is reading a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, and water vapor consistent with the presence of planetary oceans."

The probability of this system being the site of a human colony had just increased dramatically. "Ready two more probes to survey the inner planet," Change ordered. Hera acknowledged and sent the command to Flight Core. A few minutes later, two probes launched from the front of the ship and accelerated rapidly toward the inner system.

Pegasus approached the gas giant 17 hours later and made three lazy orbits before sailing inward toward the other planet in the system, a warm sphere of rock covered in blue-green seas and islands and speckled with people.

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER TWO

PEGASUS - SECONDARY MISSION BRIEFING AND TELEMETRY ROOM, DECK 92 -

The Mission Briefing and Telemetry Room on Deck 92 had been spared damage in the Battle of Gethsemane. For a time, it had even served as an Operations Center during the rebuilding of the Main Bridge. It was the worse for wear. The tincture on its wall was scratched and scraped, and the large chairs arranged in concentric semi-circles around the central holographic displays were looking a little scruffy when the ship's senior officers were briefed there, two days after entering the system.

Commander Keeler sat next to TyroCommander Redfire in the front row. Keeler's presence was a courtesy. As inactive member of the crew, he was not entitled to an officer-level demonstration. But no one was about to tell him to leave. Alkema was also there, sitting on Keeler's other side. He had already seen all the telemetry, but knew he might well have to explain it to Keeler. Acting Commander Change sat on the far side of the front row, next to General Kitaen, who whispered in her ear occasionally during the presentation.

"Eventide is tidally locked to its sun. Its period of rotation matches it's time in orbit; both are about 64 standard days, by the way..." Explained perky Lt. Scientist Sparkle, standing next to a holographic display of the planet thought to be the human colony known as "Eventide." *Pegasus* was still seven hours from reaching its planned orbit, approaching from the far side of the sun in no particular hurry.

Sparkle went on. "The planet lies at the inner edge of the habitable orbital margin. From the surface, the sun will appear to be about two and half times as large as the sun on Sapphire, but it's only 63% as..."

The image of the planet flickered, turned blue, and went out. Lt. Commander Alkema whacked the projection unit on the side and the image of the planet returned. Sparkle tried to find her place "Surface sunlight is 63 per cent of what Sapphire receives."

"Think of it is as perpetual early twilight," Alkema whispered to Keeler.

Keeler seized upon the implication. "So, chance of vampires on the surface. Got it."

Sparkle made a gesture with her hands, as though turning the holographic planet and pulling another object into view. A rocky white and gray sphere appeared around the planet. Sparkle pointed to it. "This is the planet's only

moon. It's 8000 kilometers in diameter, and orbits at 44,000 kilometers above mean sea level, completing an orbit every 24 standard hours. It eclipses the sun for about six hours on every orbit. This helps moderate temperatures in the day side. But the difference in temperature between night and day creates a massive storm zone at the margin between the hemispheres..."

She indicated the gray ring that surrounded the holographic sphere and was going to launch into a detailed explanation of how this boundary created a wall of rain and storms that divided the planet in half when Keeler interrupted her. "What color is the sky?"

"Deep indigo," Sparkle replied. "As I was saying, this marginal cloud region at the terminator between the day and night sides of the planet creates an induction zone..."

Keeler nodded and brushed his fingertips against the front of his pajamas. (He was very much enjoying the informality that came with not being in command.) "Never mind the weather report. What are the surface conditions?" Keeler asked. "Temperature, climate..."

A faint crease appeared between Sparkle's eyebrows. "On the day side, balmy. Most of the surface has a constant temperature between 20 and 22 degrees. Areas nearer to the poles and on the dark side..." The detailed topographical image of the planet suddenly was replaced with a bright blue sphere filled with ones and zeroes. Sparkle grimaced in frustration.

"It sounds nice," Keeler said as Alkema tried to reset the holographic display system.

Change scowled, made a note on her datapad, but didn't say anything.

The topographical hologram reappeared. Alkema magnified the image to zoom in on an archipelago that made a large ring of islands on the planet's sun-facing side. "These islands appear to be where the human population lives," Alkema said. "We have counted approximately 13,000 of them, most of them quite small, less than one hundred kilometers in area, but there are thousands larger than that and thirteen very large islands of over 100,000 square kilometers. This one, in the northern hemisphere, is also, based on long-range scans, the most inhabited of the islands."

"How many humans?" asked Keeler. "I mean, totally, on the planet."

"Total number on the planet is estimated at 22 to 24 million," Alkema replied.

Keeler frowned. "That's not enough to support a thriving, technological civilization."

"Our scans have shown no evidence of advanced technology," Alkema confirmed. "No aircraft, no carrier-wave or quantum-based communication, little

atmospheric pollution... but we did detect some faint electromagnetic signatures..."

"Is the planet an artificial construct?" The question was something of a surprise, coming as it did from Keeler.

"There is some evidence that this planet is an artificial construct," Alkema rose, wielded a datapad, and switched the hologram to a cutaway diagram. "The uniformity of layered minerals in the inner crust and mantle is similar to what we observed on EdenWorld, which we know to be an artificial construct."

"It would not be logical to construct a world on which the bulk of the landmasses are on the dark side," Sparkle objected. She did not favor the hypothesis that this world was an artificial construct.

Keeler spoke over her protest, asking Alkema. "Do you mean it's populated by lion-headed freaks and rhino headed freaks and vampire freaks and other... um, freaks?"

"We won't know until we get some visual telemetry from the surface," Alkema answered. "Our probes have passed over at high altitude and so far have detected only humanoid life-forms."

"And animals..." Sparkle added, a little too insistently.

"Za, and animals," Alkema confirmed.

"No freaks?" Keeler wanted to be clear on that.

"We will know when we reach the surface," Alkema activated a display that showed the paths of the three high altitude probes that were crisscrossing the planet. Little windows next to the probes gave a constant readout of the measurements they were taking. "Atmospheric analysis indicates no definite pathogens, and only a few allergens we should be able to handle with a minimal physiological adjustment."

Keeler stroked his beard. "Whatever happened to that kid we took back from EdenWorld?"

"Transferred to Lexington Keeler with his mother," Alkema said.

"Oh yeah," Keeler was surprised at having forgotten this detail. "The crew should be given some shore leave," Keeler added. "They haven't seen a real sky in three years."

"There was off-ship time when we mined the Moons of Fury," Change interjected. A little more than a standard year earlier, *Pegasus* had dropped out of hyperspace to prospect for critical ores and volatile gases in a system some 11.7 light years away, which consisted of a single gas giant planet and a large blue-white sun. The gas giant was hot and close to its companion star, and some of its 29 moons contained extractable quantities of mineral ores. The gas giant had an

immensely strong magnetic field that lit up the stellar winds of the blue-white sun as they streamed by the planetoids, creating a skyfield that looked, from the surfaces of the moon, like a cross between an aurora, a forest fire, and a hurricane. The “day” sides of the moons were too dangerous for human or even mechanoid crews to work because of extreme levels of radiation. So most of the work was done on the night sides, by mechanoids, with only a handful of human crew leaving the ship.

“That’s not the same,” Keeler protested. “The crew needs some time on the ground. They need to breathe some unprocessed air, feel the sun on their faces.” *And maybe some of the trouble-makers can get left behind, he didn’t say out loud.*

“I wasn’t objecting to the shore leave suggestion,” Change clarified. “I was correcting a misstatement, that’s all.”

Alkema reported. “We have identified several relatively remote, uninhabited islands where we could set up shore facilities. We intend to explore them further. The Acting Commander has requested plans for surface excursions, but she doesn’t want to approve them until we’ve had a chance to assess the state of the planet’s population and culture.”

“Right, we don’t want to send down crews to get shot at again,” Keeler said. “Or, do we? General Kitaen how do you feel about that.”

“I also want a plan for prospecting the system for resources,” Change added. “However, that is not the purpose of this...”

“There may be some needs we can meet by exploiting this planet, Eventide,” Alkema put up a display of the tentative reports from Geophysical survey. “Oceanic seabeds of terrestrial planets typically contain a huge variety of ores in the form of polymetallic nodules. And if we could acquire some palladium, yttrium, tungsten... turbonium, it could solve a lot of our energy and re-weaponing problems.”

Re-weaponing had been a key concern of the Tactical Core. Both Lt. Commander Kitaen and TyroCommander Redfire had pressed Alkema on the need to restore the ship’s defensive capabilities. Less than two-thirds of the close-in phalanx defensive guns had been restored. Cannibalizing the Nemesis warheads had only partly restocked the ship’s supply of hammerheads. The artifactories had tried to make of the difference with a new missile design, the Starhammer... but production had been impaired by a lack of fissile materials for the warhead and propulsion system.

Also, there had been little need for tactical systems in the past two years. The one tactical response conditions had related to a sort of energy creature that had materialized in the UnderDecks, done some damage, and killed a couple of people before being lured to an airlock and ejected into space.

"We can't just go in and take their resources," someone from the Anthropology section objected.

"Why not?" Keeler asked. "I mean, I wouldn't suggest going in and taking them. We can approach them for a trade agreement, or at least ask permission... and if that doesn't work, then we take them."

Acting Commander Change glared at him.

"Early telemetry suggests the planet's inhabitants lack the technology to mine the seabed," Alkema added. "But let me show you the other side of the planet." He rotated the hologram to display the land-masses on the dark side. These were fewer but much larger... six sub-continent sized pieces of land ranging in size from 196,000 to almost half a million sq. kilometers in land area.

"This side of the planet is completely uninhabited because of the lack of sunlight," Alkema explained. "Its mineral rights are completely unclaimed."

"Problem solved!" Keeler nodded. Someone from the Anthropology section kept her mouth shut.

"Logistics Core advises that we negotiate with those on the day side of the planet for food supplies," Alkema said. "The nutrient beds that we use for fresh crops in the Agro-Botany Bays have been exhausted by the increased demands put on them. Also, one of the processors we use to process human waste into fertilizer was destroyed in the Battle of Gethsemane, and the back-up unit is only processing with 30% efficiency."

"I thought we had enough food reserves for thirty years?" Keeler asked.

This was something else Alkema had briefed Keeler on during the voyage. "We did," Alkema replied. "But some form of exotic radiation contaminated our stores... probably from the battle at Gethsemane. At least two-thirds of our food has become necrotic. We've had to jettison it into space to avoid further contamination."

"That thing couldn't kill us fast, so it killed us slow," Keeler muttered. "What are our reserves now?"

"Less than two years," Alkema told him. "If we don't add food stocks here, we can't even make it to the next system."

"Kumba yah," Keeler muttered quietly.

"Unless we reduce the crew by 60%" Change added, a bit grimly. "The Gethsemanians seem to have a higher daily caloric requirements than we from the Perseus Quadrant."

"Lousy teenagers," Keeler pointed at Sparkle. "All right, go on with your presentation."

"I was mostly finished, Mr. Keeler," Sparkle told him, and she sat down.

"Great, what else do we got?" Keeler asked.

Change was prepared to hand over the meeting to Flight Commander James, who was going to present the proposed exploration and landing schedule, but just then, a COM Link chirped. "Commander Change, we have just received new probe telemetry. It's unusual."

"Transfer to my location," Change ordered.

Another holographic display activated. The system seemed to be working much better since Alkema rebooted it. A triangle appeared around a spot of barely discernible distortion against the star field. The view zoomed in on it, where it appeared to be... a close up view of an area of distortion against the starfield.

"What is that?" Keeler asked.

"Something is lensing the light from background stars," Alkema said. He began scrolling through an analysis. "If there were a singularity nearby... a black hole... it could produce an effect like that..."

"It's moving..." Someone pointed out.

Alkema looked up and saw, like the others, the region of distortion had slightly changed position, as though it were in very high orbit above the planet.

"Holoflage!" suggested Flight Lieutenant Jay, who was an auxiliary Aves pilot.

And then, the image vanished and the words "Link FAIL" appeared. "We've lost probe telemetry," Alkema reported, even though they had all pretty much figured that out.

"Try to regain the LINK," Change ordered.

"I am already trying," Alkema responded.

Keeler began to feel an odd sensation, as though the entire conference room had begun a very slight but very rapid oscillation. It rose from his feet up through his spine and soon made his head buzz and his fingers itch. He looked to examine his fingers, and saw that the rest of the assembled crew was doing the same, as they had all felt it.

Also, the light in the room seemed to be increasing. Then, his ears started ringing, as though in the aftermath of hearing a very loud noise. The room became brighter and brighter. All the ship seemed to fill with a kind of soft light that diminished the colors and substance of everything and everyone. The people around the table became pale and ghostlike.

The ringing diminished after several long moments, but the washed out appearance of the ship remained. When Keeler looked at the others around the room, they seemed to be moving in a kind of slow motion, or some kind of frame-by-frame advance like the effect of strobe lighting, but without the darkness between flashes. General Kitaen was drawing a battle staff in an exquisite slow-motion ballet. Alkema was slowly rising from his seat. TyroCommander Redfire looked around in confusion. Only Change seemed unperturbed by the phenomenon.

They became aware of a presence, that they had been joined by a visitor, or visitors. (Later, no one in the briefing room could ever be certain whether they remembered one entity or several, except for Eliza Change who was steadfast that there had been three.) One, or several, they appeared as ghostly white humanoid forms. They seemed to be in no single point in the room, as though you could catch one in the corner of your eye, but when you turned to look, the vision retreated to another part of the room.

"Who are you?" Keeler demanded. He tried to stand so as to better confront the apparition, but his body refused to cooperate.

"We are the Kariad," said a voice. Precisely modulated, neither male nor female, with barely any inflection, nice echo and face effect.

"You're the Kariad," Keeler repeated. "The Kariad."

"You know of us?" said the figure somehow conveying a sense of surprise that was not reflected in its tones. *"Have you encountered our kind before no you have not."*

"Who and what are you?" Keeler demanded.

A voice continued. *"We have evolved far beyond you in technology and intellect we do not inhabit your space but occupy a reality of our own construct we do not physically explore the universe we remain in our construct hidden to you and all outsiders while our lensing ship visits the worlds of your galaxy we have already visited several of your colonies."*

"Za, and you screwed them up real good," Keeler added.

"What is to mean 'screw them up real good?'"

"Do you remember a world called Yronwode?" Keeler asked.

The Kariad spoke very rapidly, and the voice became a barely intelligible buzz.

"Accessing. Affirmative. Yronwode. Code 314-Alpha-654-Stroke-two-two beta. The humans on the world were engaged in perpetual conflict we observed material disparity between the two sides and solved the conflict by mandating an equalization of living standards the side of the conflict with the inferior living standard was also offered the

possession of territory that was in dispute to compensate for prior material deprivation thus the conflict was resolved."

"Not quite," Keeler answered. "The Midians retreated to a small peninsula. The Xirong continue to attack them. The Xirong were never interested in 'material disparity' they just wanted to kill the Midians. I should know, I was one for a while. And when they aren't fighting the Midians, they're fighting each other. And all that material wealth transfer didn't work out either. The Xirong's left the factories to rot and went on trying to kill the Midians."

"Yes we learned of this when we accessed your ship's records."

"How did you get off the planet?" Keeler heard Alkema asking as though transmitting from a distant sun. "The planet has an anti-escape system that we almost couldn't break through."

"We did not physically visit that world we projected images of ourselves through the lensing ship."

"I thought as much," Alkema was heard to mutter, in a high, chipmunkbeast-like voice.

Keeler went on ... "Then, on Fallon, you caused their entire civilization to collapse through your interference."

"Fallon. Accessing. Affirmative. Code 334-Alpha-908-Stroke-Two-Two-Beta. The world called Fallon was built on an unsustainable tritium-based energy infrastructure requiring the transport of energy supplies over vast distances additionally the planet was disunified and there were severe political imbalances between the most powerful nation-state and all of the others our solution was to provide with a source of inexhaustible energy we gave each political unit or nation-state a different component requiring them to unify and work together to solve their energy problem."

"They didn't," Keeler said. "When they ran out of Tritium energy, they reverted to savagery."

"We have learned of this failure through analysis of your ship's data records this knowledge will be incorporated into our scheme."

"Gethsemane," Keeler challenged. "That Gateway to the Afterlife."

"Accessing. Gethsemane. Affirmative. Code 309-Alpha-890-Stroke-Two-Two-Beta. Gethsemane, endangered through imminent planetary collision we instructed them in the construction of teleportation Gateways that would enable evacuation to three nearby worlds."

The Kariad had a way of putting images in their heads. Keeler saw their whole plan. Three Gateways at three locations on Gethsemane, each one connected to a different world. He also saw that one of those worlds was Fallon. The Gethsemanians had only built one of them.

He also saw that the Kariad were opening up *Pegasus's* memory banks, opening up the ship's braincore and reading the totality of the crew's collected mission data.

"Your ship took energy readings during gateway activation," the Kariad continued. "The profile does not conform. Analyzing. Complete. Analysis indicates construction of the receiving gateways on the three relocation planets was incomplete resulting in failure to establish linkage. Further analysis... the construction of the Gethsemane trans-dimensional gateway varied from specifications variance allowed gateway to operate without destination any persons departing through the gateway would be annihilated."

"It opened a Gateway into the Afterlife," Keeler told the Kariad.

"That is not possible," the Kariad replied. "There is no afterlife there is only the perpetuity."

"Explain to me where the Gethsemanians went, then," Keeler insisted.

"Without an affirmed destination any matter traveling through a transdimensional intersect ceases to exist."

"I went through and I didn't cease to exist," Keeler protested. The Kariad said nothing, but Keeler briefly perceived a sense of puzzlement. "And what was that thing that came out of the Gateway and tried to attack our ship?" Keeler persisted.

The Kariad were quiet. Then, they said. *"There is no sensor data after the destruction of the Code-309-Alpha-890 planet."*

"There was too a monster!" Keeler insisted. "It had tentacles and nasty sharp pointy teeth!"

"Untrue."

"Explain the damage to our ship."

An interminable pause ensued.

"There is a probability that e-state energy escaped through the gateway after the destruction of the planet e-state energy is highly dangerous and can be observed to display characteristics that may be mistaken for sentient intent."

"E-state energy can't survive in our universe for more than a few nanoseconds," Alkema protested. He had been hanging out with Hardcandy Banks Toto a lot over the last few years and had learned a few things about Extremely Unlikely Physics.

"The time would have been sufficient to create the illusion of a sentient being," the Kariad replied. "The damage to your ship was probably caused by planetary debris."

Keeler wanted to let out a frustrated sigh then, but again his body failed. It was as though he had stopped breathing, or that the breathing part of him had disconnected from the thinking part.

“What are you doing at Eventide?” Keeler demanded.

The Kariad answered him.

“This colony is proving intractable problems of social inequalities disequilibrium not even our greatest savants have devised an implementable solution we have studied the planetary society the balance of wealth and power is held by a small number of clans connected by blood these are known colloquially as the ‘Royals’ they control the planet’s wealth through devices known as ‘Anything Boxes’ these are apparently a form of technology left over from the more advanced civilization that colonized the planet the Royals use possession of the Anything Boxes as a tool for socio-economic control this results in an intolerable disparity of wealth and power.”

Images flooded through Keeler’s mind, town and villages, castles and palaces, people being handed food in bright plastic wrappers, battles fought with swords and primitive explosive projectiles.

“It is essential that the usage of the Anything Boxes be reformed in a way to redistribute and equalize their products across all populations however attempts to communicate plans for sustainable equitable reforms in the use of Anything Boxes have not been acknowledged or accepted by the planet’s ruling classes...”

“OK, Look...” Keeler began. “The point is, we don’t want you screwing around with our colonies any more. If we have problems, we’ll figure them out ourselves.”

“We cannot allow that. Your species has a dangerous capacity for self actualization the destruction of your Commonwealth was a consequence of this capacity only with profound guidance will you escape inevitable ...”

“Shut up!” Keeler tossed at them. “We have a sovereign right to solve our problems for ourselves...”

Keeler heard a murmur, as though many voices were clamoring simultaneously to be heard. He perceived that his ship was being carefully examined and inventoried. But there were other voices...

“We have detected social inequalities and weapons of mass destruction on board your ship these conditions are dangerous we will prepare alternate social orders and mission parameters for your benefit...”

“Stop!” Keeler ordered.

“... weapons system capable of mass destruction to be dismantled limited defensive capabilities restrained abolish authority based hierarchy redistribute...”

"Stop!" Keeler ordered again.

"Cease!" Another voice ordered; Change's voice.

"...comprehensive priority reorganization this ship properly realigned can participate in the advancement recovery and pacification of dysfunctional human cultures..."

"Let me present you a wager," Keeler shouted... mentally.

The Kariad voice stopped explaining what it would do to the ship then boomed excitedly.

"A WAGER! Yes! Tell us of your Wager!"

Keeler smirked. "You like wagers?"

"For beings as highly evolved as we are wagers with the unpredictability of outcome, are our highest form of recreation! Tell us of your wager! It will please us!"

Keeler confronted them. "If we can solve the socio-economic disparity caused by the anything boxes, will you promise never again to meddle in human affairs?"

There was a long silence.

"The wager is agreeable subject to conditional terms; that you do not reveal yourselves to the planet's inhabitants as travelers from other colonies. You must resolve their disparity without revealing your true nature. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Keeler agreed.

"And you may not use force of arms to resolve the planet's disparities. Conquest is not an option. Nor may you provide the native inhabitants with weapons."

"We may defend ourselves..." Keeler protested.

"Affirmative, if you can do so with revealing your origins."

Keeler thought about it. "Agreed."

"400 Quatloos on the newcomers!" a distant voice shouted.

"Shut up with your obscure mythological references," another Kariad voice demanded.

"Your wager is met," said the Kariad with finality.

Then, much more suddenly than it began, it all stopped. Time resumed, and Keeler found himself face-to-face with the rest of the people who had received the briefing.

"What was that?" Sparkle and many others murmured.

"We would appear to have met the Kariad," Keeler answered. He felt a little queasy in his stomach, and wondered what they might have done to him.

Acting Commander Change stood. "This briefing is concluded. Everyone is dismissed except for Lieutenant Commander Alkema, TyroCommander Redfire, and Mr. Keeler."

After the last of them had shuffled out and the hatch had sealed, the four gathered, standing, around the holographic projection of Eventide. Change ordered TyroCommander Redfire, "Take the ship to tactical alert."

Redfire reached for the COM Link. "TyroCommander Redfire to tactical comment, bring the ship to tactical alert, situation 4."

"Situation 4 acknowledged," said a female voice.

That settled, Change challenged Keeler: "Are you resuming command of *Pegasus*?"

Keeler shook his head.

Change pressed, "Then tell me, who is in command?"

Keeler answered her: "Since you are in a handsome uniform and I am wearing pajamas with pink bunnies on them, you are obviously still in command of *Pegasus*."

Change fixed him with a hard stare. "It didn't always feel like that today, Commander."

Keeler leaned back in his chair. "I apologize. When the Kariad invaded my... invaded this ship I responded on instinct. I should not have acted the part of commander.

"But once done is done. As a civilian advisor to the captain, I am going to request the opportunity to lead the primary ground mission; with the main goal of finding us a food supply. And if I am very, very lucky... or clever, but that isn't too likely... if I am lucky, I will find a way to get the Kariad to stop screwing with the human race. And I will expect your full support for my mission. Do we understand each other?"

"I believe we do," Change responded. "If I do not agree, you will reassert your command and order yourself to the surface anyway. You could replace me as Acting Commander with Mr. Redfire or Mr. Alkema. I am essentially in command, except when you overrule me."

"Let's not make this about power, Commander Change," Keeler answered, with tones of respect so grave, they almost sounded sincere. "You know my plan is reasonable."

"You know that isn't the point," she gave it right back to him. "The point is the perception of the crew of who is in command of this ship."

Obviously, this was not going to work. Keeler sighed and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his robe. "I should have known better than to try and trick you, making you think I wanted to lead the ground team..."

"That's not..." Change began.

Keeler brought his arm up dramatically against his brow. "Obviously, only a complete fool would want to fly down to the surface and make contact with a pre-technological civilization on that bug-ridden rock down there."

"Commander..."

Keeler nudged her with his elbow, leaned in close, and whispered, "Confidentially, my suggestion is that you assign the mission to some troublemaking malcontent. Someone you want out of the way. Maybe someone you don't mind dropping dead of some bug-born malaria-type illness. Meanwhile, since I will have so much time on my hands, I can remain on the Main Bridge to consult on your command decisions... Oh, we will have so much fun!"

Change sighed. "All right. The ground mission is yours. But any decision that involves ship's resources will have to be approved through me or my command staff, understood?"

Keeler put on a face of dejection. "Well, if I really must..."

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER THREE

PEGASUS LAUNCH BAY ALPHA – “Let’s run a final systems check,” Trajan Lear told his co-pilot. Aeris Tuck had been found on the planet Gethsemane. He was very short, with blue eyes, clear skin and an upturned nose. His thick dirty-blond hair was cut in a medium length bowl-cut. He was almost sixteen, though he looked not much more than twelve, and, despite all that, had become a magnet for the young Sapphirean girls of *Pegasus* in a way that baffled the previous reigning babe-magnet, Warfighter Lieutenant Johnny Rook.

“Total systems confirmed operational,” Tuck reported. The headset he wore looked ridiculously large on him, but had a knock for flight. Trajan Lear was certain he was training a future Flight Captain, if he could get more process discipline.

“We’re going to checklist the systems individually,” Trajan informed. He expected Tuck to protest. He had always protested, when he was a cadet. A checklist was unnecessary, Phoenix reported all systems optimal, he would have argued. And then Matthew Driver would have explained that the exercise was for the pilot’s benefit, to mentally install the operational qualities of the ship’s major systems before a flight.

But Tuck made no argument, he simply accessed the diagnostic feed through his neural link and simply said. “Begin Systems check.”

Trajan Lear: “Primary Reactor Core.”

Aeris Tuck: “Optimal.”

Trajan Lear: “Gravity Pump.”

Aeris Tuck: “Fully operational, field geometry is stable.”

Trajan Lear: “Maneuvering thrusters, lateral.”

Aeris Tuck: “Fully powered, system checks, full rotation confirmed.”

Trajan Lear: “Maneuvering thrusters, pitch.”

Aeris Tuck: “Fully powered, system checks, full rotation confirmed.”

Trajan Lear: “Maneuvering thrusters, yaw.”

Aeris Tuck: “Fully powered, system checks, full rotation confirmed.”

Trajan Lear: “Starboard aerofoils.”



Aeric Tuck: "Fully functional."

Trajan Lear: "Port aerofoils."

Aeric Tuck: "Fully Functional"

Trajan Lear: "Starboard Accipiter."

Aeric Tuck: "Starboard Accipiter secured. Systemic connection confirmed. Engine check confirmed. Weapon check confirmed."

Trajan Lear: "Port Accipiter. Engine check confirmed. Weapon check confirmed."

Aeric Tuck: "Port Accipiter secured. Systemic connection confirmed."

Trajan Lear: "Life support."

Aeric Tuck: "Atmospheric systems check. Environmental controls check. Hatches show sealed."

Trajan Lear: "Sensor arrays."

Aeric Tuck: "Forward check. Aft check. Lateral, check."

Trajan Lear: "Navigation subsystems."

Aeric Tuck: "Beacon is operational. Navigation-sensor array interface is operational."

Trajan Lear: "Control Interface."

Aeric Tuck: "Neural Interface operational. Back-up system 1 operational. Back-up system 2 operational. Display systems operational."

Trajan Lear: "Weapons."

Aeric Tuck: "Ten Hammerhead missiles in the forward bay. Forward pulse cannons charged. Aft pulse cannon charged."

Trajan Lear: "Landing Systems."

Aeric Tuck: "Landing Systems check."

Trajan Lear: "All right then, Cadet Aeric Tuck... take this ship out."

EVENTIDE – ANGLETEER – ANCHOR-PARK ON AVON: Anchor-Park-on-Avon was the largest city on the planet Eventide, and the Capital of the Island-Empire of Angleteer. Two million and more of the planet's inhabitants made their homes int this city or in its environs. The two cities sprawled across the banks of the broad Avon River, wealthy Anchor on one bank and grubby Park-on-Avon on the other.

Apart from the eleven watchtowers that rose ten stories high in the various districts of the city, most of the buildings were low. The largest and oldest of the buildings were along the banks of the river nearest the docks and were constructed of gray-black stone that had acquired a thick coat of moss in the moist, sub-subtropical climate. The other houses, shops, and smaller structures of the city were made of brick or, much less frequently, tropical timber. The air was tinged with smoke from the thousands of cooking fires and pungent with the aroma of an ineffective sewerage system.

Keeler found it a chaotic and primitive place as he strode down the broad avenue that ran between Anchor's commercial strip and the dockyards, as though setting space between the wealthy merchants and the working dockhands that provided their wealth. Gravity on the planet was light, and the sun was a huge burning yellow ball in a sky so blue it was almost black, where the brightest stars shone through even in full daylight. Women in windows and alleyways posed alluringly as he passed. Apparently, the galaxy's oldest profession was still practiced here. Also, there were bakeries.

Keeler was dressed in what the ship's Cultural Survey said was the typical style of a merchant shipmaster... a bright blue coat with a lot of gold buttons, puffy yellow leggings, and a three-pointed hat. Honestly, he felt a bit foolish, but he didn't seem to turn the heads of any of the locals, and that inconspicuity was a good thing.

And besides... David Alkema... walking beside him in a puffy white open-chested shirt and gray leggings... looked even more ridiculous. The phrase "Panrovian Catamite" leaped irresistibly to mind, but Keeler hadn't spoken it aloud yet.

They were seeking to purchase a ship. Keeler had posted an advertisement on various of the "Message Boards" around the city, large rectangular sheets of wood set on kiosks in the major public squares of the various districts which served as information exchanges in the absence of advanced telecommunications technology. His had been worded by the ship's Cultural Anthropology Core.

Bee it knowne until all men, merchant tradesman and shipmaster seeks sturdy vessel capable of conducting inter-island trade. Serious Inquiries Only. Direct notices to our agent at 29 Street of the Breadmakers, Anchor.

A few notices had been received at the agency Alkema had secured to facilitate the transaction. The most promising was from a Mr. Shylock, who

had three vessels available at the southeast docks. That was Keeler's destination that first quartermoon².

He had some time to study the ships at dockside before the arrival of Shylock. The one that caught Keeler's eye was a beautiful two-masted schooner with a graceful catamaran stabilizer on her starboard side. She was long and graceful. The wood of her hull was glassy black. Her name was spelled out in gold lettering across her stern, Valtrious.

As Keeler ran his hands across the smoothness of her hull, he was approached by a rotund balding man at the late end of middle-age who wore a black Cossack. He was followed by a much younger, much thinner man who carried a paper book and a pen.

"Your finery suggests the gentleman-Mariner, Do I behold Mr. Keeler?" the man inquired.

"I am he. Are you the master of this ship?" Keeler asked.

"She has no master, but I am her possessor," the man explained, his eyes were squinted and suspicious beneath white forests of eyebrows. "By name and occupation I am Mr. Shylock, trader of ships and vessels. I assume you would be the gentleman trader in search of a vessel."

"I am looking for a trading ship," Keeler explained. "I am in need of a ship capable of long trade throughout the Archiopoli. This ship looks suitable to my needs."

Shylock grinned, showing yellowed teeth. "The Valtrious? I vouche, gentle Mariner, she's a fine ship. A fine enough ship indeed, long in leg and as solid in hull as the Rocks of Sihnon. But I can do you better, good sir. On the South Docks, I possess a ship called the Valtrix. Trimaran hull, with half again as much cargo capacity."

"Neg, this ship will suit my needs," Keeler assured him, patting the smooth black wood of the hull.

Shylock tilted his head and looked Keeler over with a judging eye. "Sir, I do not know thee, but thy carriage is that of Royal, not Mariner. Praythee, are you possessed of a Royal House?"

Keeler showed him the seal on his sleeve the ship's quartermaster had added to the outfit. "I am Keeler of the House of Sapphire."

² As Eventide continually faced the same side of its sun, morning, noon, and night were meaningless constructs. Instead, days were marked by four quartermoons. The 1st lasted the length it took the moon to rise from the horizon and meet the sun. The 2nd was the period of eclipse. The 3rd was the period as the moon descended toward the horizon. The 4th and final quartermoon marked the hours the moon was absent from the sky.



The man squinted and scowled at the seal, a blue circle with a white *Pegasus* in the center, surrounded by the Keeler Family Motto: “Fēlēs quae meās brācās incolit conflagrāt” (“The cat in my pants is on fire.”) the origins of which have been, thankfully, lost to obscurity.

“I do not know thy house, sir,” Shylock concluded.

Keeler turned on Alkema. “Some PR guy you turned out to be!” he shouted, then made a show of batting him about the ears. When Alkema looked chastened enough, Keeler turned back to Shylock. “Look, I’ve got money and I want to buy a ship. Will you sell me a ship, or should I find another offer?”

“What are you offering?” Shylock asked.

Keeler patted the purse of gold coins that had been produced by the ship’s Cultural Anthropology Section, a passable imitation of the Trading Ducats exchanged among the island states. They were also called Darrians for the name of the Colonial Regent impressed upon them. “What is your price... in terms of the local currency?”

Shylock scowled. “Local currency? Can you do better, sir?”

Keeler drew back. “I’m afraid I don’t get your meaning.”

Shylock broke into the flowery prose the ship’s advance scouts had warned Keeler was typical in the commercial circles of Anchor-Park-on-Avon. “It would gladden me the greater if we could talk of goods and trade. This ship is worth a thousand Darrians, but one Darian today is half a Darian tomorrow, and before the moon waxes full, I can trade five Darrians for one. I’ll offer you the ship for five thousand Darrians, but I would rather make a trade, if you understand my meaning, sir?”

Keeler reran the language in his head until he was pretty sure he knew what Shylock was talking about, “Yeah, think so.” He gestured for Alkema to pass him the datapad the quartermaster had prepared. “This is a list of goods I am prepared to trade for the ship. Does anything strike your fancy, my friend?”

Shylock took the datapad with a look of wonder. “What sort of device is this?”

“It is a datapad,” Keeler explained. “As you see, we have a number of textiles that are both soft and water-repellant. Also, they wash easily, and don’t wrinkle. This item is called brightglass, which is very popular. It stores light during the day and uses it to light your house at night.”

“What is this?” Shylock tapped again at the datapad.

"Borealan spirits? You have a discerning eye, my good friend. They'll get you drunk and make you dream of fair maidens with great big ... "

"No, no, this device," he waved the datapad. "I've never seen its like before."

"The datapad?" Keeler whistled. "Oh, I don't know. It's a datapad"

"What does it do?" Shylock demanded rubbing his hands together.

Finally catching on, Keeler rose to the occasion. "What doesn't it do? It stores any information you put into it. It can capture and store images and music. You can keep accounts on it. I use it to inventory my trade goods."

"Can you get more of these 'datapads'?" Shylock asked greedily, still rubbing his hands together in a really clichéd manner.

"Possibly," Keeler paused. "Would you be interested in acquiring them?"

"Oh, yes, good sir."

"In trade for the boat?" Keeler made clear.

"Indeed, but I would have to ask for..." The man squinted, trying to work out the value of the device relative to the ship. "... one hundred of these ... datapads."

"One hundred," Keeler whistled. "I don't know. One hundred..."

"Eighty then!" the man insisted.

"I am going to have to replace the sails," Keeler noted, looking up into the two masts. "And needless to say, the sheets will have to be changed as well."

"Seventy-five," the man offered.

"Sixty," Keeler offered.

"Done," the man agreed. He cuffed the younger man around the ears and he began to scribble frantically in the little book. "Meet me at the Trades Office after breakfast tomorrow. Bring a hundred Darians for the sealer of deals, and we will complete the exchange, and the ship will be yours."

"Pleasure doing business with you," Keeler said. He shook hands with Shylock and watched as the little man waddled away down the docks.

Keeler was pleased. "We have a ship! And all it cost us was a few datapads."

Alkema seemed a bit sullen. "We have thousands of those datapads on the ship. We could have given him a hundred, easily."

"But he was willing to sell for sixty," Keeler said.

Alkema argued the point. "But we could have spared a hundred. I feel like we cheated him."

"How could we have cheated him? He got what he wanted. We got we wanted. That's pure economics." Keeler shook his head. How could Alkema not understand this? "Signal *Pegasus* to prepare me sixty datapads, and we will have ourselves a boat."

"Would that violate our agreement with the Kariad," Alkema questioned.

"The datapads won't betray our origins, nor will they be used for military purposes as far as we know." He gestured toward the ship. "Let's take a look at this beauty."

Keeler began walking the gang-plank. Alkema followed a couple of paces behind. "Shouldn't we have done this before we bought the boat?"

"Quiet you!" Keeler insisted. He stepped off onto the main deck and stomped a few times. "It feels solid."

Alkema examined it with his Spex implants. "Most of the deck is solid, but some of the planking is worn, and some should be resecured. The keel and hull seem to be sound. You were right about the ropes and sails, though. They'll need to be replaced. I'll message *Pegasus* to send us rope and material for sails."

Keeler heard most of what Alkema said, but more to the point, he found himself invigorated by the thought of taking this ship out to sea. As he stood in what must have been the bridge, a recessed area in the foredeck with a steering wheel and various sail and rudder controls, Keeler could feel the warmth of the sun (albeit a fat, alien sun) and the taste of sea air that took him back to his yachting experiences on Sapphire.

Alkema was more down to business. "I'd like to inspect the crew quarters and the cargo hold," he said.

"Of course," Keeler replied. The cargo hold was sealed under a pair of large mid-deck hatches. A door and ladder assembly at the rear of the ship led inside to the dark interior spaces of the Valtrious.

Alkema surveyed the crew quarters at the rear deck, a space not much larger than the family room of his living quarters. Two pairs of bunks were built against one bulkhead. There were also six hammocks attached to support beams. "This is all the space we get?"

"Less space for the crew means more space for cargo," Keeler explained.

"Is a crew of eight enough to handle this ship?" he asked.

"The bunks and hammocks are designed for continuous use," Keeler explained. "A complete crew would be 20 or so people, including carpenters, people to repair the sails when they tear, a cook or two..."

"I don't think we need all of those people, sir," Alkema interjected. "We can use food packs for food. We can get navigational aid from *Pegasus*."

Keeler was amused. "Are you prone to claustrophobia, Ranking David?"

"Just thinking of efficiency, captain. A smaller crew is more manageable. Also, I'm not entirely certain I could locate 20 crew who were willing to tolerate these conditions."

Keeler knew Alkema wasn't quite stating the truth, and he felt for him. "Would it make any difference if I told you the first officer was allowed to share the Captain's Quarters."

Alkema answered without hesitation. "Neg, sir, it would not."

Keeler grinned. "Have it your way. If you think we can manage with a smaller crew, you're free to do so. Just get me a good crew."

"What will we need?" Alkema asked.

"A good pilot, some people who can handle sails... ideally they should be able to fight if necessary. Someone with cargo and dock experience, maybe two," Keeler suggested. "That should get us out of port. We can bring on more crew if necessary."

"You'll need a boy!" called a high voice from behind them.

Keeler turned to see what appeared to be a rather dirty, teenage boy, skin burnished to a dark brown – that must have been hard to come by since Eventide's primary emitted so little light in the ultraviolet spectrum – wearing the customary gray-blue coveralls of the merchant sailors guild staring down at them from the top of the ladder.

"And why would I need one of those?" Keeler called up, hoping the answer would be less dirty than he thought it might be.

The barefoot boy made his way down the ladder, talking all the while; his face obscured by the long, thick, unkempt locks of hair that framed his rather small face. "I was cabin boy on the Valtrious under her previous master. I know her inside and out, through and through. And I pray thee will keep my humble self in your employ..." he paused then added sullenly. "I've nowhere else to go."

"He's just a kid," Alkema observed.

"Thanks Eagle Eye," Keeler replied. He asked the boy. "I intend to conduct trade between Angleteer and the other islands of the Royal Houses... Illyria, Venice, Athenia... are you familiar with these places?"

"Aye, sir, aye," answered the boy. And with Touchstone, Damark, Verona, Beaumont, and even distant Tara where few have trod..."

Keeler figured the kid was probably bullshitting, but it could not hurt to have a native on board. "Come by the ship tomorrow around the same time," Keeler told the boy. "Bring a resume."

The boy was befuddled. "I pray thee sir, I know not what a resume is..."

"What's your name, kid?" Keeler asked.

"Cesario, m'Lord." Cesario bowed and offered his hand.

Keeler shook the hand offered him, which was unusually soft for a boy who supposedly had been at sea for so long. "Well, Cesario, a resume is a small keg of the best ale you can find. Bring it to me tomorrow, around this same time, and I will take you into my employ as ship's... um,... cabin boy."

EVENTIDE - ANCHOR-PARK ON AVON (The next Day) – After spending the night in a comfortable lost above the Trading Offices of the Sapphire Shipping Agency, Keeler and Alkema made their way toward the Office of the Agent of Trades after spending the eclipse in a not-entirely-filthy shared room above a tavern near the docks which they secured with a handful of coins and a bottle of Borealan whisky.

"Phoenix has cleared the launch bay," Alkema reported. "They are carrying eighty datapads – including spares. The pads have been re-styled to match local tastes and obscure their origins. They also are carrying materials for sail, rope, provisions... and the crew of the Valtrious, selected according to your criteria."

"Excellent good," Keeler replied, though he seemed only slightly interested in the conversation. He stopped at a merchant of baked goods and bought a sweet buttered sheet of fried bread slathered in butter and speckled with sugar.

"Phoenix will land near a warehouse we have secured next to the docks under cover of eclipse, with holoflage shields up. We can off-load the cargo and have it here by the third quartermoon."

"Good," Keeler agreed, crunching on his pastry.

The office of the Agent of Trades was located in the shadow of the large government buildings at the center of the city. Its rooms were dark and small,



lit by small light-globes constructed of something like brightglass but of inferior quality, they gave out only a weak yellowish light.

Shylock was already waiting in the offices of the trades agent with his nervous young assistant when Keeler arrived. The trades agent, a wiry young man, squinted over the paperwork for the transfer of Valtrious to the Sapphire Shipping and Trades Agency. "May I see your tradesman's licenses?" he asked Keeler and Shylock.

Shylock produced a thick, old leather volume stuffed with old yellowed parchment pages.

Keeler fumbled through his pockets. "Now, where did I put that Tradesman's license."

"Here, sir... I mean, my Lord," Alkema produced a similar, elaborately-bound volume from the canvas courier bag Keeler insisted on calling a 'man-purse.' The license was an elegant forgery painstakingly created in the same Cultural Anthropology Laboratory as Keeler's sailing outfit.

The agent frowned at it. "The crest of the Royal House of Procyon appears to be legitimate." *(Procyon had been selected by Cultural Survey for its distance. Relatively little trade went on between Angleteer and Procyon, an island protectorate of the Island-State of Tara.) "But this merchant House of Sapphire... that is unknown to me..."

Keeler plopped a bag of gold Darrians on the desk next to the agent.

"Your license appears to be in order," the clerk confirmed, closing the book and discreetly sliding the bag of Darrians into an open drawer on his desk. "We may proceed to execute the contract, by the grace of his Majestic Lordship, Regent Henry of Angleteer, Long Live the Regent!"

"Long live the Regent!" Shylock shouted in approval.

"What he said," Keeler agreed.

The clerk reviewed the contract. "Are standard terms agreed to under the contractual laws of Angleteer?"

"As stipulated in that contractual instrument," Shylock specified.

"We agree to standard terms," Keeler agreed.

"Then upon delivery and acceptance of five dozen... 'datapads, is it?'" the clerk squinted quizzically at the contract.

"Yes, yes," Shylock burred impatiently.

The clerk made a small notation on a pad next to the pile of contracts. "... datapads, as it is written. Upon delivery and acceptance of five dozen



datapads, Mr Keeler shall receive into his receipt, paper that will identify him as the owner and shipmaster of the trading vessel Valtrious.”

“To be renamed,” Keeler noted. “Upon my possession of that vessel, it is to be renamed Red Jacket.”

The clerk scribbled another notation on his pad. “I will make note of the changing of the ship’s name concurrent with the receipt of her possession. That will require registry with Agent of the Regent’s Mariner Fleet. Datapads are to be in receipt by moonset, otherwise standard writs of bodily forfeiture apply.”

“Sounds good,” Keeler agreed.

“Wait! Wait!” Alkema interrupted. “What is a writ of bodily forfeiture?”

The trades agent sighed, and gave him a look of impatience. “If the party of the first part, that is Mr. Keeler, fails to deliver sixty datapads to the party of the second part, Mr. Shylock, Mr. Keeler will no longer be able to claim possession of the ship Valtrious and he shall forfeit one pound of his own flesh to Mr. Shylock, at Mr. Shylock’s discretion.”

Keeler nodded, “You see, it’s just a standard...” then stopped himself. “What?”

The Agent blustered impatiently “If Mr Shylock does not receive his payment, you have to cut out one pound of flesh from your body and give it to him.”

“Haven’t you ever executed a merchant contract before,” Shylock added.

Alkema and Keeler looked at each other. This was a planetary custom the Cultural Anthropology Survey was apparently unaware of. “This is standard under your laws?”

“It was written into our laws under Regent William-Benjamin. It has been our law for hundreds of years,” the Agent maintained his scowl. “Surely, you were aware of this. Every Mariner is.”

“It is hardly ever invoked,” Shylock insisted. “And as long as I receive my merchandise, you are in no danger of forfeit.”

“Neg, it’s fine,” Keeler said, and he affixed his seal to the documents. “We will have the datapads this afternoon. What could possibly go wrong?”

ANCHOR-PARK COURT OF CIVIL LAW (Three Days Later) -- The Anchor-Park Court of Civil Law building was constructed of what appeared to be polished

black rock but which proved to be, on close inspection, a hard black wood similar to what they had seen on Yronwode.

The Chamber into which Keeler was led in shackles, was round in shape, lit only by a ring of small windows around the dome. "All rise for His Most Honorable Presence, the Regent's Judge Vernon of Troilus."

The judge who entered the chamber couldn't have been much more than a meter in height. One of the bailiffs had to lift him into his place on the seat of judgment. He looked down at Keeler from his high spot on the dais.

The judge grunted at him, "You are Captain Keeler?"

Keeler answered. "Oui, I am that guy."

This is what had gone wrong: Phoenix had not shown up with the cargo. The Aves had disappeared about the time *Pegasus* had left orbit to scout the outer gas giant for extractable deposits of Tritium and H3. There were no datapads, no prospect of gaining replacements, and Mr. Shylock had insisted on executing the bodily forfeiture clause.

The midget judge shook his head and made tsk-tsk noises. He addressed Captain Keeler. "I am sorry for thee: thou art come to answer a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch, incapable of pity, void and empty from any dram of mercy."

Keeler nodded gravely. "I had a first officer who was like that once."

The judge ordered, "Call the Plaintiff into the court."

Shylock entered into the court accompanied, once again, by his nervous little clerk. No lawyer represented him, but he carried two large books with him.

The judge took the complaint that was handed to him, "Mr. Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too, that you wear your malice as a fashion statement. The 'pound of flesh' clause is, in the view of this court, atavistic and vestigial to our contract law. Surely, we could arbitrate some closure that would not require the mutilation of this man's flesh?"

Shylock would have none of it. "It is the law of our charter. You ask me if I would rather have a weight of carrion flesh than to receive three thousand Darians: I'll not answer that. So can I give no reason, nor I will not, this is neither a lodged hate nor a certain loathing I bear Commander Keeler, but this is the law."

"Then I am bound by His Majesty's Law to proceed," the tiny judge stated with a note of regret. "Bailiff, attend Captain Keeler's defender."

A woman entered. She was dressed in the customary robes of the court. "If it please you, Lord Justice, I present myself as legal counselor to Commander ... to Captain Keeler. Will you receive my papers?"

The judge nodded. "You may present your papers."

She handed him a long, narrow bound book of the type favored in the legal and commercial circles of Anchor-Park on Avon.

While the judge studied her qualifications, she extended her hand to Captain Keeler. "I'm Cultural Survey Specialist Mercedes Porsche. I'm an expert on extra-planetary law, and I've been reviewing the laws of this island as they apply to contracts. You're in good hands, captain."

"A Republicker," Keeler sighed. "Terrific."

The judge returned her book to her. "You are welcome: take your place. Are you acquainted with the question before the court?"

Porsche answered in a confident tone. "I am informed thoroughly of the cause. With your leave, I should like to question Mr. Shylock."

The judge grunted. "Captain Keeler and old Shylock, both stand forth."

Keeler moved into the box at the judge's right, and Shylock to the left. Porsche moved to address the old merchant Shylock.

Porsche asked him, "Is your name Shylock?"

Shylock affirmed, "Shylock is my name."

Porsche turned back to Keeler. "Captain Keeler, did you willingly make this contract with Shylock?"

Keeler affirmed. "I did do that thing."

Porsche strode confidently toward the merchant. "Mr. Shylock, is there no possibility of mercy on the issue of the pound of flesh?"

Shylock sniffed. "By what compulsion do I owe mercy? tell me that."

Porsche spoke, "The quality of mercy is not strained. It drops as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed. It blesses him that gives and him that takes. It is true, you have the right to insist upon enforcement of your contract. But consider this, that, in the course of justice, none of us would see salvation: so we pray for mercy."

Shylock clung stubbornly to his law. "I have no use for mercy. I crave the law. The penalty and forfeit of my bond."

Porsche turned. "Mr. Keeler, you have offered him the return of the ship that is in question, along with a monetary fine equal to the value of the ship, is that correct?"

Keeler nodded. "Za, twice the sum: if that will not suffice, I could pay it ten times over."

Porsche turned, "Shylock, there's thrice thy money offered on the table."

Shylock insisted. "The law is on my side, and I will see a pound of flesh cut out, from near to the Captain's heart, as is my prerogative."

Porsche asked him. "Why is it more dear to you than money? What do you propose to do with this pound of flesh?"

Shylock licked his lips. "I am going to eat it with a side of fava beans and a nice Illyrian Chianti." He followed up with slurping noises.

"Um, is that even legal?" Keeler asked.

"Unfortunately, the law abides no penalty. He may do with your flesh as it pleases him." Porsche turned to the judge. "Is there no power in Angleteer that can alter a legal decree once established?"

The midget judge shook his head. "I have no choice other than to enforce the law, save mercy stays the hand of the merchant. The forfeit must be carried out." He jerked his head toward Keeler. "Prepare him!"

"Let's get on with it!" Shylock drew his knife, which was long and razor sharp. His assistant helped him into a leather mask, not dissimilar that worn by air-hockey players. The assistant was then dispatched to retrieve a rather ominous looking wooden medical gurney.

Keeler gestured for Porsche and whispered to her ear. Something bright dawned on her face and she turned back to the judge. "Does the contract require that Mr. Shylock remove the pound of flesh?"

The judge tapped his gavel and asked for the opportunity to read the contract. In doing so, he consulted with his own clerk of the court. After several minutes, he issued his decree. "There is naught within the law that requires the plaintiff's hand in the forfeiture of the defendant's flesh. However, the flesh is still forfeit."

Porsche spoke gravely. "Your honor, we concede, this bond is forfeit. However, as there is no requirement that the pound of flesh must be by him cut off, we propose Captain Keeler's personal surgeon perform the removal of flesh."

"No!" Shylock objected, hissing through his mask.

"One other such outburst and you will forfeit the whole of your case," the midget judge snapped at Shylock. "Lady Porsche, the court will undertake this under consideration."

"Objection," Shylock snapped. "I perform the surgery. That is how it has been done thirteen times already."

"Thirteen times?" Keeler wondered to himself.

Porsche stood strong. "If there is no requirement that he perform it, then he must be bound by the law, as Captain Keeler is bound by the contract."

"She is correct," said the Judge. "I'll grant counsel's request. You'll get your pound of flesh, Shylock."

"They will attempt some trickery," Shylock protested.

The midget pounded his gavel angrily. "Not in my court. I will observe personally. And I warn Captain Keeler and his counsel that I will tolerate no treachery in this matter. The law may be cruel, but it must be respected."

"I will abide by that if I must," Shylock conceded. "But I still get to eat his flesh."

Keeler was taken off the stand and led back to the holding area.

"I don't see how this helps us much," Porsche told him in the privacy of the consulting room, which was windowless and not any larger than a clothes closet.

Keeler rubbed his wrists against the discomfort of the shackles. "I trust Doctor Skinner can remove enough flesh to satisfy the court without killing me."

"Doctor Skinner is en route from our island base, now," Porsche informed him. "He should be here within the hour." She paused. "We also have some warfighters on the island who could..."

Keeler shook his head. "That would violate the wager. I am determined to get those meddling aliens to stop screwing around with humanity. Winning this wager is the only way to do that."

He patted his stomach slightly. "So, which do you think he'll go for, a bit of my brisket, or maybe some lung tissue I'm not currently using?"

The group reassembled in the courtroom nearly four hours later. Doctor Skinner had arrived, wearing white robes (for some reason) that matched neither the ship's uniforms nor the costumes of native Eventidians. Coupled with his silvery mane of hair, it gave him the appearance of wizard or a philosopher, a man of great learning and power, anyway.

He explained to the judge that he was visiting in Angleteer from far Procyon, which a sufficiently distant and exotic land that no one questioned him further.

"This would be your surgeon?" The judge questioned.

"Aye," Keeler affirmed. He cuffed his doctor on the shoulder "Skin, what it shall be!"

"Order!" the judge pounded his gavel.

"Your Lordship, the right to the flesh is mine!" Shylock insisted again.

"You shall have your pound of flesh, Shylock." The judge tapped his gavel. "Dr. Skinner, I pray thee, proceed. Do not forfeit the life of thy patient."

"Of course not." The surgeon urged Keeler to lie back on the medical gurney. "I am going to try and make this painless for you, my captain."

"I will appreciate that," Keeler replied.

Skinner opened his medical kit and pulled out a suction device and a long needle. The judge leaned over the top of his desk to observe. Skinner felt obliged to explain. "This liposuction device is seldom used as we have procedures that can remove body fat through non-surgical means. With it, I can remove one pound of flesh with great precision. You may observe."

Skinner administered a chemical anesthetic to Keeler's chest. Porsche reminded him, "You must cut this flesh from off his breast. The law allows it, and the court awards it. Therefore prepare to cut off the flesh."

"That's what I'm doing," Skinner grumbled,

He inserted the tube cautiously into Keeler's side as the captain grimaced from the minor discomfort. He activated the suction device and carefully extracted a precise one pound of fat, as measured by Shylock's weights and scales. The fat was carefully sealed in a plastic storage tub with a lid that Porsche obligingly burped before handing it to Shylock. "There, take it. Take thy forfeiture."

Seeing the fat, Shylock shook his head. "I have changed my mind. Give me my principal, and let me go."

Porsche turned to the judge. "You have witnessed the plaintiff refusing the forfeiture of flesh in open court. Therefore, I invoke sub-section 9 c of the contract."

The judge donned a pair of spectacles and flipped through the contract. "Section 9 c," he read aloud. "In the event the seller and shipholder refuses legally binding payment, all goods under the contract are subject to forfeiture and disposition at the discretion of the presiding magistrate."

Porsche repeated, "Shylock has refused both payment of the principal. And he has also refused the forfeiture. Therefore, the court may, at its discretion, grant Captain Keeler the goods that are the subject of the contract. Namely, the ship Valtrious."

The midget judge smiled. "The Lady Porsche is correct, Shylock. I decree that Keeler has attempted in earnest to fulfill the contract, and been refused. Therefore, I will rule that the Valtrious is now legally the possession of Captain William Randolph Keeler of Sapphire." He pounded his gavel making it final.

The judge shouted. "Clerk, draw the papers!"

"No!" Shylock shouted. "I am denied."

"You may take your flesh," the judge insisted. "You are denied nothing that is due you under the law."

"It isn't flesh, it is but fat," Shylock protested.

"It is the flesh of Captain Keeler's body, the contract is met." The midget judge pounded the gavel. The judge and his clerks cleared the court. Shylock and his servants left, but not without a parting shot to Keeler.

He pointed at the party with an old scabby finger. "Thou will never eatest lunch in this thy city again,"

"I feel woozy," Keeler said as the others helped him off the gurney. "Everything's sparkly."

"The removal of 500 grams of bodily flesh is non-trivial," Skinner told him. He handed him a bottle. "Drink this."

Keeler groaned. "What is it, some kind of protein supplement."

"In a sense," Skinner responded. "It's Panrovian Bourbon. I thought it would do you some good."

Keeler raised the bottle to his lips and sucked down a great gulping gulp. "What happened to my datapads?" Keeler asked.

"Phoenix got bad landing coordinates and landed on the wrong island," Alkema explained to him. "They'll redeploy to the docks during the diurnal eclipse."

"I guess we don't need them now," Keeler concluded. His side stitched painfully as he stood up from the gurney. "Let's get the hell out of here before they decide to carve out a kidney or something."

EVENTIDE: THE ANCHOR-PARK DOCKLANDS – As the last crescent of the sun began to disappear from behind Eventide's gigantic moon, Keeler stood in a field adjacent to a warehouse, recently purchased by the Royal Sapphire Shipping and Trade Agency. The Aves *Phoenix* lowered its holoflage shielding and opened its hatch. Six figures stepped out of the lighted cabin and into the morning (which was called "emergence" on the planet because it was when the sun emerged from behind the moon), amid swirls of Avon River mist.

Keeler tugged Alkema's ear and whispered. "I know I've been out of action for a while, but I don't recognize any of these people."

"Some of them are Gethsemanian," Alkema explained. "And others are from parts of the crew you may not have interacted with much."

"Didn't we have any sailors in the regular crew?" Keeler asked.

"Plenty," Alkema replied. "But these were the best."

"You may also number me in your crew, captain," Skinner told him. "You will have need of me, I am certain of that. I am not unfamiliar with the sea. One of my early assignments was ship's doctor on a Carpentarian Mass Freighter, making the North Harbor- Samaria - Dark City run."

Keeler nodded. "Good."

"I have also been doctor to the Carpenterian fishing fleet..."

"Stop selling, you've got the job," Keeler growled.

The first crewman he met was a dark-eyed woman with skin the color of kava and light cream and rivulets of copper brown hair. "Jasmine Leaf," Alkema announced. "One of the warfighters General Kitaen spared us."

"She's a warfighter?" Keeler was surprised. In his mind, female warriors tended to be large, angry, and fond of comfortable shoes.

"Aye, sir," she told him. "I've also been trained to navigate by starlight, I've studied the naval tactics of Admiral Adama, Admiral Angel, Commodore Bones, and your Ancestor, Admiral Blue Keeler during the pirate wars. I'm also rated as a rescue diver."

"All right, so you're better than me. No need to rub it in," Keeler brushed her off.

Keeler turned and found himself eye-to-chest with the biggest off-worlder he had ever seen. "Fee-fi-foe-fum, what beanstalk did you fall from?"

The man scowled and grunted. Alkema handled the introduction. "This is the other warfighter General Kitaen gave us, Goro Sulijoadikusumo. He was rescued from Port Gethsemane. He's... he's cranky."

Keeler pointed at him. "I'm gonna call you Goro,' because I can remember that."

"Whatever, man," Goro Sulijoadikusumo rumbled. He began digging in his ear with a large, muscular forefinger.

Alkema explained. "Mr. Sulijoadikusumo was rescued from one of the islands of Gethsemane. He has high aptitude for naval operations, and a good sense of the wind."

"What's that thing on the back of his head?" Keeler asked, referring to an electronic patch the size of a thumbnail.

"Goro was one of the ferals. The chip helps him regulate his mood," Alkema explained.

"Right," Keeler said, moving on to the next on the list, another attractive young woman. Her sailing jacket was adorned with a patch from *Pegasus's* Technical Core. "I have socks older than this girl!" Keeler proclaimed.

Alkema introduced her. "This is Specialist Persephone Best. She has a high aptitude for low-technology repairs."

She smiled shyly. "Hello, captain."

Alkema continued. "She's been keeping the artifactories running on *Pegasus*. We found her on Gethsemane, at the Jericho power facility."

"This is going to be really exciting, I can tell," she said. She took a deep breath. "Can you feel that? The air, it's so... it's alive."

"Don't get excited until you see the crew quarters," Keeler advised her. He jerked a thumb at the next guy in line. "Who's this guy?"

"Eddie Roebuck..." Alkema introduced him.

"Brother Roebuck," Eddie corrected with a smile. "May the blessing of Brian be upon you."

"We need an evangelist?" Keeler scoffed.

"Prior to serving on *Pegasus*, Eddie Roebuck was an apprentice Cargo Master with the Dock and Freight Guild of New Halifax," Alkema explained. "He has more experience in managing sea-ship's cargos than anyone in the crew."

"And it's a blessing that Brian has given me the opportunity to bring his word to a strange and alien world," Eddie said with his hands outstretched.

"And that's it?" Keeler counted. "A crew of six?"

"Seven with Cesario," Alkema clarified. "But there's also a reserve crew that will assist with loading and unloading cargo when we need it."

“Will seven be enough?” Keeler asked.

Alkema nodded. “I think so. During your trial, I was studied the mechanism that controls the sails and the rudder. It’s a pretty amazing piece of low technology, but it could be improved. I’ve also requested our Technical Core work on some devices we can integrate into Red Jacket without raising suspicion... navigation, communication, automated sail operations. We can do with two people what would otherwise take twenty.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Keeler said.

“We can always request additional crew,” Alkema said. “But I think this crew will be sufficient.”

“Very well then,” Keeler sighed. “We’ll make sail at dawn.”

“There’s no dawn on this planet,” Alkema reminded.

“Then, we’ll make sail as soon as I get over my hangover.”

“Are you hungover, sir?”

“Neg, but I plan to be,” Keeler doffed his hat, turned, and strode down the pier toward the tavern district.

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER FOUR

EVENTIDE – ILLYRIA: The sky was dimmed by the daily eclipse of Eventide's large moon when *Red Jacket* drew into the harbor of Illyria, sails billowing in the strong ocean breeze. David Alkema leaned over the side of the ship and heaved a Technicolor yawn into the calm waters of Illyria Bay.

The ship's constant up-and-down, side-to-side motion in the waves, coupled with Eventide's light gravity had played havoc with his digestive system. He had been seasick since they left the Avon Estuary at Angleteer. Sharing quarters belowdecks with six other people and not a lot of soap did nothing to improve his condition.

"If you're done retro-digesting over there," Keeler called to him from the foredeck, "maybe you could come over and give me a status report."

Keeler had adjusted easily to life on the ship; a lifetime sailing on Sapphire's Lake of the Loons had prepared him well. If anything, he looked more fit and ruddy than he had in years. He held court on the Aft Deck with Jasmine, Persephone, and Eddie Roebuck. Skinner and Goro tended to the sails. Cesario was at the wheel, out of earshot so they could discuss *Pegasus* openly.

According to the report from *Pegasus*'s Planetary Survey Core, Illyria was a prosperous and well-populated trading island – not far behind Angleteer – where *Red Jacket*'s crew would have a good chance of securing cargo and contacts. Since Keeler's plans on gaining access to the Anything Boxes -- which he was sure held the key to liberating the planet's human population from Kariad influence -- relied on becoming part of the planet's economy and culture, it was a good place to start. He hoped to present himself a prosperous and charming merchant-trader, whose success would enable him to cultivate a relationship with the 'Royals' who controlled the Anything Boxes. Cesario had insisted that Royals and Mariners invariably hated each other. But Keeler was confident that money and charm would overcome that obstacle.

Alkema wiped his mouth and gave a report. As usual, he began with status reports on the other teams that were exploring the planet. "Ship's personnel report construction of our base on 'Newhall Island' is 70% complete. Commander Change has authorized a general shore-leave, and about a thousand are scheduled to arrive at the base when it is completed. There's about 200 guys there now, building shelters out of indigenous materials, as you requested."

"Right, we can't let them know where we come from," Keeler affirmed.

Alkema continued. "Eight other landing teams have inserted themselves in the planet's settlements to study the culture and seek out trading opportunities. General Kitaen has established a base on the far side of the planet and is training the Warfighter Core in night fighting. This is interesting, according to the ground survey, there is an abundance of plant-life on the far side, despite the lack of sunlight. It's small and scrub-like, adapted to survive on the minimum light provided by the moon when it..."

"Blah, blah, blah," Keeler interrupted, waving his wrists effeminately. Plants did not interest him, unless they were served next to a plate of meat and a glass of something bitter and brown. "Is there anything else?"

"Do you want a detailed rundown of each of the eight other landing teams in the primary islands of the Eventide Archipelago?" Alkema asked.

Keeler grunted. "Are any of them doing anything more interesting than setting up shop and talking to foreigners?"

"Neg."

"Then, let's move on." Keeler called up to the bridge for Cesario, who gave the wheel to Jasmine and met them on the deck. "Cesario, what do we know about this stupid country are we porting into?"

Cesario answered. "This is the island of Illyria, my Lord."

Keeler took this in with a quick nod. "I knew that much. And what do they do for fun in Illyria?"

Cesario wasn't sure how to answer that, but he tried. "Illyria is a peaceable kingdom. They incline more to love than war."

"So far so good. Do they drink?" Keeler asked.

"Aye, my lord, copiously and well. The fruit of their vineyards distills their essence into a most agreeable potion that sweetens any glass it blesses."

"Good hooch, got it," Keeler continued, "Who's the head turkey in these parts?"

Cesario answered him. "The noble Regent, Orsino."

Keeler made a note of this. "What's he like?"

Cesario waxed eloquent on the character of Regent Orsino. "A good man, noble in nature as in name. He was a bachelor when my father knew him. And so is now, or was so very late; last I knew."

Keeler wiggled his eyebrows. "Oh, one of those"

Cesario was taken aback. “Not so, my captain, for such as I take your meaning. He did seek the love of fair Lady Kate Keats.”

Keeler snorted. “That’s what they all say.”

Cesario continued to protest. “Lady Kate Keats is the daughter of Count Whetabix, who died and left her in the protection of his son, her brother. Her brother shortly also died, It’s said she loved him so much that she now abjures the company and sight of men.”

Keeler raised his eyebrows again. “Oh, really? Well, sounds like they’re made for each other then. I’d like to meet Regent Orsino, what do I have to do to make that happen?”

Cesario scowled, “He may receive thee, good captain. There is a fair behavior in thee. Oftentimes, men hide their true nature. Yet, I believe you have a mind that suits with your fair and outward character.”

Keeler nodded. “Yeah, a lot of people think that. So, what’s the plan?”

Cesario impressed Keeler by already having a plan. “I’ll approach the Regent and offer my services, uncompensated, as a goodwill offering, that you might then approach and engage him in your trade and commerce.”

Keeler considered this plan. If someone offered him the service of a soft-skinned servant boy, it probably wouldn’t work for him, personally. But from the sound of things, that offer would go over pretty well with Regent Orsino. “Sounds like a plan. While you do that, I’m gonna hit the bars, see if I can get my glass blessed with some of that fine Illyrian vintage.”

David Alkema touched Cesario on the shoulder. “Also, if you could arrange for us to get a look at his Anything Box, that would be quite useful.”

Cesario shook his head. “Quite impossible in the doing thereof, a Royal would sooner bare his bodkin than show the Anything Box to a... Mariner...”

Keeler laughed, “Za, I would definitely steer clear if Regent Orsino tried to bare his bodkin at you.”

David Alkema rolled his eyes, which made his stomach queasy. He had to head for the side of the ship again.

Overhead, some weird sort of seagulls with super-elongated wings and manta-ray-like heads wheeled and screeched over the glistening waters of the harbor.

EVENTIDE – ILLYRIA – HELVETICA: A few hours after docking and sending Cesario on his mission, Keeler led his crew through the teeming market in the

thriving city of Helvetica, capital of Illyria. They soon lost Goro, who had paused to look at a display of swords and firearms. Persephone and Jasmine were soon distracted by a window display of shoes and colorful satin gowns. Eddie Roebuck got into a fierce debate with a passing monk in a long red cape, and Dr. Skinner left to mediate in the nearby parklands.

Keeler and Alkema left them behind, figuring they all knew where the ship was and could find their way back to it unless they ended up in jail, which would provide for an amusing subplot did they require rescue. Keeler and Alkema examined the goods that were for sale at the various shops and talked to the other merchants, trying to figure out what was wanted and needed in the marketplace of Illyria... and Eventide as a whole.

There was an odd and anachronistic quality to their shopping expedition. Even though the society was pre-industrial to all appearances, most of the goods available in the shops were packaged in shiny cellulose-based wrappers similar to those used on Sapphire or *Pegasus*. And the people he passed wore clothing that was too densely woven and too precisely cut to have been made entirely by hand. The standard local dress seemed to be a sort of heavy, half-sleeved T-shirt, in many different colors, many of them bearing an image of a man with his head stuck in a pig.³

There was a woman selling colorful glass beads from an arrangement of jars. Keeler traded her several Ducats and two bottles of ship's ale for a jarful of them. When Alkema asked him why, he said they were pretty and Cesario might like them.

Alkema grinned – maybe for the first time in months. “Then, you know Cesario is actually a girl, don't you?”

Keeler snorted. “Well... duh! Even if I couldn't read her biospectral aura, one smell of her tells you, there's no mule in that barn.”

“I thought you probably knew,” Alkema went on to relate that it was awkward in the hold as Cesario took a bunk between the men's side and the women's side.

Keeler mused. “Why do you suppose she would do that? Disguise herself as a boy.”

Alkema shrugged, “Many mariners believe women on a ship are bad luck.”

³ They would later learn this was a parody of the seal of the Royal House of Illyria, which depicted a man with the head of a bull. An even less respectful parody depicted a man with another part of his body stuck in a goat.

"Hmm," Keeler growled. "Something odd about men who want to spend long weeks at sea without any female company. Would you like to make a wager?"

Alkema tilted his head. "On what?"

Keeler scanned the vicinity for a tavern as he replied. "That I can get Cesario to admit to being girl without directly challenging her on the fact."

"All right," Alkema agreed. "What's the wager?"

Keeler pondered. "I could have you promoted to TyroCommander... but what would the fun be in that? You're going to get that rank anyway, eventually...."

Alkema smiled at his prospects for advancement. "How about this, if you fail and I win, you go back on active duty," Alkema countered. "Relieve TyroCommander Change and take command of the ship."

"All right," Keeler agreed. "And if I should win?"

"I can think of nothing I can give you, sir."

"Hmm..." Keeler thought. He took a drink from his flask, and thought about it some more. "I have it. If I win this wager, you have to become my butler for one ship's year."

"Your butler?" Alkema said.

Keeler shrugged. "I miss having a butler."

Alkema considered this. "All right, if you succeed in making Cesario freely admit to being a woman, I'll be your butler."

"Deal," Keeler spat on his hand and offered to Alkema, who rather reluctantly took it.

Keeler brushed his hand off on his sleeve. "Now, where's that tavern Cesario told us about?"

EVENTIDE – ILLYRIA – HELVETICA: The advance crew had arranged for rooms for them in the Talisman Hotel, which the cultural scouts had determined was where the wealthy of Illyria met and gathered. The hotel covered the whole of a city block, was immaculately landscaped, and contained no less than three fine restaurants on its premises.

Keeler had a better idea where the real movers and shakers of Illyria would be. Kitty-corner to the Talisman Hotel was a large tavern called Malvolio's, located in the lower level of a large Yellowstone building occupied by a restaurant upstairs.

Keeler strode into the lobby of Malvolio's with his crew behind him. He called out, trying to mimic the local cadences, "Yonder tavern-keeper, yo, behold, look, lo! Over here! My friends and wish to imbibe generously of your offerings, slay your wenches and such-like."

A strongly built and statuesque woman, a thick braid of hair down her back, in a low-cut serving uniform, approached. Her face grew sour as he approached them. She reproached them in a husky voice. "I would suggest you seek your pleasure at the Goat and Oyster. You will find that establishment more suitable to your ways and means."

Keeler tried to smile winningly at her. "And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking."

"I am Helga, proprietress of this establishment," she replied, frowning, not won over by Keeler's solid team effort.

"Is my coin not good enough for you, good woman?" Keeler asked the proprietress.

Helga sniffed. "I suggest that your coin may go further in another establishment."

Keeler flipped a bag of coinage on the table large enough to buy the entire pub.

Helga took up the bag as though it were full of dog poop. "Perhaps I will find you a table in the rear..."

"I think I'd like a private room..." Keeler said.

"Our private rooms are reserved for our most important..."

Goro stepped forward and growled. "We'd like a private room."

Helga grunted at him, in no ways intimidated

"If there is no one using your main room now, then it make sense for you to provide it to merchantmen who will bring in important guests with important coin," Keeler added, "In be it known to thee, we intend to become very important in this town."

Helga sighed and checked the coin bag again. Grudgingly, she led them through the pub. At mid-day, it was not crowded. There was a large room in the rear of the bar with a very large table surrounded by enough chairs to entertain a large group of people. Keeler was satisfied.

Keeler flipped the proprietress a coin. "Now, go find me a few cases of expensive liquor that I can use to impress people. Then, find me a lot of cases of cheap liquor for me to feed them once they're too lit to know the difference. Get along now! Shoo! Shoo!"

"I don't like you," Helga informed him. "And I don't like your type. But I like your coin." She stalked from the room.

"What's her problem?" Goro grumbled.

"After all that flowery talk, I find her simple threats and grunts refreshing." Keeler laid his jacket across the back of the chair at the head of the table, then settled himself in. "We're going to have to get this place cleaned up. Bring down some banners and bunting from the ship. Let's start making some business happen."

Jasmine softly challenged him. "Sir, if you bring a bunch of wealthy, powerful Illyrians into this room to talk about trade, and all they see is colorful bunting and a bunch of other drunken businessmen, don't you think they might not be impressed in the right way to do business with us."

Keeler rested his chin in the cup of his hand. "By the Allbeing, you may be right. We may need some dancing girls as well. Alkema, get on that."

"Can't I get on that?" Goro asked.

"Somebody get on that," Keeler really didn't care who. One of the doors at the front swung open and Cesario reappeared. "I thought I might find you here, Good captain."

The crew of the Red Jacket broke out in laughter. Cesario had been outfitted in the manner common to Orsino's household servants, an outfit of cross-gartered yellow boots, maroon pantaloons and tunic of a mustard color.

"Fine, fine, enjoy your merriment," Cesario sighed. "These vestments are the trophy of my success. While Captain Keeler and the rest of you were setting forth your drinking hall and exploring the day-market, your servant Cesario went to the palace of Regent Orsino, where I have quickly won his favor, and promise to be much advanced should I prevail in the task he has set forth."

"So he gave you a job," Goro growled. "Wasn't that the plan?"

"Never mind," Keeler waved Goro aside. "What task has he set for you, and how can we help?"

Cesario pouted a bit as he explained. "The Regent prevailed upon me to address my gait unto his beloved Lady Kate Keats. I will not be denied access, but I am to stand at her doors and tell them, there my fixed foot shall grow till I have audience. He told me 'You must be clamorous and leap all civil bounds, if you can't gain access, than don't return here.'"

"Got it," Keeler said. "If you don't talk to his chick, you're fired."

"That's the summary, sir."

"What are you supposed to tell her," Goro grunted.

Cesario answered, "I am to unfold the passion of love, surprise her with discourse of dear faith, to do my best to woo his lady:

"How romantic," Persephone Best sighed. "I wish somebody would unfold my passion of love."

Goro stuck a thumb at himself. "Yo! Right here!"

Persephone pretended not to hear. Cesario bowed, "By your leave, sir."

Cesario exited. "It's good the kid found work," Keeler observed. "Okay, where were we... booze, bunting, food, serving wenches..." he tallied off each on one of his fingers. "That should do it. Let's get this party started."

By the time the moon darkened the sky, Keeler was regaling the upper crust of Illyria's merchant class with wild tales of his voyages. He had just completed a creative reworking of his epic battle with the Aurelian Fleet at Bodicea, as Jasmine and Persephone were helping the serving wenches spread around another cask of expensive liquor and trays of crunchy roasted munchies.

"A gentleman Mariner," one of the highborn men eating his food and drinking his drink snarled, but in a friendly way. "We've not seen your like in many a High Moon."

"A fair improvement over the usual run of seaman," another highborn gentleman agreed.

A trader in the skins of woolbeasts and milkbeasts leaned back in his chair and fixed Keeler with a gimlet eye. "Tell me, Good Mariner..." the rest of the tavern tittered at his deliberately emphasis on 'mariner,' to remind Keeler of his place. "If I were to entrust your crew with a cargo of sheepskin and cowhide to trade with cold Damark, or be-stormed Caledonia, could I vouchsafe its sure passage."

"By my mother's grave, your pelts would be vouchsafed up the wazoo!" Keeler assured him.

The trader of animal skins pressed on. "How can you vouchsafe sure passage through the wild straits of the northern archipelago wherein there lie pirates?"

"I don't fear pirates," Keeler answered. "I have outsmarted the pirates of Hellfire."

"I have not heard of these 'pirates of Hellfire,'" the trader of animal skins replied.

Keeler slammed down his tankard with a dramatic thump! "Tallest, meanest, nastiest, ugliest creatures ever to draw breath. Eight feet high, covered with scars and thick black hair like ropes. I had just worked a trade for a cargo of Tritium from their leader, the dread Pirate Captain Choo Baca."

"Tritium?" asked one of the elite traders.

"Aye, it's a type of..." Keeler thought for a moment, then raised his bottle. "Rum."

"I thought it was a tritonic isotope of hydrogen," the other man slurred argumentatively.

Keeler waved away the dissent. "A brand of rum, then. Anyway, when I got back to my ship, I saw that the cargo he'd sold me was nothing but ship's bilge. He'd taken me, but I was not done with him."

"Did ye fight him?" asked one of the five or six bankers who had shown up to avail themselves of free food and drink.

"Nay, but I would have been outmatched," Keeler replied. "Nay, I returned to the pirate captain, and he, convinced I was seeking revenge, had all his hideous men around him. Swords, sharp as the butcher's blades held out in arms before them. I told the pirate captain that he'd gotten the better of me, and I respected him for them. I offered him a barrel of my best Borealan Smashmouth, and, after his men sampled it, he took it as a gift.

"When he'd drunk enough of it, and his mood was elevated, I asked him if he might have any more bilge water. He wanted to know why, and ... eventually I let on that I knew of an alchemist who claimed he could turn bilge-water into the sweetest, purest Tritium-rum ever to wash the lips of sailor or gentleman.

"He didn't believe me, of course, who would? But as I persuaded him he had nothing to lose in turning me over a few more barrels of bilge-water, and he agreed to that. But by now, he was thinking, what if the old man isn't lying? What if he really can turn bilgewater into rum?

"By and by, he agreed to the trade, and further offered me the return of my cargo, if I could turn a ship's hold of bilge to rum. I bade him, 'Bring me the ship!' And he set about to secure it, while I engaged a magician, who rigged a contraption of fire and tubing, which I said would turn the bilge to Tritium. So, I showed him, and lo and behold, he beheld that bilge water, cooked and alchemied, became rum.

"He and his men drank of the rum and grew drunken and while his crew was distracted by the magician, the rest of my men boarded the ship with Tritium rum on board, and stole back my Tritium rum, and left him barrels of my ship's brownwater instead."

Laughter roared around the table. Keeler was enjoying himself, and the effete men of commerce seemed to relish the company of a rough and tumble man of the sea.

Cesario entered the bar, pushed his way to the front of the bar and bowed to Keeler. "Oh Captain, my Captain."

"Ah, my cabin boy!" Keeler offered. "Hey, kiddo, how 'bout an ale?"

"Nay. Sir, not whilst in the employ of the honorable Regent."

"How's that working out for you?" Keeler asked.

"Regent Orsino tasked me to go to the house of The Lady Kate Keats, and convey his feelings for her. I did so, and waited some hours outside her door. When finally, she gave me audience, I wooed her with honeysweet words of true devotion."

"And...?" Keeler prompted.

Cesario held up a purple velvet handbag. "She gave me her purse. I think she's fallen in love with me."

"How awkward," Keeler said.

"Awkward, yea... awkward..." Cesario agreed. "I should go to the Regent now. Though The Lady Keats still would receive him not, I might prevail upon him that at least her audience was given me, and I pled his case to her."

"He'll probably send you back for more," Keeler said.

Cesario nodded grimly. "By your leave, captain. Now must I to other fates attend. Good morrow."

"Everybody say goodbye to Cesario!" Keeler shouted. Cesario left the bar room amid a hail of good wishes and cat calls.

"I wonder if that Keats Lady knows Cesario's a chick," Goro said in his deep loud voice once the kid had left. He squinted at the surprised expressions this elicited in the others. "What? We were all thinking it?"

EVENTIDE - ILLYRIA - MALVOLIO'S TAVERN: Additional days of Cesario acting as go-between for Orsino and Lady Kate Keats had yielded little progress, except that Lady Kate Keats's affection for Cesario had grown.

Keeler was in the bar early. He was having difficulty adjusting to the 24 hour diurnal cycle and low-light conditions of the planet Eventide. He found he could be rattling around in the depths of insomnia one moment and ready

to pass from exhaustion the next. And the drunken nights of ribaldry with Helvetica's merchant class probably was not helping.

Worse, he had made very little headway breaking into Helvetica's merchant community. They were more than happy to eat his food and drink his booze, but actually getting inside the tight and fraternal circle of tradesmen was nigh on impossible without the imprimatur of the Regent.

Alkema, tired but cheery, was wiping down the tables in anticipation of the day and night's festivities. It was best to make the room as clean as possible before Helga arrived and fussed and cajoled over the slightest crumb or spill on the private room floor. As he polished a chair back, Cesario entered and asked for bread, milk, and honey before he could proceed to Orsino's palace.

"And how is my little star-crossed lover, or moon-crossed lover, or cross-eyed mooner, whatever it is that you are?" Keeler asked him.

"Tis much the worsen. The more I spurn Lady Keats, the more she adores me. Oft I've tried to allay the lady's affections, yet she showers me. Then, must I play to my master --- Orsino --- and make him believe her tender attentions turn not to the servant, but to the man."

"If only there were something about you that made you unacceptable as an object of her affections," Keeler mused very loudly. "Some... hidden secret... some... maybe some physical quality you had that would make her decide that you weren't right for her." He paused, then lunged at Cesario. "Is there **anything** you can think of."

Cesario slowly shook his head. "I can think of many defects in person, good lord Keeler. But my lady's burneth with such unmetalled ardor that I scarce think wart or blemish or failure of flesh would turn it nigh."

"Come on, I'm sure you can think of something," Keeler said, scratching his crotch in an obvious way. Alkema glared at him.

Cesario sighed. "Would if only I could, sir, but my genius fails me. Much longer should I persist at this jeu de Coeur and the Regent will know his object beloves the marked and not the market."

"So, minus the flowery talk... basically, if this goes on much longer, Orsino is going to get wise, and then we'll all be in trouble."

"Well and simply put, my good Lord," Cesario conceded. Alkema handed him a loaf of bread, a few packets of honey, and some milk in a plastic bottle. Cesario thanked him, and Alkema grabbed a broom to continue sweeping the floor.

Keeler snapped his fingers. "I've got it. We'll throw a party. A massive costume ball."

Alkema stopped working the broom for a moment. "A party?"

Keeler knew what he was thinking. "Za, the mess will be huge. It's okay, I've got some people to clean it up."

"You've got me!" Alkema clarified.

"Exactly...we will hold a costume ball, to which Lady Kate Keats and Regent Orsino shall be invited." Keeler pointed to Cesario. "Lady Lady Kate Keats will come expecting you to be attired as Oberon, King of the Faeries... when in fact, Orsino will... appropriately enough... be dressed as King of the Faeries and you will be dressed as ... I don't know, a goat or something. She'll dance with the Regent, at the midnight hour, the masks will come off, and Orsino will have his shot with her."

"And if she should reject him on the sight, what then?" Cesario asked.

Keeler sighed. "Well, then the rest of us are going to skedaddle out the back because it's going to be hard to bring back a party from that level of buzzkill."

EVENTIDE – ILLYRIA -- GRAND BALLROOM OF THE TALISMAN HOTEL: With a substantial deposit, it had been possible to reserve the Grand Ballroom of the Taslman Hotel for the Grand Sapphire Costume Ball. Keeler was expecting three hundred guests. He had hired local musicians to provide music, local merchants to provide food and drink. Keeler had hired Helga to oversee the catering and serving wenches.

Keeler and Alkema hurried down the street from Malvolio's, Keeler dressed in a pink and rose costume with a huge feathered hat.

"What are you supposed to be, sir?" Alkema had asked.

"In this costume, I can only be one of two things, either the Court Jester in a House of Ill-Repute, or a Panrovian Field Marshall." He paused to let this sink in before announcing matter-of-factly. "I'm a Panrovian Field Marshall."

Jasmine, Goro, Cesario and Persphone met them at the top of the wide marble staircase in front of the Talisman hotel. Cesario was dressed as a 'forest-goat,' a creature from Illyrian mythology with a rather unsavory reputation. Persephone wore a costume that resembled 'The Enchantress,' a character from Sapphirean children's literature; although her take on the costume showed more skin than the children's books generally did. Jasmine appeared in a yellow and black striped evening gown affixed with diaphanous wings. She carried a hooked stinger in her right hand.

"What are you? A bee?" Goro growled.

"It was all I could get from the ship in my size," she growled back at him.

"What are you supposed to be?" Keeler asked Goro, who was wearing a fuzzy sweater.

"A mercenary in a fuzzy sweater," Goro answered.

"You get my vote for most authentic costume," drawled Keeler. "All right, let's go in."

Keeler threw open the gilded doors to the ballroom and looked out over a sea of people... none of whom were in costumes. Fine clothes, yes, but none of them were attired in anything whimsical.

Jasmine surveyed the ballroom. "I'm changing," she announced.

Goro was inordinately satisfied. "I don't look nearly as stupid, now. Do I?"

Keeler decided not answering that would be a good way to keep his spine intact.

Cesario was alarmed. "M'Lord, if neither Lady Kate Keats nor Regent Orsino comes in costume, our plan is forfeit."

Keeler was ready for this. "OK, we'll execute my contingency plan. Cesario... find Maria the serving wench and get her into the pantry closet. I'll seek out Lady Kate Keats and bring her to the pantry."

Cesario brightened. "And when she sees me with the serving wench, she will think me a rogue. You are as clever as a thief and merciful as a holy priest, good captain."

Keeler paused. "So, that scheme of making out with the serving wench doesn't weird you in any way?"

"She'll not need to compromise her virtue, to be found together in the pantry closet will suggest all that needs be suggested, but I pray thee, Good Captain, how will you know the Lady Keats to bring her forthwith?" Cesario asked.

"Don't worry, kid. I'll figure it out." Keeler was pretty confident he would be easy to spot --- beautiful, in mourning, unaccompanied --- that would narrow it down.

"And if all else fails, I'll ask him," Keeler pointed across the room.

Grand Regent Orsino entered the Main Hall about then from a long curving staircase in the rear, accompanied by retinue of about fifteen persons. The high and mighty people of Illyria applauded at him. He cut a fairly

dashing figure, a man in his early thirties with a well-chiseled face and tinted olive skin. He dressed stylishly, but simply, in a handsomely cut gray suit and open-necked white tunic. A gold medallion hung around his neck; the only off-note in his ensemble.

A handsome, noble man indeed, Keeler thought. The picture of suave, titled masculinity, he could have been the handsome prince in any good fairy tale ...

... until he opened his mouth.

"Cesario, ho?" called the Regent in a high, effete lilt.

Cesario snapped to his side, but gracefully, "On your attendance, my lord; here."

The Regent touched Cesario's cheek as he passed, "Stand you a while aloof, Cesario. ... "

Not cringing must have required great effort on Cesario's part. Keeler soon crossed the room and doffed his enormous hat to the Regent. "Good Regent Orsino, I bid you welcome to the Royal Sapphirean Trading Ball."

Orsino smiled politely. "Your fete befits you well, Good Captain. And your servant does you honor in my service. He has been a boon to me, and I for that am in gratitude."

Keeler gestured. "Enjoy my food and drink, Grand Regent. But make it fast before the rest of your court cleans me out."

The Regent seemed to find this hilarious. "Just kidding," Keeler told him. "Your own private spread is in the kitchen. Cesario, be a good ... lad... and lead your Regent to the kitchen... his food is laid out in the little alcove next to the pantry. Wink."

"I take your meaning, M'Lord," Cesario bowed. "Good Regent Orsino, make haste with me. Long will last the ball this night, and you should sup thyself well."

"Lead me on, then, my callow youth," Orsino offered Cesario his hand, and Cesario led the Regent to his private dining experience.

"This is getting pretty weird right here," Keeler muttered to himself. He made his way across to the tables spread out for the others. He was spiking the punchbowl with the 120 proof clear-water in his flask, when a dainty woman's voice rang into his ears. "Good fellow, would you serve a lady a bit of drink."

Keeler was going to growl, "What is the matter? Hath demon fate rendered your arm broken'd?" because it seemed like something a gentleman Mariner might say, but when he turned, he saw a dignified but lovely young

woman with engaging eyes, a sweet smile, and lovely brown hair who was dressed in the costume of a shepherdess.

"It would be my pleasure to fill your cup, fair lady," he replied, doffing his hat and inadvertently tickling her nose with its long lavender feather. She tittered as it brushed her nose.

Keeler poured the beverage into a cup. "Here, good lady, I am told the wines of Illyria bring joy to those whose lips they bless. May this sangria quench and bring joy to those soft kissing cherries of yours."

She blushed. "Oh, sir, I pray thee, restrain thy ribaldry in this least intimate setting."

"I meant not to give offense good lady."

"If none was given, then none was taken," she took a sip of the beverage and smiled sweetly at her. "Your words were true, this sangria is a joy to the lips and heart."

A moment of silence followed, during which Keeler's mind scrambled for a gambit that would keep the conversation with the delightful woman going. "It would seem you and I are the only ones who came in the spirit of the costume ball."

"You do not know Illyria well, do you, good sir?" she asked with a slight condescending grin.

"What is your meaning?"

"The better people of Illyria would rather shine wealth than the spirit of whimsy, or invention. They come to parties to show the finery of their closets, not the fancies of their minds. Their muses fail them, save the muse is coin."

It took a second for Keeler to realize she was telling him that what the Illyrians lacked in imagination, they made up for in vulgar displays of wealth. "May I ask your name?"

"You may ask," she replied crisply, extending a dainty hand. "Lady Kate Keats. You may call me call me... Kate."

Keeler took the hand. He was surprised at how warm it was, how soft, and how his heart palpitated at its touch. Then, he realized. "You are Lady Kate Keats... the one enamored of my cabin boy, Cesario."

She laughed quick and hard, losing her composure momentarily. "Cesario is your boy? Pray, no. I led him on that Regent Orsino might leave me be to myself. It was all a fancy."

"Oh..." Keeler said. He realized then that his plan was doomed to failure, but he was not entirely disappointed. And if his theories about Cesario were correct, Maria the serving wench was in for a very weird experience.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Keeler had just realized there was no way to manipulate the situation into his desired meeting with the Regent, but there was no reason to tell the lady this. "Oh... nothing that can be helped. May I ask why you don't care for the affections of Regent Orsino?"

"His pursuit is unsuitable for a suitor," she replied. "He is a good enough man, but of his Regina, too much is expected and not enough forgiven. I treasure my self-possession."

"Ah..." Keeler said slowly while his mind worked through what she was saying. "Not ready to settle down then."

"Orsino is a good moon, a guiding light to our island nation. But a light so bright cannot but cast a shadow." she asked. "Who wants to be a shadow?"

"Better a shadow cast from the light of greatness, than..." Keeler stopped. He didn't want to argue with this woman.

"Listen," he said, "Would you excuse me to the kitchen. I have to spare a friend some awkwardness. But I fancy talking more with you upon my return."

"Good mariner, you have embiggened me with your cromulent words," she gave him a little curtsy, and Keeler was unsure what the local proper response was to that. He bowed. "M'lady," he said, and then lit out for the kitchen.

The kitchen was behind double doors behind the ballroom and down a short hallway. Keeler dodged waiters with food and drink trays and entered the private space where Regent Orsino's spread had been set down. The Regent was not there, and seemed to have only nibbled at his food before departing. He had taken the bottle away, though.

He had only been to the kitchen once in the days before the party, but it was enough for him to remember where the main pantry was. He didn't know there were actually four separate closets within, and he hesitated until he heard noises within one of them.

Keeler threw open the door to the cupboard and shouted, "Ah-ha!" thinking to startle Cesario.

But the couple inside, as it turned out, was not Cesario and Maria the serving wench.

It was Regent Orsino and...

"Helga?" Keeler blurted in surprise.

"Hail and well-met, good fellow!" Regent Orsino called out, hastily tucking his shirt in his pantaloons as Helga rebuttoned her bodice.

"Obviously, I was expecting to find someone else in this closet," Keeler said. "Strange as that may sound."

"Then, hasten after thy quarry," Orsino commanded.

"Get out!" Helga clarified.

Keeler took a less dramatic approach with the next door. He knocked on it. "Cesario, you can come out. The plan's gone all higgledy-piggledy."

There was a pause, and the sound of people arranging themselves within. The door opened a crack and a face peered out.

"Goro?" Keeler said.

"Get lost... sir," Goro replied, then closed the door again.

Keeler wondered if this was a common usage for the pantry closets, and if so, he was going to decline to eat anything prepared at the Talisman hotel ever again. He quickly opened a third closet and found it filled with bread, breakfast cereals, packages of cookies and nuts. The fourth contained bags of tea, fruit drink mixes, and sugar.

He left the kitchen, ignoring the noises coming from the pantry cupboards.

People seemed to be having a good time in the ballroom, but Keeler couldn't bring himself to care. He looked around for Lady Kate Keats but couldn't find her. He did find the bar, though it wasn't much of a consolation prize.

Alkema and Jasmine soon joined him at the bar. Alkema asked him. "How is it going, sir?"

"I think we can grade this whole mission an unmitigated failure," Keeler sighed. "Unless you can think of something that mitigates it. I can't. We spent a whole lot of money and got no trading contracts. And I don't think the Regent will be inclined to help us now."

"So, now what?" Jasmine asked.

"We'll pull up stakes and see if we have better luck on another island. Maybe Beaumont?" He tossed back a shot.

EVENTIDE – ILLYRIA – MALVOLIO’S TAVERN: The sun emerged from behind the moon. While the rest of the crew returned to *Red Jacket* to make the ship ready to leave port, Keeler and Cesario made their way one last time to Malvolio’s to settle any remaining debt. They found the tavern closed and locked.

“Should we leave a note or something?” Alkema asked.

“Not sure,” Keeler rubbed his eyes, trying to work out the last of his lingering hangover. “We could tell her to go to the Trading Office to settle any residual debt... but I don’t have any... what-do-you-call?... paper.”

“Let’s go over to the Trading Office and have them send someone to settle our debt when the tavern reopens.”

“Sounds good.” Keeler agreed. And they began the walk down Engravers Street in the direction of the Royal Sapphire Trading Companies rented offices.

“I wish we weren’t sailing with an empty cargo hold,” Keeler said. “The merchants were happy to eat my food and drink my booze, but none of them would hire us, or consider any of the goods we offered from *Pegasus*. I was sure the bright-glass and water resistant fabric would interest them.”

“We have to find something they want that can’t be made by the Anything Boxes.”

Keeler rolled his eyes. “Well, obviously.”

“Maybe prepared foods they can’t get here,” Alkema suggested.

“We could launch a chain of Slam-n-Jams,” Keeler mused. “The problem is, *Pegasus* doesn’t have a lot of food to spare.”

They were surprised to find Regent Orsino waiting for them in the Trade Offices, wearing a gold suit. “Good morrow, good gentleman Mariner,” he trilled.

“Good Regent Orsino, hail and well met,” Keeler greeted him. “Also, fancy meeting you here.”

Orsino spread his arms in a gesture that seemed intended to convey joy. “I owe you a boon, good mariner. Both for the service of thy manservant, and for arranging the ball that brought me the one I love. The fair maiden Helga has won my heart, and my love so true floweth to her. My journey’s complete --- nay! My journey’s but begin, and now that love has brought exceedingly pleasing companionship, I shall no longer roam alone, but arm and arm.”

Keeler nodded. “Za, she’ll make a terrific beard. Now, about this boon.”

"Why should I engage your pretty little ship," Orsino asked Keeler.

Keeler cleared his throat and answered. "I've got a good crew: fighters, pilot, mechanic. We even picked up a preacher for some reason. There's a doctor, too. You got a job, we can do it, we don't much care what it is."

Orsino smiled, showing his small, pearly teeth. "I do owe thee a boon, so here it is. I am in need of a ship to re-supply my garrisons on St. Albans and Recent Changes. Provisions, arms, mail... transport of relief soldiers."

"We'll take it," Keeler agreed.

Orsino held up a well-manicured forefinger. "Stand thee aloof, good captain, stand aloof, thee. The shipmaster on those routes has pockets laden to heavily with my treasure. He says it needs must be so, for the waters teem with pirates, and the risk to man and ship alike is great."

"I get it," Keeler sighed. "You want a discount. I can work with that. Whatever you pay your present shipmaster, reduce it a third, and you have my bidding."

There was a slight glittering in Orsino's eyes. "Two coins where once was three, a fair exchange. We will engage your ship along two of the supply routes ... for now. Prove yourself worthy and we may see fit to offer you more."

Keeler nodded. "Good enough."

"Who is your Master of Papers?" Orsino asked.

"Him," Keeler pointed at Alkema. He didn't know what a Master of Papers was, but figured the lieutenant could figure it out pretty quick.

EVENTIDE – ILLYRIA – HELVETICA – THE GOAT AND OYSTER TAVERN:

Celebrating his contract with his crew, enjoying watered down booze and questionable food, Keeler had to admit, he liked this tavern better than Malvolio's after all. "They let you throw your peanut shells on the floor!" He demonstrated by throwing his peanut shells on the floor.

"You don't seem to be as festivus as the rest of us," Keeler said to Alkema. "We got the job. Celebrate."

Alkema had to go and bring down the party, "It's not that much of a prize. While I was going over the paper works with the man from the Sea Trades Ministry, he told me that the reason the Regent has to hire outsiders for these garrisons is because no Illyrian crew will service them. They are too remote, and the waters too Pirate-infested."

"Illyrian crews are wimps," Goro slurred.

Alkema continued, "At the rates we negotiated, it will take thirteen runs just to break even on the cost of buying the boat, renting the offices, renting the tavern, and throwing the costume ball."

Keeler didn't seem to mind. "I'll admit, we're bottom-feeders, but that's okay. We'll have to start out doing the jobs nobody else wants and then working our way up." He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "We've got advantages over other crews; better fighters and a little help from above."

"Hell yeah!" Goro agreed, pounding his mug on the table so hard it cracked.

"You're paying for that!" yelled the Goat and Oyster's proprietor, a nasty old sailor named Francisco. Keeler flipped him a coin which he snatched from mid-air.

"Speaking of help from above," Jasmine cooed toward Eddie Roebuck, who was still in his preacher robes, "What have you been doing these last few days while we have been trying to win trade business for the ship?"

"I was standing in the public square letting people know their religion is wrong, their gods are false, and they're hypocrites besides," Eddie reported.

"How did that work for you?" Jasmine asked.

"I am disappointed," Eddie Roebuck reported. "I have failed to win a single convert to the Brianist faith."

"Maybe you should try a different approach," Persephone suggested in her sweet gentle way.

"What is the local heathen religion?" Doc Skinner asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm.... not sure," Eddie admitted.

Doc Skinner smacked his lips. "Well, then, my bright young fellow, perhaps you should learn something of what the locals believe before you go imposing your chosen faith on them."

"Why bother learning their religion if it's wrong?" Eddie Roebuck argued.

"How did the Brianists win you over to their religion?" asked Persephone.

"They made me their Pontifex and gave me super-powers," Eddie replied.

"Can you do that to the Eventidians?" Persephone challenged him.

"Um... neg," Eddie Roebuck admitted.

"Then you better find another way," she told him.

"Well, my good scally-wags, our revels have ended. Let us ride!" Keeler rose from the table and gave Alkema a bag of gold Darrians to settle up the bill with the proprietor.

Keeler put his hat on. It was a large, three-cornered hat, a little too large for his head, with a bright orange band and a long feather. He had won it while learning one the locally popular card game, "Circles and Squares."

The bell on the door in the front tinkled. A large, dark man pushed his way into the Tavern. He was dressed in the black and blue uniform of the Trading Fleet of Angleter, and wore the emblem of Captain on his sleeve. His eyes were a curious shade of orange – a genetic anomaly Keeler would see again before leaving the worldlet – and his thick hair was drawn back into a braid.

"Are you Captain Keeler, of the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company," the man bellowed in a rich, dramatic baritone that would have earned him a fortune narrating historical fictions back on Keeler's homeworld.

"I am he," Keeler announced, trying and failing to project as much authority in his voice as the dark captain. He gave up and spoke the next words in his own voice, "Who wants to know who I am?"

Goro discreetly placed his hands behind his back.

The dark man announced. "I am Captain Othello of the *Reliant*, a trading vessel in service of Regent Henry of Angleter. Long Life to Regent Henry!" He paused, as though waiting for Keeler to echo the sentiment. It only took him a moment to realize Keeler would not and he continued. "You are the Captain who has stolen the meat from my lips."

"You must be thinking of someone else, I don't normally swing that way," Keeler replied.

Othello's eyes narrowed. "Regent Orsino has through his middlemen passed word to me that he has engaged another captain to supply his outer garrisons. That course and route was my ships' work."

"I am certain a man of your impressive voice and bearing can locate more employment," Keeler replied.

"I can easily secure better cargos and clients," Othello growled. "It has been honor to have well served the Regent. It is the principle of having my place supplanted by ... by the likes of you that simmers my blood."

"The likes of me?" Keeler tilted his head coquettishly. "Little ol' me?"

Othello indicated a person standing to his side, whose presence Keeler had not noticed. The smaller being was lost in the presence of Captain Othello the way a planet is hidden in the brightness of a star. "This is Endive, my ship's bureaucrat."

"Ship's bureaucrat?" To Keeler, the concept sounded just awful.

"Master of Papers," Alkema interjected.

"He ensures that the laws of Regent Henry are followed on my ship, to the letter. Long Life to Regent Henry!"

"Yeah, whatever," Keeler said.

"Endive has scoured the length and breadth of library and trading house and found no mention of a Royal Sapphirean Trading Company, nor even a House of Sapphire."

"You may examine our papers, sir," Alkema offered, removing the trading book from his pouch. Othello slapped it aside.

"Is this your ship's bureaucrat?" Othello asked.

"Acting ship's bureaucrat," Keeler answered. "My last one quit to become a cocktail waitress. I'm in the market for another." He looked pointedly at Endive. "If you're interested, I'll give you your own bunk and a share of the profits."

Captain Othello glared at Keeler and puffed out his chest. "I suggest you leave Illyria soon, sir... And tack your sails thus the wind may not prevail to blow our paths cross'd again." Captain Othello turned and left.

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear he was coming onto me," Keeler said. "I wonder what Cesario knows about my new friend."

EVENTIDE – RED JACKET – Cesario knew something about Captain Othello.

"There is no opposition to be feared more than that of noble Captain Othello..." and his discourse from there went on for half an hour. The short of it was that Othello was a cousin to Regent Henry of Angleteer, and had served in the Angleteerian Navy before the Regent presented him with a merchant

fleet that had been forfeited by its owners for lack of tax payment. He still maintained his position as an Angleteerian naval commander. Cesario recounted a tale, the gist of it was that Othello had pulled aside a merchant ship from the Isle of Kowlan for inspection. Finding a single mislabeled packet of tea, Othello had declared the entire ship in violation of naval laws and seized it for Regent Henry. Mariners gave him a wide berth.

He conveyed this to Captain Keeler at daybreak as *Red Jacket* turned out of the docks, its cargo holds loaded with food and supplies. Keeler enjoyed the fresh breeze in his face, as Jasmine laid in the course.

Alkema came up from the cargo hold, carrying a purple-wrapped food packet. He handed it to Keeler. "This is the bulk of what we're bringing with us, military rations. Want to try some?"

Keeler tore the package open. Inside was a sort of plastic tray containing four compartments. There was a sort of mixed fruit in one compartment, starchy vegetables in the next, formed protein cakes in the third, and a thick square slice of bread-like substance on the fourth. Keeler sampled a bit of the bread. It was terrible.

"I've sent a few of these to *Pegasus*, for analysis," Alkema told him. "It might give us some hint of the manufacturing techniques."

"There might be a market for decent food here," Keeler replied. "I have this idea for a sandwich consisting of two pieces of meat with bread and cheese in the middle. Unfortunately, food is something *Pegasus* is in no condition to trade. But we have to figure out something we can trade with them."

Alkema summed up the dilemma, supported by analyses from the Trade Teams. "We don't have anything they want, they don't want anything we have. They would rather have the goods that come out of the Anything Boxes."

"It's worse," Keeler replied. "The Anything Boxes create an identical level of productivity for each of the regencies. Same goods, same cost. They don't trade so much as distribute goods from the big islands to the small islands."

Keeler sighed and looked over the ocean. "At least we've made a friend in Regent Orsino. Perhaps if we serve him well, we will get a shot at the Anything Boxes. And if there is anything we can trade with these people for the food *Pegasus* needs, we'll figure it out."

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER FIVE

For the next sixty-four days, *Red Jacket* worked the milk run between Illyria and the two islands of St. Albans and Recent Changes. They were blessed by calm seas, and not harassed by pirates very much⁴. These garrisons were key to protecting Illyria's outer possessions, and Keeler made good coin supplying them.

Pegasus spent this time completing the exploration of the system, which did not take long. The Eventide system consisted of its red dwarf sun, Eventide and its moon, the gas mega-giant, and a distant and a diffuse ring of dust and comets occupying the next orbit out. The ship returned to Eventide regularly to transfer crew to the surface, some to serve in the landing parties that were establishing trading offices on the planet's major island, some for the war games on the planet's dark side, but most of them to recreate at the Trading Base at Newhall Island – pleasant, off the main shipping lines, and most importantly to the crew, uninhabited.

At times, there were barely two thousand people on board *Pegasus*, but one person who never left was TyroCommander Change. Change was impatient for transfers of food and raw materials to begin. So far, the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company had had little success in procuring them.

"Commander Change is making contingency plans to relocate the Gethsemanian civilians to the surface," Alkema reported to Keeler one day.

"Really?" Keeler replied.

"If she reduces the crew to 3,300 people, our supplies will last six years instead of two. We can make another colony."

"How do the Geths feel about this?" Keeler asked.

"They haven't been informed yet," Alkema told him. "It's considered a secret."

Keeler snorted. "That won't last. Secrets never do."

Impressed with the efficiency and reliability of his crew, Duke Orsino engaged Keeler to supply all six of his island garrisons, and gave him a license to engage in trade with the inhabitants of those islands. Using his profits from

⁴ A shirtless Goro standing on deck behind a heavy repeating gun tended to make pirates reconsider harassing *Red Jacket* and decide to bury treasure and sing sea shanties instead.

the expansion of his business, he was able to purchase cheaply two additional ships that were nearly wrecks. They were towed to Newhall Island where *Pegasus's* skilled artisans were able to repair them. Keeler placed them in service on the garrison runs, under the command of some nautical minded pilots from Flight Core with mixed crews of both *Pegasus* personnel and native inhabitants. Keeler chose new names for them; *Belle Geste* (formerly the *Valazzi*) and *Black Rock* (formerly the *Xixo*).

Once Keeler had gotten to know all there was to know about the island garrisons, and about the seas around them, he began to get bored. He craved to know more of this world. With the Illyrian trade routes covered by his new fleet, Keeler made plans to take *Red Jacket* exploring the other large islands, in hopes of finding a Regent who was more open – or more gullible – to allowing his crew to plum the secrets of the Anything Boxes.

He was aided on Day 65 when Regent Orsino called him into his Palace, the Regina Helga at his side, and asked him to transport a detachment of Mercenaries to aid his friend, Regent Duncan of Caledonia, in putting down an uprising.

So on Day 66, *Red Jacket* was at the dockside, loading in the heavily armed mercenaries. Eddie Roebuck had been in Helvetica, proselytizing to unenthusiastic audiences. And he almost missed the ship's scheduled departure, but showed up on the docks at the last minute.

"Did you save any souls, preacher-man?" Goro asked him. Goro was unlocking the ship from its mooring lines.

"Neg, but I found us a passenger," Eddie Roebuck exclaimed. He walked up to the pier with a woman at his side. She was a slip of a woman, with a bland face, and waves of molasses-colored cascading down past her shoulders. She wore a long white dress, and little white lace gloves. She had a pair of traveling bags with her.

Keeler recognized her instantly. "Lady Keats?"

She curtsied politely to Keeler. "Good Captain, I wish to book a passage to Athenia, and points beyond. I understand you to be traveling hence?"

"Hence?" Keeler scratched his ear. "If you mean we're going there, za. I guess we can."

"Za?" She arched a single eyebrow. It made Keeler's toes tingle.

"Za, it means 'yes' in an old dialect from whatever island we're supposedly from. There's a cabin in the front of the ship."

"And the passage fare?" she asked.

"Um... I don't know... a hundred Darians?" Keeler shrugged. He didn't know what passage fare was around these parts. "We have to make passage to Caledonia first."

"Good enough," she announced. "Though you'll find Athenia far more fair than dark and dreary Caledonia."

By the time the sun emerged from shadow, they had cleared the harbor. *Red Jacket* turned toward the northeast and set sail for New Caledonia, a rugged island in the Northern reaches of Eventide's Grand Archipelago. Its only cargo was twenty-four burly and beweaponed, leather-clad soldiers in the cargo area, who spent their days drilling shirtless on the main deck. Which made Jasmine and Persephone very happy, although Lady Kate Keats kept below decks during those times. Keeler was walking past them when he caught their conversation.

"I like that one," Persephone said, trying to point with subtlety at a tall, muscular mercenary, with curly dark hair, but dark sensitive looking eyes, who was practicing his sword thrusts.

"Why not go for it?" Jasmine suggested.

"I don't know, they're mercenaries. Do you think there's anything on their minds besides fighting?"

"Have you ever met Lieutenant Rook?" Jasmine asked incredulously.

"He's married," Persephone protested.

"He wasn't always," Jasmine reminded her with a crooked grin. "And trust me, fighting was the last thing on his mind when he was a stripling warrior."

"Cesario!" Keeler called. "Come over here."

Cesario tied down the rigging he was working with and approached Keeler and the two women. "Good morrow, my good captain. Full many a glorious Emergence have I seen, but few so fine as this. The sun flatters the wave tops with sovereign eye, kissing with golden face the cerulean curl, gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy; Anon permit the basest clouds to ride. Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth."

"Yeah, for sure," Keeler replied, though he didn't know what the hell Cesario was talking about. "So, what do you think those manly, bare-chested men working out on the mid-deck?"

Cesario answered with a flowery speech about their gallantry, the honor of soldierhood, and the longstanding allegiance between Illyria and Caledonia.

"Do they do anything for you?" Keeler asked.

"Forsooth, just last evening on the afterdeck, one did assist me in repair of a plank," Cesario replied.

"Neg, I mean, do any of them excite you... physically... do they make you..."

"Sir," Jasmine interrupted him and shook her head. This tack was never going to work.

Keeler shrugged. "Never mind, go back to what you were doing. But if you decide you want to get to know any of the soldiers better, let me know."

Cesario returned to the rigging. Jasmine sighed, "Not very subtle, Captain."

"Subtle, Shuttle, Schmuttle," Keeler sputtered. "I got money riding on this. Speaking of which, which rail is my first mate puking off of today?"

Actually, Alkema wasn't puking. He had grown accustomed to the queasiness the ship's constant motion gave him, though it never left his stomach. He was using a handheld device to set the optimal trim of the sails. He came over when he saw Captain Keeler signal to him.

"What do I need know about these... Caledonians?" Keeler asked.

Alkema answered, "According to Cesario, the coin of the realm of Caledonia... is coin."

"What does that mean?" Jasmine asked.

"He means they take bribes," Keeler answered. "Have Cesario go down below and fetch my treasure box. And see if you can arrange for one of the handsomer mercenaries to be doing squat thrusts when he walks by, just in case. What are we attempting to trade?"

Alkema discreetly showed Keeler the manifest on his datapad. "We have several crates of water-resistant clothing in the cargo hold. Our advance scouts inform us that Caledonia is the wettest and coldest major island in the archipelago. So, weather resistant clothing should go over well."

"We can also expect the weather to get worse as we approach," Jasmine reported. "*Pegasus* informs us there's a storm front more or less parked directly over the island."

Keeler tapped Alkema on the chest. "Come below. I have formed an idea of how we might get closer to the Anything Boxes this time.

EVENTIDE – CALEDONIA – STRATHCLYDE HARBOR: The port city and capital of the Island of Caledonia was called Strathclyde-on-Clyde. Its huddle of wood and stone structures hunkered under layered blankets of black and gray

clouds, like a man with a hangover bundling himself under thick blankets against the morning sun. Beyond the city, hills rose at the feet of a ridge of black rock that rose above the island's middle like a row of rotted teeth. The sky beyond the mountain range was full of lightning, thunder, and the portent of more rain.

Red Jacket rode choppy dishwater waves into Strathclyde harbor. The wind was rough, and the ship was at half-sails as they approached the docks. St. Elmo's fire danced around her topsails, and the clouds spat clots of warm rain at them.

Keeler scanned the coast in his spyglass, examining the sad, stone houses and long gray commercial buildings. "Well, it all looks perfectly dreary, who is the big cheese around here?"

"Regent Duncan last I knew," Cesario answered, pulling his rain cloak tight across his shoulders. "A good man."

"Well, if we can't move water-repellant fabric in this climate, we might as well give up and go home," Keeler decided.

Jasmine steered their ship dockside as Goro, Eddie Roebuck, and Cesario worked the lines that secured them to the pier. They were received by a well-dressed elderly gentleman and a pack of soldiers – all wearing heavy plaid skirts – as well as the harbormaster who demanded a docking fee of 200 Ducats before their cargo of soldiers was allowed to disembark. Keeler talked him down to 100 Ducats, citing patriotism and his cargo of soldiers for the Regent, and also a fifty Ducat "service fee" paid directly to the harbormaster. He concluded the transaction with the distinct impression he had been suckered.

The well-dressed gentleman introduced himself as Count Angus McPorridge-Oats, expressed gratitude for the mercenaries, but informed Keeler that the battle was over.

"Well, good for Regent Duncan," Keeler replied. "Does he still have need of these men?"

"Regent Duncan is dead," Angus burred at him. "Murthered by his own men."

"Murthered?" Keeler said. "Are you therious?"

"Aye, mair foal 'n' unnatural act ye've ne'er seen," Angus continued. "Macbeth is noo th' king."

"Macbeth?" Keeler's brow furrowed. This was starting to sound vaguely familiar.

"Aye, Macbeth... thane of Glenis and Cawdor, now Regent of Caledonia..."

"Well, I would hope he's thane... May I offer you some gifts," Keeler said, putting his arm around Angus's shoulder, which made the old man noticeably uncomfortable. He led him away down the dock where Alkema and Cesario were waiting with a large black chest, which Alkema opened to display for the Count.

The first thing he pulled out was a large *Pegasus* officers jacket, stripped of mission patches, but embroidered with Caledonian emblems at the shoulders and cuffs. "Try it on," Keeler encouraged him. "It's rain repellant. You should appreciate that. And it will go fabulous with that kicky skirt."

"Kilt," Angus growled at him.

"Well, I'm sure it was alive when you caught it," Keeler replied.

"It's quite comfortable," Angus admitted, admiring his reflection in the reflective glass Cesario held up. Keeler also gifted him with a handsome gold timepiece calibrated to the 24-hour Eventidian day, then asked. "Is there a Mrs. Angus?" Keeler asked.

"Lady Angus, aye..."

The opening for a milkbeast-related play on the name Lady Angus was a nice hanging slow-ball, but Keeler bit his tongue. Alkema opened up a jewelry box, filled with handcrafted gold, silver, and platinum necklaces and bracelets.

"For your wife," Keeler explained.

Angus seemed taken aback by the generosity. "Ah don't ken whit tae say, guid keptin."

"We have more gifts for Regent Macbeth," Keeler smiled. "Which we would like to deliver personally, if that is possible, at his castle."

Angus looked positively aghast. "Mariners at Dunsinane Castle? that wull ne'er happen."

Keeler dangled a long gold chain in front of Angus. It went with the watch,

"Bit in consideration o' Regent Orsino, fur th' sake o' guid relations atween oor islands, 'n' in gratitude fur th' sonsie men ye huv brought wi' ye, ah kin see aboot arranging a buird fur ye at th' feast th' nicht." Angus snatched the gold chain from his hands.

Keeler blinked and after a moment or two made sense of what Angus had said. "Well, all right then. We'll see you in the eclipse at Cawdor Castle."

EVENTIDE – CALEDONIA – CAWDOR CASTLE: The ballroom had gigantic bonfire chandeliers swinging over it, and dogs in the corner. Eight large wooden banquet tables had been set up, and Keeler and Alkema were at the one furthest from the King.

“This isn’t any good,” Keeler grumbled, picking at some kind of mashed meat stew with his fork.

Alkema shook his head. “You didn’t really expect them to just say, ‘Why don’t you come by my castle and see the Anything Boxes.’”

“Not right away,” Keeler conceded. He was sore cranky, having not eaten since breakfast because he found the local cuisine unpalatable and by the time he had realized this, had been too far from the ship to go back for a snack. He hoped the people in the castle ate better than the masses. He had been horrified to discover there was no custom of serving hors d’oeuvres before the main meal in Royal circles. And now, presented with a plate of something that looked as though it had been pre-digested by a milk-beast, his stomach growled in protest.

Keeler had found himself hooked up with a gentleman next to him named Montgomery... or something like that ... who gave him a rundown of Caledonia’s unhappy history. The island was divided into many clans and estates, all of which more or less feuded constantly. A large landowner named McDonald --- supposedly with backing from two of the other Regents of the north islands --- had sought to drive Regent Duncan from the throne, but was turned back by forces under the command of Macbeth and Banquo. Duncan was later found murdered in Macbeth’s castle. Two of his guards were implicated and executed. Macbeth then became Regent of Caledonia.

Peace was restored at the moment, but Montgomery doubted it would last. “War will come nigh upon us again.”

“What makes you say that?” Keeler asked.

Montgomery shrugged. “Nothing bloody else to do on Caledonia.”

Keeler nodded. He was thinking he was beginning to understand this place. A squad of serving wenches approached, bearing covered plates of food. Keeler gave his serving wench one of the shiny glass spheres from his pouch. He had been advised that small glass spheres were considered more reliable means of exchange than the official currency in debt-ridden Caledonia, and had had *Pegasus* send him a large quantity.

“And what delightful delicacy is this?” Keeler asked, lifting the cover off his plate and finding something unrecognizable.

"Sheep's stomach stuffed with organ meats," Montgomery announced cheerfully, plunging his heavy table-knife into the side and delighting as the gray-purple meat oozed onto his trencher.

Keeler turned to Alkema. "Is this a banquet or an autopsy?"

Before Alkema could answer, there came a flurry of horns from the front of the room. Regent Macbeth entered, with Lady Macbeth on his arm and a squad of their attendants behind them. Their guests stood and applauded as they entered the dining hall. Macbeth shook his head. He gestured for quiet. "Ye ken yer ain degrees; set yer creases down; at first an' lest th' hearty welcome."

Keeler tapped his ear. "Is my Lingotron malfunctioning?"

Alkema shook his head. "It's a regional dialect. Lingotron hasn't resolved the Regent's particular variation."

Keeler struggled to get a good look at the Regent from his table at the back of the hall. Macbeth was shorter than he would have expected, with a stocky muscular body. His hair was steel gray, and there seemed to be a weariness about his face. Like most of the other men present, he wore a plaid skirt. Lady Macbeth was a blond woman, large, maybe at one time in the past attractive. Her placid face was unreadable and she wore a yellow pantsuit.

Macbeth then announced. "Ourself wull mingle wi' society 'n' speil th' humble host."

Lady Macbeth added. "Pronounce it fur me, Sur, tae a' oor mukkers; fur mah hert speaks thay ur welcome."

Macbeth worked his way around the lead table, greeting his various Thanes and Counts. Montgomery nudged Keeler with his shoulder. "Are y'gonna eat that?" he asked, pointing his knife at Keeler's uneaten haggis.

"Neg, I don't think so," Keeler said. Before he could slide his plate over, Montgomery snatched it away from him. Keeler took his goblet of wine and sipped from it, hoping there were no organ meats in it. Shortly, Regent Macbeth finished working the main table and returned to his seat at the head of it, but when he reached and went to sit in it, he blanched. "Which ay ye hae dain thes.?" he sputtered.

The Thanes turned toward him, muttering confusion. Regent Macbeth continued stammering. Sweat had suddenly appeared across his face and was falling in drops on the table. "Thou canna nae say ah did it: ne'er shoogle, Thy gory locks at me." He turned from the chair and hid his eyes in the crook of his elbow.



Keeler cuffed the side of his own head. Despite Alkema's assurance, he was certain his Lingotron was malfunctioning.

One of the men at the head table stood. "Gentlemen, rise: his highness is not well."

Lady Macbeth, placid as ever, appealed for calm. "Sit, worthy mukkers: m' Laird is often thus. 'n' haes bin frae his youth."

Keeler raised his eyebrow and whispered to Alkema. "So, she's saying he's always been nuts?"

Lady Macbeth continued. "He wull again be weel. Ye shall offend him 'n' extend his passion, Feed, y'stoats, 'n' regard him not."

She turned to Regent Macbeth and whispered harshly, but Keeler picked it up above the murmuring and shuffling of the other diners. "Urr ye a mon? how come dae ye mak' sic faces? whin all's dane, ye keek bit oan a stool."

Regent Macbeth uncovered his eyes. "As sure as ah staun 'ere, a clocked him."

Lady Macbeth raised her hand as though to slap him. "Fie, for shame!"

"Suddenly, I miss TyroCommander Lear," Keeler whispered nostalgically to Alkema. "Neg, wait, now it's gone. Must be the hunger."

The regent seemed to recover a bit. He addressed the Thanes and Ladies at his table. "Ah dae forget. Dae nae muse at me, mah maist worthy mukkers, ah huv a streenge infirmity, whilk is hee haw tae they that ken me. Gimme some wine; fill stowed oot. Ah dram tae th' general joy o' th' hail buird, 'n' tae oor dear mukker Banquo, wham we miss."

Keeler could not stop staring at Regent Macbeth, though he was fairly certain it was rude to stare at the king. *I am looking at a madman*, Keeler thought. *How can I use that to get a peek at the Anything Boxes?*

Suddenly, Macbeth threw down his goblet and shrieked. "There's a deid bairn crawling o'er th' ceiling!" He then fell over backwards on his chair. Lady Macbeth and two of the Thanes scrambled to help him up, but apparently, he had crawled under the table. They could hear him shouting from underneath.

"Avaunt! 'n' quit mah sight! let th' earth scouk thee! Thy bones ur marrowless, thy blood is baltic; Thou hast na clashmaclavers in they een whilk thou dost glare wi'!"

Lady Macbeth touched her hair. "Think o' this, guid peers, bit as a thing o' custom: 'tis na ither; ainlie it spoils th' pleasure o' th' time."

"What did she just say?" Keeler demanded of Alkema.

"I think she said this is normal for him," his lieutenant answered.

"This is normal?" Keeler was unbelieving at this.

"For kings, yeah, pretty much." Montgomery sipped his wine.

"Mind if I finish your haggis?" Montgomery then asked Alkema.

No semblance of order had returned to the main table, the Regent was still under it, admonished by Lady Macbeth. "Ye huv displaced th' mirth, broke th' guid meetin, wi' maist admired disorder."

When it became clear that the Regent was going to continue hiding under the table. Lady Macbeth stood, smoothed the front of her pantsuit, and addressed the dinner party. "Ah pray ye, spick not; he grows waur an' worse; question enrages heem. at ance, guid night: stain nae upon th' order ay yer gonnæ, but gang at ance. a kin' guid nicht tae aw!"

This seemed to be the cue for all the assembled Thanes and Ladies to Exit. They began en masse to make their way toward the door. Montgomery tucked Alkema's plate of haggis under his cloak and made for the door also.

"We can't stay," Alkema said.

"We're going to stay," Keeler said. He stood up from the table. "Follow me."

As the rest of the guests exited through the main entrance in a calm and orderly manner, Keeler grabbed Alkema's arm and led him into a narrow servant's corridor that connected the banquet hall to the kitchen.

"Pretty wild party," Alkema said.

Keeler shrugged. "I've seen worse. At my Aunt Honoria and Uncle Charlie's 30th wedding anniversary, one of their idiot nephews got the idea of honoring the occasion by turning loose twenty-nine woolbeasts in the ballroom during the anniversary dance."

"Why twenty-nine?" Alkema asked.

"I wanted to drive them crazy trying to find number 30." The hallway was dark, but there was a light at the end of it, and warm cooking smells coming from it.

"Do you think the Regent is insane?" Alkema asked.

"I think everybody in this country is crazy," Keeler answered him. "They eat haggis, what do you expect? I am pretty sure that door at the end leads to the kitchen."

Alkema nodded. "Good plan. If you want to know what's really going on in a castle, ask the cook."

"Whatever," Keeler said. "I just really need to eat some real food. I'm starving." He sniffed the air. "Come on."

At the end of the corridor, firelight outlined a door. Keeler grabbed the handle, lifted it, and pushed the door open. He had been correct. This was the kitchen. It was brightly lit with overhead lamps and the glow of cooking fires. It was thick with the scent of cooking meat, spices, the dirty funk of potatoes, and the dying gases of vegetables.

In the middle of the kitchen, three women were boiling something in a cauldron. The fattest of the three was saying to the others, "When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

Keeler looked upward toward the skylight, where lightning was still flashing. "Based on my learned assessment of local climatic conditions... all three."

The youngest of the three answered differently, "When the hurlyburly's done, when the battle's lost and won."

The oldest and skinniest of the three swatted both of them with a prolonged face swat. "Knock it off, you two."

Keeler shrugged and approached the cauldron. He took a stab at his Caledonian, "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags! What's in the stew?"

The fat cook chuckled: "A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap, And munch'd, and munch'd, and munch'd. 'Give me,' quoth I: 'Aroint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries. And, like a rat without a tail, I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do."

The old crone poured something from a jar into the pot. "Pour in sow's blood, that hath eaten her nine farrow."

Keeler grimaced. "Chestnuts, Runyon rumps, pig's blood, and rat tail? I think I'll just make myself a sandwich."

The young one approached Keeler and Alkema, tittering. "I'll give thee a wind." She was hot, in an emaciated sort way. Her hair was platinum blond, here cheeks were prominent, she wore a tight red dress.

Keeler wiggled his eyebrows, "So, there's beans in it too?"

The old crone approached Keeler and touched a scabby finger to his cheek. He tried not to cringe, but her haggis-breath made that impossible. "Ye are a long way from home, Mariner," she croaked. "Ye don't belong here."

"Show me where I can make a sandwich and I'll leave," Keeler assured her.



"Ye are a most extraordinary man," said the younger witch.

"Damn right!" Keeler agreed. "Now, shut your whore mouth and make me a sandwich, woman." He could tell Alkema was startled by his language, but dammit, he was hungry.

"We'll fill our gullet, and tell your fortune, too" chuckled the fat witch. "But first, show us some coin, or show us some love."

"I choose coin," Keeler replied quickly. He reached into his pouch and retrieved one of his "trade marbles." They were a little under two centimeters in diameter, clear glass, with a hologram of a starburst in the middle. They were the type of things children played with on Sapphire, but they dazzled and delighted Eventidians.

He gave one to each of the women, and they snatched them eagerly. The young one giggled. The fat one tittered. The old crone grunted contentedly and slipped it into her bodice, which Keeler determined was safer than any vault.

The crone grabbed his hand and stared at him, her eyes glittering like polished stones at the bottom of a trough. "Ye've traveled to stranger places than any man has every traveled. In the space between time and worlds ye've heard this prophecy before. You will live long after the bones of all those ye knew've turned to dust," said the crone. She pointed at Alkema. "His, too."

"And how does this lead to me eating a sandwich?" Keeler demanded to know.

There was a muffled sound of boots in the hallway. The youngest cook looked up from the cauldron. "His lordship comes."

"Ye'll want to hide now," said the fat one. She extended a chubby hand to Keeler and, waddling, led Alkema and him to a closet, where Keeler was delighted to spot bread, meat, and cheese on a back shelf. He was one condiment away from his goal.

He couldn't find a knife and the loaf of bread was whole. He wondered how the people of this world would respond if he began retailing sliced bread, and thought they would probably consider it the greatest thing ever. He picked up the loaf and found it crumbly. If he tried to break the bread, it would fall into pieces too irregular for good sandwich-making.

On the other side of the door, the mad regent consulted with three cooks about his future. Keeler caught snatches of it; something about trees, something else about babies. He heard the young witch say something to the effect of "All of this has happened before, all of this will happen again," in a cold and mechanical voice.



"Is there a knife in here?" Keeler whispered to Alkema.

"Try this," Alkema answered, handing him a large clumsy instrument with a two-handled blade shaped like an X, sort of. It was awkward to handle, but it was sharp. Keeler was able to get a pair of neat slices off the bread, but the slices he produced were smaller than the available slices of meat.

"I need bigger bread," Keeler muttered. "Do you think there's any ale in here?"

"I don't think so, but I'll look," Alkema answered.

"What! Ho! Who is in my larder!" Macbeth raged.

The door to the closet flew open, was almost ripped off its hinges. Regent Macbeth stood before them, with red rage burning in his eyes; which was less scary than the large, heavy and sharp sword he held in his right hand. He roared, "Villains! conspirators! assassins! whit dae ye hink tae be daein' in mah press?"

"Making a sandwich," Keeler offered weakly, holding him out a sandwich of bread and meat that, because of the poor quality of the bread fell apart in his hands.

"Gie ootta mah closit an' coo-pon me loch a cheil." The tip of the sword twitched, ushering them out of the cupboard and into the kitchen.

Keeler and Alkema came out slowly. The cooks drew back expectantly.

The fat witch said, "Round about the cauldron go; In the poison'd entrails throw. Toad, that under cold stone. Days and nights has thirty-one. Swelter'd venom sleeping got, boil thou first i' the charmed pot.

The young witch said, "Fillet of a fenny snake, in the cauldron boil and bake; Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog, Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting, Lizard's leg and owlet's wing, for a charm of powerful trouble, like a hell-broth boil and bubble."

The old witch added, "Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf, witches' mummy, maw and gulf of the ravin'd salt-sea shark, root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark..."

"Stop talking about haggis!" Keeler shouted.

Macbeth soliloquied at them, "Is thes a dagger which Ah see afair me, th' handle toward mah hain? come, lit me clutch thee. Ah hae thee nae, an' yit Ah see thee still. art thoo nae, fatal vision, sensible tae feelin' as tae secht? ur art thoo but a dagger ay th' min', a false creation, proceedin' frae th' heat-oppressed brain? Ah see thee yit, in f'rm as palpable as thes which noo Ah draw. thoo marshall'st me th' way 'at Ah was going; an' sic' an instrument Ah was tae use. mine een ur gart th' fools o' th' other senses, ur else worth aw th'

rest; Ah see thee still, an' oan thy blade an' dudgeon goots ay bluid, which wisnae sae afair. there's nae sic' thing: it is th' bludy business which informs thus tae mine een. noo o'er th' a body halfworld nature seems deid, an' stoat dreams abuse th' curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates peely waly hecate's offerings, an' wither'd mudder, alarum'd by his sentinel, th' wolf, whose howl's his watch, thus wi' his stealthy pace. wi' tarquin's ravishin' strides, towards his design moves loch a ghost. thoo sure an' firm-sit earth, hear nae mah steps, which way they donner, fur fear thy huir uv a stones prate ay mah whereabit, an' tak' th' present horrur frae th' time, which noo suits wi' it. whiles Ah threat, he lives: words tae th' heat ay deeds tay braw breath gi'es."

"How's that again?" Keeler asked. He raised the only defensive weapon he had, the big double-bladed bread cutting apparatus.

"I'll make haggis outta ye!" Macbeth roared, flipping his sword forward. Keeler dodged, left, Alkema right. The blade of the sword caught Keeler's coin pouch. Fortunately, it was the non-metaphorical one, and the only jewels that spilled were the glass spheres he had been using for currency.

Then, things got really weird. The old witch tossed a handful of seasoning into the flames beneath a boiling cauldron. A column of smoke shot out, and formed the shape of a spirit. And the spirit spoke, "Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn the power of man, for none of woman born, shall harm Macbeth."

Keeler fended off a blow with his awkward, two-handled, double-bladed bread slicer. "Can't we just talk about this?"

"Lay off!" Macbeth brandished his large, heavy, twin-bladed sword. "Ya hear 'at? Ah cannae be defeated by onie cheil born ay hen."

"Oh," Keeler said. "Then, this is probably a good time to mention that my mother was afraid childbirth would wreck her figure. I was gestated externally for the last six months."

"Wha? I canna understand ye?" Macbeth stammered. "Lay off!"

"I was a test-tube baby," Keeler clarified. He waggled the point of his sword in Macbeth's direction. "You might want to consider whether the witches left a loop-hole in that prophecy."

In a memorable change of preposition, Macbeth charged. "Lay on!"

He ran forward, promptly tripped on Keeler's spilled marbles, fell neck-first into the crux of the double-bladed bread knife, and decapitated himself. His head rolled toward Keeler's feet, wearing a shocked expression.



Alkema stood in shock since a splash from the regent's jugular had caught him across the face. Keeler faced the cooks. "What's the penalty for regicide in Caledonia?"

"Ye shall be flayed alive and yer skin fed to dogs," the old cook warned.

"And they'll make ye watch!" the young cook added.

"OK, next question, is there any way to get out of the castle before anyone figures out I've committed regicide?"

The old cook jogged her head toward the cupboard. "The back wall is false, there's a passage that'll let you out underneath Birnam Street."

"Let's get out of here," Keeler said to Alkema. When Alkema was slow to respond, Keeler slapped him across the face. "Kid, let's get outta here."

"Ye owe us a boon," said the old witch.

"Keep the shiny glass beads," Keeler replied.

"Nay, a boon," said the young witch. She leaped over Macbeth's body and stole a kiss from his startled lips.

"How about some sugar for Nanny Ogg," the fat witch said. She pulled Keeler to her breast and wrapped her arms around him.

"Aw, Alternative Universe Hell," Keeler sighed pushing the old witch aside and breaking into a hard run through the tunnels, the echoes of witchy cackles echoing in his ears.

Eventide – Caledonia – The Docks: It was still dark outside and the rain was pouring as Alkema and Keeler made their way back to the docks quick, fast, and in a hurry. Goro and Jasmine were standing watch portside next to *Red Jacket*.

"Strike the mooring lines, prepare to leave port," Keeler shouted. "Quickly. Things are about to get interesting."

"What do you mean, 'interesting?'" Jasmine asked.

"I cut off the king's head with a sword," Keeler explained.

Goro shouted. "Dammit! And I was stuck here on the gorram boat!"

"We have got to get out of here, now!" Keeler ordered.

"We haven't even had time to secure a cargo," Jasmine protested.

There was a sound of bells and trumpets in the distance. They looked toward the castle, and saw torches. "The alarms been raised," Alkema said.

“We should go,” Jasmine agreed. She ordered Goro to undo the ropes while she went to the boat, roused Cesario, and raised the sails with his help.





EVENTIDE: CHAPTER SIX

EVENTIDE – RED JACKET: After leaving Caledonia and evading a pair of Caledonian coastal patrol ships, *Red Jacket* made for the Island of Athenia on the advice of Lady Kate Keats. Athenia was reputed a center of arts and entertainment.

On their third day at sea, Alkema received a message from *Pegasus*. When Captain Keeler awoke, Alkema relayed him the message. “Captain Othello’s flagship tailed and boarded the *Black Rock*, as it left the harbor at Illyria. The captain reports that he inspected the ship’s papers and left, but wanted to convey a warning to the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company to stop poaching his trade routes.”

“Captain Othello is right to be angry with us,” Keeler opined as he washed his face in the bowl of water that passed for a hygiene pod. “We are cheating. He has to pay for his ships. He has to pay his crews. I don’t. I have a ship full of trained people and resources in orbit around this planet. I have access to advanced technology. He is absolutely right to be angry that we are cheating.”

“What should we do about it?” Alkema asked.

Keeler called for Cesario, and when the boy appeared in his cabin, with Keeler’s usual breakfast of cold sliced meat, slices of pineapple, slices of pickle, and a glass of mostly orange juice. He sipped at the juice and informed Cesario of Othello’s warning, asking him what Othello might do next.

“There are no rules for such a case, m’Lord,” Cesario answered. “But his next parry may be at arms.”

“He’ll attack one of my ships?” Keeler asked.

“Aye, or line the purse of a scoundrel pirate to do his bidding,” Cesario answered. “Methinks the latter unlikely, for Othello beholds himself a man of honor, and would not deign that another should do his dirty work. Nay, he’ll



not attack without leave from his Regent, but 'tis sure the order is writ and wait's only the Regent's seal."

Keeler took a moment or two to figure out what Cesario was saying. "He won't attack unless Regent Henry approves, and he may try to provoke us to attack him to get that approval."

"Right, M'Lord," Cesario frowned.

Keeler nodded then nodded. "Okeedokee. Let's try to avoid conflict with Captain Othello's ships. Inform *Pegasus* to..." He remembered they weren't supposed to reveal their origins to anyone, not even Cesario. "Inform ommander-kay ange-chay to onitor-may the ovement-may of Othello's eet-flay and steer our ips-shay away from his."

Alkema noted. "I'll get right on that, sir. But we'll have to figure out a way to recognize his ships from... a great distance."

"They'll be flying the colors of Regent Henry," Cesario told them.

Keeler sighed. "Perhaps, when I leave this planet... I mean, retire, of course... I will sell Othello my ships at an enormous discount. Maybe that will even the ledger."

"You're a fair man," Cesario said. "Is there any more service my fair and good captain requires this sun-kissed pleasant morn?"

"I'll give you 20 Ducats if you pee over the side of the ship," Keeler challenged him.

Cesario blushed. "Um, I think not, but thank thee, good captain."

Keeler snapped his fingers, Alkema glared at him. When Cesario had left, Keeler nibbled at his breakfast and asked Alkema for a status report on resupplying *Pegasus*.

"*Pegasus* reports its operations to extract tritium and helium 3 from the gas giant are proceeding very well. There are currently 4,302 personnel off-ship, including 1,100 at our supply base on the day side and 800 warfighters on maneuvers on the dark side. A mineral extraction crew has recovered 1,800 tons of nodules from the ocean floor on the far side, and it is being reprocessed on board the ship."

"How are we doing on trading for food supplies?" Keeler asked.

Alkema took a deep breath, now the bad news. "Food supplies are still lagging though. We've secured less than 5% of the food needed to restock the ship."

"I thought we were doing better than that," Keeler said. "We have five ships trading throughout the archipelago, including ours."

"One of the reason we haven't been able to trade for food is because the Eventidians don't produce a lot of crops. They depend mostly on the output of the Anything Boxes."

Keeler feigned astonished disgust. "The stuff wrapped in plastic? I've tried it. It's terrible. Our emergency ration bars are more appetizing."

"But they are cheap, plentiful, and easily procured," Alkema went on. "Like everything else that comes out of the Anything Boxes; which is why we have not had much luck finding something to trade for food. We've tried clothing, jewelry, medicines... they don't want them."

"They like shiny glass beads," to emphasize the point, Keeler lifted from a pouch a handful of what the Eventidians had come to call "starfires."

"But there's only so much you can trade beads for," Alkema replied.

"True," Keeler conceded, munching a piece of cold meat.

"I have an idea, though," Alkema told him. He paused to build up the suspense.

"Well, are you going to just stand there building up suspense, or are you going to tell us what it is?" Keeler demanded.

Alkema grinned. "Entertainment. We have a whole library of entertainment on *Pegasus*, entertainment from worlds across the galaxy; everything from Panrovian sitcoms to Republic State Opera."

Keeler shuddered. He was not a fan of Republic State Opera, but he understood the idea. "You want to sell them fiction and drama, are you sure they will be receptive to it?"

Alkema begged their indulgence to let him explain. "Do you remember Aurora? The entertainment business on that planet was... enormous. The... what did he call himself? The Magnificat? His entire empire was built on fiction and entertainment."

"A market they had developed over decades. We only have...less time than that," Keeler was not sure how long they would be staying on the planet, but he did not think it likely they would stay for decades. "They also had global scale transmission capabilities."

Alkema had thought this through. "We don't need to get as rich as the Magnificat. We just need to trade enough to get enough food to resupply our ship. Second, if we package the entertainment programming on datapads, we

can bring our entertainment to each local market to do that. We don't need to have the entire planet."

"It wouldn't be a technology transfer," Keeler said, sounding as though he were figuring his way through it. "We could run off a few hundred datapads, limited to playback only."

"Cultural Survey could isolate entertainment that won't reveal any technology secrets or adversely affect their culture," Alkema added. "And Athenia may be the ideal place to try out the model. Lady Kate Keats tells me they are very interested in Arts and Entertainment."

"Damb! Lady Kate, I meant to take my breakfast with her," Keeler quickly wiped his face with his napkin.

"Go ahead and order up four hundred datapads from the ship," Keeler ordered Alkema. He pulled on his captain's jacket. "We'll give your idea a try. I am going to go above and find Lady Kate."

"You might want to put on pants first," Alkema advised him.

Keeler sighed. "All right, Mr. Traditionalist, we'll do it your way."

Keeler found Lady Kate Keats standing at the prow of the ship, seeming to enjoy the spray and the steady breeze that filled the sails. Keeler crossed the deck and stood beside her.

"Isn't the sea beautiful?" she said at once.

Keeler turned his attention to it. They were in the midst of a vast open region, surrounded by water that rippled softly beneath a cloudless sky. The ocean-seas of this world, because of its weak sun, were a dark blue-black, where Sapphire's had been a rich cerulean. Where the sunlight caught the ripples, it glinted off them in a way that reminded him broken glass. "It is indeed," he assured her. "Is this your first voyage?"

She giggled. "Indeed not, sir. I have traveled from Angleter to Illyria, from Illyria to Athenia, from Athenia to Illyria again, and thence to Caledonia."

"A tourist," Keeler _____

"A what?"

"One who travels for traveling's sake," Keeler explained.

"A fair description," she agreed. "But I travel for more than for traveling's sake."

"And for what other sake do you travel?" Keeler asked.

"I seek my muse," her eyes glittered. "She's a wanton creature, my muse. A spirit of the wind, and I must chase her."

"Lucky muse," Keeler whispered, under his breath, but loud enough for her to hear. A faint hint of smile told him she had. "What's your business in Athenia?"

"I'll seek a public space, and there sing."

"Sing?" Keeler repeated. Then, he lied. "I should like to hear that. Could you favor me with a song now?"

"No, sir," she replied. "Not now."

Keeler pressed. "You must let me know when you might find a place to sing."

Her eyes smiled slyly at him. She touched his hand and moved away, speaking to herself, loud enough for him to hear. "I must take care not to become bewitched with the rogue's company. If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I'll be hanged."

EVENTIDE – ATHENIA – NEW ROMAN HARBOR: Before *Red Jacket* made port, an Aves landed in the fields outside the capital city and a courier delivered to the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company Office four hundred datapads filled with a variety of the best entertainment programming from Sapphire, Republic, and some of the worlds *Pegasus* had visited.

Cultural Survey had done a fair job in producing devices that looked like they might have been produced locally. Internally, they were simple datapads loaded with entertainment programming and a playback mechanism. The shells that contained their electronic guts were formed of polished wood and metal, shaped to fit comfortably in the hand.

As *Red Jacket* made its way into port, Alkema, Goro, Jasmine and Keeler discussed the other issue on their minds; getting close to the Anything Boxes. A paper map of the island lay on Keeler's dining table, and the crew were gathered around it. The island was shaped like a comma with a long tail. The Capital City of Constantia curved around New Roman Harbor in the indented part of the comma, with the Palace of the Regent set at the foot of the interior hills.

"We could drop in a commando team," Goro suggested. "And I could lead it."



"Neg, we can't," Alkema replied. "Direct military action would violate the terms of our deal with the Kariad."

"So?" Goro growled.

Keeler growled to himself. He was leaning back in his chair, with his captain boots on the table. "If we can't get those translucent assols off humanity's back this time out, there's no guarantee there will be other chances to do it."

Goro was disappointed. "So, no commando assault?"

"The only reason we need to see the Anything Boxes is to win the wager, we bring in commandos, we lose the wager." Keeler clarified. "But I've been trying to have an idea, and I think I may have succeeded. I was thinking this crew might be able to pull off a caper."

"A what sir?" Jasmine asked.

"A caper... a stunt... whatever. If they won't show us the Anything Boxes, and we can't bust the door down, maybe we could sneak into the palace and get a look around at the Anything Boxes, if we're clever enough."

"Big if," Goro snorted.

"You tried to do that at Caledonia and ended up killing the Regent," Jasmine reminded him.

Keeler grunted, "Za, that caper didn't go like I had planned it. But I understand, the people in this land of Athenia, they love their theater. We have a company of players on *Pegasus*, don't we? People who act out plays?"

"Za," Alkema told him.

Keeler smacked his hands together. "Surely, we can show them something they haven't seen before, and use it as publicity to move some of our merchandise. We need to persuade the head honcho here... what's his name?"

"Regent Pyramus," Alkema informed him. "Cesario reports that he is 'a voluptuary, but no rogue.' He seeks entertainments and disdains martial pursuits. A long time ago, according to Cesario, Athenia was rich as Angleter. But they no longer care to rule the world."

"Uh... yeah," Keeler agreed. "Does the Regent ever put on plays within his palace?"

Alkema pulled up a sheaf of papers, containing the carefully rendered aerial maps *Pegasus* cartographers had drawn of the Isle of Athena. He pointed to a round structure attached to the Royal Palace. "Recon is pretty sure this is an auditorium of some kind."

Alkema spread another map on the table, this one was an aerial map of the Palace Grounds. Keeler mentally noted he would need pictures and schematics of the theater as well, and suspected Alkema would be far ahead of him in procuring them.

Keeler tapped the drawing of the theater. "If we can persuade the Regent to perform our play in his, we'll be inside the palace ... and he'll be distracted. If we make enough noise at the right time, we can cover a team..." He pored over the map. "Where are the Anything Boxes relative to the stage?"

Alkema indicated some boxy structures. "On the other side of the palace."

Keeler pointed to Jasmine, Goro, and Alkema. "You three should be able to make it into the Anything Boxes. Figure out how to do it."

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

"I'm gonna figure out how to get booked at the palace," Keeler replied.

EVENTIDE – ATHENIA – CONSTANTIA: *Red Jacket* had made port in the harbor of Athenia's port and capital, Constantia. Keeler had sent word ahead of his need to secure the palace theater, and the ship's representatives at the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company offices had secured him a meeting with Count Ocula, the Athenian Trading Minister.

Presenting himself as a gentleman merchant, Keeler met the Count at his office. "I'm afraid, good sir, I know little of this House of Sapphire who sponsors your papers," Count Ocula said apologetically.

"You may know little of us, now," Keeler replied. "But you will know all of us soon. We trade in everything you need; you need everything we trade in."

"Indeed," Count Ocula muttered. He did not seem to be enjoying the meeting, but he had enjoyed the handsome bribe from the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company Representative (a.k.a. Specialist Ione of the Cultural Survey). "I have tickets for a new production this afternoon the Theater of the Muses. You are welcome to accompany me. We may discuss your trade application along the way."

They left the Trade Ministry's quiet, dingy offices and proceeded to the Avenues des Femmes, a broad thoroughfare cutting through the heart of the city on which were located some three dozen large theaters and an ever-changing number of small ones. The streets around were thick with taverns, cafes, and the other remoras of the theater trade.

Theater of the Muses was a tall structure, stone on the lower floor and timbers above. Keeler and the Count were escorted to a private booth, from which they observed a play called *Twixt Night and Day*.

The plot seemed to center around an abnormally precocious and world-weary teenage girl named Belladonna who is newly arrived to small island called Spoons, a trade outpost on Eventide's meridian where the sun is seldom felt. Disdaining the other suitors her friends have arranged for her, she is drawn to two mysterious and aloof brothers; Edward and Robert. The brothers flee during the brief minutes of sunlight between acts. Then one of them rescued Belladonna from an attacking ram, but disdains her friendship. Later, he is revealed to be a vampire, but most of the audience seemed to have known that coming into the play. Apparently, there had been a longstanding feud of some kind between the vampires and the non-vampires in Spoons, and Belladonna's human family disapproves of her being courted by a vampire.

Then, Robert is killed in a duel with Belladonna's brother or nephew or something, and then Edward kills him for revenge and is threatened with exile. Belladonna poisons herself, but Edward sucks the poison out and transforms here into a vampire.

By the third act, Captain Keeler was hopelessly lost. Keeler watched the two actors kissing each other on the stage. "I'm confused. Which of them is supposed to be the girl? Are they both supposed to be boys?"

Lady Ocula stood up and applauded, her eyes wet with tears. "Bravia!" she cried to the actors. "Bravia, bravia!" Soon the entire theater was on its feet as the two actors arose and took their bows.

As they lingered in the lobby after the play, Keeler pressed his case. "You know, we at Sapphire have some plays that have not been seen by... by anyone in the Archipelago."

"Really?" drawled Count Ocula slowly.

"We are about to launch a massive sale of entertainment programming," Keeler went on. "And the best way... the best way... for us to gain the attention of the public would be to have one of our works performed at the Theater of the Globe with the Regent in attendant."

"Oh, dear," Count Ocula sighed. "Why, that would be most difficult. The Regent himself selects the works to be performed at The Globe. Even getting him to consider a work would require..."

Suddenly, the Count felt his pocket grow heavier, as though a bag of gold Ducats had been slipped into it.

“... my personal intervention,” the Count finished. “And I would be delighted to arrange... a Night of the Works of the Royal House of Sapphire... a special event, called by the Regent himself.”

“I am most grateful for your discernment in this matter,” Keeler tipped his hat. “Let me know when our performance data is. Preferably within seven days time.”

“That would require a major shuffle in the performance schedule...”

His other pocket grew heavier.

“But I am certain it can be arranged.”

EVENTIDE – ATHENIA – CONSTANTIA: Elsewhere in Constantia, Eddie Roebuck had gone to proselytize. A few blocks off the theater district was a grandiose structure in the middle of large square that had been labeled “Temple” by *Pegasus* cartographers. It did not say to what faith this temple had been erected. At best, Eddie figured, he would get a chance to share the Gospel of Brian with fellow believers, or at least, open-minded truth-seekers. At worst, he’d get a look at the local competition.

The Temple of Infinite Justice was constructed from a kind of silver-white metal, and was shaped like the roof of a barn. Huge plate glass windows filled its front, but were tinted against the sun and hid the insides. Over its immense door hung a red shield with a stylized S. Eddie Roebuck walked up to the doors, but was met on the front steps by an elderly man in a blue suit and red cape.

“May I help you my son?” the man asked.

“Are you a Holy Man?” Eddie Roebuck asked him.

The old man emitted a sort of choking chuckle. “I am a High Priest of the Justice League, I do hope that is close enough for your purposes.”

“The Justice League?” Eddie cocked his head. “Haven’t heard of that one. I’m a Holy Man in the Church of Brian.”

“I have heard nothing of this Church of Brian,” the priest replied. “But I will show you my beliefs, if you will show me yours.”

He laid a papery old hand on Eddie’s shoulder and led him gently into the temple. The inside was a large, mostly abandoned, reception hall. There were statues lining the walls, men and women in colorful costumes. “Who are these?” Roebuck asked?

"These are the gods of the ancestors," the Priest explained. "Mighty Ultraman, savior of the human race and the planet Earth. His consort, Wondrous Woman. And her, Sea-Man, god of the seas of Earth."

"Who's the sketchy looking guy with the young boy?" Roebuck asked.

The old man spoke in reverent tones. "Chiroptera, the dark god, and his consort, Sparrow..."

"And are there anti-gods?" Eddie Roebuck asked.

"The Bald Man, and the Laughing Demon," the priest said. "Among others."

"They are colorful, I'll grant you that," Eddie Roebuck admitted. "And I will hear of your gods, if you will listen to my gospel of Brian."

"Can your Brian defeat Ultraman?" the Priest asked.

"I don't know," Eddie Roebuck sputtered, before recovering. "With the power of the Allbeing behind him, there is no task Brian could not accomplish."

The priest seemed mildly interested. "Tell me more of this... Brian."

Eddie Roebuck drew a bound copy of the Fifth Testament from his satchel. "This is the Holy Book of my faith."

"Does it have pictures?" the priest asked.

"Indeed it does," Eddie said, opening to one of the more dramatic pieces of art-work in the Fifth Testament, the slaying of the 10,000 Goths by the Armies of Mannix the Merciless.

The priest was impressed. "Wow! Who wrote this, Brian?"

Eddie Roebuck explained, "The Prophet Brian discovered The Fifth Testament in the ruins of an ancient Earth colony that had been wiped out by giant space broccoli." Remembering he was not supposed to betray their origins, he hastily added. "It was rediscovered, buried in a temple mound on... um, the dark side."

"Superman could have defeated the Space Broccoli," the priest asserted, as he flipped to another illustration, the razing of the streets of St. Francis by Barnaby, the Elderly Wrath Demon.

"Perhaps," Eddie Roebuck said. "May I teach your brethren the gospel of Brian?"

The priest paused over the illustration. "I find your gospel sufficiently intriguing for more investigation. You may freely enter the sanctum, brother."



EVENTIDE – THEATER OF THE GLOBE: Within seven days, the performance of the Royal Sapphirean Theater Company was set at the Regent's Private Theater, the Theater of the Globe. The promise of a never-before-seen play had been less of a draw than Keeler had counted on, but enough of Athenia's upper crust were there to almost fill the seats.

Keeler chose a work that had been a favorite of his in his childhood, and one which, furthermore, could be adapted to the stage with scenes requiring only a minimum of set redressing. He had a linguist translate it into the flowery language preferred in Athenian theater. Also, because magic and supernatural elements were woven into the plot, it would both dazzle the audience, and hide any use of advanced technology necessary for the performance.

Keeler had determined that the play should begin with an opening act and had engaged Lady Kate Keats. But on opening night, he was beginning to doubt whether this had been a wise decision, having never heard her sing before. She was only going to perform two songs, but if she were really bad, she might drive out the Regent on the spot. Keeler could only hope that she sang passably well.

Finally, the night of the play arrived, and Keeler waited backstage, watching the auditorium fill up with the elite of Athenia. Finally, the last seat was filled and the ushers closed the doors. This was it, and Keeler was more nervous than he had been facing Aurelians in space battle. As his heart stomped on his stomach, he gave the order to lower the lights and raise the curtain.

Lady Kate went out to the sound of polite applause. When it subsided, she nodded politely to her accompanist, who began playing a few delicate notes on a clavier brought from the ship.

She launched into a sweet, but tragic song about two young lovers meeting on a windswept plain, and their thwarted romance. (There might have been something about a ghost in there, too.) The music rose as the rest of the band kicked in, her voice rose and soared with it.

Keeler was enthralled by it, how a voice of such power and range could come out of such a slight woman. Thunderous applause erupted as she finished and he found himself involuntarily joining it. She smiled shyly at the applause, and when it finally subsided after many minutes, she waved the band to begin the next song. This one had something to do with clouds.

The applause was only slightly less subdued when she finished the piece. She then sang a rather abstract song about a woman's wish to be transferred into her lover's body and vice-versa. The crowd roared when she finished. She



was going to leave the stage just then, but the crowd demanded another number. She sang a very light traditional folk song that lasted less than a minute, then she smiled, curtsied and left the stage before the audience could demand more.

Keeler took a deep breath. The source of his anxiety had migrated during he brief performance and now, he hoped his players could hold the audience. He waited as the stagelights darkened, then came up on a garden scene. A troupe of actors from *Pegasus* began their scene.

Lysander. Hear me, Hermia. I have a widow aunt. From Athens is her house remote seven leagues; And she respects me as her only son. There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee;

Hermia. My good Lysander! I swear to thee, by Cupid's strongest bow, By the simplicity of Venus' doves, By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves, By all the vows that ever men have broke, Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee.

[Enter HELENA]

Hermia. God speed fair Helena!

Helena. Call you me fair? Fair again unsay. Demetrius loves you: O happy fair! Teach me how you look, and with what art you sway the motion of Demetrius' heart.

Hermia. I frown upon him, yet he loves me still.

Helena. O that your frowns would teach my smiles such skill!

Hermia. I give him curses, yet he gives me love. The more I hate, the more he follows me.

Helena The more I love, the more he hates me.

Hermia Take comfort: he no more shall see my face; Lysander and myself will fly this place.

[Hermia and Lysander joined hands and gazed lovingly at one another]

Hermia And in the wood, where often you and I Upon faint primrose-beds were wont to lie, Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet, There my Lysander and myself shall meet

[They kissed]

The stagelights dimmed, and the band played spooky music in a minor chord. A single spotlight stabbed out of the darkness and onto Captain Keeler, dressed in a plain dark suit, wearing a smug, hipper than thou expression.

Keeler: “Submitted for your approval, four young star-crossed lovers, Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and soon to be met, Demetrius. Each seeking a profound, long-term relationship with another forbidden to him or her, and unaware they are about to become game-pieces of the gods in a game they cannot understand, much less hope to win. They think their path to true love runs through these woods, but not all paths lead to true happiness. Some paths lead to places we’d rather not go. Some paths lead to... The Scary Zone of Unpredictable Madness.

As the next scene played out on-stage, three members of the backstage crew slipped discreetly under the stage. A tall, well-muscled man pried a lock from a trapdoor and wrenched it open. A deep shaft led into the tunnels below the palace. There were two gates to pass through to make it there, but with some advanced, Odyssey-issue metal cutters, they were bypassed without too much effort.

EVENTIDE – ATHENIA – THE TUNNELS BELOW: While Keeler’s company strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage, Alkema, Goro, and Jasmine made their way through the underground utility system. The tunnels were exactly as they should have been, trapezoidal in shape, tall enough to walk upright in, wide enough for them to walk three abreast. The sewerage flowed through a pipe in the center that was over a meter in diameter, encasing the stench nicely. As sewers went, it wasn’t bad at all. A stone pipe one meter in diameter carried freshwater above the sewer pipe. Below both pipes, a dark stream flowed through a channel in the bottom, a sort of storm drain.

Keeler had seen them outfitted with stealthy infiltration suits, black coveralls that made them virtually silent, let them communicate telepathically, and helped them blend into the walls like shadow-men if they stayed perfectly still. They had tools for accessing the locked off areas and to record any data they could gather from scanning the Anything Boxes. They also had a highly improbable story about searching for pirate treasure to use in case they were caught. Alkema was hoping they would not have to use it.

What they did not have were weapons. Goro hated this aspect of the plan, but Cesario had informed them that if they were captured with weapons, under Athenian law, they could be presumed to be attempting to assassinate the regent, which carried a sentence of death. Without weapons, they were merely thieves, and would be sentenced to either prolonged

imprisonment, torture, or the amputation of an appendage; although the last was usually for chronic offenders.

Alkema pulled out the detailed map of the facility Geophysical Survey had created for him. It had been transferred to paper produced locally, which meant Alkema required separate above and below ground maps of the palace complex, instead of a simple datasheet containing both. Keeler had specified no visible technology, in case they got caught. Also, the maps were large and had to be folded and returned to Goro after each use.

"These damn things never fold up properly," Goro thought angrily.

"We got straight ahead 12 meters, and we should be in the primary passageway," Alkema communicated to them.

They moved quietly down the side tunnel until it merged with the primary utility tunnel. It was as large as a subway tunnel, dim, but not dark. Along the ceiling and embedded at regular spacings in the walls were pale yellow and blue lights. The corners and floors were covered with a rough white substance.

Jasmine accidentally kicked something with her foot, startling herself. Because they were telepathically linked, this startled all of them. Alkema turned to the floor to see what had startled her; two piles of bones, representing two incomplete human skeletons.

Jasmine had a sense of it. *"Those must be the last guys who tried to break into the palace through the sewers."*

"What did this to them?" Goro thought-asked. "Why is this all that's left of them?"

"Rats?" Jasmine thought-wondered.

"They'd be really big honkin' rats," Goro thought-thought, but he didn't thought-think the word "honkin'."

"We keep going, we'll find out," Alkema thought-said.

"Not going and not finding out are also options," Goro informed her.

"You afraid of rats, Goro?" Jasmine thought-asked.

Goro didn't answer directly, but in his mind, he was contemplated the difficulty of fighting a horde of large rats versus a straight-up fight man-to-man against guards.

Alkema sought to reassure them. *"The last guys who tried to break into the palace did have physical augmentation armor, or stealth technology. We keep going."*

"Bet they had weapons though," Goro muttered mentally and to prove it, pulled a rusty, filth encrusted knife blade from the ground near the victims. The blade had been bitten off.

"Personally, I'm just grateful we have 'Neg-a-stink,'" Jasmine said.

"Keep moving," Alkema ordered. *"And put the knife back. No weapons."*

"Can I keep some teeth or something as a souvenir?" Goro asked.

"Neg," Alkema answered. *"Keep moving."*

They continued down the sewer tunnels. The plan, once they got inside the Palace, was simply to get as close to the Anything Boxes as possible, take as many scans as they could, and then get out. Ideally, without encountering any of the palace guard.

Ideally.

A couple hundred meters further down, Alkema motioned for them to stop. *"Did you hear something?"*

"Just your yammering mind..." Goro answered.

"Neg something..." Alkema began.

"Something moved," Jasmine finished.

Goro reflexively tried to cock his weapon, but realized he was just motioning in empty air.

"Spex to life-form scan," Alkema ordered. He scanned the water moving through the trench next to them. Something was swimming in it.

Jasmine tried to maneuver for a better scanning angle, but lost her footing on the slippery smooth rocks. Goro caught her in his big strong arms, which was fortunate because at that moment, a horrible creature ... like some long reptilian with thick scaly skin and a long mouth filled with teeth leaped from the water and snapped at her.

"What-the-(fetch)" Goro asked.

"Don't. Move." Alkema mind-spoke slowly and urgently. *"It won't be able to spot us if we stay still."*

But by the time he thought it the creature had splashed back into the water and swam away.

As they moved forward, the chalky white substance grew thicker and thicker on the ground. It was so thick in the corners, it changed the shape of the tunnel from trapezoid to oval, and shrank it.

"What is that stuff," Jasmine asked.

Alkema scanned it with his Spex. *"It's organic material of some kind. Looks like it's been accumulating here for centuries. It's very thick."*

"And it smells like crap," Goro added, except he didn't think the word 'crap.'

They walked through the tunnels until their passage was blocked by a stone wall that marked the outer perimeter of the Regent's palace. A steel gate in the center allowed the sewerage to flow through. There was a narrow stone passage through the wall, which was guarded by a metal gate.

"This is such an obvious point of access, you would think it would be better guarded," Alkema whispered as he pushed the gate open and they entered the passage.

"It is," Jasmine replied.

Something large and hairy skittered up ahead, just outside their range of vision.

Alkema turned his spex on one of them. It was like a huge rat, with exceptionally long and sharp teeth. *"Some kind of unusually gigantic rodent...."*

"I sure wish we had some WEAPONS!" Goro signaled to the others.

Alkema signaled back. *"As long as we're in stealth mode and they don't detect us, we're safe."*

But they moved in closer to the wall and pressed against it, making their way slowly through the passage. After a few meters, it opened up again into another crap-coated tunnel on the other side of the wall.

They stayed closer to the sides as they made their way forward.

"Look!" Jasmine pointed. Creatures were emerging from the trench of water. They looked big blobs on monstrous little legs.

"Holy sh...!" Goro started.

"What are they?" Jasmine mind-whispered.

"Some kind of..." Alkema scanned them. The blob shaped masses were completely filled with highly pressurized methane.

Then, one of the gasbags exploded, its concussive force knocking everybody but Goro off their feet.

The explosion seemed to arouse the attention of other things in the corridor. In addition to the skittering gas bags, the big rat-like things were now trying to find them. They ran and snapped their jaws, closing on Alkema and Jasmine.

Goro thrust himself between his mates and the rats and swung his foot around. His big heavy boot connected with the rodent's underbelly, with a satisfying crack of ribs and a painful squeak, and his kick sent it arcing toward the stream. One of the reptilians caught it in its jaws and dragged it swiftly under the black water.

Jasmine helped Alkema. *"We better ..."*

"Run..." he finished.

The reptilians had begun leaving the water, and the crew got their first good look at them. Their bodies were long and serpent-like, but covered in rough scales like alligator skin, their jaws were like alligator jaws but larger and with more teeth, and they had hundreds of alligator legs underneath them, that allowed them to scoot across the ground like millipedes.

About then, a kind of noise like a fluttering roar was picked up by their auditory sensors. As one, they turned toward it. The tunnels were dark, but they had detection systems building into their gear, and what they made out coming toward them... above all the other creatures... was a massive swarm of vampire rats.

Abandoning caution, they ran down the tunnel. The suits gave them a speed boost, and this enabled them to stay ahead of the swarm. As the vampire rats flew over the sewer stream, the reptilians rose and snapped at them. One of the vampire rats smacked into a skittering gas bag and the two exploded, sending chaos through the swarm.

There was on last, heavy door at the end of the passage. They reached it a few meters ahead of the chaos. The reptilians, the rats, the vampire rats, and the gasbags had mostly lost interest and were now snapping and biting at each other. Goro stood between them and his mates. Alkema pressed the unlocking device against the door's keyhole. Metal filaments reached into the hole, found a locking pattern, and pushed the tumblers aside.

"Go!" he shouted, vocally not with his mind, letting Jasmine through first and following her. Goro grabbed the gate after him and swung it open hard enough to smash a rat-creature in the face. They hurried inside and slammed the gate shut. They heard several loud bumps as various horrors smashed headlong into it.

They were now in the sub-basement of the main palace building, which was relatively clean and definitely horrible animal free. Alkema breathed a sign of relief, then remembered they would have to make their way back out through the same nightmare.

That would be for later. Now was the time to press on. They were only fifteen meters from the chamber below the Anything Boxes. The next door

was a combination lock, with five separate dials that had to be set to the correct choice of 38 numbers. Goro drilled a tiny hole next to the row of dials. Alkema set the delocking device against it, and they watched as the dials set themselves in the proper sequence. The deadbolts withdrew and they were able to push the doors open.

The final gate had a puzzle lock... 14 square blocks with runes on the that needed to be assembled a particular way. Alkema realized that none of the tools he had brought with him could unscramble the code and reassemble the pieces in the right order. *"We're stuck,"* he thought to the others.

"Neg, we're not," Goro answered, and swung his fist into the puzzle, pieces of which went flying everywhere.

"What the Hell?" Jasmine snapped, out loud, the sound of her voice startling. Alkema hand-signaled both of them to be silent.

Goro punched the wall again, and then tore away what was left of the puzzle, showing a work of gears and tumblers. Alkema realized his delocking tool could figure it out from here. He stuck it into the hole, and it quickly worked through the tumblers.

Alkema signaled for Goro to hand him the maps, and checked the castle layout again. *"Once we get on the other side of this door, we should be..."*

"Caught..." Jasmine said out loud again, staring into the faces of the six burly, well-armed guards pointing crossbows at them when the door swung open.

EVENTIDE – THE GLOBE THEATER: At the end of the play, the crowd demanded Lady Kate Keats return to the stage, and so she came out and sang three more songs, all of which the crowd adored. Flowers and ribbons were thrown at her as she had bowed and smiled shyly.

Backstage, she was met by Captain Keeler, with a large bouquet of costly Illyrian roses and an ear-to-ear grin. She took the flowers, and left him with the smile.

EVENTIDE –ATHENIA – THE PALACE DUNGEON: Alkema was shackled to a very uncomfortable chair made of metal which was very cold. His arms were secured behind his back in a way that started out painful and had become excruciating, except for his hands, which had gone numb from lack of circulation and the cold damp air of the chamber.

When the six burly guards had seen they possessed no weapons, he, Goro, and Jasmine had been separated, each taken to a different cell by a different pair of guards. Goro had attempted some last-second resistance as he was led away, had bloodied the walls of the passageway with the faces of his first two guards, and the last Alkema had seen of him, was mixing it up with the replacement squad of six they had sent to restrain him.

He did not know if Goro had escaped and would come to his rescue, or if the Athenians had simply decided to kill. After they had strapped Alkema into the chair, they spent many hours asking him what he was doing, how he had gained access to the palace, and... most often and most harshly... which Regency held his fealty. The answer to the last question, "None, I am a rogue, a Ronin, I hold no fealty but to myself" was unsatisfactory to his interrogators. And so they had hit him. A lot. His lips had become quite swollen, and just for good measure, they had pulled out a couple patches of hair from his scalp.

After that, they had left him alone for a while, to give him a chance "to think things over, while me and my mates fetch some iron tools and build a fire."

They must have been very bad at building a fire, because they had been gone for many hours.

At the nadir of his misery, the door to his cell opened again. A tall and rather darkly handsome man entered, accompanied by two masked guards. The tall man was finely dressed, but wore a sort of leather armor that padded his shoulders and elbows. He stood to the side while the guard approached Alkema's chair.

One of the guards forced his mouth open while the other raised a bottle and flooded his mouth with a bitter tasting liquid.

"Loosen his bindings, but keep him secured," the tall man ordered.

"Yes, M'Lord." Rather more roughly than necessary, the guards loosened the bindings slightly. Blood flowed into Alkema's hands again, burning like fire.

"Is that better?" the tall man asked.

"My legs are still in agony," Alkema replied through a grimace.

The young man nodded. "Excellent good. Then in that condition, we shall deign to leave them; when the body's weak, the mind is delicate, agony will focus your attention on the vitalities of our discourse."

The young man turned and addressed the guards sharply. "Find your way to other places, gentlemen. Make your presence scarce in these wretched

walls, remain close but out of cautious hearing. I will summon thee forthwith."

The lead guard protested. "Sir, I believe I should remain."

"I believe you shouldn't," the young man replied. "And my opinion is the one that matters. Avaunt and quit my sight."

His guards availed. The young man slowly sat himself down in the chair opposite Alkema, staring him down. He took a breath and closed his eyes, as though to calm and gather his thoughts, then he spoke. "Greetings, I am Prince Regent Coriolanus, Heir to the Regency of Athenia. As you are a foreigner, I will speak to you simply. I bid you welcome to our dungeon. As you can see, it is a singularly unpleasant place, and I have the authority to detain you, as well as your compatriots, here for the rest of your lives if I so chose."

He paused to give Alkema a moment to ponder that before he continued. "But of course, we would have to feed you, and guard you... all of which would be costly, and a distraction from our other purposes. Yet, it is not our law neither our custom to make the unarmed vagabond forfeit his life. Imprisonment, yea, in this too wretched chamber, for a man who longs for warmth and freedom may be the worse fate. And you'll the supper we offer as bitter and sour to the stomach as that elixir my guard poured onto your lips. With that in mind, I have two questions, and if you answer them satisfactorily, I am prepared to release you, provided you leave our Kingdom on the next ship out of port."

As luck would have it, Alkema had a pretty good idea what ship would be leaving port next. "What are your questions?" he asked through bloody, swollen lips. The prince struck him as too smart to buy the pirate treasure story.

"First, I want to know exactly how you gained access to the palace," the Prince Regent asked.

Alkema had been a student of Keeler long enough to know how what to do in this situation. He looked in Coriolanus in his eyes, projected himself not as a prisoner at his mercy, but as one man making a deal with another. Keeler had a trick that, even shackled to a chair, of acting like he always had the upper hand. Maybe, Keeler just tricked himself into believing it. Alkema tried. "You will free me if I tell you this, and my comrades."

"By my word and honor," said the Prince.

"It is pretty valuable information," Alkema said. "My throat's rather dry and burning. Maybe some wine so we can talk as men."

He sensed that the prince was about to shout at him, enraged by his insolence perhaps. But instead he smiled. "Wine, it shall be." The prince pounded on the cell door, whereupon a guard came to the door. The prince requested wine, cheese, and bread, then closed the door again.

"What is your other question?" Alkema asked.

The prince reached into a pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out maps that the guards had obviously found while searching Goro. He unfolded the intricate maps and placed them on the floor in front of Alkema, the map of the sewerage tunnels on top.

"I want to know how you produced such detailed maps of our Palace grounds."

EVENTIDE – ATHENIA – THE DOCKS: Keeler was nervously pacing *Red Jacket's* top deck. Alkema, Goro, and Jasmine had not returned from the mission, and he was worried about Alkema and Jasmine.

He received a report that crews were striking the sets at the Theater of the Globe and that one of the Theaters on Avenue Des Femmes was contracting with the company for a 10 day engagement. That was good, it would help move merchandise.

Finally, midway between eclipse and moonset, three large heavy carriages appeared at dockside, accompanied by a phalanx of palace guards. One by one, Alkema, Jasmine, and Goro were trundled out of the carriages still wearing their infiltration gear.

"An officer of the palace demands your presence, sir," Cesario informed Keeler, indicating the unfortunate fellow in the largest and most elaborate headdress. Keeler threw on his captain's overcoat... the one with the elaborate braid on the sleeves... and left his ship via the gangplank.

The Officer of the Palace was a tall man who removed a golden helmet with a brushy arrangement of feathers on top to reveal a closely shaved head.

"Shipmaster, I have three prisoners for you, the palace begs your indulgence," he handed Keeler a sealed envelope made of thick paper. "Do not open this until you are at sea. The Regent thanks you for your service, and hopes you wish to be remembered favorably and well in the ports of Athenia."

Keeler shoved the paper in his breast pocket. "And you may tell his majesty the regent that I love him. Why hasn't he called? Tell him I miss the kippers. He'll know what it means."

The Officer of the Palace looked befuddled. "I ... will do so, good captain."

"Blow in his ear a little bit. He loves it." But the Palace Guards were not listening to him. They remounted their carriages and sped away.

"So, what happened?" Keeler demanded of Alkema.

"We were captured," Alkema informed him.

"They tortured us," Jasmine replied.

"It wasn't really torture," Goro argued. "I mean, they roughed us up a little, threatened to kill us, made us drink our own urine..."

"So, What you are saying is, you didn't learn anything about the Anything Boxes," Keeler frowned in disappointment.

Alkema looked at him gob-smacked. Jasmine asked, "Did you hear about the part where we were tortured."

Goro shrugged. "I've had worse. Could we get some food. They fed him, but we didn't get nothing."

"Get to the ship, have Cesario round you up some sandwiches," Keeler ordered. He began walking them back to the ship as the palace guard watched diligently. Sensing this, Keeler cuffed Alkema on the back of the head.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"I can't let the guards think we were colluding," Keeler hissed. He called up to Cesario. "Boy! See that these knaves are secured in the brig. They're not to be trusted."

Cesario answered, "Aye, sir, by your word so shall it be done."

Keeler rubbed his eyes. "That's our Cesario, never use one word when sixteen will suffice."

Sometime later, round his captain's table, as Goro and Jasmine greedily consumed the food Cesario offered, Alkema explained how he had gained his freedom, beginning with how he had gained access to the palace.

"I told him that in the Land of Our Inheritance, there was a tree that grew whose fruit was never touched by the animals. The juice of this fruit was repugnant to them, and that as a result of eating it, animals were repelled by us, because we carried its scent. He seemed to buy that."

"What did you tell him about the maps?" Keeler asked. "You didn't betray our origins..."

"I told him I knew of a very skilled mapmaker in Beaumont, and I offered to arrange for the prince to secure his services. The Prince Regent and I eventually struck a deal. In return for detailed maps of Athenia, and their island possessions, he will exchange us ten shiploads of grain and fruit.... With the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company acting as neutral intermediary."

"Ten shiploads," Keeler repeated.

"And another ten if we provide him with detailed maps of their adversaries."

"Twenty shiploads of food?" Keeler sighed. "By my calculations, we need well over two hundred more to restock *Pegasus*, but it's a good start."

Goro paused in his eating. Crumbs fell from his chin as he said, with some offense. "He traded us for some maps?"

"The Prince doesn't share his father's love of the theater, of entertainment," Alkema explained. "He's concerned his country is vulnerable, and growing poorer. He wants to change it. He believes knowledge is power, and detailed maps will provide him with a strategic advantage."

"Then, you probably could have gotten fifty shiploads," Keeler replied.

"I didn't want to stay in his dungeon," Alkema replied. "I also persuaded him that for another ten shiploads of food, the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company would clean all the bat guano out of the dungeons and caves underneath the castle."

"Why would we want to do that?" Keeler asked.

"Bat guano is a very potent fertilizer," Alkema replied. "I estimate there's at least 3,000 or 4,000 tons in those tunnels and caves. We can rebuild *Pegasus's* nutrient beds with them, and begin restoring our food production on the ship. Those shiploads of food are a meal, but the bat guano is a farm."

Keeler smiled. "You're picking up on this business. I am pleased."

Jasmine paused, a bit of fruit on her fork almost to her mouth. "Wasn't he suspicious that you were throwing all of this business at the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company?"

Alkema answered. "I made sure to discuss several alternatives with him for handling the food shipments. I steered him toward the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company by mentioning their fearsome reputation among the pirates of the north. I even implied that I held a grudge against them. I put the idea into his head the idea of them cleaning bat feces out of his tunnels amused me."

"You were able to influence him telepathically?" Keeler asked.

"I think so, I tried, but I can't be sure it's why he came around and became so agreeable," Alkema replied. "But I am free, and alive, and our company has two lucrative contracts. I'm just glad for that."

"Have Doc Skinner check you out," Keeler told him. "I don't like the looks of your face. Also, it looks like someone punched you in the mouth a few times."

Keeler leaned back in his chair and opened the door to his mess. Cesario tumbled in through the door, almost as though he had been listening

"Good to see you, Cesario," Keeler said. "Clear the lines and prepare to make way."

"Mr. Roebuck is not yet back from port, sir," Cesario reported.

"Mr. Goro can help you clear the lines, then," Keeler replied.

"I think he means we shouldn't leave Mr. Roebuck behind, sir," Jasmined prompted.

"Oh, yeah, that..." Keeler redirected his orders to Cesario. "As soon as Mr. Roebuck appears, clear the lines and prepare to head out of port."

"Aye, sir, what course then?"

"Beaumont!" Keeler declared. "I sense the trading will be good there, and I've heard they make a great steak and ale."

Cesario bowed, scraped, and left.

"Aside from our capture and imprisonment, how did the play go?" Jasmine asked.

"Fortunately, the Regent enjoyed our performance... and was particularly taken with Lady Kate," Keeler tilted his head toward the part of the ship where Kate had, presumably, taken to her cabin. "We've made a deal to sell our entertainment pads, here. And a separate deal to record and sell Lady Kate's singing. With the money, we can buy more food.

"I'd say this mission was a success all around!" Keeler concluded.

"And you didn't kill the Regent," Jasmine added. "Good for you!"

Keeler and Alkema were securing the ship for departure when Eddie Roebuck approached the ship some hours later. He was accompanied by two men wearing the finer, brocade clothing of the upper classes. It was difficult to tell the two men apart. "Captain, can we go to Angleter?" Roebuck called from the gangplank.

Keeler frowned. Angleteer was a place he had been hoping to avoid. "We could go there," Keeler replied. "Who wants to know?"

"These two guys..." Eddie Roebuck gave their names, but they were complicated, and Keeler decided it would be easier to call them Wingus and Dingus.

"Do they have money?" Keeler demanded.

"Better, good shipman. We have papers from Prince Hamlet of Damark," said Wingus, and he presented Keeler with a sealed scroll."

"Damark?" Keeler asked.

"An island to the north, known for its shoddy consumer goods," Cesario replied.

Keeler cracked open the scroll and read it. As he did so, an expression of surprise came across his features. "This came from your prince."

"It did indeed, sir," Dingus answered.

"It is a contract for passage to Angleteer, is it acceptable?" Wingus asked.

"Mr. Roebuck, why don't you find these men some quarters," he ordered. "By which I mean, string up a couple more hammocks in the hold. Step to it."

As Eddie Roebuck led the men into the ship, Alkema approached his captain. "Something wrong, sir?" Alkema asked.

"You could say that," Keeler replied. "According to this scroll, I'm supposed to kill those men."

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER SEVEN

EVENTIDE – RED JACKET: While Eddie Roebuck and Goro untied and secured Red Jacket's mooring lines, Captain Keeler sat down with Wingus and Dingus in his Captain's quarters. Doctor Skinner sat with them and Cesario attended them. They drank tea brewed by Lady Kate Keats (which was delicious, by the way) and Keeler calmly and matter-of-factly told them that he had been instructed to murder them. Keeler automatically assumed that two people had a right to know if someone was going to kill them. They didn't seem at all surprised by the news; didn't so much as drop a biscuit⁵.

"You don't seem surprised by the news," Keeler observed.

Wingus shrugged and dipped his biscuit into his tea. "'Tis much as we expected it to be, good lord, sir."

"Indeed, expected we to be it as much it is," agreed Dingus.

Keeler found their calm attitude unsettling, but it made the conversation easier at least. "Why does this Hamlet guy want to kill you? Does he have a good reason?"

"Good reason left the melancholy prince long days since," Dingus replied. "He does confess he feels himself distracted; But from what cause he will by no means speak."

Wingus added, "Nor do we find him forward to be sounded, But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof, When we would bring him on to some confession of his true state."

"Are you saying he's faking it?" Keeler asked. "Seriously, I'm asking. I have trouble following you guys sometimes."

Dingus took a sip of tea and explained, "His mind has not been at rest, nor as one with sensibility, since his Uncle Claudius crept upon his father, the Regent, And in the porches of his ears did pour the leperous distilment; whose effect holds such an enmity with blood of man that swift as quicksilver it courses through the natural gates and alleys of the body."

⁵ Literally or figuratively

Wingus picked it up then, "All his smooth body, sleeping, by a brother's hand of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd: Cut off even in the blossoms of his sin, Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd, no reckoning made, but sent to his account with all his imperfections on his head."

Dingus shuddered, shaking tea from his cup into his saucer. "O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!"

"It sure is," Keeler agreed. "So, I caught something about a porch, and ear poison..."

"Claudius killed Hamlet's father, stole his thrown, and married his mother," Skinner summarized. "That can be rather traumatic to a young mind. How has he dealt with these events?"

Wingus reported. "His sweet and commendable nature, bound Hamlet in his mourning duties in filial obligation for some term. He remained to do obsequious sorrow: but to persevere in obstinate condolment. To school, he returneth not, most retrograde to the Regent's desires. Of Ophelia, he hath, my lord, of late withdrawn from her the many tenders of his affection."

Keeler just let his jaw hang open. "Huh?"

"He dropped out of university and broke up with his girlfriend," Skinner translated. "Also, he claims he has been talking to his father's ghost. They didn't say that just now, but it came up earlier."

There was knock at the hatch and Goro stuck his large head into the room. "Lines are stowed. Jasmine and Persephone are taking us out. Can I have some tea?"

"Help yourself," Keeler offered. Goro lifted the pot and drank from it directly.

"He's quite mad, you know," Dingus said.

"So, it would seem," Skinner said, looking at Goro.

"So, now what do we do?" Keeler asked.

"I'll call to the ship for a Mind Doctor," Skinner suggested. "If this Hamlet fellow is disturbed, a few sessions with a crack skullbreaker would put him to rights."

"I mean, what will we do about them." Keeler jerked a thumb toward Wingus and Dingus. "Take them to Angleteer and pretend we didn't get the message?"

"Then, it will fall to Regent Henry to free them from mortal concerns," Cesario explained.

"Is there an option in which they live?" Keeler asked.

Dingus looked confused. "Am I to understand that our fair Lord and shipmaster intends us no ill, that he'll set neither hand nor bow to kill us?"

"Why should I?" Keeler took a drink from his goblet and asked.

Cesario informed him. "Once a ship is a day's travel from land, it's outside the realm of any regent. The only law is the captain. Setting them to die at sea removes any blood from Hamlet's hands; as far as any accounting of it goes."

"OK, that's not the right context for the question of 'Why should I?'" Keeler replied.

"It is a signed sealed order from a Royal," Cesario explained. "If you fail to comply, the Royals would have leave to take your shipping license."

"Oh?" Keeler was perplexed at this.

"Killing them might be the best option," Goro suggested. "We could throw 'em overboard with irons on their legs."

"OK, Goro, our part of the conversation has moved onto the part where we don't kill them," Keeler explained patiently.

Goro was pissed. "I was under the understanding there would be some fighting on this mission, but all I've gotten was a couple of bar brawls and a fight with some sewer rats. When the Hell is something exciting going to happen?"

"Next Twosday," Keeler replied. "Now, back to Wingus and Dingus. Could we pretend to kill them?"

"The Royals would demand a hand and rings, to prove the deed was done," Cesario replied.

"That's easy then," Goro enthused as he caressed the blade of his knife.

"I don't want to sever their hands," Keeler averred.

"I said I'd do it," Goro pointed out.

"I meant nobody should cut off their hands," Keeler explained further.

"They'd live," Goro pointed out.

"Couldn't we just put them on an island somewhere?" Keeler asked. Then, he answered himself. "Do these guys look like they could survive on an island? No offense."

"None taken, M'Lord," Wingus replied.

"We are a rather fey lot," Dingus agreed.

"So, what do we do?" Alkema asked.

The table was silent, save for the creaking of the ship's timbers as it moved across the waves. Keeler sensed that it was up to him, as Captain, to come up with something. So, he did.

"We sail for Damark," Keeler announced. "We'll visit the Regent, meet this Hamlet fellow, and try to work this mess out."

"So, you won't be killing us, then?" Dingus wanted clarity on this.

"Probably not," Keeler assured them.

"Bloody decent of you!" said Wingus.

"God save you, sir!" said Dingus.

Goro chunked his knife down hard into the tabletop and stalked out of the room. "I'll be in my bunk."

After the meeting had concluded, Keeler remembered he had an order from the Prince Regent of Athenia regarding Goro, Alkema, and Jasmine. Fortunately, he was not obligated to kill them, merely to deliver them in irons to the Regent of Angleteer "upon his next call of port." All the more reason, Keeler decided, to avoid sailing for Angleteer.

He traveled out to the Main Deck where he hoped to find Lady Kate Keats. He was successful. The lady was relaxing on a chaise on Red Jacket's afterdeck.

Keeler doffed his hat to her. "Good day, M'Lady. And thanks for the tea, it was much loved."

"You're a very fair man," trilled Lady Kate Keats, in such a sweet way that his heart seemed to flutter.

"Fair handsome, or fair just?" Keeler asked.

She smiled enigmatically, and almost but not quite sang her next line. "Grace stayed the captain's hand; ship's master more than twice a man; the vagabonds, their hearts may beat on, beat on, beat on..."

Keeler bent into a crouch beside her divan. "Your singing is beautiful."

She tucked her skirt in a recumbent imitation of a curtsy. "Thank you, good sir. That's but a snatch from my next canticle, its subject is a noble sea-captain who spares the life of two condemned vagabonds sent to him by a mad prince."

"How did you know?" Keeler asked.

“’Tis a small ship, M’Lord,” a perk of a smile turned up her left cheek. “With a large and noisome crew.”

Keeler grunted. “Yeah, they can get pretty noisome alright. Tell me, my lady, is there a maiden involved in this... canticle... at any point?”

“There well may be,” she demurred. “In the next verse, the noble captain voyages to erstwhile Damark, there to confront the mad prince.”

Keeler grimaced. “The last time I went to confront a mad royal, it did not go so well.”

“His head was forfeit,” she remembered.

“You heard about that, too,” Keeler sighed. “Are you going to write a song about it?”

“It would gladden me, save that nothing rhymes with decapitation.” She flipped a sprig of hair with a dainty hand.

They stayed on deck together for a while, watching sea-birds, until the moon eclipsed the sun and the ship was too far from land for birds to follow. When the stars came out, Keeler told Lady Kate Keats some incredible stories about them.

EVENTIDE – DAMARK: Damark presented itself as a dark and rocky land that jutted from the sea like a great black stone robo-shark. Seismic data from *Pegasus* indicated that the tall, dark cone-shaped mountain that loomed over the port was a dormant volcano. A large gray cloud hung around its peak, creating the impression of a giant mushroom. Its port and capital was called Skoal. The town huddled in the shadow of the volcano and its perpetual cloud.

“Scary,” was Keeler’s assessment.

“That’s just the approach from the sea,” Alkema informed him. It should be noted here that many weeks at sea had left Alkema leaner and ruddier than he had been in years. There was also a new spark in his eyes, a joy for finding adventure on the islands of Eventide.

“There are three large islands that make up Damark, and its plains are renowned for their hops, and the pastures wherein they keep their herds of milkbeasts.” Alkema informed Keeler that the primary exports of Damark were cheese, beer, and off-brand consumer goods.

“These worlds seem so much bigger from down here,” Keeler observed. From *Pegasus* in orbit, these islands would have appeared like crumbs on a plate, and Keeler would have wondered how anyone could live on it.

According to cultural survey, it was one of the less populated of the major islands, fewer than 800,000 people.

Red Jacket ploughed into its graywater harbor and drew up to the docks. There were two other trading ships parked at the docks. Cesario could tell by a look at their flags they belonged to the licensed trading fleets of Beaumont and Sihnon. Dockers were bringing up cargo crates in loading them into their holds. The moorages were much better kept than in other places they had been, and the buildings nearest the harbor gave the appearance of a tidy and sober prosperity. Damark would make an excellent trading contact.

"Where to find Prince Regent Hamlet?" Keeler asked Cesario.

"Yon," Cesario answered, and pointed to a large, square, almost storybook castle that was sheltered in a nook near the base of the volcano. It looked like quite a hike, so Keeler engaged a pair of hansom cabs to transport himself and his party there. Doctor Skinner and Doctor Starkraven – one of *Pegasus's* mind doctors who had been sent from the ship and who met them dockside – followed Keeler and Alkema in the other carriage.

EVENTIDE – DAMARK – Elsinore Castle: The Castle was located on a flat hilltop, and at the foot of the hill was a graveyard. It was here that the carriage driver let he and David Alkema off. Two men in clown make-up were digging graves. Keeler shrugged and figured the make-up was some weird local custom; like the funerary masks worn by mourners in some parts of Panrovia.

"Perhaps Hamlet's had some others killed," Alkema suggested.

"We'll soon see," Keeler exited the carriage approached the clowns. "Good morrow, gravediggers, Pardon my asking but, whose grave is this?"

"It's my grave, sir," the first gravedigger. "'Til I'm done digging it, anyway. Then, we're going to plant Prince Hamlet's girlfriend in it. Because she's dead."

"Dead?" Alkema said.

"We're not in the habit of planting the living, M'Lord," the second grave digger said.

"We happen to be looking for Prince Hamlet." Keeler said.

"He's the one over there," said the Gravedigger. "The skinny one, wit' the eye make-up, and the tight leggin's."

Keeler looked over to where a skinny kid maybe in his late teens, maybe in his early twenties, was sitting under a tree talking to a human skull.

"The one with the doofus haircut?" Keeler clarified.

“At’s right, t’one w’t’skull,” the gravedigger tipped his shovel. “G’day, guv’nor.”

Keeler tipped his hat in return and approached the boy. “How does my good Lord Hamlet?”

The boy looked up, he dropped the skull, letting it roll away from him. “It’s you!”

Keeler was taken aback, “Do you know me, my lord?”

Hamlet jumped up and took his hand vigorously. “Excellent well; you are a fishmonger.”

Keeler feigned outrage. “I take umbrage at that. I’ve never monged a fish in my life.”

Hamlet answered. “Then, I would you were so honest a man.”

Keeler followed. “I consider my self an honest man.”

Hamlet chuckled in a way that made the hair on Keeler’s legs stand on end. “Ay, sir; to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.” He turned toward the castle and began screaming. “You’re all liars! You’ve been lying to me my whole life! Liars!” He paused as though composing a follow-up statement then added. “*Liars!*”

Within Keeler’s own family, talking to skulls and screaming at distant castles was not completely unheard of behavior. One of his grandfathers or grand uncles – Five Keeler⁶ – had declared one of the bricks in the family outhouse to be his best friend and insisted it be seated at dinner with him. He ironically died of kidney stones, thankfully, before producing any heirs. But the deranged shouting and talk to skulls Keeler decided to take as clues to tread cautiously around Hamlet’s dementia.

“I recently made the acquaintance of two gentlemen, I believe you may know them ...” Keeler began.

“Are they dead?” Hamlet hissed.

“They’re not, not, not, not, not dead,” Keeler indicated, then quickly moved on before, he hoped, Hamlet could parse the sentence. “They weren’t dead the last I saw of them, but they had boarded a ship for a sea-journey, and I believe the devilish captain had sealed orders to bring them to harm.”

“I hope they’re dead,” Hamlet pouted petulantly.

“Whyfore?” Keeler asked.

⁶ Five Keeler lived in Sapphire’s 64th Century, the son of two University of Sapphire at New Cleveland mathematics professors. His brothers were named One and Three, and his sisters were Two and Four. Strangely enough, the names were not given sequentially.

"Because my uncle murdered my father, usurped his throne, and married my mother," Hamlet seethed.

"So, you want Wingus and Dingus dead for that?"

"In my mind it makes sense!" Hamlet insisted.

Keeler could only nod at this.

"Death is my bitch lover!" Hamlet cried.

Keeler gestured. "Prince Hamlet, the nice people in the white coats behind me are Doctor Skinner and Doctor Starkraven. They'd like to have a nice long talk with you. Meanwhile, my associate, Mr. Alkema, and I will investigate the case of your father's murder... I mean, murder."

Hamlet's eyes fluttered. "You will?"

"Za, and if we discover anyone's been naughty, we will see to it that they are punished."

"Just don't kill him while he's at prayer," Hamlet insisted. "I'd not have my revenge were he to see heaven."

Keeler flipped him a quick thumbs up as the doctors helped Hamlet into a snug white jacket with sleeves that tied in the back.

EVENTIDE – DAMARK – POLONIUS'S TAVERN: Damark was a dark, very serious country. The cloud that surrounded the volcano – combined with the planet's dim sunlight -- put most of Skoal into permanent night. The streetlamps burned constantly, and the alleys were places no reasonable man would explore.

Keeler found himself and his crew a decent tavern. Its walls were black volcanic stone, and its roof was volcanic slate. The smell on the inside was a mix of cave-like dampness mixed with spilled oil and soot. But, they served large drinks, not watered down, and their sandwiches were large and generous.

While the mind-doctors toiled with Prince Hamlet and a pair of Inspectors from *Pegasus's* Ship's Watch investigated the murder of the former Regent, Keeler caught up with other goings on through a briefing with Alkema and Jasmine.

"The entertainment slates have sold out in all three locations; Illyria, Athenia, and Angleteer. We're going to make 3,000 more, and expand into the six more islands we have trading contacts with."

"Good," Keeler agreed this was good.

Jasmine asked, "How does this put us in terms of supplies for *Pegasus*?"

Alkema held up a hand and checked the vicinity to see if any of the serving wenches were within listening distance. Seeing the coast was clear, he pulled back the sleeve of his jacket revealing an information display gauntlet. The little red diode to the left indicated an urgent incoming message from Commander Change. He tapped. Her face appeared. "Commander Change hailing Commander Keeler."

"What, ho, forsooth woman!" Keeler commanded.

Change ignored his command of local lingo. "Commander, I thought I would provide you with a status check in person, as I am uncertain that your adjutant is relaying updates to you."

"Speak, ye shrill harridan!" Keeler ordered as Alkema seethed.

Change transmitted a report to him, and conveyed its contents verbally. "Currently, there are fewer than 2,300 personnel on board the ship. The majority of the crew and the civilian population is planet-side. We have completed extraction operations on the gas giant. Our reserves of Tritium and H3 are at maximum and we have purged our waste tanks. We are focusing on extraction and refining operations for metals in the dark hemisphere. Food reserves are up to 8.2 years."

Keeler nodded. "All of this Lieutenant Commander Alkema has relayed to me, no matter how many times I told him... 'Not. During. Breakfast.'"

Change missed the sarcasm. "We have been in the system for 182 ship-days. Sir, I ask you, how much longer do you intend to remain?"

"As long as it takes to top off our food reserves," Keeler answered.

Change's face twitched ever-so-slightly in a manner faintly reminiscent of TyroCommander Goneril Lear. "There are three probable colonies within 8.2 years of travel at current operational capabilities. With rationing and the new hydroponic beds, we can reach a fourth probable colony."

"And if none of those colonies turn out to exist, or if they are unable to resupply us, what then," Keeler asked. "Lieutenant Commander Alkema, how many probable colonies with 20 years of travel?"

Alkema knew the answer off the top of his head. "Eleven."

"Much better odds," Keeler said.

"At your current of success, it will take another 220 days plus or minus 5 days to reach a 20 year food supply."

"220, 221... Whatever it takes," Keeler replied.

A hint of red showed around the edges of Change's ears and her cheeks. "We have already been in orbit of this planet for 182 ship-days. This is the longest period we have ever spent in planetary orbit."

She is itching to get back into space, Keeler realized. She was probably not the only one. "We need to top off our supplies commander Change."

"Which of us is in command?" she demanded.

"You command the ship, I command the ground mission," Keeler replied.

"Do you want your command back?" Change demanded.

Keeler answered grimly. "If you are offering your resignation, I would be glad to consider handing command over to Mr. Alkema or Mr. Redfire. If you are not tendering your resignation, then continue to oversee ship's operations until we are ready to leave the system."

"Another 220 days is not going to enhance our operational capabilities..." Change began to protest.

"Got to go, a serving wench approacheth," Keeler waved goodbye and Alkema covered up the gauntlet. Alkema and Jasmine didn't look around for a serving wench. They knew there wasn't one.

"I guess I don't need to discuss the supply situation now," Alkema said.

"Za, weird coincidence, huh?" Keeler added as a serving wench hung a lantern on the wall next to their table.

"You would really stay here another year?" Jasmine asked.

"When I said 'Whatever it takes,' I meant 'Whatever it takes,'" Keeler answered with uncharacteristic grimness.

"Just to win the bet with the Kariad," Jasmine pressed.

Keeler fiddled with his sandwich, and put on a pensive expression. "I don't know whether that's more or less important than making sure my ship has enough food to make it to the next colony, but as long as we are here, we should try to find a way to keep them from screwing up any more human colonies."

"I think I might know a way to keep TyroCommander Change busy." Alkema tapped his gauntlet. "I have been studying the astronomic reports on the gas giant. It is a highly unusual creature. Virtually no metals or complex gases whatsoever, but extremely rich in tritium and H3."

Keeler shrugged. "So?"

Alkema continued. "I think it was an artificial construct, just like this planet. And I think the Commonwealth builders intended to ignite it."

Jasmine's eyes lit up. "Ignite it?"

"A second sun," Alkema explained. "It is in precisely the right position to illuminate the dark hemisphere and be eclipsed daily by the Eventide moon. 63% of this planet's land mass is in the dark hemisphere. If the system is artificial, they had to have intended it to be habitable."

"So, why didn't they turn it on?" Keeler asked.

"Maybe the Commonwealth collapsed before they got a chance," Alkema answered. "If this planet was another Eden World, it's obvious they didn't finish it. There's no genetic manipulation."

"Or, it was built for a different purpose," Keeler replied. "It's a big warm planet with machines that provide all the basics. No need to work. I think this might have been some kind of artificial retirement colony. Like the Geezer Islands in Arcadia province back on Sapphire."

Alkema sighed. "You mean the Grazer Islands. But anyway, the point is, I think I can turn it on."

Keeler wiggled his eyebrows, "We're talking about a giant mass of gas, not a Panrovian barmaid."

"Won't it heat the planet too much, being between two suns?" Jasmine asked.

"I would think that the Ancients took that into account," Alkema replied. "We can run some modeling and simulation before we begin the ignition project."

"Can you really do it?" Keeler asked.

"I think I can," Alkema sounded pretty certain. "Let me put together a plan. I'll pass it to Technical Core. If nothing else, it will keep Change busy for a while."

DAMARK – ERAS – TEMPLE OF MARVELS: Some 600 years before *Pegasus* arrived at Eventide, the Church of Infinite Justice had undergone a schism, and Damark had landed on the other side from the previous islands Eddie Roebuck had visited. Practitioners here had rejected the Divinity of Ultraman and the others.

In their belief system, Marvelism, they believed that the spark of divinity was written into the human genome, that humans could evolve toward Apotheosis, and that some humans had already achieved this. (Their books of

prophecy foretold an eventual war between normal humans and evolved humans.)

Eddie Roebuck sat in a meditation chamber, surrounded by a selection of Marvelist priest dressed in the traditional black spandex and body-molded padding. Their leader was a bald man who sat in a wheeled chair, who had promised Eddie that his monks would “listen without prejudice” to whatever he had to say.

Eddie Roebuck placed a book on the low table in the center of the room. “I’m going to tell you a story from the 4th Compendium of the Pontifex Gilgerard XVI of Artemis. In the great city of Aora, there lived a man named Seth. Seth was employed in the Grand Regency Hotel of Aora.

“One evening, two visitors came to the Hotel and requested the Imperial Suite. When Seth saw them check in, he determined that they must be wealthy because only the wealthy could afford the Imperial Suite. He also thought they were two of the most desirable creatures he had ever laid eyes on.

“He was confident in his own youth and beauty, so when his shift ended, he went up to the Imperial Suite. Aora was a decadent city, and he had offered himself, or sold himself, for the pleasure of his Hotel’s guests many times. At worst, they would refuse him. At best, he would have a night of pleasure, and maybe some money at the end of it.

“Seth’s decadent lifestyle had also left him with a disease that would foreshorten his life by decades. He knew he was ill, but still appeared healthy to all who knew him.

“When he offered himself to the visitors. They conferred with each other in a language he did not understand, but which he found beautiful, like music. And they came to a decision that one of them would ...” Eddie paused. How to put it in a meaningful way. He gestured with a stiff left forefinger inserted into the cup of his right hand. “They would conjoin, frolic, knock boots... you know... and the other would simply watch.

“This was not a request Seth had not received before, though he was a little disappointed. The Visitors were so beautiful, he had wanted to take on both of them. But he was happy enough to be the love toy of one of them for the night.

“And so, above the lights of the city, Seth and the one visitor made love, as the other watched sitting in a chair. And Seth had been around the block more than a few times, but what he experienced in that night felt different; as though for the first time in his life, he was being loved.”

The Head Priest interrupted him, “Are you sure that is Holy Writ and not a selection from ‘Letters to the Topmost Suite?’”

Roebuck made a show of conceding the point. "For obvious reasons, the 4th Compendium of Gilgerald XVI of Artemis is the most popular of the Brianist Testaments."

"I can understand that," Kato, a young acolyte, agreed.

Eddie Roebuck continued, "The next morning, he awoke in the Imperial Suite, naked and alone. He felt strange, and heady... although disappointed that the visitors had left without a farewell. He was curious enough that when he went downstairs, he checked the records to see who had been in the Imperial Suite, but there were no records. According the Registry, the Imperial Suite had been vacant. And no one but he remembered anyone checking into the suite.

"This puzzled him, but he knew that guests to the Grand Regency frequently requested anonymity. He returned to his work, and though he usually forgot his trysts the next morning, his thoughts of the two visitors remained with him.

"And upon the next visit to his physician, he was surprised to find no trace of the deadly disease in his body. He had been completely cured from a disease for which there was no cure on Artemis.

"Seth did not know what to make of this. He was sure his experience had been real, and furthermore, he had been miraculously cured of a disease that should have killed him. Seth found that after this circumstance, he no longer desired to spend his nights dancing in the clubs of his world, or drinking in its bars, and the physical relations and the chemicals he had formerly enjoyed with wild abandon had no appeal to him.

"One Sabbath Night, he found himself walking past the grounds of the Great Temple of Brian at Aora. It was cold, but there was light inside. He had always ignored the Temple. He had been raised with no specific belief system beyond a vague knowledge of the Allbeing. But he felt compelled to go inside, as though some great Force were pulling him into the warmth and light of the Temple.

"Once inside the Outer Temple, he was greeted by a pair of Seekers... men like myself who go forth to seek the lost remnants of the Allbeing's Celestial Family. They showed him around the Outer Temple, and he marveled at its stained glass and statuary. Then, he saw something that stopped him cold in his tracks. There, in one of the glass portaitures, were the two visitors he had seen at the Grand Regency Hotel. The Seekers told him it was a glass portrait of the Ascended Angels Viv and Pax, who were said to have been transformed into Angels while still humans, and who were to walk on his planet until its Time of Judgment.

"Seth became convinced that Viv and Pax were the visitors from the Hotel that night, and that they had cured him for a purpose. He never went back to the Hotel, but enrolled as a scholar at the Great University of the Temple in another City.

"Thence, he undoubtedly went on to become a great scholar of the Brianist Canon, or perhaps a Cardinal or Pontifex or something," the High Priest guessed.

"Neg, fourteen years later, he was hit by a hovercar while crossing the street."

"Hovercar?" Kato asked.

"I mean horse-drawn hover carriage," Eddie corrected himself.

The Acolytes looked at each other. "So, what was the point of the story?"

"In the Brianist Tradition, we think the story symbolizes how the Allbeing will reach out to us in whatever way He can to offer us an insight to our own Redemption," Roebuck explained. "Also, to always look both ways before crossing a busy thoroughfare."

The priests agreed that this was a good and worthwhile lesson to learn. Afterward, cakes and tea were served. They agreed to keep some of the Compendia for study in their library.

As Eddie prepared to leave the Temple of Marvels, he felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to see the young Acolyte Kato. Kato bowed slightly. "Good sir, with the grace of my High Priest's commission, I do offer this acolyte to your service; that I might follow thee, and learn of thy faith."

"Really," Eddie Roebuck looked the young man over. He was large for an Eventidian, not fat, but large in frame. His hair was a dark blond, buzzed short. And his skin appeared thick.

"Yes," Kato said. "Give me some moments to gather my things. I will follow you, and learn of your faith from you."

"My testimony moved you that much?" Eddie Roebuck asked.

"Yes," Kate said, then overcome by a bit of guilt, he added. "Also, they kind of treat me like crap around here. I'm just a sidekick... no one respects me."

"It is written in the Third Compendium of Estrada IX of Iotia that any reason to follow the path of Brian is good enough," Eddie told him. "Pack your things, my ship is at the docks."

EVENTIDE – SKOAL – THE DOCKS: Doctor Starkraven spoke with and observed Prince Hamlet for five days, then gave Keeler a report. “After my initial discussion with the patient, I diagnosed him as suffering from delusional schizophrenia.”

“But he was right about his father being murdered by his Uncle,” Keeler protested. “The Inspectors found a stash of ear poison in his dresser. Goro offered to beat him up until he confessed. But we decided that wasn’t necessary. So, he beat up some milkbeasts.”

“He wasn’t delusional about that,” Starkraven clarified.

“There’s nothing we could do anyway,” Keeler said. “Under local custom, the Regent is allowed four murders, no questions asked. Granted, he wasn’t technically the Regent when he murdered the previous Regent, but he is now...”

Starkraven reasserted control of the conversation. “Hamlet did believe he was talking to ghosts. I would say his mental health declined after the murder of his father, the marriage of his mother to his uncle who killed his father, and the suicide of his girlfriend after he, apparently, accidentally stabbed her father to death. But, after talking to the servants, I found out he’s pretty much been this way since puberty hit.”

“What did you do for him?” Keeler asked.

Starkraven referred him to her final report. “I gave him a neural implant to take care of the hallucinations and some mood management medication.”

Keeler nodded. “That brought him around did it?”

“He had deeper issues, that he was able to open up about once the neural implant took the edge off his schizophrenia,” Starkraven continued. She was a woman in early middle age, her hair was black except for one lock dyed a streak of artificial red. She had a nervous habit of playing with the red lock.

“He had dreaded becoming Regent after his father,” Starkraven continued. “Even though he was angry with his uncle for killing his father, he also was relieved not to have to take the throne. But his relief compounded his guilt at not being able to avenge his father’s death.”

“How did you get him past that?” Keeler asked.

“I persuaded him it’s not really his job to avenge his father’s death. In the long run, the Allbeing will take care of it.”

“He bought that, did he?”

“Well, it is true,” she insisted. “And he was relieved to have the burden lifted from him, or as he put it, not having to bear the fardles anymore.”

"Fardles?" Keeler asked.

"I think it's a kind of potato," Starkraven said. "Anyway, I discovered he had a love for music, and suggested he might use it as an alternative outlet for his angst."

She gestured down the quay. Hamlet and two other men of about the same age, same thinness, and same doofus haircuts, all wearing black, approached the spot where *Red Jacket* was docked. Hamlet favored Keeler with a gentle bow. "Good Captain, might I engage your ship for travel to Athenia?"

"Your money is as good as anyone else's," Keeler answered.

"Indeed, and now I have the greater part of it and the lesser need," he tossed Keeler a palm-sized bag of gold coins.

"What's in Athenia," Persephone asked.

"We have formed a company of musicians," Hamlet explained. "I am going to wail and scream my sorrow for all the world to partake. We call ourselves, 'Surcease of Sorrow.' After we make a name for ourselves, we're going to tour Angleteer."

"You'd give up your crown and inheritance?" Persephone asked.

Hamlet put on a disgusted face. "If I can't avenge my father's death, I'm unworthy of his crown. But I don't care. I just don't care."

"Well, maybe you'll at least meet a nice girl and settle down," Starkraven suggested.

Hamlet tittered. "Not bloody likely. I've decided that the fair sex is not so fair to me; I prefer the company of men. And I must, to mine own self, be true."

Keeler tucked the bag of gold coins into his pocket. "Have Persephone find Prince Hamlet some suitable quarters on the ship. Away from Goro's bunk, please."

"I'll find them a spot," Starkraven assured them both and then led Hamlet and his band up the gangway. Hamlet turned at the top and waved at Keeler with black polished fingernails.

Keeler called down Alkema from the ship.

"I guess we ought to lay in a course for Athenia," Keeler reported to him, a little regretfully. He would have preferred to have visited an island he had not yet seen.

But Alkema was distracted by a group of men making their way down the pier to *Red Jacket*'s place of docking. "We've got company."

Keeler looked up and recognized the leader immediately. "Captain Othello."

When Othello and his three burly sailing companions reached them, Keeler extended a hand. "Captain Othello, my good friend. How goes it?"

Othello did not take his hand. His eyes narrowed into slits, making him look like an angry ember. "How goes it? You deign ask of me how it goes? By laws, I might answer thee with a sword, draw out thy tongue and leave you to ask no more how goes it. Curse you, and curse every man who befriends you! Thou purpled half-faced scullion! Thou quailing fen-sucked gudgeon! Thou unmuzzled dog-hearted whey-face! Thou froward rug-headed horn-beast! Thou pernicious plume-plucked ruffian! Thou quailing shrill-gorged ratsbane!"

"I sense that you're mad about something," Keeler hazarded.

"My fleet by four ships reduced, my trade diminished. All in all, any man would say bad enough. But lo, not satisfied to snatch the coin from my purse, you and your merchantmen spread perversion through my Regent's lands. A curse on you, captain of skin and lust." Othello glared darkly at him. "You are a fraud, a whoremonger, a drunkard, and a pirate."

"Yarr, I be not a pirate," Keeler replied. He pointed toward a tavern. "Sit, I bid thee, good captain, and have an ale with me. We can work this thing out."

"There is nothing to work out," Othello growled. "When Regent Henry seals my orders, all of your ships will be my prey. No one will stand with you. You will be hunted, Thou distempered bat-fowling measle!"

Keeler was puzzled. "What's Regent Henry's beef with me?"

"Thou hast perverted his Regency!"

"I never even met her!" Keeler insisted.

Othello held up one of the entertainment slates the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company had been distributing. The image on its screen was of a naked man copulating with two naked women, one light-skinned, one-dark. They wore masks.

"This perversion is loosed in his Regency, by your hand," Othello growled. "You've appalled the morals of the Regent, and for that, he shall bid me hunt thee to death."

"Why don't we just throw down right here?" Goro growled. He leapt from the deck of *Red Jacket* and landed on the dock. He stood behind Captain Keeler, cracking his knuckles in a way that displayed his massive biceps. "I'm up."

Othello's men twitched, like attack dogs restrained only by the lack of their master's command. But the command did not come. "My petition is before Regent Henry," Othello said calmly. "When his leave is granted, I will come for you."

"Well, it's been nice catching up," Keeler tipped his captain's hat. "But I think I ought to be going now. Take a rain check on that ale?"

"Run, coward," Othello roared. "For when I catch thee, I'll slit thee neck to nards."

Othello stood glaring on the pier as Keeler turned and walked toward his ship. Goro stayed back long enough to give Othello's men a good stare-down before following. Othello was still glaring at their ship as they cleared the mooring lines and pulled in the gangplank.

"Problem, sir?" Jasmine asked when Keeler entered the bridge.

"You might say that, Othello is seeking permission from his Regent to kill me."

Jasmine cocked her head to one side as though considering this. "At least he's asking permission first. Are we still bound for Athenia?"

"Za, we have passengers. And we also have to find out what the hell is going on with our entertainment slates."

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER EIGHT

EVENTIDE – ATHENIA: Keeler and his crew made their way down the broad avenue of New Roman Harbor's theater district. Athenia had much changed much in the few scant weeks since *Red Jacket's*, previous visit. It had always been a lively place, but in the span of a few short weeks it had become even more colorful. Some would have said gaudy. Bright pink and lavender banners hung from the lightposts, many depicting the silhouettes of ridiculously endowed naked people.

The theaters were booming, but the selection of titles on the outside billboards were much altered from the time of their previous visit.

The Two Gentlemen of Beaumont and a Hooker

The Cherry Whores of Sihnon

The Taming of Thundercrotch

All's Well That Ends in Buttsex

Antony and Cleopatra and Ted and Alice

These were accompanied by suggestive silhouettes of couples copulating. And sometimes triples, quadruples, and nonuples copulating; Eddie Roebuck swore he saw a duodecacouple on one billboard, but no one was able to confirm it.

"Mercy of the Allbeing, what have we done?" Jasmine whispered.

"Are they actually... doing it?" Persephone asked, gesturing toward the theater showing *A Midsummer Night's Ream*. "I mean, right there naked on the stage and everything."

Goro was staring at a theater offering a double bill of *Comedy of Whores* and *The Winter's Tail*, "I can find out if you guys excuse me for the rest of the day."

Keeler nodded. "You do that."

"Anybody want to come with?" Goro asked, turning to Persephone, who blushed and shook her head.

"Cesario, go with him," Keeler ordered.

Cesario's face reddened like the sun of Medea. "M'Lord... I would rather not."

"What are you, a girl?" Keeler asked.

Cesario, eyes wide as saucers, caught his breath, hitched, and sighed. "I shall go with him, if you will it M'Lord, but a thousand other wretched tasks would gladden me the more."

"You can leave after the first act if you need to," Keeler said.

Goro snarled. "I don't wanna go to a show with a boy. People will think I'm weird or something."

"If anyone asks, say it's your nephew... and that you promised him iced fruit if he doesn't tell anyone," Keeler instructed.

Goro reluctantly agreed and made for the afternoon showing of *Horny V*, which featured both sex and battle scenes. Cesario trailed him unhappily.

"I really thought I had her for a second," Keeler muttered. "In any case, onward and upward."

"Be careful," Alkema advised Goro. "You and I and Jasmine are still subject to arrest here."

"I don't think they care as much about that as they once did," Keeler muttered.

They continued through the town until they reached the offices of the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company on Oberon Street. These offices occupied the top two floors of a three story building, and there was a mob on the street outside.

"By the Allbeing," Keeler took in the situation. "Alkema, fight through that mob, tell our agents we'll meet them in the nearest tavern." He directed their attention to a tavern-house up the street, Poitrines.

Alkema sucked in his breath and touched his COM Link. "Alkema to Athenian Outpost, I need Cultural Specialist Ione Skybar."

"Ione Skybar, here," a voice answered.

"Could you and your team get away from the office and join us at a tavern called Poitrine's, approximately 220 meters northwest of your position?"

"We will try, lieutenant commander."

Alkema looked over to Keeler. "They're on their way."

"I almost forgot we had those thingies," Keeler said. How long had they been on the planet? Eight months? Nine? This was the longest he had been off

Pegasus since the beginning of the voyage. He had lost track of time... and he was startled to admit that it was because he was enjoying himself down here.

Poitrine's was accessed via a short flight of stairs as it was situated one half level down from Oberon Street. Its interior was typical for an Eventidian tavern, with polished wood floors and tables, lanterns on the walls, and portraits of various figures from the Royal Family of the island. Alkema shuddered a bit at the portrait of Prince Regent Coriolanus.

In the taverns they had met in previously, the staff had been dressed in local, casual-style clothing. At *Poitrine's*, the serving wenches wore tight yellow shorts so small that hints of cheek were visible when they walked, and when they bent over the whole world was their gynecologist. They also wore tight little blouses that were little more than brassieres.

The hostess put her arm over Keeler's shoulders. "Welcome to *Poitrine's*, my lord. Anything we have is yours, for the right price. Would you like a table near the stage, or..."

"At the back will be fine," Keeler said. At the front of the bar, three nearly nude women were performing some kind of slow motion acrobatics around steel poles. Their hostess led Keeler and his companions to a large table at the back. It was not yet lunchtime, and so they were surrounded mostly by empty tables.

As they waited for drinks and appetizers, Alkema pulled out a datapad (camouflaged inside a binder) and reported. "According to the last report from our trading representative, the Prince Regent is offering a hundred shiploads of food crops, in exchange for one hundred datapads, but only if they contain more of the 'Auroran' shows."

Keeler rolled his eyes. "Good grief, is that what the mob outside the office was on about."

Alkema nodded. "Za, word got out that the Royal Sapphirean Trading company is the only source for the ... they call them, 'Show Boxes.' Every merchant in town wants to be the sole provider."

"Allbeing Love a Duckbeast," Keeler sighed.

A serving wench approached the table, "Good morrow and well met, my fair Lords, Welcome hither: I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing. So, let me enfold thee. And hold thee to my heart."

"That would take a pretty big shovel," Keeler observed, given the size of the breasts heaving in front of him.

The wench laughed and wrapped a bare arm around his shoulder, "Be large in mirth; anon we'll drink a measure the table round."

"Drinks, za. Drinks! Bring us many, many drinks, and I'll reward you with shiny things." He tossed her a new issue starburst marble. She caught it, but seemed disappointed. She left the table muttering something about "last month's wonder."

Shortly thereafter, Specialist Ione Skybar, the Athenia Mission Trade Representative arrived at the table. She was a rather small and plain woman. She took a seat opposite the commander. Alkema went on explaining. "With the amount of food we can buy with a few more Show Boxes, if we expand trade to few more Regencies, we could fill *Pegasus*'s reserves in a matter of weeks. And no one would need to go hungry on the planet."

"Let us back up a bit," Keeler commanded. "First of all, do we know how it was that Auroran pornography ended up on our entertainment pads?"

Alkema, of course, did know. "Cultural Survey selected 200 programs for inclusion on the entertainment pads. One of them was a Sapphorean space opera called *The Aurora Files*, which followed the adventures of the renegade crew of *Aurora*, a small interplanetary cargo ship operating in the outer reaches of the Sapphire and Republic systems. "

"Sounds familiar," Eddie Roebuck muttered. "I think I used to watch that."

"When the technician was told to add 'The Aurora Files' to the entertainment pad, she mistakenly added several cultural files from our mission to the planet Aurora," Alkema sighed. "The majority of which were pornographic in nature."

Keeler cradled his head in his hands. "Good Lord, where did we ship them?"

"Our trading contacts in Illyria, Angleteer, Verona, Athenia, and Beaumont have been distributing them for the last thirty-three days. And the response has been," Alkema shook his head. "Phenomenal."

"Phenomenal?" Keeler repeated.

Alkema affirmed. "Based on sales/exchanges of the initial run, I'd calculate that another 2,000 units would purchase *Pegasus* all the food we need."

"Do we have enough datapads for that?" Jasmine asked.

"We can spare that many," Alkema said. "The artifactories on the ship could manufacture them."

Specialist Ione Skybar interjected. "What we and the other trading offices are hearing a demand for is for different entertainments. The Auroran pornography files also contained... well, summaries of additional pronographic

programs that could be purchased by the user. The audiences who have seen the initial runs now want to see these additional programs.”

Keeler cupped his face in his hands. “So, those theaters we passed are the way for the lower classes to imitate the forms of entertainment the rich are enjoying.”

“What are you thinking, sir?” Jasmine asked.

Keeler frowned. “I am wondering if distributing datapads on a mass scale would have transformational impacts on society. We have seen the effect we’ve gotten from a few hundred on the planet. It’s obvious, the people of this world adapt very fast to changes in technology and culture. What if we made a version for the masses, containing programming that would inspire them to change their culture...”

“Could we make enough?” Persephone asked.

Alkema answered. “The artifactories can build as many as we have the raw materials to make. The planet has enough metallic and ceramic resources to support ... virtually limitless production.”

“If we chose to do that, we could have unintended consequences on this society as severe as those inflicted by the Kariad in their misguided interference in other cultures,” Skinner argued. Drinks were being delivered, he was not touching his.

“Not to mention, it would further antagonize Captain Othello,” Alkema added.

“Our agents in Anchor-Park tell us the Regent is prepared to sign an arrest order on the Captain for Corrupting Public Decency,” Skybar added.

Keeler chuckled. “I am so glad that wasn’t illegal back on Sapphire.”

A pair of serving wenches began unloading plates of deep fried animal parts and vegetable matter at their table, along with an array of dipping sauces. “Do we have those additional programs in our archives?” Keeler asked.

“We have over 41,000 Auroran entertainment datafiles in our archives,” Alkema told him. He picked up something squidlike from the food tray that was still wiggling. He ate it without really looking at it. “The vast majority are pornographic in nature. Our Cultural Survey has spent years cataloging them.”

Keeler wiggled his eyebrows. “And I spent the last two years writing a history book. Why doesn’t anyone tell me about these jobs?”

Addressing Eddie Roebuck, Keeler asked, "Preacher Man, I am surprised you have been so non-committal on this. Certainly, there is a moral dimension to our dilemma."

Eddie Roebuck munched an appetizer. Crumbs spilled out of Roebuck's mouth as he spoke. "As is written in the 14th Compendium of Pontifex Lucius II of Nineveh, 'Temptations of the flesh may be actual or virtual, and the virtual will lead to the actual in most cases, unless one is a loser who resides in the basement of one's parents. In any case, no matter how base the greater society becomes, it is the believer who must protect his own virtue. For no worldly place will ever be pure. Only the heart and soul of the believer may be pure.'"

"In other words, just don't look," Jasmine summarized.

Roebuck went on, "However, in the Ninth Compendium of Gonzo IV of Artemis, it is written, 'Our society is unclean enough, we don't need any more of this crap.'"

"I would like to know more of the context of that statement," Keeler said. "Quite a lot more, actually."

Roebuck replied. "But in the 16th Compendium of Darius the Sage of Greenleaf, it is written, 'The good man is the last line of defense for his own virtues.

"Still, in the 21st Compendium of Rush VII of New California, it is written... 'Gifts of the Allbeing are not to be bartered in the common marketplace like vegetables or little plastic figures of ducks from Jiangyin."

He Captaining snapped. "Or, as Pontifex William the Perfect of *Pegasus* wrote in the 1st Compendium, 'Either make a point or shut up and eat your squid, Preacher Man.'"

Eddie grinned. "Captain, I'm not going to pass judgment, but like, it's already here, you know. So, like, I don't like it at all, OK? I don't like it. But it's what it is."

"It is what it is, very wise," Captain Keeler agreed. He turned to Ione Skybar "All right, negotiate with the trade representatives from all the islands. Get as much food as you can. We'll arrange to produce another 3,000 datapads."

"But at what cost to the population," Doc Skinner objected.

Keeler held up a hand. "Hold it, I'm trying to develop some sort of tortured rationale that will allow me to justify what I've already decided to do."

Keeler sighed. "*Pegasus* is going to get pretty hungry if we can't refresh our food stores. We have to look out for our own people. And Mr. Alkema is correct. We have already let Schrodinger's Cat out of the bag. They're making their own erotica now. If we exchange a few more Auroran Erotica shows, the impact is going to be marginal, anyway."

Keeler saw that Doctor Skinner had remained behind and was scowling at him. "What?"

"Why not just sell them bottles of fruit juice loaded with the White Plague virus?" Skinner asked, acidly.

"Well, for one thing, they already have a thriving domestic fruit juice industry," Keeler told him.

"Don't be so glib, Commander," Skinner huffed. "Don't think me a prude. I've strode naked in the Bacchanal Island Nudity Parade. I've been to the Platinum Festival Dog and Pony Show, and I spent a memorable year interning at the clinic at the Sex Mall on the Fourth Moon of Gigantor. And I've learned as well as any man can why it's best to keep depravities under lock and key."

"On Sapphire, we learned along time ago that people are happiest when vices are openly forbidden and privately tolerated," Keeler explained. "Forbid a man to drink wine, and he is happy to have a glass of wine in the privacy of his home or his private club. Surround him with a thousand bottles of spirits and say, 'Do as you will,' he will drink himself to misery."

Good Lord, I'm starting to talk like these people, Keeler thought as a pair of gorgeous young women so identically matched they had to have been twins approached the table with trays of wine, cheese, and fruit.

"Or, tell a man he can't see a woman naked, and he's happy to see titties," Eddie Roebuck countered. "I understand what you're saying. We give this to the Eventidians, there's gonna be trouble."

"Pandora is out of the box," Alkema pointed out. "The Auroran Erotica is already out there. We didn't mean to do it, but we did."

Keeler nodded. "I admit, doctor, this will hurt the people of this planet. And if there is some sort of judgment waiting for me when I die, this is going to be a huge debit against me. But I have 10,000 hungry mouths to feed..."

"There must be a different way," Skinner insisted.

Keeler nodded, and grabbed a piece of cheese off the tray that was offered. "Oh, yes, and I've thought of several. We could always take the food. Our firepower is vastly superior. Should I do that?"

Skinner glowered, "In the end, it would be less destructive that what you are proposing to do."

Keeler admitted, "I'd rather be trading in jewelry and blankets, but that option is not on the table."

About that time, the main courses arrived. Per Eventidian custom, these consisted of large roasted meat dishes accompanied by bowls of roasted nuts, vegetables, and rice. Several large loaves of spiced bread were brought also. Also, a wiry little man accompanied the table. "Good, sir, withhold your ducats. I understand your party to be attached to the Royal Sapphirean trade office."

"Well, we're not that attached to it," Keeler demurred.

The man nervously asked, "Good sirs, you may consider this meal bought and paid for... in exchange for a copy of the second and third installments in the *Naughty Enema Nurses* trilogy."

"That arranged can be," Keeler said. "Someone from the trade office will deliver that to you by this evening."

The man bowed. "Thank you, sir. I will have the cook prepare some spice cakes for you. Compliments of the house."

Skinner at that point, stood and left the table, but took his glass of dark raspberry wine with him.

"*Naughty Enema Nurses*?" Persephone asked.

"I am sure it's a classic of the genre," Keeler replied, loading his plate with meat and fruit.

Soon after they dug into their generous meal, they were approached by sharply dressed man with a craggy face, who asked if he could join their table for a few minutes. Keeler said that would depend on his willingness to pick up their bar tab. When the man agreed to their terms, he was offered a seat. He disdained the food and drink, but instead, set down a heavy, leather-bound book on the table.

"My name is William Benedict. I am the ranking diplomatic trade representative of Tara in Athenia. I would like to contract for the right to distribute your showboxes on my island. I am prepared to offer you a unique reward for said privilege."

"We are trading primarily in food and grains," Keeler replied. "Although, if you have some bat feces you would be willing to sell us, we can make a deal with that as well."

The man sniffed humorlessly. "What I have to offer is, I think you will find, far more interesting than grain crops or bat manure."

"Go on," Keeler bade.

"First, I will assume that since Tara is not well-acquainted with the Royal Sapphire Trading Company that you are likewise not much acquainted with us. Do I have correctness in that understanding?"

Actually, between the orbital surveys and the ground agents, Keeler knew quite a lot about Tara ... or at least Alkema did. But Keeler decided to keep his advantage. "We have yet to travel there, Mr. Benedict."

The man explained. "Tara is a distant island, far out from the trading centers of the Archipelago, and as such our ships are better equipped for long sea voyages, larger and better armored. I am prepared to offer you the *Sovereign*, the former flagship of the Tara Trade Fleet in return for 2,000 showboxes, and the privilege of distributing them to Tara. Naturally, the *Sovereign*, is only part of the package. We may negotiate separately for the purchase of the showboxes themselves, the *Sovereign* is the seal that you will deal with me exclusively."

Keeler took this in, nodding gently. "Tell me more about this *Sovereign*"

Benedict spread out a large sheet of parchment-like paper on the table that contained the drawing of a large, three-masted single-hull ship, sleek and swift-looking. "Sovereign is twice as large as a standard trading vessel, better armed with twenty-two guns on the gun deck, and she's very fast."

Anyone who looked into Keeler's eyes would have seen a distinct look of pure lust not even the half-undressed *Poitrine's* waitresses had inspired. "She is beautiful ship," he said.

"And she is fine shape," Benedict went on. "Of course, we need not conclude the agreement until you have had the opportunity to inspect her. She has been docked at Corsiva Harbor, where another buyer expressed interest. but I have dispatched orders for her to sail here by moonrise tomorrow. You can inspect her at your leisure."

"Moonrise tomorrow, at the docks," Keeler agreed. "If the ship is in fine shape, you may consider your proposal accepted."

"The Tara East Archipelago Company thanks you, my card..." Benedict handed him a small piece of heavy paper with the Benedict's name and contact information on it. He stood up from the table. "Good day to you gentlemen and ladies."

He began to walk away, then paused and turned around. "That you might continue your luncheon in piece, I will pay the proprietess to keep the establishment closed until you have completed your meal. I would also suggest you leave out the west exit, it is ... discreet."

EVENTIDE – ATHENIA – NEW ROMAN HARBOR: Keeler and his crew (minus Eddie Roebuck, who had gone proselytizing with Kato) arrived early because Keeler wanted to see *Sovereign* sail into the harbor. He wanted an impression of her power at sea, not merely tied up to the dock.

He was not disappointed. The ships arrived with the sails of two of her three masts filled with the morning breeze. She glided across the water with too much sheer grace for a ship her size. The planet's ever-fixed sun gleamed off the enamel-white wood of her polished hull.

"Do you like what you see?" Benedict asked as the small maintenance crew aboard *Sovereign* tied her up to dockside.

"She appears a fine ship," Keeler asked.

Benedict spoke well of *Sovereign*, but Keeler thought his tones were insufficiently respectful. "For forty years, she reigned over the waters of the East Archipelago. No pirate could catch her, no trader could match her speed."

"Why would you part with such a fine ship?" Keeler asked.

"Our new liners are even more swift... but still," Benedict paused. "She is too fine a ship to remove from service. She deserves many more years in the service of a master who will respect her. Clearly you are such a man. Shall we explore her decks?"

"We shall indeed," Keeler said, although he had already decided that unless the interior decks were completely run through with deadly deadly snakes, he was going to take Benedict up on his offer.

Alkema asked for seven days to install the equipment that would enable *Sovereign* to operate without a large crew, but the size of the ship still dictated a larger crew size than *Red Jacket*. Ten additional crewmen were being brought from elsewhere on the planet, and another six to replace the crew of *Red Jacket*.

Keeler promoted Jasmine to captain of *Red Jacket*, and Persphone took the position of first officer. The rest would move over to *Sovereign*.

While the modifications were made, Keeler got to thinking about Cesario. The girl had been clever enough to evade all of his attempts to reveal her true sex, and while that frustrated him, he had to admire the cleverness behind it. And this made him wonder how much Cesario had actually figured out about the ship and crew. He called Cesario into his quarters aboard *Red Jacket*, ostensibly to help him pack his things for transport to *Sovereign*, but also to try and figure out how much the "boy" knew.

"You're a clever... person, Cesario," Keeler said in a voice intended to sound as though he were musing while Cesario folded and packed his underwear... most of which was silk with multi-colored designs of ducks and bunnybeasts. "And yet most incurious for someone with so much knowledge of this pla... of these islands."

"Incurious, sir?" Cesario replied.

"You've never once asked about my crew or the land of Sapphire, or the ship *Pegasus*, which has been mentioned from time-to-time while you were in earshot."

Cesario began to speechify. "I know nothing of this land of Sapphire, except that which I deduce from your words."

Keeler challenged him. "And what have you deduced, in your clever cleverness?"

"As I've not heard of it, I deduce it is distant. And from the mechanical devices with which your ships are outfit, I conclude there is genius there residing nowhere else in the Archipelago. From your bearing, I would deduce it is wealthy, save your single-mindedness on the question of food, from which I conclude that it is a land of famine. And two things vex me there.

"No island in the care of a Regency goes hungry. As hunger haunts Sapphire – your pursuit of food for cargo shows it is haunted thus – I would make of that that Sapphire is aligned to no regency in the archipelago. But you have the required signs and sigils on your Mariner book, which you could not receive unless Sapphire were in alliance with the Royals of some regency.

"I conclude, sir, that you either of a king of no land, or that your land is real, but you are not."

Keeler paused and stroked his beard. "Put down my underpants and come hither, Cesario. I'm going to put some dangerous ideas into your head." He paused. "I do not mean that in nearly so a dirty a way as it sounded."

Cesario folded and put away a pair of Keeler's underwear, then came and stood before him.

Keeler took a sip of the local Athenian wine, a case of which had been delivered by Mr. Benedict with his compliments. "A question: Why should a Mariner require the seal of a Royal to pursue his business?"

"How else is anyone to know if you're a good Mariner," Cesario replied.

"One's reputation is one's own. The measure of a Mariner is does he deliver cargo. That fact proves itself, whether or not I carry a book of papers with thirteen seals on them. Regent Orsino did not grant me his patronage

because of my book, he did so because I delivered supplies to his garrisons reliably."

"I cannot dispute that," Cesario admitted. "Also, you made your costs cheap."

Keeler grunted. "When you say that all who swear allegiance to the Regent are guaranteed food from the anything boxes, you are correct. But we from Sapphire believe that dependence upon other people deprives us of the opportunity to achieve our potential. No human ... no man... is fully a man, unless he can supply his own needs."

He paused to offer Cesario a glass of wine, which Cesario refused. Keeler continued, "My dear Cesario, all these islands that make up this world... they're stagnant. Your culture, your society, in two thousand years, maybe more, you've accomplished nothing."

"What do we have to accomplish, sir?" Cesario asked.

"You could accomplish a world where every man his own regent. You could have a world where trade enriches the common man, and isn't a tool of the Royals. And as the common strives to enrich himself and keep what he's made, he'll discover... new tools, new inventions, new ways of doing things. Everyone is raised up. Everyone lives as the Royals do."

Cesario laughed at him. Before Keeler could go onto explain how this was possible, a furious knocking happened on the door of his Ready Room. He opened it to see Specialist Skybar standing there holding a thick pink leather binder.

"What, ho?" Keeler greeted her slily.

"Captain Keeler, I need to speak with you?" she said.

"Alone?" Keeler said, turning toward Cesario.

She shook her head. "Not necessarily."

She handed him the binder. "This was delivered by special courier from the Embassy of the Island of Miranda. You will want to read this."

Keeler took the binder in his hand and unsealed it. Inside was a two-page letter, handwritten on very creamy paper, with the sigil of one of the Royal Houses in the upper left corner. Keeler read it quickly... then, he read it again, slowly.

"Is this a prank?" he asked after the second reading.

"It appears to be legitimate," Skybar replied.

"Kumba yah!" Keeler exclaimed in a whisper. "Cesario, what know you of the Island of Miranda."

"A fair island, blessed with warmth and sun, but of late fallen down," Cesario replied. "Perhaps seven days distant at good sail."

"And its Regent?" Keeler asked,

"Regent Prospero I believe rules there. I know little of him, for Miranda has not much trade, nor many possessions. I've not, though set I upon these waters for the greater part of my brief time, encountered a Mirandan ship or sailor. Tho' I will repute that the Mirandan is a man of passion, and no small artifice. 'Tis said Miranda was last among the islands laid when the world was formed, and as such, left not quite finished when the artificers fled."

"The Miranda Trade Office has prepared a report, which I can review with you later..." Ione Skybar began.

Keeler waved his hands. "I will see it forthwith. Cesario, tell Mr. Alkema I want *Sovereign* ready to make sail by moonrise tomorrow. Our course will be for Miranda."

He opened the binder to read it again. "I cannot believe this offer is genuine, but if it is... it changes everything."

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER NINE

Sovereign caught a southerly wind, and made course for the island of Miranda.

If Keeler had been fond of *Red Jacket*, then he was in love with *Sovereign*. The moment she had cleared the harbor and caught the breeze, it was clear that this was a special ship. From the polished blonde wood and exquisitely fitted closets of the captain's quarters to her majestic towering masts, to the slim-as-a-woman cut of her prow... Keeler loved this ship. He even had brief fancies of sending Eliza Change on her way and remaining on the planet with this tall ship and...

... and maybe a certain Lady at his side.

A few alterations had been made, of course. The rigging had been replaced with a scaled up version of the automated system he had used on *Red Jacket*. He had to replace the worn sails with fresh new ones shipped from *Pegasus*. These were lighter and stronger than the canvas sails she had previously been fitted with, and gave her matchless speed as she cut across the waves. Filled with the winds, they billowed like a beautiful woman's hair.

When Alkema had asked if Keeler had thought of renaming her, the commander had snapped. "No, they got it right the first time."

As they sped toward Miranda, Keeler, Alkema, and Goro held a daily meeting in the captain's mess – which was on the deck just below and aft of the bridge. It was mainly used as an officer's dining room, but also served as a place for Keeler to meet with his officers. Jasmine had the bridge at the time.

Without knocking on the door, Cesario burst in, and Alkema quickly threw a cloth over the center table.

"What is it, Cesario?" Captain Keeler demanded.

"Sir, our ship cross'd the equator, just now, with the rise of the..."

"Blah, blah, blah..." Keeler waved away the rest of what could have been a flowery soliloquy. "So, what does this mean to me?"

"This is the first crossing of this ship under this master, and I thought it good and pertinent to advise you to the rituals commonly performed upon the passage."

"Rituals?" Keeler asked. "What kind of rituals?"

Cesario explained. "'Tis customary, M'Lord, to favor the seas with spirits and libations, an offering of good wine for fair winds."

Keeler did not care for that idea at all. "I'm supposed to pour perfectly good booze over the side?"

"Aye, M'Lord. The better the offering, the fairer the winds."

Keeler raised an eyebrow. "Are there any alternative rituals?"

"Where I come from, we all sodomize the ship's boy," Goro was carving out chunks of fruit with a large knife and eating them messily.

"You're a man of many depths, Goro," Keeler replied. "But unless, Cesario is really..."

"I'm not, M'Lord," Cesario, red-faced, interjected quickly.

"Fair enough," Keeler rubbed his hands off each other. "We've ruled out rum and sodomy, do any of these rituals involve the lash?"

"I am aware of no such rituals, M'Lord," Cesario answered, backing up slowly until his backside was against the bulkhead. "But if it please the sea and binds fair winds to our sails, some new rituals, if it pleaseth thee also."

"I say we all get drunk and piss off the fantail," Keeler decided. "The sea-gods will get their liquor, and we'll all have a good time. We'll commence the ritual at High eclipse. Cesario, inform the crew... and stay out of here until you're called."

"Aye, Captain," Cesario backed out of the ready room, warily keeping an eye on Goro. He closed the hatch behind him.

"That kid's gonna sleep with one eye open for the next month," Alkema said.

"As well she should," Keeler pointed his walking stick at Goro. "You're a sick man, Goro, but I like the cut of your jib."

"It's a genuine ritual!" Goro insisted. "One of the sailors at the docks in Athenia told me about it."

"You're sure he wasn't asking you out?" Keeler wiggled his eyebrows. "Never mind, I don't want to know. As the Panrovian Acolyte said to the High Priest, 'Enough with the sodomy already.' Mr. Alkema, let's get down to business. What's our status? Good news first."

Alkema gave him the good news. "In two short words, we're rich."

He went on to detail how, in the 56 days since they had begun trading entertainment datapads, they had executed enough porn-for-food deals to meet all of *Pegasus's* re-supply needs. They had gained a full fleet of 22 trading ships, including *Sovereign*, most of which were busily carrying cargo from the main islands to their base on Newhall Island. As the food arrived, it was sent up to the orbiting ship, processed, and stored in her cargo bays. ("The Eventidians can't believe all we want are food crops," Alkema reported, shaking his head. "They think we're insane, trading something so valuable for something as common as food.") They had also removed 3,000 gross tons of guano from the sewers and underground passages of the Athenian palace, and had used it to completely restore the hydroponic crop beds in *Pegasus's* botany bays.

Keeler received this news with satisfaction. "Very well then, excellent good. I should now like to focus on settling our wager with the Kariad. If the offer from Regent Prospero is genuine, we may finally get access to see the Anything Boxes. How many days out are we?"

"Two days," Alkema answered. "We should be arriving in port at moonset, the day after tomorrow."

"Good, that takes care of the good news. Now, let's discuss our tactical problem," Keeler said.

Alkema nodded and pulled the tablecloth from the captain's dining table. He had spent considerable time installing a tactical display on the surface. It was only two-dimensional, but it was adequate for their purposes, and easy to hide from the Eventidian members of *Sovereign's* crew.

A day earlier, two of Captain Othello's ships had surrounded, boarded and captured a Sapphirean Royal Trading Company ship, the *Harlequin Romance*, claimed it in the name of Regent Henry of Angleter, and taken its crew of twenty-eight into captivity.

"*Pegasus* has tracked Captain Othello's attack ship." Alkema indicated a moving red diamond on the map. "It's making directly for Angleter." A dotted line appeared showing the ship's course.

"How long until it reaches Anchor-Park?"

"Four of this planet's days," Alkema replied. "Once they get to Anchor-Park, a rescue of the crew will become much more difficult."

"So we have to take them at sea," Keeler said, stating the obvious. "How?"

Goro folded his muscular arms. "Commandos. We can take a ship like that."

"Commandos are your answer to everything," Keeler replied. "But, that would be too risky. They could kill the prisoners before we got to them. What else do we got?"

"Our odds improve if we can get them off the ship and out into the open." Alkema's finger traced the dotted line. "They're going to pass very close to these uninhabited islands. If we could drive their ships aground... they'd have to evacuate."

"We're too far to intercept them," Keeler said.

"And we're not good enough at driving this thing to force them to shore," Goro pointed out. "Not that I wouldn't really love to try."

"I'm not sure any of our merchant crews are up to the task," Keeler admitted.

Alkema presented a solution. "We use the wind."

Keeler raised an eyebrow. "The wind?"

"We're going to fart at them?" Goro exclaimed. "How's that going to help?"

Alkema pulled out a datapad and fed the data to the table display. "Back at Gethsemane, I was looking for a way to break up the cyclonic storms that were impeding the evacuation. One approach I looked at was using the wake vortices generated by Aves at high-speed flight."

He moved his fingers over the table, but it was not designed to display Aves and wake vortices. He frowned, picked up a piece of paper, and folded it into an airplane shape. He dragged it across the table-map. "Normally, Aves power down their Grav Engines when they're in the atmosphere. But if they go full power, they create atmospheric disturbances. If two Aves at max power, and very low altitude... like 10 meters above the sea... cross this vector at high speed, it will create a storm cell... here. It will be small, but very intense. And it will blow Othello's ships right into these islands."

Goro picked up the thought. "We have commandos waiting on the island. Stun grenades. Land traps. We take the crew by surprise, grab our people back."

"Any chance the storm will sink the ship with our people still on it?" Keeler asked.

"Some risk, yes..." Alkema admitted. "We can keep some rescue personnel nearby."

"But once the storm starts, we can't control it," Keeler made a spinning gesture over the table with his hands, suggesting a cyclone or a whirlpool.

Alkema hadn't considered this. He paused and stared at the map. "Since it's not part of the normal weather pattern, it should quickly dissipate."

"We want them pushed into the islands, not sunk out at sea," Keeler said. "Can we calibrate it to that level?"

Alkema had to admit. "There are too many variables to be sure."

Goro crunched and swallowed the core of whatever fruit he had been eating. "I like the idea of getting them to the island, though. We can set up an ambush."

"I agree, getting them onto the island is our best shot," Keeler said. "Maybe instead of blowing them in, we could lure them in."

"How?" Alkema asked.

Keeler smiled like a pirate. "Treasure."

Goro and Alkema asked in unison. "Treasure?"

Keeler touched the table. "All we need is fairly large boat, and we have to make sure they see it cross their path. If Captain Othello sees a fully laden ship flying the flag of Sapphire, he'll be unable to resist the opportunity. He's obsessed with us. Our ship would make for the beach and bury several large chests in the sand. Othello's men will come to investigate. And when they pull into shore..."

Goro slammed his fist on the table. "And then blammo!"

"Blammo?" Keeler repeated. "If by Blammo you mean we capture and disarm the shore party, then hit his ship with stun weapons and rescue our crew, then, za, blammo maybe the right word."

Goro looked a little disappointed at the insufficient level of violence. Then, he suggested. "We should blow up his ship. That will keep him out of our hair for a while."

Keeler wasn't sure. "Do you think that might be too much?"

Goro looked at him like he was an idiot. "Neg!"

Alkema was all common sense. "Othello's going to be a problem. Stranding him on the island would keep him out of our hair for a while. We can make sure there's enough supplies for him and his crew to survive."

"But not to get off," Goro insisted.

"Right, without their ships, they should be stranded there for some time. It's not a common shipping lane," Alkema went on.

This seemed to assuage Keeler. "Do we have a ship that can intercept them?"

Alkema pointed to the icon of the closest Sapphirean ship on the map. "*Belle Jest* is the closest. She can intercept them within a day if the winds are favorable, and lure them right into this passage between Nocturne and Five Big Whales Island."

Goro shook his head and pointed to another of Keeler's ships. "*Belle Jest* has a full load of cargo. It will weigh her down. *Armpit Avenger* is faster and better armed, and she's running empty."

Alkema looked at him in surprise.

"What, I can think though stuff." Goro tapped his forehead.

"All right, for a plan to draw in Othello's ships and then inform *Pegasus* of the plan," Keeler ordered him. "Make sure you inform Commander Change after it's too late for her to do anything about it."

"Will do," Alkema agreed.

"Coordinate with the Captain of the *Armpit Avenger*. Goro, would you like to lead the ambush?"

"Duh!" Goro answered.

Keeler grunted. "Very articulate of you. We'll put you off in a lifeboat, and Aves will rendezvous and pick you up at sea. Choose your own team of commandos."

Goro already knew who he wanted. "Max Jordan, Johnny Rook, Dayvan Cowboy ..."

"You don't have to name them to me, just get them on that island and execute the plan."

"You bet, captain," Goro was so happy he saluted.

Keeler clapped Alkema on the shoulder. "Don't worry kid. We'll use that weather idea someday."

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA ISLAND: Avoiding a stormfront, *Sovereign* drew into the wide, shallow cove that defined Miranda's harbor and made for a berth adjacent to Red Jacket, which was the only other ship docked there. The faded white buildings of the capital and port city of Arial occupied the hills around the harbor cove. These buildings were both fewer in number and shabbier than those they had seen in the other islands. According to Cesario, Miranda was one of the

poorer islands on the Great Archipelago. Keeler hoped this would improve his bargaining position.

When they left the ship, the old pier groaned in places where the wood had warped and grown weak. Goro waited for them on the pier.

"Did your mission meet with success?" Keeler asked.

"We got 'em!" Goro confirmed. "It was a good fight." He reported that the rescue had gone more or less as planned. The crew of the *Harlequin Romance* had been rescued. Othello's ships had been sunk. Othello was stranded on Five Big Whales island. Goro and the others had stood on the deck of the *Armpit Avenger* and watched as Othello's ships burned and sank.

Keeler received the news with no show of satisfaction. "That should keep him out of our hair for a while."

The assessment of Miranda's poverty was borne out as Keeler, Alkema, and Jasmine left the dock area and passed through the dusty streets beyond. The bustle of commerce that had animated Angleteer was absent. The gaudy theatricality of Athenia was absent. Even Damark and Caledonia, beneath their somber clouds, had been more alive than this place. The few open shops displayed a desultory assortment of wares, watched over by clerks that seemed more interested in reading, smoking, or arguing with somebody to pay much attention to customers.

The Royal Sapphirean Trading Company had tried and failed to secure a trading office here. All lease permits had to be approved by the Regent, and had to pass through the Regent's Office of Commerce, Commercial Leasing Office before they could be approved. Typically, this process took at least 130 days, during which period, the application would be lost a minimum of four times. Their scouts ended up renting a house in town and working out of it discreetly on the sly, all under the table since a legitimate purchase also required approval from the Regent's Housing Ministry.

The Trade Representative met them in a shabby café on Rue Sycorax, where their requests for food and beverages were ignored entirely by the staff, making it possible for them to discuss the situation with Cultural Specialist Juno without interruption.

"I haven't been able to meet personally with Regent Prospero," Juno told them.

"Prospero," Keeler interrupted, cranky from lack of lunch. "That's a queer name."

"He gave it to himself when he ascended the throne upon the death of his mother, who had been acting as regent. His father, who had been the regent prior, and he was raised by his mother, who, if local legends are to be

believed, was quite a piece of work. She fancied herself a witch, among other things..."

"Blah blah blah, cut to the chase..." Keeler ordered. "Is his offer genuine?"

"Right," Juno said. "My contact tells me it is."

"How? Why would he offer this?" Keeler asked.

Juno explained. "Prospero never married and has no heirs, and it is suspected he would like to quit the throne and appoint a successor. So, the Lesser Royals constantly struggle to curry favor with him. He got hold of one of the Auroran programs, became wildly enthusiastic about it and was able through his contacts.... And through the desires of the other Royals to seek his favor... to assemble a very complete collection of them.

"Viceroy Antonio, Count Nintendo has been acting as our intermediary," Juno explained to them. "He has been meeting with Regent Prospero on our behalf, and it was he who brought Prospero's sealed offer to me."

"Does he know what it is?" Keeler asked.

"I thought it best that he didn't," Juno assured them. "If the other Royals knew what Prospero was offering, there would be chaos."

"I am clear on what he is offering us," Keeler replied. "But I've read through his proposal a dozen times... well, Alkema has read through it a dozen times... and we can't figure out what exactly he is asking for *from* us."

"It might be something we can't deliver," Alkema said. "Like weapons or technology."

Juno shook her head. "I don't think so. From what I have heard, he doesn't have those kinds of ambitions. But the only way to find out for sure is to meet with him."

"She's right," Keeler agreed. "All right. Well, let's get on up to the palace and find out what the deal is."

As they stood, the owner and the two staff began yelling at them for money.

"You never brought us any food!" Keeler insisted.

"Doesn't matter! You order food! You pay for food!" the nasty little man who owned the place insisted.

Keeler, unwillingly passed a sack of coins at the man. It was far more than the value of the drinks and snacks they had not eaten, but still the man was unsatisfied. He kept yelling at them until Goro took out one of his

throwing knives and wanged it into the wall next to the owner's head. This convinced him to back off, finally.

"I admire your negotiating style," Keeler told him as they exited to the street.

EVENTIDE — MIRANDA — THE PINK PALACE. Prospero's palace was a shabby imitation of the villa inhabited by the Regent Orsino; remarkably different only in being clad in polished pink granite.

After being led in by a pair of rather embarrassed looking guards wearing strange leather uniforms with large codpieces, they were led into the Regent's reception chamber. It's walls were covered in shocking pink silk, and they were made to sit on large lavender couches. Keeler's eyes started hurting almost as soon as the walked into the room.

After waiting for several minutes, they were met by a small man ... middle aged in the face, completely bald, but as small as a ten year old ... dressed in a pink and yellow costume, with sequined cape in back and two interlocking "A's" on the front.

"Do you know who I am?" the man asked, grinning wildly.

"Regent Prospero?" Keeler asked tentatively.

The man laughed and shouted. "I am the Anal Annihilator!"

"Indeed," Keeler said calmly, as he scanned the room for a viable exit.

"From the programs!" the little man insisted. "*Anal Annihilator, Return of the Anal Annihilator, Revenge of the Anal Annihilator, and Surprise Buttsex! Anal Annihilator's Greatest Hits!* You are Captain Keeler of the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company."

"And my associates, Lt. Alkema, Miss Juno, and Mr...."

The little man waved them away. "They don't matter. You're the man for whom I have waited, whose anticipation has made the days flow like thickly syrup, and the nights draw upon themselves and make each hour a lifetime. Come! You must see my gallery. You will be so impressed!!"

With the excitement of a small child leading parents to the toy department, the Regent led them to his gallery, which featured a score of large paintings depicting scenes from the Anal Annihilator series of Auroran entertainments.

Keeler had to admit, there was a resemblance between the series protagonist and the Regent Prospero.

"When I watched those entertainments, I was moved, unlike I had ever been moved before," Prospero said. "All my charms were all o'erthrown. On this bare island by your spells was I released from my bands. Now I want spirits to enforce, art to enchant. Unless I am relieved by that which pierces so that it assaults mercy itself and frees all faults. As you from crimes would pardon'd be, let your indulgence set me free."

"Right," Keeler said. "So... what's the deal?"

The man smiled, showing yellowy teeth. "I have, at great pains, assembled all the Auroran monographs made for man, and yet for all my labors, the set remains incomplete. The entertainments refer to another program which was not among those listed. It must lie somewhere, but none upon none of the regents nor their agents foreswear that they have seen it either."

Keeler turned to Alkema, who translated. "One of the programs was missing from the set."

"Missing, missing, yes," Prospero babbled. "The program lacks, *The Anal Annihilator versus the Red Crotch of Thunder in the Ultimate Throwdown Showdown*. I would forfeit my kingdom for that one program, yea, would I give over the whole of my kingdom, per what I have offered."

"He means..." Alkema began.

"I know what he means," Keeler interrupted, scarcely believing what he heard. The Regent's offer had been real. "He will trade us his entire island for one Auroran entertainment program."

"We reach!" Prospero sang. "Aye, Miranda and my other islands, all for you, if you will deliver unto me *The Anal Annihilator versus the Red Crotch of Thunder in the Ultimate Throwdown Showdown*. I swear, by thee I foreswear!"

EVENTIDE – ARIAL HARBOR – SOVEREIGN: When they returned to the ship, the world had fallen into eclipse. Cesario hung lanterns on the ship's bow and stern, and Keeler and the crew met in lamplight. And the first question Alkema had was would the Regent really trade his entire island for one pornographic video.

"He has the power to do so," Cultural Specialist Juno reiterated. "As the childless Regent..."

"Anal Annihilator..." Keeler corrected.

"Anal Annihilator," Alkema repeated. "He can appoint whoever he pleases as his successor."

"The new Anal Annihilator," Keeler repeated.

"Could we maybe refer to him as something other than the 'Anal Annihilator,'" Juno suggested, or possibly begged would be the better verb. She was uncomfortable with the term, which was why they had started using it in the first place.

"What will the other Royals do if he turns the island over to us?" Keeler wanted to know.

"They are very likely to resist," Juno replied. "There is likely to be civil war."

"Can we buy them off?" Keeler wanted to know.

"Maybe... some of them," Juno replied. "But I doubt you could buy off all of them."

Keeler made a notation on his notebook. Since coming to the planet, he had discovered he enjoyed the physical sensation of writing.

"What if he backs out after we give it to him?" Goro wanted to know. "What then?"

"Then, we'll be out one porn video," Keeler replied. He shrugged. "It's worth it to get a look at the Anything Boxes."

"We're taking advantage of a man who's not right in his faculties, it isn't right," Juno added.

"Neg, it's wrong, it's very, wrong. It's unethical and wrong... and we're doing it anyway," Keeler said. He turned to Alkema. "Has *Pegasus* dug up the program?"

"There is a problem," Alkema reported.

"Of course there is," Keeler sighed. "There's always a problem."

"We don't have that program," Alkema explained. "I checked with Cultural Survey. There's no *Anal Annihilator versus the Red Crotch of Thunder* in our database. They think it may have been in production or unreleased at the time of our visit to Aurora. Knowledge of it exists only in some 'Previews of Upcoming Releases' at the end of some programs in the Anal Annihilator and Red Crotch of Thunder Series of entertainments."

"Could we maybe refer to him as something other than the 'Anal Annihilator,'" Juno suggested, or possibly begged would be the better verb.

"We could fake it," Keeler said. "We could make our own version of it."

Skinner was incredulous. "You want us to make a pornographic video fantasy?"

Keeler looked at his crew, "Once again, I am advocating something grossly unethical, but we need access to the Anything Boxes. Prospero is offering even more than that. We can't pass up this opportunity."

Eddie Roebuck stood up, "I volunteer for this project."

Goro stood up. "Neg, I volunteer for this project."

"We won't need actors," Alkema informed them, to their grave disappointment. "We can use the images of the Anal Annihilator and the Red Crotch of Thunder from the existing programs to construct a tromplographic model of each person. The previews can tell us what other actors were going to appear in the program and what activities they would have engaged in."

"He'll want to see some new stuff though," Goro said hastily. "If he just sees the same stuff he's seen before, he won't be satisfied."

"We can add characters from other Auroran programs, ones that were never released to the Eventidians," Alkema suggested.

"I can help pick them out," volunteered Eddie Roebuck.

"I can help, too," Goro added.

"He's not going to be satisfied anyway," Doctor Skinner said. "That's the nature of anticipation. The payoff will inevitably disappoint him."

Keeler sighed. "Probably, but again, it's worth a shot. Alkema, can you put together a plot, something that will make Prospero happy."

"I'll leave that up to Cultural Survey," Alkema was only too happy to foist off that responsibility.

"Prospero really identifies with the Anal Annihilator character," Keeler realized. "I think we can make that work for us. Maybe we could create a plotline around the ... protagonist defeating the Thunder Crotch character and then renouncing his position as regent, and going on to achieve even greater power."

Skinner was infuriated. "Now, that's just mean!"

Keeler turned his hands up. "I'm giving the poor old man what he wants."

"What he needs is intensive brain therapy," Skinner protested. "Captain, you do what you want, I want no further part of this mission. If you would arrange to have me transported to Newhall Island, I will appreciate it. I'm out."

Skinner stood up from the table, and left the room without turning back.

"I can't blame him," Keeler said. "We are being deceptive and immoral. For that matter, what we did to Captain Othello was not strictly ethical either."

"Fun though," Goro opined.

"Indeed," Keeler agreed. "But getting a look at the Anything Boxes could be of great benefit and insight to us, even if we fail to win our wager with the Kariad, which I still hope we can do."

"We haven't heard from the Kariad in a long time," Eddie Roebuck observed.

"Their lensing ship has not left the system," Alkema replied. "We believe they are monitoring our activities."

"What's the status of your plan to blow up the sun?" Keeler asked.

"You mean ignite the gas giant?"

Keeler chuckled quietly, "When you put it that way, it reminds me of a prank we played on my fat Aunt Petunia after a bean picnic."

After looking around the room to make sure he was exclusively in the presence of *Pegasus* crew, Alkema withdrew a datapad from beneath the table. "Lieutenant Scientist Toto is finishing the calculations, but the basic plan involves modifying and removing the Aft Port Drive engine, towing it to the gas giant by Aves, forcing it as deep into the atmosphere as it can go, then sending out a brief gravitational super-pulse that will collapse the core, initiating a sustained fusion reaction." The datapad had a rough graphical depiction of how those steps could be accomplished.

"How do you get the engine out of the ship?" Keeler asked.

Alkema didn't have a graphic to show, so he had to explain it to Keeler. "The people who designed the Pathfinder Class of Starship anticipated that engines might need replacement during the ship's career. The hull plating outside the engines is designed for quick removal during maintenance. We would need some Aves to pull it loose and put it back in place... which will not be easy but it can be done."

"But it would cost one of our engines," Goro observed.

"The Aft Port Drive Engine isn't even functional," Alkema argued. "And it never will be. However, Acting Commander Change wants to keep the engine as a spare parts bank. She thinks if we lost any of the surviving engines, we could cannibalize the aft port engine to rebuild it."

Keeler cut off the debate. "The gas giant isn't going anywhere. For now, your priority should be completing the Anal Intruder versus the Red Crotch of Thunder..."

"Anal *Annihilator*," Eddie Roebuck corrected.

"Whatever," Keeler waved him off. "How long will it take to put the fantastic tromplographic pornographic ... maybe work in a beach scene and make it oceanographic..."

"You're stretching, sir," Alkema advised.

"Right, just get it done," Keeler ordered. "How long?"

"I've never done this kind of thing before," Alkema held up a hand. "Don't even say it, Captain. My guess would be we can put it together in a couple of ship-days... maybe three for polish, once we have a script."

"Get started," Keeler ordered. He cast his gaze fondly down at the paper map of Miranda that lay on his table. "I'm going to have to make some big plans for everybody. Mr. Alkema, how much money do we have?"

"Define we, sir."

"How much money does the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company have?"

Alkema shrugged. "Lots ... heaps... with our current reserves, we could resupply *Pegasus* six times over, double the size our merchant fleet, and still have money left over."

Keeler took in this information. "How many merchant ships do we have?"

"Thirty," Alkema declared. "The largest merchant fleet on the planet."

"If Prospero follows through on his deal, I want them loaded them up with supplies and ordered to Miranda," Keeler said. "I'll make a list of the supplied we're going to need."

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA – THE PINK PALACE: The video took longer to complete than anticipated ... six days. Keeler declined to review the final product before delivery, but Goro watched it with several other sailors and reported it was a perfect success. "Not a dry fly in the house," he quipped.

The packaged the final product in a special datapad with a larger viewscreen and delivered it to the palace with sparkling wine and chocolate. Prospero had been excited to receive it, and then retreated to his study to enjoy it alone, which struck Captain Keeler as especially sad.

An assistant provided Keeler and Alkema with a tour of the palace while the regent enjoyed his acquisition. The palace had seen better days, much of

the furniture was worn, and whole rooms were empty as though the contents had been sold in order to keep the Regent from admitting bankruptcy. (The minds of the servants were incredibly easy to read.)

At the end of the two-hour tour, they returned to the Regents personal chambers. He emerged from his study, looking happy and also ... um... drained.

"How was the entertainment, fair Lord Regent?" Keeler inquired, bowing politely. "I trust it met with your satisfaction."

Prospero clapped his slim, soft hands together, "Oh, indeed yes, goog, good, excellent good, more excellent than I had hoped for, wonderful, wonderful, and even more... wonderful."

"Then our obligation is met," Keeler said cautiously. He half-expected guards to pop out at this point and drag Alkema and him to the dungeon. But to his half-surprise, the Regent removed the Regency Amulet from his neck and offered it to Keeler.

"A good show, well worth this decrepit kingdom. Well worth it, indeed." Prospero hesitated only a moment as he handed Keeler a rod of platinum topped with a crystal skull. "This is the Scepter of Miranda, the key to the Kingdom. Who possesses it and the Amulet of Miranda is the rightful Regent of Miranda."

He turned and addressed the handful of rather shocked and surprised servants who had witnessed the exchange. "Behold, lo, and lend me your ears. Let all in attendance behold his Regency..." He paused and looked a but confused.

Alkema stepped in, "Regent William Keeler, of Sapphire. Long live the Regent."

The staff repeated "Long Live Regent Keeler," but without much enthusiasm.

Keeler put the amulet on his neck and waved the scepter at the staff. They were heavier than Keeler had expected.

"My first order as Regent is for you guys to leave this room and let me talk with the unemployed guy in the pink pajamas. Mr. Alkema, you may stay."

When the palace staff were outside, Keeler turned to the Regent and asked a simple question. "Why?"

Prospero grinned, showing yellow teeth. "Why indeed, forsake a kingdom for barely two scant hours of merriment. You, sir, shall soon learn that this kingdom is the lesser prize. Yet, any of the counts would part your

throat for it. But I have fortunes put aside in foreign places. I shall travel thence to the Mystic Isles of New Jersey, to learn the ways of Magic," Prospero informed them in conspiratorial tones as he wrapped himself in a bright red robe.

He continued, "The Counts have left me to my own self, for the greater part, thinking I am not in my perfect mind and soon to pass. But when 'tis learned that the amulet drapes your shoulder and the scepter lies heavy in your hand, they will conspire or plan separately to part you from them."

"I didn't think they'd be too happy about the arrangement," Keeler admitted.

"Guard yourself well," Prospero advised. "Or, if you are much the wiser, flee. For this kingdom is rot, and you're better alive and away from it than dead upon its throne."

Prospero exited through a door at the back of the room, so none of the palace attendants could follow him.

When Prospero had departed, Keeler turned to Alkema. "Let's go to the Anything Boxes."

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER TEN

EVENTIDE - MIRANDA - THE PINK PALACE - They had waited for this moment for such a long time, they practically sprinted through the halls beneath the Pink Palace. All they had labored to see - the Anything Boxes - were housed in a gigantic sub-basement the size of a groundball field. It was accessed via a simple declining tunnel, guarded by a pair of men in armor, who tensed when Keeler approached but let him pass otherwise.

The Anything Boxes were all lined up on the center of the floor of the sub-basement. There were four of them, like large, tall hexagonal boxes made of a crystalline white material that gave the appearance of snow, or maybe very thick frost, clinging to them. Each one had a console/kiosk in the front and a hatch in the side.

"I was expecting something more grandiose," Keeler said. It was a bit anti-climactic, like going exploring in the basement of grand old house and finding a furnace.

Alkema mounted the small ladder next to one of the consoles, and began playing with the interface.

"Operation appears to be quite simple," Alkema announced after a few minutes. "These consoles access a database of stored items. It's vast. Hundreds of thousands of entries." The controls were holographic. Sigils hovered just above the surface of the kiosks. "For example, I access clothing, sub-section footwear, sub-section male. I select a pair of boots. It gives me multiple options, representing different styles of boots. I select an option. It asks me how many. I can order one pair, or thousands."

Keeler walked up behind him, then leaned in toward the console. "Make me a sandwich."

Alkema poked at the holographic controls. "Access food, sub-section sandwiches, and let's get you something called turkey and swiss on pretzel bread with lettuce tomato and mustard. Select. Quantity: 1 Order complete."

The hatch opened. A single sandwich, wrapped in pink waxed paper, was ejected and landed softly on a cart. Keeler crossed over and retrieved it.

He tore the wrapping open and took a bite. "It's vile," he concluded. "Can we make it better?"

"Let me work on that," Alkema said.

Keeler nodded, considered taking a bite of the sandwich, but then tossed it aside.

"Is the rest of the fleet inbound with the supplies I requested?"

"They are," Alkema confirmed without looking away from the console.

"Good, I should begin consolidating my hold on power," Keeler said, making to climb down from the kiosk. "I have much to do, and little time."

By the time the sun emerged from eclipse on the next day, Alkema had an answer to Keeler's question. He had been helped by a team of *Pegasus's* best cyberneticists, two or three of whom clustered at each of the consoles.

"The program can't be altered or added to," Alkema told him. "I've got a dozen cyber-techs going through the system, but it looks like the inner workings were set up to be fixed and unalterable."

Keeler restated the idea in terms that made sense to him. "So, I can order any sandwich that I want, as long as it's already in the system? But, I can't add a sandwich into the system."

"Right."

"It's odd to have a database that nothing can be added to," Keeler noted.

"It's a closed database," Alkema confirmed.

"I couldn't combine two of the sandwiches already in the system to create some sort of third-style amazing sandwich?"

"Correct."

"Have you figured out how it all works?" Keeler asked, throwing the rest of something the system called a "Reuben sandwich" into a waste receptacle.

"Za," Alkema left the console and walked over to a sort of monitor kiosk attached to the wall. He flipped a switch and the side of one of the Anything Boxes dissolved, sort of, revealing a swirled mass of segmented metal tubes writhing and twisting around each other like a mechanoid's intestinal tract --- which they don't have. In the midst of the intestines were four brightly glowing devices, each the size of a small cargo container, that looked sort of like cylinders made of pure light.

"These are the modules that drive the anything box," Alkema told him.

"How do they work?" Keeler asked.

"Let me see if I can explain this to you," Alkema said. "We have molecular sequencers on *Pegasus* that can re-arrange matter at the molecular level. We use it primarily in the recycling systems, purifying water, turning waste into useful matter, making new materials out of old. We don't use it for everything because its energy use curve is very intense."

"Intense, hmm," Keeler agreed, stroking his chin-beard.

Alkema decided to pretend Keeler knew what this meant. "All right, but this device can manipulate matter and energy down to the subatomic level. Give it one oxygen atom, and it can make 8 hydrogen atoms, 2 beryllium atoms, or one carbon atom and 2 hydrogen atoms."

"Like an Atomic Change machine!" Keeler exclaimed.

Alkema nodded. "Sort of, I'm simplifying, it's not quite one-to-one because it extracts energy from the atom to fuel itself. But the important thing is, it works both ways. It can also take four oxygen atoms and spit out one iron and one carbon atom. Then, this next module rearranges the flow of elements into the basic components of whatever you ask it for. The rest of the machine assembles it; anything from sandwiches to clothing to construction materials."

"Dip!" Keeler exclaimed.

"Dip indeed," Alkema agreed. "It literally builds things out of thin air. It rearranges molecules in the atmosphere into solid materials... clothes, food, furniture, weapons."

"So why can't it make me a sandwich that doesn't taste like dogfood and cardboard?" Keeler asked.

Alkema pointed to the third glowing cylinder. "This third module is kind of the memory unit. It has atomic-level templates programmed in for hundreds of thousands of items. The machine can make anything it has a template for. But if the template isn't in the system, the machine can't make it."

"Of course," Keeler said. "This is either brilliant or amazingly stupid. Or, I should say, brilliant if your goal is to create a world that's amazingly stupid. This device not only keeps everybody sedentary, it also stifles any hope of innovation. Everything this society can produce is circumscribed by the programming. This society can't advance, these machines won't let them."

Alkema sighed. "We're trying to crack the programming. But it looks like the machine won't allow itself to be reprogrammed. We think there might be a

master code somewhere, and if we find it, it might give us programming access."

"You don't sound optimistic," Keeler said.

Alkema sighed again. "If such a code exists, it would be at a primary station. This is just a sub-station. If there's a Master Control station, it could be one of the other Anything Box Sites, or it could be elsewhere on the planet, or ... and this seems likely ... it could have been part of some orbital facility or ship that no longer exists."

Keeler was silent for a moment, and there was an unfamiliar look on his face, one of serious contemplation. "This makes my job much more complicated."

"How so?" Alkema asked.

"I had thought the solution to this would lie in disabling the Anything Boxes while teaching the planet's inhabitants to be self-sufficient," Keeler explained. "But if this planet was designed to be resource-poor, that makes things a lot more complicated."

"Resource poor?" Alkema asked.

"Eliza Change got bored and ran some mineral surveys," Keeler explained. "We've cleaned off the sea beds of several thousand tons of elements... molybdenum, yttrium, palladium... but the crust of the planet doesn't contain more basic minerals like cobalt or copper in any notable quantities. At least not on the day side of the planet. And we've already discussed the problems with ammonia. The bat guano we extracted from under the palace in Athenia is most of the extractable fertilizer on the planet. The people on the planet have not only been conditioned for dependency on the Anything Boxes... they can't survive without them. This planet can't sustain human life without them. Or, barely in any case.

"These Anything Boxes are an oligarch's dream. Complete control over the entire economic output of a nation, at no cost. I may have to write an entire supplement to *Hello, Sailor* to describe the impact on society. In ancient times, rulers would have to control the farms, or the artifactories, but they still needed people to work in them. These things take the workers completely out of the equation. There are only rulers and consumers. No producers. "

Alkema understood. "So, we're back to square one vis-à-vis our wager with the Kariad."

Keeler raised a finger to his lips and began earnestly spitballing. "This planet isn't like the other EdenWorld. It's not an amusement park. I'm beginning to think it was some kind of ancient retirement colony. On our planet, people retire to Arcadia when they get to be, say, a hundred years old.

It's warmer there. They live off their investments and savings and whatever support their families provide. This planet, Eventide, is a lot like Arcadia or Kandor. It's balmy, it has low gravity – which is kind of a difference but, if you were old, you might appreciate lighter gravity. The sun isn't too bright here, which is easy on the eyes. It would be a good place to rest if you were old and waiting for the Grim Reaper to bring your last meal of salmon mousse."

"Salmon Mousse?" Alkema inquired.

Keeler shook his head. "Old legend. There was a reference to it in the literature of Winter."

"Well, it isn't a retirement community," Alkema pointed out. "Not any more. It's a real world."

"Supported by phony technology," Keeler finished. "That is exactly the nature of our problems. Are you certain there's no way to reprogram the machines."

"They are designed to be un-re-programmable, that's what I have been trying to explain," Alkema was raising his voice, a little. "Even if I figured out how to reprogram the ones in this room, every Anything Boxes on the planet is networked to every other Anything Box. They have a self-diagnostic, self-remediation program that makes it impossible to meddle with the program. Every 24 hours, these machines check each other, and if there are any changes to the programming in any one of the machines, the other machines correct it to their own standard baseline."

Keeler gave him a look of disappointment. "So, it's impossible in other words."

"That's my assessment," Alkema replied, with a tone of defeat.

Keeler crossed his arms. "What if I told you to do it anyway?"

Alkema looked at the console, back to the Anything Boxes, and then to Keeler. "I would keep trying, but I can almost guarantee failure."

"Keep trying," Keeler ordered. "And just in case you can't do it we're back to re-ordering society within the context of the Anything Boxes." He thought for a minute or two. "Is everything in the database finished goods, or can they also produce raw materials?"

"Raw materials?"

"Steel ingots, raw paper, cotton, hemp... stuff that can be processed into finished goods."

Alkema manipulated the sigils a bit and produced a lavender display with long lists of items. "Za, there's a large database of raw materials. Why?"

Keeler almost smiled. "If we can't change what the boxes do, we will have to change how the humans relate to them."

"How are you going to do that?" Alkema asked.

"I haven't completely figured that part out yet," Keeler said. "But I should have an answer by the time I have destroyed and rebuilt this society."

"How is that project going?" Alkema asked.

Now, Keeler grinned. "Tonight is my coronation ball and I have big plans for everybody which I will announce there. On a related note, have our ships begun arriving yet?"

"Three or four have made port," Alkema reported. "The rest will arrive over the next few days."

"And what of our old friend Captain Othello?" Keeler asked, almost as an afterthought.

"Still stranded on the island where we left him," Alkema replied. "They keep signal fires burning in hope of rescue."

Keeler nodded. "Good, everything is going according to plan."

"I thought you were still working on the plan."

"The shape of the plan, I've got," Keeler assured him. "But when it comes to the details, things could get sort of messy."

"Will you require reinforcements from the ship?" Alkema asked. "To stop the counts from killing you?"

"No kidding," Keeler agreed. "The only reason I am still alive is the counts don't know which of them would succeed me if I died."

"Is that a 'za,' then?"

Keeler shook his head. "Not yet. Goro took the palace guard out for a few drinks the other night. After they had a few drinks to loosen their tongues, he was able to determine which ones were loyal and which ones... Well, long story short, the loyal ones were kept on with double wages."

"And the disloyal ones?"

"They will be given several weeks of leave while I go about changing the world," Keeler explained.

Alkema, nonetheless, looked very worried. Keeler assured. "Don't worry, kid. Goro will keep me safe. You – figure out what to do with those Anything Boxes. As long as they're around, this society can always revert."

"But if we destroy them, the planet can't sustain its human population," Alkema sighed.

Keeler nodded. "See, I always give you the easy problems."

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA – THE PINK PALACE: The following evening, the fifteen Royal Families of Miranda were gathered in a ballroom of the Pink Palace to greet the new Regent. They were dressed in the finest clothing, and they smiled at him extravagantly when they talked, and the women curtsied to him and to Lady Kate Keats, and because Keeler was a mild telepath, he was fully aware that every one of them wanted to see him dead.

Lady Kate Keats wore a beautiful white gown embroidered with colorful designs along the sleeves that matched a belt that cinched her slender white. She was shy about attending the ball, but Keeler reminded her that they had met in a similar such ball. And, he promised her an opportunity to sing, which she gratefully accepted. A passionate rendition of the Mirandan national anthem from Lady Kate Keats brought tears to a few of the Royal eyes. She followed with some traditional Mirandan folk melodies and a reprise of one of her songs about clouds.

The Mirandans received her warmly, which gave Captain Keeler some residual goodwill as he took the podium. He made sure they were well lubricated and disarmed before he took the podium.

"Welcome elite parasites," Keeler said. "I am so glad you all could come, even Count Quisp, who smells like something moist left out in the sun too long. I hope you have enjoyed my food and my wine.

There was nervous tittering in response.

"I have good news and bad news. First of all, you will all be happy to learn, I do not intend to remain as Regent, it is a title unworthy of my birthright..." A few interrupted him with applause, although most seemed uncertain whether this was an applause moment.

"Thank you, fans," Keeler said to the applauders. "As I stated, I have no interest in remaining as regent. However, before I go, I am going to make some substantial changes here. You are free to remain, and if you remain, you are likely to become even richer than you are. However, the power you have wielded here will be much diminished, if my plan works out as I expect it will."

Keeler had their attention. He continued.

"Under the previous Regency, there was a simple arrangement. The Regent supplied each of you with goods from the Anything Boxes located underneath this palace. In return, you paid the Regent a license fee, in return

for exclusive monopoly rights over the distribution of that class of good. Count Bix, you held the license for clothing and shoes. Count Quisp, you held the license for foodstuffs. And on down the list. By Regent's edict, I am abolishing those license fees and distribution arrangements."

A groan came from the crowd. Keeler knew what they were expecting; new arrangements, new license fees. He let the groan subside before he dropped the bomb on them. "Tomorrow, we will commence construction of fifteen artifactories on the outskirts of Arial. One of these artifactories will produce textiles, clothing, and shoes. Another will produce weapons. Another will produce paper, books, and printing supplies. On down the list. The goods from these artifactories will be sold in the open markets and made available for export."

One of the Royals stepped forward. "Good Regent," he enunciated pointedly. "The people do not want manufactured goods. They want the output of the Anything Boxes."

"Perhaps," Keeler said. "However, if the artifactories can compete in price and/or quality, it will provide them more options. By the way, I have signed a decree eliminating the commerce tax, effective at moonrise."

A gasp went up from the crowd. *Good*, Keeler thought. *Let's build on that.*

"Also, the Regent licensing offices are hereby abolished. The office of leasing approvals is likewise abolished. The office of commercial licensing is abolished. In fact, everything but the militia, the Royal Guard, the court magistrates, and the Bureau of Roads and Bridges is abolished."

"The Regent's Academy of Arts is gone?" said a Fat Woman.

Keeler made a shooting gesture with his arm. "Gone!"

"The Royal University?" a skinny old man in whiskers and spectacles demanded.

"Up for sale," Keeler replied.

"Subsidies to the Church of Marvels?" asked a man in a red cape.

"Ended," Keeler informed him. "And I'm gonna need one of your churches. Since nobody goes any more except on Easter and the Feast of the Green Lantern, I don't think you'll miss one."

"This is insane!" thundered Count Ocula. Of all of the Royals, he had been slightly favored to replace Regent Prospero. He was taller than the others, and had a commanding air about him. "The system has worked well for two thousand years, and you're throwing it aside in a day."

"The system has worked well for *you*!" Keeler shot back. "But for the rest of this culture, everything has stagnated. Your people live today as they have

lived a thousand years ago, and a thousand years before. I am offering the people of Miranda a new beginning."

"By the people you mean, the Sox," Count Bix spat.

"What makes you think they want a new beginning?" asked Count Aikenberry.

"The common folk – the Sox – will now have the opportunity to run a business, or to work for a business, to become as rich as they want," Keeler was saying.

"Thou will'st to destroy our Regency," a red-faced Count Life was shouting at him.

Keeler was unmoved. "I know all of you have large accounts in banks in Angleteer, and estates in Illyria, Beaumont, and Athenia. If you do not wish to be a part of the New Free Republic of Miranda..." he was almost drowned out in the groans and cat-calls that followed. His voice rose to a shout. "Then, you are free to leave. I am prepared to pay handsomely for your estates."

The mood of the crowd was decidedly ugly. Keeler raised a glass to them. "Friends, let not this news trouble your festive spirits. Enjoy the wine, enjoy the food. Let us meet on the morrow, and I will lay out the new arrangement for you."

Keeler stepped down from the podium. The crowd might have rushed him again, he could feel their rage, their desire to tear him to pieces, but Goro and the other guards formed a tight cordon around him and Lady Kate Keats.

EVENTIDE – ARIAL – THE PINK PALACE: By moonrise the day following the inaugural ball, the pink palace was surrounded with workers patching its outer walls and installing reinforced gates. Inside, the number of palace guards had doubled. Keeler was not taking chances. He hoped the enhanced security would be temporary, but he knew better than to merely hope.

Beyond the palace grounds, land had been cleared for the first of the fifteen artifactories Keeler had demanded be built. The plans had been easy to put together, *Pegasus* kept many prototype artifactory designs in its memory banks. It was thought they might be needed should the ship encounter an undeveloped colony. They had required some adaptation to use local materials, shiploads of which were arriving in Arial Harbor.

He had called in Eddie Roebuck for his earliest meeting. Roebuck had brought Kato, and had only agreed to the meeting on the condition that his acolyte be allowed to teach Keeler a lesson from the Brianist faith. Keeler had

reluctantly agreed, and tried not to fall asleep while Kato explained the missionary aspect of Brianist Theology.

Kato had been going on for about twenty minutes, and Keeler was getting ready to call him off. "And so, you see, we were once part of a great family that existed beyond the plane of this universe, outside of it. Call it Heaven, if you wish. But our family came down to this plane and became separated. Ultimately, following the Shining Path laid out in the Fifth Testament, we will find our way back to our Celestial Family. And we... the Seekers... seek out the members of the Allbeing's family as they have been scattered through the universe."

"Thank you," Captain Keeler said. "Your ideas are intriguing to me and I wish to subscribe to your newsletter. Now, if I may ask Mr. Roebuck a question, how many followers have you collected in your travels?"

Roebuck shrugged. "A hundred and change, not much."

"I want you to let them know that if they come to Miranda, they will be free to practice their faith without harassment," Keeler informed him. "I am arranging the purchase of the Third Church of Superiorman, it's a large and almost unused building along the seaside in Arial. You may use it as a Temple and base of operations, provided you initiate a literacy and education program there. We're going to need the populace to be educated and engaged if this experiment is going to work, and we need it done on the cheap. So naturally, I thought of the church."

"I don't know if we can handle them all," Roebuck replied.

"But if you set up a school, the Church of Marvels will also set up a school," Keeler explained. "Others will follow. I just need you to be the example."

"And in return..." Eddie began.

Keeler shook his head. "Don't even think of asking for money. You can charge the little miscreants whatever you want, but from the state, you get diddly. Right?"

"Gotcha," Eddie agreed.

"So, get word out to your followers to come to Mirandan, and you can practice your religion in peace, here. I'll even send ships to bring them in."

"Bless you, sir!" declared Kato. "Our members have been having an awful time!"

Eddie shook his head. "The other churches..." he began.

"The other churches are angry at me for ending the subsidies the Regent paid for their cultural development," Keeler said. "But they are happy that

their church holdings and collections are no longer taxed, and they are allowed to own property outside the church, which was not permitted in the prior regime." Keeler sighed. "I have spent most of my time in office repealing the laws put in place by the last 200 Regents. A little tax here, a little prohibition here, a little payoff there, each one a thread, but woven together into..." he paused, and tried to think of what they might be woven into.

"A horrible spider web," Eddie Roebuck shuddered.

"Za, a horrible spider web that chokes all life!" Keeler agreed. He passed them a sheaf of papers. "Anyway, there is the title to the former Church of Superiorman. Use it well. Now, get the hell out of my office!"

"May we offer you a prayer of blessing?" Kato offered.

"Neg!" Keeler insisted. "Not now, but if I sneeze, I'll call you."

He signaled them toward the door and they took the hint. Next up on his agenda was Cultural Specialist Juno, who had been charged with managing the buy-out of the Royalist Estates. She entered the room accompanied by another member of *Pegasus's* crew.

"Have any of the Royals taken us up on our offer to buy their estates?" Keeler asked.

"Twelve out of fifteen," Juno answered. She presented him with an annotated list of which Royals had accepted the buyouts.

That was more than Keeler had expected, and he had a sneaking suspicion he knew why. His suspicions were enhanced when he read the list; the most ambitious counts had accepted his buyouts upon the first offer.

"Good work, Specialist Juno. Now, Stage two: I want you set up a bank, the Royal Sapphirean Trading Bank, and I want you to arrange loans for motivated commoners who want to buy land from the estates we bought."

"We could just give it to them," Juno suggested.

Keeler burst in frustration. "Neg, we can't. They have to own the land, and to own it, they have to buy it. If we just give it them, they don't have real ownership. Because if you give something, it means you can take it away again. They have to pay for it, or they won't feel like it's really theirs. And it's very important that they believe they own the land."

Juno did not look like she understood, but then, economics had not been her forte.

"Why am I here?" asked Specialist Faraday, from *Pegasus's* Technical Core. He looked old to Keeler, although he wasn't that old. He was about Alkema's age. But with all the Gethsemanian teenagers in the crew, even the youngish were looking long in the tooth.

"I want some informational kiosks set up in the public squares around Arial, and in the other towns around the island. They need to blend in with local technology, and they need to be ready in three days. Can you do it?"

Faraday shrugged. "Guess so. How many do you need?"

"We have about a hundred and forty-eight locations designated. Can you handle it?"

Faraday shrugged. "I guess so. What do you need them for?"

"Communication," Keeler explained. "Can you have them up by eclipse tomorrow?"

Faraday nodded. "I think so. Half of them, anyway. It'll take a big team, and you have half of Technical Core setting up your artifactories."

"Get to work," Keeler ordered. "Pull as many bodies as you need, but I need them up by eclipse tomorrow. Excuse me..."

He touched the datapad on his desk. The face of Eliza Change appeared. She looked mildly peeved, but there was nothing unusual about that.

"Mr. Alkema the ship's artifactories have some fabricators that were damaged in the Attack as Gethsemane. I'd like them brought down to the surface."

"Why? They don't work."

"They have limited functionality. They can still be used in industrial processes, but they lack the precision or the ability to fabricate devices at our level of technology. With some retrofitting, they will support manufacturing on the planet."

She pondered this for a moment, then input her approval code. "I'll allow it. We can use the extra space. I'm going to order Technical Core to salvage spare parts from them first."

"Thank you," Keeler said. He signaled to Faraday that he could leave the room.

"How much longer is this ... whatever you're doing down there going to take?"

"I don't know," Keeler admitted. "But the sooner I have the artifactories up and running, the sooner we can leave."

She scowled. "We've been in this system for 154 ship-days. How much longer can we be expected to stay?"

Had it really been that long? Keeler had lost track. "I wish I could tell you, but I can't. I know we can't stay long enough to finish the work we start, but I have to see it started..."

Change leaned in toward him. "Is there any reason other than your bet with the Kariad to remain here beyond the time necessary to complete repairing and restocking the ship?"

Keeler had to think for a few seconds. "Za, there is. The Technical Core tells me the Anything Boxes are an amazing piece of technology. If we could figure out how to integrate some of that Technology into *Pegasus*, we would have an indefinite supply of food, equipment, medicine... everything we need. Not to mention, the pure understanding of Commonwealth Technology."

Change sighed, but did not have a look of defeat. "We cannot remain here indefinitely. At some point, you will have to make a choice... leave with the ship, remain here, or relieve me of command. I do not intend to stay in this system indefinitely."

"Acknowledged, Keeler out." He deactivated the COM Link and nested his head in the palms of his hands. He had worked too much and slept too little over the last several days.

There was a soft knock at his door. He had no other appointments until after lunch and he almost called out "Go Away," but accidentally found himself saying, "Come in" instead.

It proved to be Lady Kate Keats. Keeler had set her up in comfortable accommodations in a house on the outskirts of the city. "How finds you this day, my good rogue captain?"

"I am well enough off, fair lady. I owe you, something like, a million pardons for my neglectful nature of late. I trust you have found charms and delights in this city, perhaps walking through gardens to give roses a cause for jealousy, leaving daisies in your footprints..."

She blushed, "Stop, my brave lord. Your fancies can not but hide the burdens that weigh upon your heart..."

"Huh?"

"You seem tense," Lady Kate Keats clarified, sitting herself atop his ornate desk, facing him.

Keeler nodded. He appreciated that she understood him as ... perhaps only one woman... had ever understood him before. "When I was at sea, I felt more vital than I had felt in years, but this land business, this trying to get these people to ... it's wearing on me. I am beginning to feel old again."

Kate smiled her special smile. "Let me show you something that will make you feel young as when the world was new."

She took his hand and guided it to her bodice.

He guided it back away. "Later," he promised.

"I should leave," she said.

Keeler grasped her hand, almost desperately. "Neg, that isn't necessary. I just have work to do. But I could take an early lunch... and I would be delighted to do so."

"Not that," she sighed. "You have become all consumed with affairs of state, and I feel the withdrawal of your affections acutely."

"I am trying to build a new nation," he replied firmly, but regretfully.

"If I wanted to be a Regent's consort, I could have chosen that long ago," she reminded him. "Though I was born into it, I have little affinity and less affection for the Royal class."

"I do not intend to remain long as Regent, I made that clear..."

"The more you stay, the harder it will be to leave," she cautioned.

"I don't hunger for power," Keeler scoffed. "If I plant the seed of the idea here ... liberty, free enterprise, self-reliance... it will change the planet."

"That *is* power," she reminded him.

He looked into her eyes. She was a wise and rare woman. And she liked him. Her kind seemed to be sprinkled lightly throughout the galaxy.

Since he did not argue, she broke the silence. "Men have tried your course before and it has always ended badly for them."

"I'm going to try anyway," Keeler assured her. "I intend to leave a mark. I hope it will endure."

She cocked her head. "Miranda is alone and without allies, without friends, and with enemies ready to seize her."

Keeler grunted. "Za, well, the problem with that is, if you invade Miranda, you get... Miranda. This is the poorest major island in the Archipelago."

"There are powers that would claim it, run you like hounds, run you up a hill, catch you in a tree and bay at you..." Keeler didn't care for it when she referenced her own songs, but that nit came with the package.

She leaned across his desk and whispered. "Let me help you."

"How?" he asked.

"Duke Orsino loved me once, and will at least give me ear. And the Prince Regent of Athenia loves me also," she sighed. "Make me your emissary. Send me thence. I'll secure you friends in Illyria and Athenia. Not strong allies, but good friends. Miranda will need them. Let us make a mark here together."

Keeler pondered this. "Can you also secure right of passage through their waters for Miranda's ships, and promises of open trade?"

"Those are cheaply won," she assured him.

"You would do this for me?" Keeler could scarce believe it. "Because I could never ask..."

"Consider it repayment," she replied. "You have shown me the world, and more."

He put down his notebook and grabbed a port manifest. "*Potent Voyager* is in harbor now. It's the fastest ship I have available. I'll write orders for her captain to convey you to Illyria and Athenia with offers of friendship and good wishes from the new Government of Miranda. Tell them we are also willing to make a sizable bribe ... gold, porn, whatever they would rather have. I shall have papers drawn certifying you as the Diplomatic Representative of Miranda in Illyria and Athenia."

"An Ambassador, how lovely," she smiled and made a graceful gesture with her hands. "I never fancied titles much before, but it means much to be in your service."

Keeler corrected her, "Not in my service, but in service of a New Miranda, and I hope, a whole new world."

She kissed him before she left, a dainty and chaste peck on the cheek, but it thrilled him. He walked her to the gates of the palace, then returned to write the papers offering Trade and Friendship to Illyria and Athenia with an assist from Juno. He dispatched Juno to deliver the packets to her before she left on her voyage. He thought saying farewell would be too painful. But if he had known he would never see her again, he would have delivered the papers in person.

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA: Two eclipses later, the information kiosks --- 97 of which had been deployed around the island and 84 of which were working -- activated. Keeler appeared on the screen, and addressed the small crowds that had gathered round them in anticipation of an address from the Regent.

Keeler appeared on the viewscreens, dressed in a rather elaborate outfit of black, yellow, and green.

"People of Miranda, I bid you greetings and salutations.

"I have come before you this evening to announce that I am presenting New Articles of Governance for your ratification. These may be read at any other informational kiosks like this one. Printed copies will be made available at locations throughout the Island State. You have 10 days from now to vote to ratify these Articles of Governance. If a majority of the population approves, these will become the new laws under which you will be governed.

"Key aspects of the articles of governance are your right to free expression, to practice religion, to own weapons, to engage in commerce, to keep what you earn. These Articles will abolish the Regency of Miranda. The Articles will establish a governing council, which will be selected by lottery from among eligible citizens. Their adaptation will mark the birth of the Free Republic of Miranda.

"I think you should ratify these articles. If you find that things aren't working after they have been ratified, you will have the opportunity to change them later – that guarantee is written into the articles.

"For as long as any of you can remember, you have been ruled over by a few Royals. Some have been good, others... not so much. Your previous Regent sold your island to me for one erotic entertainment program. I don't know how he ran the place before I got here, but if that's typical, it could not have been very well.

"Since taking over as Regent I've made many changes. Some of these changes have been felt already. My elimination of the commerce tax and the licensing agencies has already helped improve commerce in the city. By moonrise tomorrow, the artifactories I have constructed around the Pink Palace will begin hiring. Those of you who have been idle, will now have the opportunity to earn a wage and improve your living standard.

"We will be making other improvements to the island, and these details will be provided to you as part of the campaign on behalf of the New Articles of Governance. And you should carefully consider your decision.

"If you do not vote to ratify the Articles of Governance, I am prepared to abdicated the Regency upon their defeat, and I will return the Regency to the remaining Royals who governed previously. So, if you like things the way they have always been, you ought to vote no on ratifying the Articles of Governance.

"Either way, the choice is yours. Thank you for your time and attention."

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA: Over the next 200 days, much changed in the New Free Republic of Miranda. After some teething pains, the artifactories opened, and people went to work in them. The artifactories produced goods that people bought at the shops and businesses. Banks were established to save the wages of the workers and provide loans for homes and businesses. The old estates --- those of the Royals who had accepted Keeler's buyouts --- were divided up and sold. New crops were planted and animals husbanded. On the eastern side of the island, large plantations were established, not just to grow food crops, but also cotton and hemp to support the paper, packaging, and clothing factories.

The tired old streets of downtown Arial roused to life and before very long, every space that could be made into a shop or a tavern was made into a shop or a tavern. East and North of the Pink Palace, new houses were being built to accommodate thousands who were coming from the countryside to Arial to make money. This employed still more people, providing more business, providing more jobs.

Keeler led the efforts to reorganize Miranda's government and economy, and ignored most of Cultural Survey's suggestions as to how to go about that. He slept little those first 200 days, caught in the constant bustle of building a new society while teaching the new legislature how to manage it. They had trouble with the very idea that he wanted them to make the laws and approve his orders... after all, he was the Regent.

He sought to explain economics to the new legislators and especially to explain Government's role ... staying the Hell out of it except where absolutely necessary. He established courts to enforce business contracts. He pushed them to organize a militia to defend the island.

The Pink Palace was slowly converted from a residence into a center of government. The Regent owned two additional palace estates near Arial, and Keeler converted one into the New Regent's Residence and the other into a Technical School to train those Mirandans with high mechanical aptitude in engineering.

By shutting down most of the Regent's offices, he had emptied several large buildings downtown. One of these was reopened as the Arial Stock and

Commodities Exchange. The Mirandans caught on to the concept quickly, and small fortunes began to be accumulated. On one edge of the harbor, a row of ten and fifteen story towers were being constructed to house still more businesses. One ambitious former count was financing the construction of a trading fleet, to sell the unique goods of Miranda in other Island-States.

His efforts were only interrupted by Eliza Change's bothersome requests to leave orbit and resume *Pegasus's* voyage. Keeler reassigned Alkema to the ship to work on the gas giant ignition project, in order to keep the rest of the crew busy on something.

And in the evenings, there were walks through the palace gardens, where he would read letters sent to him by Lady Kate Keats, who was as charming in papers as she had been as a companion. He promised her concerts at the New Free Republic Concert Hall when she returned.

But more or less, for 200 days, things went very well. And when things stopped going well, they stopped going well with remarkable swiftness.

EVENTIDE – ARIAL – THE PINK PALACE: The day things began to go badly, Keeler was in his office reviewing a proposal to expand manufacturing into the smaller towns on the island of Miranda. It would require an extension of the power lines from the Anything Boxes to those other towns. He would need to put an infrastructure crew from *Pegasus* at work on it, as a priority, because it was important to spread prosperity around the island. His secretary, a local hireling named Walter, burst into the room accompanied by a pair of burly Miranda militamen.

"Sir, these men need to see you right away," Walter said.

"They can see me right now. Look, here I am," Keeler answered.

Walter squinted at him through his small round spectacles. "No, sir, I meant, they need to talk to you."

"Why didn't you say that then?"

"Say what?"

"Exactly," Keeler nodded toward the Militiamen. "Talk to me, gentlemen."

The Militiaman reported to him. "Lord Keeler, Count Ankenberry is dead."

Ankenberry had been one of three Royal Counts not to accept the buy-outs. "How?" Keeler asked.

"His carriage was off the North Road, outside his estate. His driver was murdered with arrows, and the Count's throat was slit and his body hung by a tree. A note left at the scene read simply, 'Traitor.'"

Only the note came as a surprise. Keeler had been expecting more detail. He issued some crisp orders to the militiamen. "Deploy the militia around the ports and factories. Tell them to be on the lookout for foreign troops, saboteurs, and people of suspicion generally. Walter, Call the Governing Council together for an emergency meeting in the Cabinet Room."

The Militiamen saluted, grunted "Yes, sir," and left the room. Keeler grabbed Walter by the sleeve before he could leave. "Also, fetch me Goro and Mr. Alkema."

"I don't know where Mr. Alkema is," Walter replied.

"Goro does. Go find him."

"Yes, sir," Walter awkwardly imitated the militia salute then hustled out the door. Keeler locked it behind him.

He pulled out a datapad and activated a COM Link. "Keeler to *Pegasus*..."

A Tactical Officer, Specialist Brandywine appeared. "Captain Keeler, we've just received word that our island base is under attack."

"That didn't take long," Keeler remarked. Although, actually, he had expected the attack on Newhall Island to precede an attack on Miranda.

"Ships in the harbor are firing ballistic and incendiary weapons at the base," Brandywine reported.

"Casualties?" Keeler asked.

"Some minor injuries."

"Damage?"

"Moderate structural damages and some fires," Brandywine reported.

"Tactical response?" Keeler queried.

"Returning fire with our fixed, low-yield pulse cannons," Brandywine responded. "Acting Commander Change has ordered us to implement Contingency Plan Zeta?"

"Za," Keeler replied. "Good choice. Hold them off with cannon and small weapons fire while you evacuate and scrub the base of anything that would indicate an off-world origin. Who is the Warfighter Commander in charge of Base defense?"

"Lieutenant Rook, sir."

"You should advise the Lieutenant Rook to put up a tough fight, but let them take the base. How many people are on the ground?"

"973," Brandywine answered. "We have Aves en route for evacuation. You knew this was coming, didn't you?"

"From the day I met Captain Othello," Keeler replied. "Keep me apprised of the situation. Keeler out."

Keeler turned toward his balcony as he waited for Walter to call him to the Cabinet Room. Across the flat fields were rows of small homes housing workers for his factories were going up. "You've tasted freedom, property, treasure..." he whispered to the distant workers. "If you wish to keep them, you will have to taste blood, only then will you be fully invested in the experiment."

EVENTIDE – ARIAL – THE PINK PALACE: Keeler walked through the corridor to the Executive Conference Room, accompanied by Alkema, Jasmine, Goro, and Walter who spoke to him rapidly, in a compelling, dramatic manner.

Alkema: The ships in the harbor at Island Base are Angleteerian privateers.

Keeler: Privateers?

Alkema: Independent operators paid by the Angleteerian Regency under the table.

Goro: We've spotted troops on their decks.

Keeler: Regulars or mercenaries?

Goro: Mercs.

Keeler: Status of our Militia forces?

Goro: They couldn't hold off a troop of Girly Scouts.

Jasmine: A few warfighters from the ship would make a difference.

Keeler: Our warfighters can advise them, but they have to fight for themselves.

Goro: They'll get killed.

Keeler: We can't fight for them. Oz has spoken. What's the word on the street?

Jasmine: So far, just rumors.

Keeler: Rumors of what?

Jasmine: Count Ankenberry's assassination. A foreign fleet off the coast.

Keeler: Oh, so the rumors are accurate.

Jasmine: I suppose so.

Keeler: That would make them not rumors. Is the fleet in the harbor who I think it is?

Alkema: It's Othello's fleet, sir.

Keeler: Sweet. Walter.

Walter: Sir?

Keeler: I'm gonna make a speech. Write it down and make sure it gets to the people all right, here we are. Goro, Alkema... fetch a pair of carriages and have them waiting for me outside the Palace. This won't take long.

Keeler pushed his way through the double doors and into the Executive Cabinet Room. The Cabinet Room had previously been used by Regent Prospero to act out his favorite scenes from the Auroran Entertainment Programming. Keeler had removed the slings and mattresses, but the lavender velour wallpaper remained, surrounding a long oblong table carved of polished red wood.

Before him gathered the council of 20, the leaders among the people who represented the people of the Free Republic of Miranda. 65 days earlier, they had been farmers, bakers, dockworkers, and clerks. Now, they ran the country. Keeler was not sure how what he was about to tell them would go over, but the fate of their country, their world... and maybe the fate of other colonies... rested on it.

"Ladies and Gentleman of Miranda," he began. "It is my duty to announce to you that the Court of Regent Henry of Angleter has declared the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company illegal and this Free Republic of Miranda government illegitimate. A few hours ago, our primary trading base was attacked and burned to the ground, with heavy loss of life. Count Ankenberry was assassinated early this morning as he attempted to ride to the palace in his carriage."

Their shocked expressions told him he had their full attention. "How do you know of this?" one of the councilors asked.

"We have sources in the Regency of Angleter," Keeler explained, by which he meant *Pegasus* had been monitoring all the Regencies, and he had filled in the gaps with his own intuition.

"The former Royals of Miranda have used the money from the buyout of their estates to purchase a mercenary army," Keeler continued. "They have allied with Angleteer's Navy. They intend to conquer Miranda, and reinstall the Monarchy."

He paused to let the shock register with them, but it didn't. One of the men in the council stood up and demanded, "What are you going to do about this?"

"I am going to ask you to preserve your country," Keeler replied. "If you answer in the affirmative, then we will fight. If you answer in the negative, I will leave, and let you be over-run."

"We can't stand up to Angleteer," another member of the council protested. "Our militia is too small."

"How many people live on the island of Miranda?" Keeler asked.

"Five hundred and some odd thousands," a woman councilor answered.

"Can Angleteer stand against a militia of five hundred and some odd thousands?" Keeler asked.

"You wish to throw all of our people into the fight?" asked an old bald councilor.

"There's a reason I made a munitions factory one of our first industrial enterprises," Keeler said. "There are sufficient weapons to arm two-thirds of our populace. With guidance from our mercenaries, they will be able to hold off the ground forces, or at least make them pay for every acre of territory."

"Our people are not fighters," a Councilor insisted.

Keeler challenged him, challenged them all. "Do you want to give your lands and shops back to the Royals? Do you want to go back the way it was?"

"We were sort of used to it," one of the Councilors admitted. "We've only been a Free Republic for 190 days."

"185 days," Walter corrected.

"We could negotiate," a woman councilor suggested.

"Negotiate what?" Keeler asked.

"The Royals could return, but we keep the economic and political reforms in place," she explained.

Keeler pounded his fist on the table. "What the Hell is wrong with you people? Do you really think the Royals would let the reforms stay in place? Do you think they give a damn about you? Isn't your wealth and freedom worth fighting for?"

“What good is wealth or freedom if you’re dead,” the woman councilor who wanted to negotiate continued.

One of the men stood up. “I think we should give them a fight.”

“Good for you,” Keeler said.

“I put every centime into buying estate lands, even if Count Quisp were gracious enough to let me live, I would be left with nothing,” the male councilor continued.

“I agree we should defend ourselves,” said another woman councilor. “But we need a plan.”

“We need to draw up Articles of War,” a man said.

This was going to go on for a while, Keeler realized. “All right, I’ll let you guys work out the Proclamation of War or whatever. But, as Supreme Commander of the Militia, I am going to lead the people in a defense of your homeland. And, you guys work out whatever you’re going to work out. Consider yourselves advised.”

“But we need your input,” a councilor protested.

Keeler turned to his aide. “Walter, have someone stay here and take notes while the Grand Council debates whether or not to defend their homes and people from invasion. I am going to meet with Count Quackenbush.”

He paused at the door and turned to them. “With any luck, we will have a defense of the country organized in the time it takes you all to write Articles of War to authorize a defense of the country.”

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA – ARIAL – THE DOCKSIDE: Count Quackenbush was the other Royal who had remained behind and Keeler had in return allowed him to buy into the Republic of Miranda Distillery, which was the most profitable of the island’s new business. Count Quackenbush operated out of a tavern in the docks district.

“We knew this day would come,” Quackenbush told Keeler over a glass of his best whiskey. “I am surprised my former elitists were able to organize so quickly.”

“I was expecting another year at least,” Keeler agreed.

“It was foolish to buy them out. You should have had them all hanged,” Count Quackenbush had never liked the Royals, and in conversation had revealed he thought them a bunch of inbred, dysfunctional social derelicts who barely knew how to dress themselves.

"Goro told me the same thing," Keeler quaffed a quick shot. "If Count Ankenberry is dead, I don't think you are safe. I'd like to evacuate you to a place of safety."

"A place of safety," Quackenbush chuckled. "Well, where would that be?"

"Off the island," Keeler said.

Quackenbush shook his head. "I don't think so. But I think I can be useful to you. You're very good, but you are still new. My knowledge and experience will be useful to you as you organize this country's defenses."

"Then, you should come back to the Palace," Keeler said. "You'll be safer there."

Quackenbush laughed. "I somehow doubt that. But I can do more good there, and in times like these, I think my distillery will run profitably without my oversight during the current crisis."

Quackenbush grabbed his favorite maroon hat and the large white cane. He issued orders to his subordinate to poison the whiskey and wine if the distillery were in imminent danger of capture.

As Keeler and Quackenbush stepped out of the tavern, the Captain heard a whistling noise and looked up to see an arrow stopped about half a meter from his heart, grasped in Goro's large, muscular hand. He turned to his side to see Count Quackenbush lying in a pool of blood, three arrows protruding from his neck.

Goro pointed to the minaret of the Harborside Church of Justice. "There, in the tower. Go!" he ordered the pair of Militiamen who were serving as Keeler's bodyguards. He handed the arrow to Keeler. "You want it?"

Keeler took it. "I'll treasure it always. Is he...?"

"Dead," Jasmine confirmed. "Before he even hit the ground."

"You might want to..." Jasmine began to suggest Keeler take cover, but he had no interest in that. He strode purposefully toward the dock where Sovereign was waiting for him... a walk of nearly a kilometer, where assassins could be hidden anywhere along the way.

"Captain, get in the carriage," Alkema ordered.

"To Hell!" Keeler shouted. And he forced his way down the dock toward his ship while nervous aides and bodyguards scrambled behind him.

No one tried to kill Keeler again, and he made it to his ship.

"Get us underway," Keeler ordered Jasmine as she boarded the ship. He proceeded to the Captain's Ready Room. Alkema and an appropriately attired TyroCommander Redfire were waiting for him.

"Helluva ship, Ranking William," Redfire told him.

"I know," Keeler said. "Alkema, what's the latest?"

"Here's the orbital reconnaissance from *Pegasus*," Alkema laid several sheets of paper on the table in front of Commander Keeler. Pains had been taken to make them into the stylized graphics preferred by Eventide's cartographer. They showed a map of the bottle-shaped harbor of Arial. Right at the neck, Othello had positioned a fleet of eighteen warships. Close fly-bys by cloaked probes showed them to be ten frigates with 10 guns each, six corvettes with four guns, and two ships-of-the-line with fourteen guns each.

Keeler hung his arm on Redfire's shoulder. "You've been studying Captain Othello, what's your evaluation?"

Redfire advised. "He is intelligent, but not experienced. His pattern indicates two-dimensional thinking."

Goro scowled. "Two-dimensional? Like we could take him from the air? Or maybe blast his fleet from space."

"Neg, neg, neg," Keeler pounded his fist on the table. "This has got to be an organic victory."

"Or at least look like one," Redfire finished for him.

"You have some ideas?" Keeler asked.

Redfire nodded. "A few."

It struck Keeler that the trace of an impish grin a younger, pre-amnesia Redfire would have flashed was gone. This Redfire was all business about the business of blowing things up.

Keeler looked up from the maps and let his gaze fall upon his sole warship, the Sovereign, anchored in his harbor. With its twenty-two guns, it could match any one of Othello's ships individually. Eight against one, though...

"So, I am guessing that an orbital strike against Othello's fleet is out of the question," Goro hazarded.

"That wouldn't be very sporting at all," Keeler agreed.

Alkema suggested, "We could use cloaked Aves to draw storms into the harbor. His ships would be forced to withdraw."

"Again with the weather," Keeler groaned.

Redfire tapped nervously on the side of table. "Surely, Othello has made his meaning plain. He means to avenge himself upon you, Captain. He means to deprive you of your ship, your kingdom, and your life. In that order."

Goro agreed. "He wants to kill you, you know."

"All I did was steal his business, wreck his flagship, strand him on a deserted island..." Keeler shrugged. "I guess he at least owes me a firm chop in the jaw. Everyone else is dead, but like a poor marksman... he keeps missing the target."

"Can I have the boat when he kills you?" Jasmine asked.

"It's called a ship, Lieutenant," Keeler rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I am willing to make some sacrifices to win this battle... this war," Keeler replied.

"Do those sacrifices include your life?" Redfire asked.

"They do not," Keeler replied. "But sacrifice is the one thing the enemy does not anticipate."

"Do those sacrifices include our lives?" Alkema asked nervously.

"Not if it can be avoided," Keeler assured him. "But Mirandans are going to die... that's a helluva sacrifice."

None of them could tell where he was going with this.

"Orders, sir?" Jasmine requested.

"I need to see his fleet for myself," Keeler insisted. "And I need to see what the ratio of sanity to madness is ... so I can calibrate my own corresponding mix of sanity and madness."

"I'd run that mix a little rich if I were you," Goro advised.

Redfire agreed.

"Where the Hell is Cesario?" Keeler growled.

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA HARBOR: The sun was in shadow. Reliant hung at anchor. Othello and his men waited, keeping the fleets of Miranda and Sapphire trapped at dockside while the landing ships swung to the north and east coasts.

Othello brooded. His fleet was far superior to the one he faced, and he liked it that way. He would have preferred to simply enter the harbor and burn everything in sight. But Regent Henry wanted to claim the Sapphirean Trading Fleet as a prize of war, and the Miranda Royals... a worthless bunch

of inbred dysfunctional drooling idiots in fine clothes... wanted their ships preserved for trading. Fools they were. When this battle was over, they would be servants of Regent Henry, and Miranda would be a province of Angleteer. They were naïve to believe otherwise.

"Boat approaching, sir!" called the bosun's mate.

"Boat approaching, sir!" called the bosun.

"Boat approaching, sir!" said the officer of the watch.

Captain Othello smoothed the front of his brocade coat. "Ready cannons. Warship over merchantman?"

"Neither, sir..." called the bosun's mate.

"Neither, sir..." called the bosun.

"Neither, sir," reported the officer of the watch.

He grabbed the spyglass. A single rowboat was approaching. There was a single occupant inside, a young boy by all appearances.

Captain Othello strode out onto the deck and drew a large pistol from his waistcoat. He pointed it at the rowboat's pilot and addressed him. "What say you, boy?"

Cesario stood. "Sir, I would bring you news of my master."

"Your master, boy?"

"Captain Keeler, sir. I have been in his confidences overlong. He talks of sorcery, sir. Of bringing down storms upon your fleet through magicks. He talks of a great warship in the sky called *Pegasus*. He talks of ending the reign of Regents and Royals, mere anarchy would he unleash upon all our shores. I believe he is mad or in league with devils, I know not which or perhaps both."

Othello threw back his head and left heartily. "Sorcery and devils, he plays with your mind, boy. Did he send you to hearten fear in me of such fancies?"

"He did not send me, sir. I came freely."

"Why?"

Cesario swallowed. "I thought him a good man once."

"And no more?" Othello questioned.

"Nay, sir, more there is," Cesario's voice trembled. "My brother, Sebastian, was pressed into the service of the fleet of Angleteer, captured. Swear upon your honor you will plead my case to Regent Henry, that he shall be returned, and be free to pursue a life of religious fulfillment. This do and I will tell you all I know."

Othello's eyes narrowed, crossly. "Tell me what you know, if it proves true, I'll spare your life and return your brother to you. If it proves false, I'll put both of you to the sword."

Cesario paused, seeming to chew the offer over in his mind. "Sir, is unlikely to grant me more a boon than that offered."

"No, sir is not" Othello growled.

Cesario sighed, paused, and eventually spoke with the utmost reluctance. "Keeler has called all hammersmiths to the harbor. He is adding timber to his merchantmen. He has ordered the garrisons to give him their cannons and men and balls to outfit the merchantmen as gunships. He will challenge your eight ships with his eight ships. He thinks to defeat you in the harbor, but he gambles to leave his garrisons undefended. A land force could take them easily."

"He sends you to deceive me!" Othello spat.

Cesario knelt in the boat. "At the forfeit of my life, sir? I have no wish to die."

"Perhaps he trusts me not to make that forfeit," Othello contended, he tucked his pistol into his waist.

"I offer proof, Captain Othello."

Shaking, he held up a bundle wrapped in a handkerchief, a sheaf of papers.

"What be these things?" Othello asked.

"Details and accountings, contracts made and set to rebuild his ships," Cesario offered. "Pilfered from his desk this very day."

"Pass them here!"

Cesario tossed the bundle at the ship. The Officer of the Watch retrieved it, examined it, and passed the papers to Captain Othello. Othello thumbed through the sheaf of papers. He found a detailed manifest for Sovereign, and saw that the shipwright had recommended repairs to her starboard hull and a complete re-rigging of her sails. This would take days, which meant Sovereign was essentially helpless. He chewed on this information for a while, scowling, tapping his pistol, trying to work out whether he believed him.

"Should we give the sharks a meal, sir?" his mate whispered.

"No," Othello decided finally. "Send him back to his master. Tell him his ruse has failed."

Cesario drew his pistol and leveled it at Cesario. "Lose thyself, boy. We believe you not, nor trust in your master."

"Sir, I pray thee give heed to my words, I can help..."

Casio replied with a shot that blew a chip off the front of the rowboat. Taking the hint, the boy rowed backwards away from the fleet. Gradually, it disappeared into the night.

When it was gone, Othello drew his mate close to him and whispered. "Take two squads of men, land a few leagues away from town. Mind that you are not spotted. Approach from land. One squad shall spy out the garrisons to see if cannons have been removed. One squad shall spy out the harbor, and see if Keeler really is foolish enough to think he can take me in the sea, my own element."

"Regent Henry has ordered Captain Keeler to be taken alive if possible," the mate reminded him.

Othello struck him hard across the face.

"He tasks me," Othello hissed to himself. "He tasks me and I will have him. I'll chase him 'round the moons of Nibia, and 'round the Antares maelstrom, and 'round Perdicion's flames, before I give him up!"

EVENTIDE – MIRANDA HARBOR – EMERGENCE: The sun emerged from shadow and set about burning off the heavy mist that had rolled off the shores of Miranda in the night. The crew of Reliant, and those of Othello's other ships, had never seen such a mist at this latitude. Some took it as an omen.

Captain Othello had not slept since his encounter in darkness with the boy Cesario. That was two nights passed. His spies on land confirmed what the boy had said. Keeler's ship's were being worked in the harbor. Cannon had been taken from the Garrisons. Keeler would attempt to challenge him at sea. He relished it.

He stood on the foredeck of his ship, looking toward the island. He could not see it through the mist, but he knew it was there. He wondered if Keeler would risk an attack in the mist. His fleet was outgunned, perhaps he would foolishly seek an advantage in the blinding fog.

Let Keeler Come, was Othello's sentiment. At the first diamond light of emergence, the mercenary land forces were to land on the island. Count Cornpop would land outside the northern town of Sihnon. Count Grapenuts would land in the east and take the town of Simon River. After securing those towns, another force would take the Pink Palace, whose soft government would surrender quickly. Captain Othello would move into the harbor at Arial and take the Sapphirean Trading fleet Keeler had so foolishly gathered there.

He had memorized the map provided for him by his spies. He knew precisely where each ship of the Sapphirean Trading Fleet was docked: *Sovereign, Red Jacket, Belle Jest, Morning's Angel, Queen of Hearts*, he had memorized their positions at the dock.

Unless Keeler moved first.

Othello wanted Keeler taken alive so he could be brought back in chains to Angleteer for trial and hanging.

But dead was also okay, if that was the way the Captain wanted it.

He would move as soon as the mist burned off.

"Captain, ship ho!" called the bosun's mate.

"Captain, ship ho!" called the bosun.

"Captain, ship ho!" called the officer of the watch.

Othello slowly turned toward the officer of the watch, who was peering through a spyglass. "He moves?" growled Othello. He knocked the officer aside and took the glass for himself.

Through the spyglass, the gray shape of a warship in full sail began to resolve in the midst. It was too large to be Red Jacket. It could only be

Sovereign. "There she is! There she is! Ah... and perhaps not so wounded as we were led to believe. So much the better!"

Othello calculated. Keeler was too canny to run at them in his flagship alone... no matter how well-armed it was. He must be leading his fleet in an attack run. A fair strategy under the circumstances, Othello thought. They could outgun Keeler, but a hard assault right through the center of his line would break through easily, and he could take the harbor. So, Keeler was abandoning Miranda and making a run for it. With a little luck, he might slip through the Angleteerian line behind him. Keeler had pulled off more unlikely feats than this before.

"Come around and meet them full on!" Othello ordered. "Bring the fleet together, we will destroy them at sea!" Othello hoped Keeler was not leading the attack himself, he did not want him to die a glorious death in battle.

The message was flashed to the nearby ships. Three frigates and the other heavy battleship closed the line.

He raised the glass again. The ship coming on was definitely Sovereign. He calculated the odds Keeler was on-board.

"Move the barques along the line, make sure he doesn't try to flank us," Othello ordered. Keeler was smart enough to use Sovereign as a distraction while he made his escape in a smaller ship. In any case, he did not intend to send Sovereign to the bottom of the bay if he could avoid it. A Tararian ship would make a grand trophy to present to Regent Henry.

"When you can see her clearly in the mist, fire on her sails," Othello ordered.

Sovereign emerged from the mist, her sails full of wind, flying full at them. A fusillade from the three nearest ships burned streaks of black and red through the morning sky and slashed through her mainsail. A second salvo shredded her two largest sails and splintered the top of the second mast. Othello's ships readied themselves for return fire, but Sovereign held her course and kept her guns silent.

"What's he doing?" asked the officer of the watch.

"Hold thy tongue within," Othello snapped, but he was asking the same question. He lifted the spyglass and scanned the ship again. Smoke from the burning sails obscured her deck. Then, there were flashes.

Missiles from Sovereign's guns arced toward his ships. They went wide of Reliant, but struck two of his flanking ships, doing moderate damage.

"Fire again!" Othello ordered.

Those cannons which had been reloaded launched another fusillade at Sovereign, but the ship was drifting to port because of the damage to her sails. One shot crashed into the afterdeck, but the others went wide.

“Fire again!” Othello ordered.

The guns were re-aimed, hastily, and the next barrage caught the ship broadside, splintering the wood of her whole. By now, all of Sovereign’s sails were a ablaze, and the fire was spreading across her deck. Fiery and blackened, she bore down on them like a vision from Hell.

As Sovereign closed to 100 meters and less, Othello raised the spyglass again and tried to peer through the smoke for signs of the crew, who should have been struggling to put out the fires... or reload. He saw a splash off the side and saw another crewmen drop into the water. Abandoning ship! The prize was his!

“Close in and prepare boarding parties!” Othello ordered. “Ready buckets and hoses!” There was still a chance to save his prize.

Reliant and three of his other ships moved to surround Sovereign, which had lost the wind and was dead in the water.

“Tend to the fires!” Othello ordered.

A crewman threw a ten-liter bucket water on the burning deck of the Sovereign.

Then, Sovereign exploded.

More descriptively, Sovereign exploded in a massive fireball of fire and shrapnel that engulfed Reliant and two of the nearest ships, the heavy warship Regulus and the frigate Genesis. The intense heat of the fireball ignited the armament storage lockers in the two other ships, exploding them in a fury of blast and shrapnel.

In seconds, Othello had lost three ships, and another two of his fleet were burning.

So intense was the blast, that it burned away the mist from the surface of the harbor in a rapidly expanding circle. It was replaced by smoke pouring from the wrecks of Othello’s fleet. And if Othello’s surviving ships had not been completely in panicked disarray, and if they could have seen through the smoke of the burning hulks that were all that remained of Reliant, Regulus, and Genesis... they would have seen the proud, up-armored, Royal Sapphirean trading fleet bearing down on them.

Eventide Harbor – Red Jacket: Alkema looked through his spyglass... similar in appearance to the one used by Captain Othello, but stuffed with

high-resolution optronics. "Two battle cruisers destroyed... one frigate destroyed... two frigates damaged and burning..." He put the glass down and turned to Captain Keeler. "Two-thirds of his heaviest warships destroyed."

"Thank you, Ranking Phil," Keeler said to TyroCommander Redfire.

Phil Redfire was still decked out in the costume of a proper bridge officer. "Glad you enjoyed the pyrotechnics, commander."

"Captain," Keeler corrected.

"Captain," Redfire agreed. "Amazing what you can do with common chemicals and a sodium-based detonator, if you know how to mix them properly."

"Would chemicals include proto-stellar plasma from a gas hypergiant?" Alkema asked.

"Maybe a little," Redfire allowed.

"Othello was just the appetizer," Keeler said. "The Main Course is behind him," he indicated the table map, from which most of the small wooden models representing Othello's ships had been removed. Beyond his picket line was the Angleteerian Navy."

"They're moving," Alkema reported.

"Of course," Keeler turned and called to Jasmine. "Prepare to make way."

"What's our course, sir?" she asked.

"Set a course to rendezvous with the Angleteerian flagship," Keeler ordered.

She looked at him as though he had grown a second head and asked for a Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster. "Are you sure, sir?"

"Get on the bridge and take us out to meet them."

"I advise against it, sir," Redfire advised... against it.

"I got us this far," Keeler reminded him.

"Shall I convey the order to the other ships?" Alkema asked.

"Negative, we go alone," Keeler ordered. "Have the other ships clean up the mess and support the shore parties if necessary. Speaking of which..."

He flipped the map around and indicated the north and east of the islands. "How are the enemy landings going?"

"They've gotten some troops ashore, but they are encountering stiff offshore winds," Alkema told him, with a wink.

"It's up to the Mirandans to hold off the ones that get through," Keeler decided.

"Goro and the warfighters will keep them in line," Redfire said. Goro had been dispatched to lead the defense against the mercenaries on the ground. Keeler felt sorry for them.

"Still, people are going to die today," Keeler went on. "We have to make it worth it."

Cesario came down off the bridge. "Oh, Captain, my captain, the day is yours."

"You acted your part well," Keeler acknowledged

"Well and fairly said good captain," Cesario replied. "I prithee, though, what my part did accomplish, save for it appraised him our very strategy."

"Which was what I wanted," Keeler replied. "He was prepared for a fight, he never dreamed I would use the pride of my fleet as..." his voice choked a little. "... a fireship."

Keeler removed his hat, mournfully. "Cesario, find out how long before we meet the fleet of Angleteer."

Eventide – Miranda Harbor: Broken and burned, Captain Othello clung to a shattered piece of Reliant's hull, watching his last burning ship sink into the sea.

"To the last," he hissed. "I will grapple with thee... from Hell's heart, I stab at thee! For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee!"

Later, one of Keeler's trading ships picked him up and gave him a large blanket. He huddled and sulked at the rear deck for the rest of the battle.

Eventide – The Southern Sea --- Red Jacket: Jasmine guided Red Jacket toward the flagship of the Angleteer fleet, the HMS Wasp. The bigger ship's guns were trained on her, as were the guns of four other vessels in the vicinity. At one word, they could unleash hell.

Eddie Roebuck intoned scripture. "I enjoy long walks through the valley of the shadow of death and the company of thou who comforts me. My dislikes include evil, which I fear not when you are with me..."

Jasmine told him that Red Jacket had come up within 40 meters of the flagship. Keeler peered through his spyglass to see the crew assembling on the deck.

"Which is the captain?" Keeler whispered to Cesario.

"Admiral Kellogg, he fills the uniform of the Angleteerian master of the fleet, in the black and gold coat," Cesario answered.

"30 meters, captain," Jasmine intoned quietly.

"Are they taking any offensive action?" Redfire asked.

"No sign of it," Alkema reported.

"20 meters," Jasmine said.

"Close enough, hold here," Keeler ordered. Keeler saluted and raised a megaphone, "Admiral Kellogg, I approach under a flag of truce, will you hear me?"

The Admiral appeared to consult with three of his officers. Finally, he favored Keeler with a crisp nod. One of the officers shouted. "Come aboard unarmed and prepare to surrender thyself and thy fleet; pay thee homage to Regent Henry and to the rightful and birthrighted Lords of Miranda."

"I'm coming aboard unarmed," Keeler told them. "No promises beyond that." He turned to Redfire. "If I'm not back in an hour, you and Goro get a squad of commandoes and rescue me. Understood?"

"Aye, Captain," Redfire saluted him.

Red Jacket pulled alongside Angleteer's flagship. Keeler and Cesario jumped aboard and were met by its officers. Keeler saluted, "Greetings and salutations, Admiral Kellogg."

"Hold thy words," Kellogg ordered him. "My orders are to take you prisoner and return you to Anchor-Park-on-Avon for trial in the fair and judicious courts of Regent Henry."

"I have some experience of your Regent's courts," Keeler replied. "What are my crimes?"

"Piracy, perversion of the public morality, and subversion of the social order," Admiral Kellogg replied.

"And the penalty?"

"A stretched neck," Admiral Kellogg replied matter-of-factly. He did not seem a harsh or arrogant man. There was something of the soldier about him, an obligation to duty. He seemed like a decent sort of fellow a man could reason with. Keeler decided to take a chance on reasoning with him. He could destroy the fleet later if it didn't work out.

"I want to show you something," Keeler said. He carefully withdrew a poster-sized roll of papers from his pouch and spread a pair of maps on the table. "This is the harbor of Miranda. Your fleet is represented by these black circles. The ships of my fleet are the blue triangles. What remains of Othello's fleet... these red squares, are being taken back to the dockside as prizes of war. As you can see, our forces are outnumbered and outgunned, your forces are superior."

"Any fool can see that," Kellogg stated, agreeably rather than arrogantly.

Keeler nodded. "Now, I want to direct your attention to these blue squares beyond the mouth of the harbor. They represent the naval fleet of Tara, who are my allies. And they will soon be joined by privateers from the Isle of Illyria, whom I have secured with my profits. The Tararians would very much like to be the dominant naval power on this... in the world. The destruction of your fleet would leave no doubt in my mind which is more powerful."

Kellogg was aghast. "Tara?"

"You can send one of your swift-boats to verify their presence," Keeler said. "But they are out there, I assure you. Just as I can promise you that were you to attempt to conquer my island with your ground troops, you would find a gun and a sword waiting for your men behind every tree and every rock, you would find a sniper in every window, and in any inn or tavern where your men would lay down, they would never know whether they would awaken to find their throat slit. The forces of Count Cornpop and Count Grapenuts are learning this as we speak. The people of Miranda will not readily give up their freedom."

Cesario spoke. "If you press your attack, Regent Henry will find himself with a reduced fleet, and mired in a long, deadly, expensive campaign in a distant land."

"Quiet boy," Kellogg snapped. "I have no means to discern the truth of what you proclaim. Perhaps the Fleet of Tara is there, perhaps not. Perhaps the mercenary armies are meeting this people's resistance, perhaps not. If I hesitate to press my attack until determining the verities of your report, you are given time to prepare a defense. However, if I press my attack, and your words are truthful, in the end, I meet my end."

Keeler nodded sympathetically. "I agree, it is quite a dilemma for you. Let me offer you ... a saving grace."

"Speak and I will listen to it," Kellogg replied. He was reserved, but Keeler sensed he welcomed an honorable way out of the fight.

"In return for your withdrawal from Miranda, I will resign as Regent of Miranda's government. My legislature will offer Regent Henry a Treaty in return for no further interference in their affairs of state."

Kellogg shook his head. "I cannot foresee the Regent accepting that."

"The Treaty will in turn offer Trade and Friendship to Angleteer," Keeler offered. "Furthermore, I will dissolve the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company and it will no more confound Regent Henry. You can claim victory and return with your fleet intact..."

Kellogg considered this. "It is a good offer, but Regent Henry will demand your just trial and punishment."

"I will plead guilty to the charges in exchange for a punishment of my choosing," Keeler offered.

Kellogg rubbed his chin, maybe to hide a smile. "And what, pray thee, would you accept as punishment?"

"Exile," Keeler answered. "Exile to the dark side of the world. You may deliver me there personally."

"No one can survive on the dark side," Kellogg warned him. "The darkness and the elements forebear against the strongest will. Man finds neither food, nor water, nor warmth, nor comfort nor even light. And you must pass through the veil of storms to reach it, which few ships survive that passage."

Keeler shrugged. "Then, call me a mad man, but who would doubt the reason of Regent Henry, and who would not sing praise to the noble Admiral who brought down the terror of the waters... the ruthless Captain Keeler."

Kellogg nodded "Exile it is."

"Red Jacket will deposit me on that far shore," Keeler told him. "You may send a ship to follow."

"I will send a ship to follow to the veil of storms, I'll not risk a ship and crew to see to your exile," Kellogg agreed. "You will know your life is forfeit on any shore should you return."

"You shall not see my kind again," Keeler promised. "In return, I ask only that the people of Miranda continue on their way."

Kellogg almost smiled then, but fought it back. "Sir, did I not know thee to be but a Mariner, I would swear there was Royal blood in you."

"Perhaps I am a bastard prince," Keeler replied. "Or merely a bastard. In any case, send word to Miranda. They will be molested no more. I will return

to the ship, you may keep my boy. He has proven himself a good and loyal servant, these many days."

Cesario looked shocked. "My Lord, this cannot be. I have served you well."

"And you must serve me no more," Keeler said, and added hyper-dramatically. "For I am going to a dark, cold and forgotten place of exile, where I shall surely die."

"I pray thee, sir. Let me return to Red Jacket with you," tears were welling up in Cesario's eyes."

Keeler shook his head. "I cannot withdraw the offer without losing honor, without unmaking the deal I have made with Admiral Kellogg. On the other hand, if you had some defect or deformity that made you unfit to serve him, then I would have to withdraw..."

Cesario sighed. "You force it from me, sir. Your master quits you; and for your service done him, So much against the mettle of your sex, So far beneath your soft and tender breeding, And since you call'd me master for so long, Here is my hand: you shall from this time be Your master's mistress."

"Ha!" Keeler exclaimed. "I knew you were a chick! You're all my witnesses!" He pointed round to members of Kellogg's crew.

As the day drew on, Captain Keeler and Admiral Kellogg drew up the Treaty. Angleteer pledged to end its aggression toward Miranda and allow the Free Republic to govern itself. Keeler pledged to disband the Royal Sapphirean Trading Company, quit as Governor-General, and accept exile to "dark and distant lands" with the understanding that he would be considered a criminal, and his life forfeit, were he to ever be seen in the Archipelago. The survivors of Othello's fleet --- now prisoners of the Miranda Militia, would be returned to the custody of Admiral Kellogg's fleet. By evening, the provisions had been drawn up to both sides satisfaction.

A ship was sent ahead to Arial Harbor to convey to the General Council the end of hostilities. Cesario carried the packet containing the Treaty, as well as a personal letter from Keeler conveying to her the command of the Trade Ship Sea Witch and ordering the Council to issue her papers as a registered merchant captain ... in the name of Cesario of Illyria. It seemed fitting.

It was planned that in the next emergence, Admiral Kellogg's flagship would enter the port under the colors of peace.

Two of Kellogg's ships would escort Red Jacket to the veil of storms and proceed inward as far "as caution and sense prevail."

And that was the last anyone of Eventide ever saw of Captain William Randolph Keeler, -- the Legendary Pirate-Regent -- as his ship disappeared into the stormy mist. He stood on the uppermost deck, a flagon of Miranda's finest whiskey at his side. He raised his bottle in a final salute, and the captain of the Angleteerian escort ship returned it.

EVENTIDE: CHAPTER TWELVE

Just beyond the veil of clouds... 270 kilometers, to be more precise... was a large, barren piece of rock; an island without a name, storm-tossed and dark. But it was large enough and flat enough to land an Aves on, and it had a half decent anchorage on the far side, away from the wind. Red Jacket made port here, and Keeler left his ship for the last time. The long months that the Captain was down on the planet passed quietly on board the ship. I did not miss him, and anyone who says I did is lying.

The Pegasus Keeler returned to was strikingly different than the one he had left. With the materials we harvested from the dark side of the planet, we were able to fabricate replacement parts for many of our damaged systems. Power was restored to sections of the ship that had been dark for years. We fabricated replacement hull plating and patched parts of the outer hull that we had not been able to get to before. Pegasus's outer hull became a patchwork of the original gold composite, the platinum plates they had added in the first round of repairs, and the new black and silver poly-composite-alloys made from materials recovered from Eventide.

When Zilla docked in the Hangar Bay, the Captain returned directly to his quarters. We had arranged some surprises for him.

Acclimated to the dim sun of Eventide, Keeler had to wear light-filtering lenses to accustom himself to the brightness of *Pegasus's* normal interior lighting. He reached his quarters escorted by Lt. Cmdr. Alkema and a young Gethsemanian Page. He still wore clothing from the surface of the planet.

When they reached his quarters, Keeler opened his hatch and stood all amazed.

His quarters had been redone in panels and beams of blond wood. The floor was hardwood planks. His curtains had been redone in the same fabric as had been used in Sovereign's sails, tastefully, though. It didn't look like a seafood-themed restaurant in Carpentaria, but the effect tastefully recalled Sovereign.

"Do you like it, Commander?" asked Lt. Commander Alkema, hopefully.

In a voice scarcely louder than a whisper, Keeler asked "How did you do this?"

Alkema gestured for Keeler to take a seat on the couch. They were new couches, but in the style of the old ones, which Keeler had always found enormously comfortable. He brought the Commander a glass of Eventidian

brandy and explained. "We bought Sovereign's sister ship, Majesty, from the Tararians. They were going to scrap her anyway. We disassembled her and used her timbers to redecorate your quarters."

Keeler tilted the glass and downed his brandy in a gulp. "Why?" he asked.

"It was plain to all of us how happy you were on that ship. Some of us were surprised you didn't stay behind and let *Pegasus* leave without you."

"The thought crossed my mind," Keeler admitted.

Alkema met his eyes. "I know it did."

"We have a gift for you, Captain," Queequeg told him.

"Another one?" Keeler should have been surprised, but he wasn't. Two Technical Crewmen wheeled it out of his guest room. It was a scale model of Sovereign, about two meters long and brilliantly detailed. Despite himself, Keeler found his eyes watering. "For the first time in my adult life, I do not have a damn thing to say."

"Thank you' would work," Alkema suggested.

"Za, thank you. Thank you, indeed. Thank you," Keeler repeated, feeling as though he were on the verge of blubbering. "I feel like it's my natal anniversary."

"You had two while we were on the planet," Alkema reminded him.

Keeler wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "You're a good man, Ranking David, I don't care what everyone says about you."

"Well, I am your butler," Alkema reminded him. "For the next 272 days, anyway."

"Thank you for reminding me," Keeler handed him his glass and Alkema filled it up again. When he returned, Keeler said, "Thank you, but you're still my butler. Prepare my hygiene pod. I expect my towels to be warm when I emerge."

"Very good, sir," Alkema said. "You may also be happy to learn I may have devised a solution to the problem of the Anything Boxes."

"Swell," Keeler said. "Now, get me those towels and a set of clean pajamas."

Best of all, his shower worked.

Devised a solution my furry butt! It was my idea, and I was the one who showed him how to make it work. More on that, later.

After the Captain had his shower and a nap and a few more drinks and breakfast and then one more drink and then a long angry rant about his clothes smelling of cat urine or something similarly ridiculous because I did not miss him while he was gone, did not resent his absence, and most certainly did not instinctively moisten the clothes in his closet with my own aromatic excretions --- he went to help Alkema with his science project.

PEGASUS'S FORWARD MISSILE HATCHERY – David Alkema and Lieutenant Scientist Hardcandy Toto stood next to the open warhead bay of a highly modified Nemesis Carrier Vehicle, putting the final touches on a rather amazing weapon.

The Nemesis Carrier Vehicle looked something like a slimmed-down Aves with stubby little wings and a large, bulbous forward section that contained its payload of up to twelve Nemesis warheads; variable yield anti-matter bomb that could destroy entire planets. The Carrier's warheads had been removed and returned to the ship's armory. Three large pods bulged around its stumpy nose. As Alkema and Hardcandy calibrated the instruments in the weapons bay, Captain Keeler sat on a ladder nearby, watching them work in the comfort of his bathrobe.

"Explain how this works to me again," Keeler asked.

Alkema sighed. He knew it was futile, but he would try to explain it again. "We have replaced the Nemesis warheads from this vehicle with three modified pulse-graviton generators made from the parts Acting Commander Change let us salvage from the Number Three Gravity Engine."

"And a few other pieces we assembled from fusion generators, spare Aves parts, and one Nemesis warhead," added Hardcandy Toto. "It's a real Frankenmonster piece of work."

Alkema tapped one of the input screens, frowned at the result, and put in new equations. He continued talking as he did. "We are going to fire this rig into the core of the gas mega-giant. If the shields don't hold until it reaches the inner core, it will be crushed like ... an egg, I guess."

"An egg under 40,000 atmospheres of pressure," Hardcandy added.

Keeler interrupted. "I get that it's a messy piece of engineering, and I get that you are firing it into the gas giant. OK, what will that do?"

Alkema closed the weapons bay and approached Keeler as he explained, making hand motions to indicate the flight path and explosion of the probe, "When it reaches the core, the pulse-graviton generators will fire, flooding the core with graviolis. These will pull together all the matter around the core, and the core will become super-dense, collapse on itself, and hopefully, ignite

a sustained fusion reaction inside the core. That will turn the mega-giant into a star."

"I get all that," Keeler said impatiently. "What I want to know is, where should I be standing when it happens? I mean, how many times in life do you get to present at the birth of a star?"

"I think there will be pretty good view from the dark hemisphere," Alkema said. "From *Pegasus*, you won't see much other than a blinding flash of light... and maybe a shockwave as some of the matter is blown into space. But if you pick the right vantage point on the surface, you'll see You'll see a brand new sun."

"Is there any change the new star will explode and, you know, destroy all life in the system?" Keeler asked.

Toto held her thumb and forefinger a few millimeters apart. "About this much of a chance. And only if Commander Alkema and I are much worse at math than we think we are."

"It's more likely that if we made an error in the calculations nothing will happen," Alkema said. "It will fizzle."

"It's still pretty incredible to try and figure out how the ancients built the gas giant to begin with," Toto said. "And it has to be an artificial construct. The mixes of hydrogen, helium 3, deuterium, and tritium are too pure. There's almost no cosmic dust present, which says that they must have brought the material from somewhere else."

"Or transformed the cosmic dust from this system into pure hydrogen and helium 3," Alkema countered. "I have a theory that at the core of the gas mega-giant, there could be some huge version of the Anything Boxes, and they've done nothing but convert the gas and dust of this system into star-fuel for the last two or three thousand years."

"And I think for various reasons he's off his nut," Toto giggled.

Alkema grunted. "Be that as it may, we've learned enough about the matter transmorphification technology used in the Anything Boxes that we may be able to replicate some of it on the ship."

Keeler raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Don't get too excited, captain. It's going to take years of work to adapt the technology," Toto flicked a loose strand of hair back behind one of her adorable ears. "But it will give us something to do while we transit to the next system."

Alkema closed and sealed the last panel on the probe's exterior. "I think it's ready."

Keeler looked at the strange spacecraft. It seemed impossible that something so small could be the catalyst for adding a new star to the night sky, albeit a quite dim one. The new star would only output about half the light of the system's primary. But it would illuminate the surface of the planet slightly more when it was at closest approach through some kind of perverted squares law Keeler did not pretend to understand.

"Do we have a name for this probe?" Keeler asked.

Alkema looked puzzled. "A name? We didn't really think one was necessary."

Keeler shook his head. "Names are important. People always remember the names of ship's longer than they remember the names of their captains."

"This ship has one mission, and then it's done," Alkema sort of argued.

"Sunspark," Hardcandy Toto suggested. "We will call it Sunspark."

The Captain decided he would accept the risk and watch the stellar transformation from the surface. Alkema, in his role as butler (which was not noticeably different from his role as Second Officer) prepared Keeler a large picnic basket to enjoy while watching the show.

I stayed behind on the ship and watched the transformation attempt from the Astronomy laboratory. It was more interesting. I had come to hate the gas mega-giant. To me, it was just a big ball of cold white gas... useless. A few of the humans thought the transformation of a gas giant into a star was a dangerous interference with nature processes. But who am I to object? I'm a talking cat.

EVENTIDE – THE DARK SIDE: When the Sunspark probe was launched, (Not) Commander Keeler was sitting on the back of a Warthog near what had been Tango Base when General Kitaen had been conducting training exercises on the surface of Eventide.

It was bitterly cold, but he and TyroCommander Redfire were bundled in heavy-issue landing jackets and boots, heated. They were parked on a ridge overlooking a valley of gently undulating hills. Stubby plants covered the hills and part of the ridge; Keeler was amazed that anything could survive on so little light.

Keeler and Redfire had warm thermoses of hot chocolate. Keeler's was, of course, enhanced with chocolate crème liqueur. Keeler took a long draught of the beverage then replaced the cap. Redfire checked his chronometer. "Twenty seconds from launch," he reported.

"You know what surprises me," Keeler said out of almost no where. "It surprises me that Ranking David and Hardcandy came up with this weapon without you. This kind of thing used to be right up your alley."

"Perhaps the torch has been passed," Redfire said. "And the weapon did use some of the parameters from my previous weapon designs."

"You simply don't seem as excited as you should be at the prospect of ... all that stuff exploding, Ranking Phil."

"Perhaps, I am getting old." Redfire's chronometer beeped. "The probe just launched."

"Here we go," Keeler said. He swiveled his head. "Where, exactly, should I be looking?"

Redfire pointed. "Look at the brightest star in the sky, about forty degrees above the horizon, right where I'm pointing. That's the gas mega-giant. It will take seven and a half minutes for the probe to reach the core. We're about 85 light seconds from the megagiant, so, we should know in about ten minutes if it works."

"Is it always this dark on the dark side of this planet?" Keeler asked, shifting to try and find a comfortable position in the cold. The night sky was a perfect velvet black, and the stars glittered so clearly that their sharp points of light hurt his eyes.

"When the moon is high, it's brighter," Redfire reported.

Keeler shuddered. "I don't know how our warfighters coped with this."

Redfire assured him. "After a few days, their eyes got acclimated to it."

"And the cold?" Keeler asked, turning up the thermostat in his landing suit.

"They got used to that, too," Redfire replied. "Sometimes, the kids, I mean, the warfighters, would come back from an engagement, and their uniforms would be caked with frozen sweat."

"Engagements? Is that the young people call it these days," Keeler wiggled his eyebrows, but no one saw under his parka. He had seen the reports; fourteen pregnancies among Gethsemanian females who had participated in the War Games.

Redfire took a drink from his thermos, and then continued to speak. "Max Jordan --- who is a son to me in all but the biological sense --- is a very skilled warrior. General Kitaen set up a challenge requiring his squad to crawl through a canyon of snow and rock to shut down a generator on the far side. Most of his team were wiped out in the first ambush. But Max fought and snuck his way across the valley. Sniped all the sentries at the generator.

Disabled the automatic defenses, and shut it down. General Kitaen promoted him to Lieutenant on the spot."

"You should indeed be proud of him," Keeler agreed. "I've been meaning to ask, did I get the report right that we lost eight of those kids to training accidents over the last year?"

Redfire reported stoically. "Za, we lost three in climbing accidents, two in vehicle accidents, two to weapons malfunctions, and one self-termination."

"Crap on a cracker, Ranking Phil." Keeler stomped his feet. The heating unit in the boot was working well, but somehow a sense of numbness was still setting in.

"Military training is supposed to be tough," Redfire argued. "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war."

"Still, Cheese Louise, eight kids," Keeler sighed, and took another drink of what was still, very technically, hot chocolate.

"We lost almost that same number of people to drowning and accidents in the civilian landing parties," Ranking Phil offered. "And we had a larger number of injuries and episodes of violence among the civilian landing parties."

Keeler grunted. That much was true. The body count from Eventide was rather large compared with most of the worlds they had visited, but mainly a function of the length of time spent on the planet and the number of people visiting it. Also, most of the casualties were among the Gethsemanian refugees.

"I hate to say it," Keeler said. "But the Gethsemanian refugees seem to lack our discipline and character."

"We selected ourselves for this mission, they did not," Redfire pointed out. "Some of them have asked to remain behind on the planet. Commander Change is considering their petition."

Now that he had the opening he was waiting for, Keeler asked, "Are you still banging Acting Commander Change?"

Redfire paused before he responded. "Neg, General Kitaen is banging Acting Commander Change."

"Really?" Keeler guessed he was more out of touch than he should have been.

"Za, they began at some point during our transit to here from Gethsemane system. I believe it was during the mining operation on Fury."

Keeler thought probably a lot of affairs had begun during the transit. It was certainly one way of dealing with the boredom.

"Have you thought much more about... the other place?" Redfire asked, as he always did when the two were drinking together.

"Not much, over the last... how long have we been on this planet?"

"Four hundred fourteen ship-days," Redfire answered.

"Amazing, time does fly," Keeler said.

"So, not much then," Redfire guessed. "I continue to try and meditate upon the experience, and I still find that whatever occurred in wherever we were is still like a half-remembered dream that slips away from me, the harder I try to grasp it."

"Did I tell you about that Hamlet guy we met?" Keeler asked.

"I read your reports," Redfire answered soberly. "During the long cold nights on this dark side of this planet, I have often tried to contemplate what the Kariad said; that everything we think we experienced was a delusion brought on by the malfunction of the device."

Keeler snorted. "And you believe that?"

"In the end, I don't," Redfire replied. "I still feel that even though I cannot remember what happened, or even if anything really happened, it is still somehow influencing my life and the choices I have made since I got back. For that reason, I believe the experience to have been real. However, I gave the Kariad perspective due consideration for the sake of philosophical honesty."

Keeler grunted. "Whatever."

Redfire checked his chronometer. "The probe should be inside the core by now."

Keeler looked in the space he was supposed to, but his attention was drawn to the other stars. "How is the mapping project going. Where are we headed next?"

Redfire pointed to a part of the night sky, to the south, toward the zenith. "See that bright star... behind it, lost in the glare, is another star which we think is where Jericho colony is located."

His pointing finger swept across the sky. "And over in this direction is a colony called Cormorant. Beyond it, Ironheart. Ironheart and Jericho, according to the literature from Yronwode, were military outposts of the old Commonwealth."

Keeler's outlook brightened. "Military bases? Then, they ought to have maps or something. Maybe even some old tech."

Redfire was not so optimistic. "If they weren't destroyed by the Tarmigans." His chronometer chirped urgently. He checked his ship-link. "The payload has detonated."

For 80 seconds, nothing happened. Creation held its breath. Keeler even kept his mouth shut as he waited.

Then, the bright star 40 degrees above the horizon began to glow even brighter. It dropped in magnitude by a point and held there for a fraction of a second.

Then, it was like the lights came on, all over the world. The sky went from black to a deep indigo. The biting cold did not immediately flee, but the temperature climbed several degrees centigrade in that first instance.

Suddenly, the land before them was visible in all its magnificent desolation. In the fresh light he could see much farther into the distance, could see details in the land. Far off in the distance was a frozen stream that turned and twisted through the hills like a Kandorian Sidewinder.

But mostly, it was rock, frozen mud, and scrubby little bushes.

"That's all?" Keeler asked in disappointment.

"I'll make a note to Mr. Alkema that the next time he ignites a sun, he should make it more entertaining for you," Redfire deadpanned.

"Damned Spiffy, he will!" Keeler took a slug from his thermos. He looked out over the valley. The scrubby little plants that covered the hills were rippling in the wind.

Then, he realized there wasn't a wind. Not even a breeze.

"Ranking Phil," Keeler muttered. "Either there is too much crème liqueur in my heated-up chocolate, or that bush just moved."

Pegasus has very, very good sensors. Even our optical sensors are good enough to track a single ship on a planet's oceans from a distance of 100,000 kilometers. I was in the Forward Telemetry Laboratory when the mega-giant became a sun. It was all very interesting and when the first beams of light from that naked star poured through the open viewports of the laboratory I had to fight my instincts not to lay down and take a nap.

The energy readings from that stellar ignition will be studied for centuries. But the sensors trained on the planet told a much more interesting story. They told a story of awakening, and the humans that witnessed that witnessed something that will probably never be replicated in the next hundred centuries.

As the first dawn in its history broke across the (no longer) dark side of Eventide, it became clear to the humans that they had made a mistake in assuming that, like the previous artificial world we had explored, the Ancients had left half this world barren on purpose. That had not been their purpose at all.

EVENTIDE: THE SURFACE: A forest had appeared around the area that had been Firebase Prime, and only the strips that had been cleared of scrub for military operations were bare now. Majestic trees reached toward the heavens, forming a clearing where the prefab operations base (a collection of Quonset buildings and large tents) had been built. From the top of the watchtower, a spotter could see, in the distance, golden fields ripe with grain, and orchards heavy with fruit.

All of this had appeared in the twenty hours since the second sun was ignited. The two or three hundred crew who had chosen to watch the sun's ignition from the surface had watched in amazement as whole eco-systems grew, as though in a time-lapse visual data presentation.

"Your report said this area was nothing but scrub and moss?" Alkema challenged Kitaen as they walked across the compound. The second sun, by then, had warmed the hemisphere to the temperature of a mild spring day. They had stripped out of their parkas, no longer necessary in the rapidly warming atmosphere. They still wore full landing dress, however. Even Kitaen was wearing a shirt.

"It had been," Kitaen confirmed.

"These trees must have grown to maturity within hours." Alkema picked at the bark of one of the alders, as though to confirm for himself it was all real.

A Warthog drove up the trail, piloted by Blade Toto with Captain Keeler riding shotgun. Keeler jumped out of the vehicle before it had stopped, stumbled, recovered his bearings, and approached Alkema and Kitaen. The Tactical Commander saluted him and Alkema, reflexively, followed suit.

"We drove all the way to the end of the valley," Keeler reported. "I've never seen anything like this. Trees are growing before my eyes. Flowers blossom in your hand."

"The rate of growth has leveled off in the last few hours," Alkema informed him.

"Can your mighty science explain this miracle?" Keeler challenged.

Alkema sighed, not knowing how much of this would go over the commander's head. "My science can try. We think the plant life on this planet was in a sort bio-stasis. We have no idea how the ancients could have pulled it

off, but they managed to let the plants sleep as long as it was dark and cold. In response to the radiation from the new sun, they began photosynthesizing at a maddening rate. Now, they've reached maturity and the growth has leveled off.

"We had noted in our preliminary evaluation of the dark hemisphere that concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere were unusually high. The rapid consumption of CO₂ by the plant life has returned it to a more normal range. We think that may have been the signal for the plants to stop growing."

Keeler blinked at him. "Okay, I can buy that."

"You're drunk, aren't you?" Alkema asked.

"Neg, not at all," Keeler turned around, breathed in his hand, and sniffed it. "Not very drunk anyway," he amended.

Alkema shook his head. "All this time we spent, and if we had just ignited the sun, we could have harvested all the food we needed right here."

Keeler shook his head, a little too vigorously. He almost fell over. "Neg, neg, we did good things here. We had some wonderful adventures, and we learned what it meant to be human... or something like that."

"I am surprised the Kariad didn't figure this out," Alkema went on. "This sort of changes the whole equation."

"Not necessarily," Keeler countered.

With the planet's other hemisphere now bathed in light, full of food and resources, uninhabited and cut off from the dayside, the inferior quality Gethsemane humans were even more desirous of leaving the ship. And frankly, I wouldn't miss them.

Here's how it is: My sense of smell is six times more sensitive than that of a human. I find the scent of Sapphireans barely tolerable. Republickers are actually a little better, they harbor fewer bacteria on their skin, medical fact. But Gethsemanians smell bad. They just do. And the ship will smell better with a few thousand fewer of them.

PEGASUS: The hatch to the Deck 24 Councilor Conference Center slid open and Keeler walked in, wearing his Captain's jacket from the Sovereign, but otherwise looking neat and normal. The D24C3 was where the ship's Advisory Council met to manage the needs of the Gethsemanian refugees and provide a liaison with *Pegasus's* Command Core.

The Advisory Council consisted of six representatives of the Gethsemanian refugees, and three members of the crew – one of whom was David Alkema's wife. Acting Commander Change was seated in the center

between the two groups, flanked by the saffron flag of Gethsemane and *Pegasus's* ship's colors. She looked up when Keeler entered.

"I didn't mean to interrupt the proceedings," Keeler said. "I am not going to interfere in this decision, but I hope you don't mind if I listen in?"

Change gave him a suspicious look, then, nodded her assent. Keeler took the seat Alkema had saved for him at the back of the observer's gallery... three rows of nice leather chairs arranged above the central table and podium. About three dozen Gethsemanians occupied the gallery, more watched via the ship's COM Link

Soarboar continued. He wasn't accustomed to public speaking, and his voice was husky and tremulous. "Commander Change wanted to know how many Gethsemanians want to stay behind on the planet. The answer is two thousand one hundred and fourteen. The Gethsemane members of this civic council agree unanimously that these people have the right to stay behind on the planet if they want to."

The Gethsemanian observers applauded from the gallery.

"I do not believe the Gethsemanians should stay on this planet," Alkema's wife objected. "It's too dangerous for them. They should stay on the ship where it is safe."

"Damn, she's gotten even fatter!" Keeler thought.

"If you don't allow them to leave, you're going to have to deal with two thousand angry people," countered one of the two female delegates from Gethsemane.

"More than that," said another councilor. "Even our people who don't want to leave... and I am one of them... support the right of those who want to leave... to leave."

"Things are going to be better now," Alkema's wife insisted. "The ship's systems are up to 90% restored."

"That is not the issue," a male delegate interjected. "We've been to the surface, and some of us want to stay here."

"We appreciate that *Pegasus* rescued us," said Soarboar. "But now, we want to live on the ground."

Keeler cleared his throat.

"Did you wish to say something, Mr Keeler," Change asked.

"Not at all," Keeler insisted. "It's just a little dusty in here. Maybe the air circulation filters haven't been changed recently. Like I said, I am only here to observe, and if I were to offer the opinion that we have left crew behind on

other worlds when they have requested it, and that the Gethsemanians have the same right as any other people to determine their destinies, that would cross the line into being a participant in the proceedings, and I am only here to observe."

The crowd applauded, and Keeler gestured for them not to; after all, he was just there to observe.

"If it's an issue of living space, additional cargo areas on Deck Minus 40 through 45 can be opened to habitability," Alkema's wife suggested.

"No, they can't," Acting Commander Change corrected, with irritation.

Alkema's wife continued to object. "The planet below is too primitive and too dangerous. There's no technology, and the people fight all the time."

"We've been to the surface," Soarboar argued. "We know what it's like."

"Perhaps, we will find a more suitable planet in the future," Alkema's wife went on.

"We've reviewed your mission logs," said a woman from the Gethsemane delegation. "They do not give us optimism."

A woman councilor from *Pegasus's* Cultural Survey articulated another issue. "The problem is that putting a colony of people from another world on an inhabited planet is tantamount to invasion."

Alkema's wife seized on this. "That's right! It would be an invasion."

Keeler belched. The council looked toward him.

"I knew I shouldn't have eaten that burrito," he said. "I apologize. I am just an observer, and I would be completely out of line to remind the Council that an entire uninhabited hemisphere of the planet has just opened up. It contains almost two-thirds of the planet's land area, it is rich in resources, and is separated from the Archipelago by a barrier of storms and wind that few are willing to brave. But, maybe the nice young man from the Geophysical Survey Core in the front row... no, not you, the blond kid... oh, that's a chick? My bad. Damn, you look like a man, though. Anyway, she might tell you what I just said... if you asked."

Commander Change sighed. "Thank you, Mr. Keeler."

Keeler held up his hands. "I am just an observer."

Alkema's fat wife had one more card to play. "What about the Kariad? We would be leaving our people on a colony that alien beings are interfered with."

Change looked up at the captain. "Mr. Keeler, did you resolve the Kariad problem?"

"Maybe," Keeler answered. "We have a solution that we are implementing. Mr. Alkema will take it to the surface when it is ready. It may work, it might not. As for the Gethsemane colonists, if they know what they are getting into, the choice is still theirs."

"Will you brief us on the solution you are implementing?" asked one of the Gethsemane councilors.

"Not here and not now," Keeler replied. "But later."

Change asked the Council. "Hypothetically, if we were to set up a settlement on the surface, how much of the ship's resources would be required?"

A Gethsemanian Councilor reported that the issue was under study. The original colonization plans had centered around a mid-sized, remote, and uninhabited island on the day side of the island. Colonizing the new hemisphere would require recalibrating their assessment of their requirements. But, he added that even without any supplies from the ship, most of the Gethsemanians who had requested recolonization would remain behind.

When the issue of supplying the colonists from the ship had been tabled, Keeler raised his hand, like a schoolboy. "The chair recognized Mr. Keeler." Change said.

"If I may not make a suggestion," Keeler said. "I know where the colonists can get a fleet of trade ships fairly cheap. And I know a country or two that would be more than willing to provide some goods that would be useful to a budding colony."

"Noted," Change said. "And do you have any other observations, or should I wait for you to express a bodily function before I call on you."

"Neg, I'm just a humble observer," Keeler demurred. "I certainly wouldn't suggest that any colonists set out a charter of Governance for their colony before starting out. You know, I wouldn't advise they embrace a few simple commonsense rules like, "A free citizen shall have the right to keep his property and the fruits of his labors, and to better his economic circumstances through his own initiative." Or "A free citizen shall have the right to self-defense, and to keep arms for the purpose of defending himself, his rights, and those of others." Or "A free citizen shall have the right to worship the Allbeing in the manner of his own choosing." Or "A free citizen shall have the right to participate in government, to criticize the government, and to demand that government correct injustices." But look at me, here I am going off on things that I am most definitely not interjecting into this council's proceedings.'

"Thank you for your non-suggestions, Mr. Keeler," Change replied acidly. "Pending approval of a plan for colonization, I will approve the use of ship's resources to settle any Gethsemanian... or any other non-essential member of the ship's crew... on the backside of the planet Eventide."

Pieta Alkema opened her mouth to object, but Change cut her off. "My expectation is that the Council will work together to present me with a fair and workable plan within three ship-days, so that resettlement can begin as rapidly as possible."

"And also, they should take the prisoners from the ship's jail with them," was the last thing Keeler pointedly did not suggest.

After the colonization plan was finalized --- with a few more non-suggestions from the captain ---the crew mobilized to establish the colony. Change insisted the colony be established with no more than the bare minimum of supplies the ship could spare, but in practice, she was somewhat more generous. We had a good amount of cargo to spare, and the cargo containers themselves had been designed to function as emergency shelters. We afforded the colonists medical supplies, and some food, but food was already abundant on the surface. They had already sufficient clothing, but she did afford them a production run of heavy jackets for the winter season. Many of the basic tools and other commodities for the colony were acquired from sources on the planet's surface, principally from the artifactories of Miranda and the Trading Fleet of Tara.

The really hard part was for some of the humans to say good-bye to other humans.

PEGASUS – CREW INHABITATION LEVEL 22: Trajan Lear sat at his desk reviewing his manifest and flight plans for the next two days, a mug of warm protein supplement close at hand. He and Phoenix had been tasked with two cargo runs and one passenger run. For the latter, he would be bringing down fifty trained warfighters, about half the colonial garrison. He had made the run to Firebase Prime many times during the time operations were carried out on the planet's surface, but these would be his first in daylight.

He was aware that Flight Specialist Tanzarian, who had been part of his cadet class, had drawn the more interesting assignment of transporting Gethsemanian prisoners to the surface. Flight Captain Driver would be using his ship to plow a path through the planet's storm zone ahead of a convoy of trading ships, laden with cargo for the new settlements on the far side. That seemed to Trajan Lear an interesting assignment.

He thought Firebase Prime was an excellent choice for the main settlement. It still had landing fields, fortifications, and some infrastructure

left from the war games. The warfighters had further discovered a geomagnetic tap in place that could supply the colony's power needs for centuries to come.

At 1705 hours, his door alert signaled that someone wanted to come in. He acknowledged it and the hatch slid open to reveal his protégé, Aerick Tuck.

"You're late," Trajan Lear informed him.

"I am sorry for that, sir," Tuck replied.

Trajan nodded and made no further comment on it. He and Tuck together had completed 102 flights to the surface during the Eventide mission (as well as 11 missions to the extraction operations on the gas mega-giant). These missions had included 33 passenger transits, 41 cargo runs, and 28 combat training sorties on the planet's darkside, where Tuck had shown a special proficiency in low-altitude night flying. He had always been punctual in the past.

Trajan Lear shared the next day's flight data with the younger man. "Our first cargo mission is tomorrow at 1100 hours. I'll expect you to be on time."

Tuck folded his arms nervously. "May I ask you something, sir?"

Trajan Lear grunted. "You may ask, but unless it concerns the flight, I may not have an answer for you."

"Some of my friends are going to stay behind," Tuck said. "They have asked me to join them."

"Do you want to join them?" Trajan Lear asked.

Aerick Tuck's young face was scrunched in hard contemplation. "I need to know what I should do. Part of me wants to join the colony, but I know it would mean never flying again. They're not going to have aircraft down there. I don't think I could live if I couldn't fly."

Trajan Lear shrugged off his concerns. "Then, wait for the next world. Maybe the next colony will have flight."

"I feel as though I am leaving them."

"I faced a similar choice when our crew divided at Chapultepec Station," Lear told him. "The rest of my family left the ship, but I chose to remain behind."

"So, you could keep flying."

"Partly because of that," Lear put his hand on Tuck's shoulder. He was not entirely comfortable with the gesture, but it seemed to be the one people used when trying to extend comfort to another. "But... mostly, I guess, I just wanted to get away from my mom. I'm not sure that applies to you."

Tuck's cheeks flushed. Of course, he had never known his mother. Trajan Lear apologized, but Tuck told him it wasn't necessary.

Trajan Lear did not want to ask, but he had to. "Is there anyone you love staying on the planet."

Aeric Tuck paused for a long time. "Kind of," he admitted.

"That makes it hard," Trajan Lear said with a dawning of recognition. "But you wouldn't be asking me for a reason to stay if you didn't already want to stay. So, just stay."

Tuck seemed unconvinced. "But what about my friends?"

"They are making a choice to leave because it is what they want to do. You do what you want to do."

Tuck thought about it some more. "I think you're right. I do want to leave the ship someday and live on a world of my own with my own people. But not yet."

PEGASUS – KEELER'S QUARTERS: Keeler was sitting on one of his couches drinking Illyrian brandy and listening to pianoforte music when Alkema returned from the surface. "Did you find her?" he asked.

Alkema reported. "She is living in a summer house provided to her by the brother of the Prince Regent, who fancies her."

"Did you and Cesario deliver my letter to her?"

"She received us both," he reported. "We gave her the letter." He passed Keeler an envelope of thick, heavy paper. "She gave you this by way of reply."

Nervously, Keeler took the letter and read it, carefully. Then, he folded it and put it back into the envelope.

"What did she say?" Alkema asked.

Keeler carefully folded the note. "She said 'neg.'" He sighed and put the letter aside.

"I am very sorry, sir."

Keeler shrugged. "Well, I couldn't say to her, 'Come on up to my spaceship.' I couldn't even tell her that the dawning of a second sun had changed the dark side. The vague promises I was able to make to her were apparently not enough."

"Did she say that?"

“Not in so many, words,” Keeler admitted.

Alkema sensed that he should go. “I should go,” he said.

Keeler held up a hand. “Did you implement the solution to the Anything Box problem.”

“I ... did.”

“And what is the attrition rate of the affected commodities?”

Alkema was a bit surprised Keeler recalled that phrase from the explanation. “Point-one-percent per one thousand days.”

“A little slow,” Keeler observed.

“You wanted it slow,” Alkema reminded him.

Keeler nodded. “You may go.”

They spent an additional nine ship-days transporting the Gethsemanian colonists to the surface and setting them up at three settlement sites along a river in the largest land-mass of the far side. It was a rapid deployment. Commander Change did not want to give the refugees too much time to reconsider, and she was eager to leave the system after our long mission.

2112 colonists total settled on the planet. I have calculate that if they can maintain a rate of population increase consistent with their birthrate on the ship, the population of Gethsemanians on the dark side will surpass the population of native Eventidians in 360 Sapphirean years. It is always interesting to me how few humans become many, and yet with that increase, they seem to always have more wealth/money/property than when they started.

EVENTIDE – NEW GETHSEMANE LAND – RESCUE OF ABADDON SETTLEMENT:

The Name “Rescue of Abaddon” was chosen for the settlement because the refugees wanted to make sure the crew of *Pegasus* knew they were grateful for having been saved from the destruction of their homeworld, and they would never forget who had rescued them. Further down the *Pegasus* River were the settlements of Rescue of Jericho Point and Rescue of Abbanaki.

Rescue of Abaddon had formerly been known as Firebase Prime. The *Pegasus* river now washed through what had been an empty ravine but the melting waters of the glaciers to the north had revealed its true purpose. The river would serve as a trade conduit for the settlements. A dozen trade ships

had arrived with cargo from the Dayside of the planet. The settlers could subsequently use the ships to trade, to establish new settlements, and to explore their hemisphere.

The new sun had peaked some days earlier and was beginning its long slow sink to the horizon. General Kitaen had insisted that since what had been honorable military ground was being turned over for civilian occupation, a ceremony of turnover was necessary. Dressed in ceremonial war-paint and wearing what Keeler sincerely hoped was a ceremonial leather jock strap, General Kitaen addressed the one hundred warfighters that were staying behind to defend the new colony on Eventide.

The bulk of his war-sermon was directed at the 160 warfighters who had joined the colony, and who pledged to defend it and preserve it as an outpost of human civilization in the eternal darkness of space."

"And when the settlement is rooted firmly in the ground of this world, you shall seek out a mountain," he commanded. "And on the mountain, you shall build a war temple. And when the children of the New Gethsemane shall come to you in the temple, you shall instruct them in the deadly arts of war, and the discipline and strength of military cohesion."

"Sir, we will."

Kitaen held out his sword. "By my word, swear this oath."

"By your sword, we swear this oath," they shouted.

"Do not ever forget that it was the hand of mankind that brought light to this place of darkness," he finished. "Amen."

"Amen!" his men called back to him.

Kitaen handed his sword to Lieutenant Atreyu, who had been one of the ferals, but had overcome his dependence on the emotion modifier. "You shall lead them, Atreyu."

"I will," Atreyu vowed. He turned and faced his warfighters, raising his sword in salute to them. He showed no sign of nervousness. His training had been thorough, and he was burning with purpose; to establish the Sumacian tradition on this new world.

Behind the large ancient stone and steel structure the warfighters had nicknamed 'The Castle' during their exercises, one hundred and sixty two inhabitation units were arranged in rows, built from *Pegasus* cargo containers mashed up with trees from the forest and canvas imported from across the sea. A few large Quonset buildings, left over from the wargames, made up the downtown. These were filled with supplies to keep the colony going until

they could grow and build their own. At a high spot near the river, a small Brianist temple and library ... dedicated to Pontifex Kato the First who was newly enthroned in Miranda... was being constructed. Eddie Roebuck would bless it before returning to the ship.

Alkema, Keeler, and Soarboard stood in the tower, the highest point on the ancient structure. From here, you could see across valley and over the hills. As Alkema yammered on about the final logistical arrangements, Keeler was wondering where the population would spread as the settlement grew. The mesa plateau that the outpost stood atop would fill up eventually.

"We think the Ancients intended this side of the planet as a sort of, supply room," Alkema yammered. "They put a lot of resources here, not just fast-growing crops, but also mineral deposits. No animals, so we're bringing some over from the day side."

"Thank you," Soarboard said politely. He had resigned from the ship's council, and would act as leader of the first settlement. It was supposed to be temporary, but Keeler had a sense that Soarboard would be leading the colony for the rest of his life and this was a good thing since Keeler found him a pretty sensible kid.

"It's going to take some adjustments to live here," Alkema warned him. "Because of the planet's orbit, for 16 days at a time, you are going to be in complete darkness while the planet is on the opposite side of the sun. During the other 48 days, you're going to have to plant and harvest your crops very quickly. The ancient plants have been modified for a rapid growth cycle, but your people are going to have to adapt."

"We will," Soarboard promised.

"You're going to keep following the Contract of Governance, right?" Keeler asked.

"Yes, sir," Soarboard answered, in his soft-spoken, polite way. "But I don't quite understand Provision 12 regarding Two-for-One Ladies Night..."

"That's the linchpin of the whole arrangement!" Keeler insisted. "It's the heart of your Democracy. Don't let anyone take away Two-for-One Ladies Night."

"Really?" Soarboard asked.

"I wouldn't have put it in if it wasn't important," Keeler insisted.

"Okay, then, sir," Soarboard agreed.

Keeler shot a sly look to Alkema. He had just won another bet.

Alkema continued in seriousness. "Eventually, you may want to trade with the Archipelago. I have some ideas on how you can get through... or, technically speaking... under the storm barrier."

"But that's not important just yet," Keeler interrupted.

"Right, we recommend you avoid open contact with the day side for at least two centuries." Alkema explained this would give them time to establish a sufficiently large and robust population to be able to defend themselves against possible aggression, and maintain the integrity of their culture.

"You should know," Keeler advised Soarboar, "That the Ancients left nine more geomagnetic taps on this side of the planet."

Soarboar squinted in bemusement. "Really?"

"We've mapped them from space. But, we think you'll have more fun exploring the planet if we don't tell you where they are." Keeler winked.

"The Data Library we're leaving with you will let you know how to harness them for your power needs," Alkema added.

"The Ancients also left behind some other things," Keeler added. "Maybe someday you'll find them and figure out how to use them."

"What kind of things?" Soarboar asked warily.

"Let's just say you guys are in for an interesting few centuries," Keeler replied, wiggling his eyebrows.

Finally, after one final festive dance party, the last of the *Pegasus* crew reboarded their Aves for the final return to the ship.

And that's when those "translucent gray bastards" decided to show up again.

ZILLA: On the return flight to *Pegasus*, the Kariad showed up again. Keeler was sitting on his landing couch, enjoying an adult beverage, when suddenly the cabin quivered and did that light-washing-everything-out trick and he and Alkema were once again in the presence of the Kariad.

You are quitting the planet?

"Za, we are leaving. Our work here is mostly done."

You have lost the wager. Work? You have done little but sail your ship and drink alcoholic beverages.

Keeler chuckled, which sounded really strange in the echoey environment created by the Kariad. "Oh, I don't think so. Things are about to get very different down there."

The Kariad voices grew haughty and pompous in their objection.

Your colony is a cheat. It is outside the parameters of the wager.

"Our colony is too far away to affect the inhabitants, but we have done three things that will fundamentally alter the power relationship between the Royals, the Mariners, and the Sox."

We listen.

Keeler held up a wavering finger. "First of all, I have introduced them to the concept of enterprise. I replaced the Anything Box economy of Miranda with one of distributed enterprises... artifactories making manufactured goods, drawing power from the Anything Boxes. I cut taxes and regulations to encourage entrepreneurship. They have farmers and planters growing crops, fishers harvesting the bounty of the sea, and they have people freely exchanging and trading. Soon, there will be designers and advertisers. This system means wealth is being created instead of just distributed. Instead of the Royals controlling the economy, everybody has a stake in it.

"Second, I tore down the Royal form of government in Miranda and replaced it with a representative style of governance. This gives all of the people a stake in the management of their country."

Those changes are effective for Miranda only

"And Third, the trade I have introduced ensures that the ideas I have seeded in Miranda will spread around the planet. It will take a little time, probably some bloodshed but the seed has taken root. Now, it will spread like a... well, like a virulent weed, but the good kind of weed. Like dandy lions maybe."

The other Royals will not give up their power. They still control their Anything Boxes.

"You are correct. Tyrants will not as a voluntary matter give up their power. But Mr. Alkema and my cat developed a solution that means they won't have any choice. Over to you, Dave."

Alkema stepped up and explained. "The Anything Boxes were set up so that their programming could not be altered. Each box checks each of the others and returns its program to the default if it detects any alteration. There is no way to alter their operational programming... but there is a way to delete items from their database. I had one of our ship's best cyberneticists

develop a virus that will slowly erase items from the Anything Box database. Eventually, the boxes will only be able to make energy and raw materials.”

Keeler picked it up. “The only way to continue producing goods is for the other Regencies to set up production facilities that follow the Miranda model. At which point the other Royals will have to choose between accepting the Miranda system as their enterprise system, or living off the raw material put out by their Anything Boxes. When people see the success of the Miranda way, they will demand it.”

The Kariad sounded aggravated

There is no guarantee that your predicted outcome will prevail.

“Give it another two hundred years,” Keeler told the Kariad. “In two hundred years, the humans will have effected the social change you claim to desire... and they will have done it... mostly... on their own.”

There will still be social inequalities.

“Probably,” Keeler conceded. “But all of them will be better off and most of them will be freer than they are now.

We do not consider this a satisfactory resolution of the wager.

“I suspected you wouldn’t,” Keeler said. “And you know what? Here’s a little message for you. I don’t care. Because you have already lost. We’re going to warn other human colonies about you creeps. And if you keep messing with our species, someday, we’re going to figure out how to get to you. And, I wouldn’t want to be a snotty, non-corporeal alien when we figure out how to launch missiles at right angles to reality.”

Our business with you is concluded, Pegasus.

With headache-inducing suddenness, the main cabin of Zilla came back into focus.

“Does that mean we lose?” Alkema asked.

Keeler shook his head. “Neg... it just means we haven’t beaten them, yet. But we will.”

Finally, after spending way too long in this dreary system, it was time again to point Pegasus at another star and begin the long, boring process of moving through space on the power of our two weakest engines.

I’m taking a nap now. Bye.

PEGASUS: MAIN BRIDGE: Keeler was surprised when Commander Change summoned him to the bridge as Pegasus prepared to leave the system. She had not done this on previous departures. He was beginning to get the distinct impression she didn't like him.

He entered in time to hear Alkema deliver a final report to Eliza Change. He paused to stand at the entrance hatch and gawked at how different the Bridge was since he had last commanded it.

Change finished with Alkema and turned toward Keeler. "Mr. Keeler, welcome to the Primary Command Center."

"I like what you've done to the place," Keeler replied. He crossed over in front of the Engineering Display, which graphically showed the functionality of the ship's two functioning drive engines.

"All Mr. Alkema's doing," Change assured him. "Your butler also suggested I should extend to you the courtesy of being on the Bridge as we left the system."

"Thank you, or thank him, I guess where are we going?"

With an unfortunately fey gesture of his left hand, Alkema brought up a holographic star chart in front of the captain's chair. A golden line stretched from a small binary system toward a nearby single system. "There's a colony called Pearl. If it's where it is supposed to be, we can reach it in 2.9 years."

Keeler sighed. "Well, Hello Sailor should be finished by then, at least." He had many revisions to make to his opus. Spending the better part of two years on Eventide had given him perspective. He realized he had only skimmed the surface of the other colonies, and he would have to rewrite every chapter with a better understanding of how the pieces and layers of their societies fit together.

Alkema brought up another hologram. "Also, we have detected neutrino pulses along this same vector." He superimposed some squiggly pink lines over the map. They roughly followed the ship's course to Pearl.

Keeler's eyes crinkled. "Neutrino pulses? What is it?"

"Controlled oscillations of neutrinos traveling through space-time, but that's not important right now," Alkema replied. "Or, actually, it is. These pulses are characteristic of a StarLock."

"Chanticleer?" Keeler asked.

"No, closer than Chanticleer," Alkema replied. "I can't get a precise navigational fix, but easily within 500 light years," he said. "Do you know what this means?"

Keeler knew what it meant. He hadn't been away from command for that long. "We could repair our engines. We could get reports from home."

"How long to get there?" Keeler asked.

Eliza Change had already done the calculations. "Depending on how close it is and our top speed and whether we make any stops, 1,080 to 1,560 days."

Alkema made some inputs into the navigational display. "The StarLock lies along the same general vector as Pearl, Cormorant, and Ironheart colonies. If we stop in each of those systems just long enough to take on supplies, survey any colonies that may be there, and take a navigational fix, we can reach the StarLock within five Sapphirean years."

"Well, let's get going then!" Keeler exclaimed. He paused, and turned toward the Commander's Chair. "I mean... perhaps the Acting Commander would like to give the word and take us out of here."

Change nodded, but did not betray a trace of a smile. "Lieutenant Navigator Atlantic, execute our course for the Pearl Colony system."