



WORLDS APART BOOK FIVE: AURORA

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CHAPTER ONE

"Forward Shields down to fifteen per cent!" Tactical Lieutenant Alkema shouted, as *Pegasus's* command center rocked from another in a series of non-stop explosions. The forward view showed a barrage of copper-colored energy pulses coming at the ship from something they could not see, something that was also pulling them inexorably into the line of fire.

Alkema held hard to one of the safety rails ("Oh Shit handles") as another pulse connected, transmitting enough energy to shake the ship's superstructure. He struggled his way toward the command seat. "Captain, if we can't shake this... or shut it down... the shields will fail four minutes."

"And then...?" asked Prime Commander Keeler.

"Those bolts will blow our ship apart piece by piece ... beginning with the Command Tower."

"HMMMMM," said Keeler, looking around the parabola-shaped bridge. *Shayne American... married. Kayliegh Driver ... married. Eliza Jane Change ... iceberg. David Alkema... male. Goneril Lear... harridan.* Apparently, he was not going to be able to use these last four minutes to die a happy man.

Not that Keeler was indifferent to the fate of his ship and crew, he simply knew that there was nothing he could do about it. On his bridge were the finest navigators, helmsmen, tacticians, and problem solvers his society could provide. He was only good at leading, and until one of his brilliant crew solved the problem, he had nothing to lead with.

It had taken seven months... *seven months* ... in hyperspace to reach this point, dead center in the middle of nowhere in space. There had been only three brief breaks, once to re-supply at an automated way-station, and twice to explore star systems that proved to have no inhabitable planets. The coordinates to this spot had been provided by a 4,000-year-old General of the former Commonwealth, who seemed slightly less insane than most of the other inhabitants of the planet Winter.

When they emerged from hyperspace, they had had just enough time to confirm these coordinates when something started firing massive, deadly weapons at them that easily outclassed anything in what the crew had previously considered an impressive ship's arsenal.

"Weapons?" Keeler requested.

His Tactical Chief, Tactical Commander Redfire, a tall, lean artist with fingerless leather gloves, reported back. "Nothing to target on, Captain."

"Those energy blasts must be coming from somewhere," Keeler thundered over the explosions.

"They are, sir" Redfire answered. "They're coming from all around us."

A particularly strong blast grazed the underside of the ship and exploded, throwing *Pegasus* violently upward, knocking every person on the bridge to the ground. Alkema pulled himself up by the "oh-shit" handle and pulled himself to the helm station, where a helmsman by the name of Justinian Atlantic, a Republicer with an amazing mop of curly blond hair. Atlantic had been a kid

when they left the homeworlds, boarding the ship in the family of one of the engineers. He had joined *Pegasus* crew during the hyperspace transit when he reached sixteen, the age of adulthood.

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“Full reverse?” Alkema asked, repeating Keeler’s last order.

Atlantic turned to him. “Reverse engines at 10% over maximum safe limit. No effect.”

Alkema nodded understandingly. “Make it twenty.”

Atlantic did not look raise some protest about overtaxing the engines or overstressing the ship’s design limits. Getting the hell out of there was the imperative. He reached out with his right hand, which sported a torsion-blue interface along his index finger, like a technological skin condition. This was his interface with the ship’s systems, and when he reached for the virtual thrust controls, this interface made them real. The projections around his station warned him of the danger, then flashed out briefly as another blast connected with the ship.

“Alkema!” Redfire ordered. “Get back to your post and tell me what shield strength is?”

Alkema lurched back, but Specialist Shayne American, a thin, all-business Republicker with close-cropped platinum hair and chocolate brown skin, accessed shield data through her monitoring of ship’s operations. “Forward shields at 11%.”

“Aft shields?” Alkema queried, reaching his station. The read-out showed 78%. “Use thrusters to re-orient the ship,” he suggested, loudly, to Keeler. “it will at least buy

us a few more minutes if the rear shields take the brunt of the attack.”

Keeler tapped his Thean walking stick against the deck. “Go to.”

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Redfire asked the next practical question. “If we’re taking hits from all sides, but the front shields are taking the bulk of it... Tactical... give me a dispersion chart of every pulse that’s been fired at us.”

Alkema brought up the display. There were hits all over the ship, but most of them were over the forward quadrant. This meant the forward part was closer to the action than the rear.

Atlantic worked the thrusters and turned the ship around, simultaneously reconfiguring the propulsion fields to push the ship forward, away from the ... no one guessed what it was called yet ... “extremely dangerous thing” would do for the time being.

Several more blasts of pure anti-proton battered the shields just forward of the Command Tower. “They’re still targeting our bow,” Alkema said incredulously. “How can they do that?”

“How long until the shields fail?” Keeler asked, with preternatural calm.

“One minute, seventy seconds,” Alkema answered.

Keeler looked to the outer bridge. Specialist Brainiacsdaughter ... buxom, lithe, and unconscious. You’re a sick, sick man, he thought to himself. But then, maybe Ziang was a sick old fart as well, perhaps sick enough to direct his ship to the location of some ancient

doom machine. Ziang did not like the Commonwealth, certainly had a vested interest in not seeing it reconstituted.

Then Keeler remembered. The crystal that Ziang had given them had contained two data sets; one was a set of coordinates, the other was a series of musical tones. "Lieutenant Alkema, General Ziang's data crystal is in my Study. Would you be good enough to retrieve it?"

"Za," Alkema began making his way across the shuddering bridge.

A new alarm sounded. A hologram of the ship appeared in the middle of the bridge, with a gaping hole in the shields directly behind *Pegasus's* missile hatches and forward defense arrays.

"Shield Failure! Shield Failure! Shield Grid 18Alpha has failed," said the voice of the ship as those very words appeared below the hologram.

"Extend shield grids 17 and 19 Alpha to cover the hole," Tactical Commander Redfire ordered.

"Re-orient the ship to protect the vulnerable spot," Executive Commander Lear ordered.

American at tactical and Atlantic at helm carried out the order. The hologram displayed fourteen other shield areas that were near critical or failure. In a very few seconds, there would be no way for *Pegasus* to turn or cover herself.

"If the shields fail completely," Keeler asked. "How long can the ship survive?"

"Long enough for one anti-proton burst to hit the Command Tower," Redfire answered.

"Grim," said Keeler.

"Shall I order an evacuation?" Lear asked.

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"Abandon ship?" Keeler asked. "Even if we had a place to abandon ship to, do you really think Aves or lifepods would last fifty seconds against that barrage?" He looked back to Brainiacsdaughter. On the other hand, there was a lot you could do in fifty seconds.

"One minute to complete failure of the forward shield grid," American announced.

Alkema came out of Keeler's Study holding the hand-sized piece of black crystal they had gotten from General Ziang. Just as he entered the bridge, another shield collapsed, and a burst of energy bucked the deck. He flipped over the Outer Bridge and went sprawling, but still held onto the crystal. He pushed himself up off the floor, and brought the crystal to Prime Commander Keeler. There was a cut on his chin.

Keeler handed the crystal off to American. "There's a musical code somehow embedded in this crystal. Retrieve it, and broadcast it out to whoever is shooting at us."

American placed the crystal carefully on her data transfer node. "I could have pulled it out of memory," she informed Keeler for future reference.

"Neg," said Keeler. "Transmit it directly from the crystal."

"Transmitting now..."

“Fifty seconds to shield failure,” said Lear.

Above the thunder, the strange music wafted over the bridge, a simple arrangement of notes played with deep tonal range and complexity, like orchestral door chimes.

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As soon as it played, the bombardment stopped. In fact, several incoming rounds, surely enough to finish off the ship, dissipated en route.

A terrifying silence ensued, followed by pounding bass notes that set the Bridge throbbing. “What is that?” Keeler yelled above the din.

American, shielding her ears against the onslaught answered. “It’s an incoming transmission... source unknown.”

But I can guess, Keeler thought. Just as it stopped, the crystal chirped up again, filling the silence with cybernetic birdsong. When the crystal finished, the hammering loud notes of the other transmission returned. It continued for another twenty seconds before it ceased. The black crystal then answered with another brief song. The transmission returned almost the second the crystal stopped, and then the two of them began to perform together, the outer transmission providing a pounding baseline which the crystal complemented with a complex melody.

“Oh my Hat!” Keeler whispered. “They’re jamming.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, they stopped.

“We’re still being pulled into something,” said Helmsman Atlantic.

It was true, the barrage had stopped, but *Pegasus* was still being pulled in toward the blasts.

“External hull stress increasing rapidly,” said American. “I am detecting an intense gravity well nearby.” She displayed its energy signature.

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Alkema was still catching his breath from the fall, otherwise he would have gasped. “Sir, that’s a space-time singularity. What the ancients used to call a ‘Black Hole.’

“It will pull us apart,” Alkema added, just in case he had not figured this out. “There’ll be no escape once we cross the event horizon,” said the helmsman.

“Well, at least we were safe for two seconds,” sighed Keeler. “Is there any way to turn it off?”

“Neg,” answered Alkema, American, Driver, and Redfire in four-part consensus.

“Full thrust,” Keeler ordered. “Pull us out of here, Mr. Atlantic.”

“We’re still at full thrust plus twenty,” Atlantic answered. “No effect... we’re still falling toward the singularity.”

“Well, I’m out of ideas,” said Keeler. “somebody wake up Specialist Brainiacsdaughter”

Kayliegh Driver stood. “Permission to try something, captain? I don’t have time to explain.”

“You bet,” Keeler answered.

Driver slid over to the helmstation, showing the full ripe swell of her pregnancy. She pointed to Atlantic’s helm

controls. "Change the geometry of our propulsion field, bring it up to the absolute maximum and reverse course."

Atlantic looked at her like she was insane. "You're insane," he said.

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"Think about it," she told him, beginning to lay in the commands he would have to execute. "What powers our ship? Anti-gravity. What powers a singularity? Gravity."

Atlantic got it. "Laying in new course," he turned to her. "This better work."

She shrugged. "If it doesn't, we'll die too fast to realize our mistake."

Atlantic nodded. When this mission had launched, gallows humor would have been both out of place and out of character for the bright-eyed optimistic crew that had set out from Sapphire and Republic, four years ago. Since then, they had been attacked, fired upon, betrayed, and nearly destroyed so often that a new threat of annihilation was but a variation on a theme.

"10 seconds to event horizon..." American announced.

Pegasus hit the event horizon, skipped, and bounced back into space. The ship shuddered one last time, shaking loose bits of hull plating and other bits of herself that swirled off toward the black hole, but she had broken free.

"Full thrusters!" Driver shouted. Atlantic was already on it. He hit the propulsion system hard and *Pegasus* leaped away from the gravity well.

Prime Commander Keeler looked around his bridge. Not even when the Aurelians had attacked them with a

full battle force at the Boadicea system had it looked so torn up. Some of the ceiling plates had shaken loose and were hanging, several stations were scorched from the eruption of over-stressed power conduits. Some of his bridge crew were injured and all of them were shaken. "What happened?" he asked.

Kayliegh Driver answered. "The time-space singularity was pulling us in with its intense gravitational field. I knew we could never reach escape velocity, but I knew that its gravitational field was limited by the lensing effect of the Event Horizon."

"I see," Keeler said. "Meaning what exactly?"

"*Pegasus* uses anti-gravity for propulsion. I used our propulsion field to bounce us off the gravitational field of the singularity."

Alkema slapped his forehead. "Why didn't I think of that?" he exclaimed. It was his job to think of that kind of thing, after all. Then, he said, "Ow!" because his forehead had been scraped rather badly when he fell on the deck earlier.

"Damage report," Goneril Lear requested.

"Reports coming in," American came back. "Minor to Moderate reported at fifty-five locations and systems. Nothing life-threatening, so far."

"Sensors coming on-line," Kayliegh Driver reported.

Above the External Sensor and Tactical station, a three-dimensional construct began to emerge, piece by piece. First, it was a line. Then, the view zoomed out and the line became a shallow curve. The view had to zoom out again.

More details were projected as the shallow curve became a crescent. The view went out again, and the size of the projection enlarged. The crescent became a semi-circle, and surface detail was lost against the sheer enormity of its shape. Finally, it became a ring. In the projection, its structure was filament thin, and *Pegasus* was a speck next to it.

"It's phucking huge!" Redfire burst out. No wonder they could not isolate a firing solution.

"It's 1,600.6 kilometers in diameter," Driver reported. "The distance describes the event horizon of the singularity in the center."

"I recommend moving the ship to at least 100 million kilometers out," said Executive Commander Lear.

Keeler agreed. "Helm, move us away." He studied the schematics the sensors were displaying about the object. Its outer surface had look of rough metal, and was layered and graduated all around. The sensors could not yet image the inside of the ring. The design aesthetic struck him as human. "Ziang knew about this, it must be some kind of Commonwealth artifact," he muttered out loud. "Mr. Redfire, is there anything on the surface that looks like a docking port."

"Hard to tell on forty seconds worth of sensor readings," Redfire said. "Are you proposing... going over to it, sir?"

"We've come a long, long way just to be shot at," Keeler answered. "Can you tell me, at least, if there is a habitable environment within the ring?"

“Neg, I can not,” Redfire answered. “Our scans can’t penetrate the surface.

“Launch a probe,” suggested Executive Commander Lear, as usual, in a tone more commanding than suggesting.

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“Good idea,” Keeler said.

The specialist who would have launched the probe was being tended to by Medical Technical Jersey Partridge, who had been the first to arrive when the Medical call went out. American switched over probe configuration and launch controls to her own station. “Preparing Alpha class probe for launch. Configuring sensors. Course?”

Alkema suggested, “follow the outer-ring of the structure. It should keep the probe from being pulled in. Launch a second probe to map the interior of the ring and take gravitational measurements.”

Fourteen minutes later, the first probe had confirmed that there were docking bays, and the second probe had provided an intriguing glimpse to the inside rim of the ring, catching a brief image that suggested cities and structures, before both probes were pulled inside by tractor beams and all telemetry was lost. “Well, now what?” Keeler asked.

“I think we all know what comes next,” said Redfire.

“Right, prepare an Aves,” Keeler ordered.
“Commander Redfire, prepare your suicide squad... I mean, away team.”

“I volunteer,” said Alkema.

Keeler looked at his young protégé in surprise. "I would have thought having a new wife would have curbed your enthusiasm for conspicuous acts of valor."

"Pieta knew who she was marrying," Alkema answered. The ship's youngest officer, with curly dark hair, ruddy complexion, and a slim, athletic build, had recently married a girl who was almost as pretty he was. "Besides, if the shooting starts up again, I'm probably safer over there than here."

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"That depends on who ... or what... is inside the ring," Keeler replied. "What the ring might be is some kind of abandoned Commonwealth battle-station. The Allbeing only knows what you'll find inside... battle drones, automated defense stations, ... infestation by predatory alien creatures."

Redfire asked Keeler. "What do you know about the kind of creatures that used to infest Commonwealth Space Stations?"

"The records speak of creatures that caused our ancestors problems. Two of the more common ones were called Face Huggers and Brain Suckers."

"Ah..." said Redfire.

"Don't let the name scare you," Keeler said. "They didn't actually suck out your brain, it was more like a parasitic infestation that ate out all the interior lobes over a period of several days."

Redfire digested this. "I'll prepare a battle-armored Aves for myself, Mr. Alkema, a mission specialist, a Medical Technician and ... ten warfighters?"

“Make it twenty,” Keeler ordered.

In four years, *Pegasus* had progressed far along the away-mission-learning-curve.

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Aves Victor left *Pegasus* in a thickened shell of battle armor and charted course for the giant ring carrying a aviator, four crew, ten five Warfighters, which Warfighter Lieutenant Commander Honeywell insisted were enough. When it approached the spot where the probe was pulled in, they watched a section of the ring dissolve... and suddenly they were inside and the plate-work was reintegrating over their heads. They were in a kind of hangar bay, with the probe parked next to them.

Mission Specialist Scout, an attractive, hard-bodied Sapphirean whose uniform sported a medallion that read “I was part of Prime Commander Keeler’s Landing Party on EdenWorld...and survived!” scanned the interior. “Oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere... pretty fresh, too. Interior temperature 19 degrees. No biohazards.” She raised an eyebrow. “Looks safe.”

“Warfighters, set weapons to maximum stun,” ordered Redfire. He already had a pulse weapon strapped to either forearm. He stuffed another one into the belt of his landing pants. He had been on more landing missions than anyone, and, in his opinion, nothing was really safe until it had been shot.

The *Aves* hatch opened. Three Warfighters got out first, training their weapons at each of the probable attack points. Redfire and Alkema followed next. Scout and four more Warfighters, leaving the others back in the ship.

Alkema walked over to the probe. He had never been this close to one of *Pegasus*'s drones before. It was a dart-shaped vessel, with a long needle-like probe at the tip and three large fins at the rear. He was reaching out to touch the probe, when he saw a silvery light glisten in the bay behind it. "TyroCommander Redfire, you better take a look at this."

Redfire, Scout, and Warfighters crossed to where he was standing, shining his light on a small, silver craft in the shape of a flattened egg resting on a tripod of landing gear. "Does that not look familiar?"

"It's exactly like the ship Keeler found at Boadicea," Redfire answered.

"And not only that," Scout added. She illuminated even further into the bay, where many more identical craft were picked in rows six deep, stacked three high.

"May I help you," said a voice.

They turned around and looked for the source, then realized the voice was emanating from inside their own heads. "There is no need to be alarmed," it said calmly.

"We'll be the judge of that," Redfire said. "Who are you?"

"I am a sprite," the voice answered. "I am at your surface."

"Indeed," Redfire said, not lowering either pulse weapon. "Why did you fire on our ship?"

"Your vessel does not appear in the Commonwealth Registry. Our automated defense systems were left with

instructions to fire on all unidentified ships when the crew abandoned the station. We did not realize you had a valid access key." Redfire realized the voice was not so much speaking to him, as delivering the knowledge directly into his mind, as though it had been there all along.

"We would like to communicate with our ship," Redfire said next.

"Communication systems may be accessed through our Command Center."

"Okay," Redfire said. "Why don't you lead us to the command center."

"Command Center is 1,780 kilometers spinwise from here," answered the Sprite. "However, there is a Sub-command center 800 meters anti-spinwise. Communication will be possible from there."

Suddenly, Redfire knew exactly where the sub-command center was and how to get to it. On the far wall was an oval outline marked in white against a dark gray background. As they approached, it disappeared, showing a passageway beyond.

Redfire jerked his head toward the opening. The two Warfighters led, moving powerfully and muscularly into the corridor. When they signaled it was clear, the rest of the team followed.

The interior was done in a combination of slate gray panels set among shining silver support beams; more hyper-modern than even the mass transit systems on Republic. Every ten meters along the wall was a square plate with an oval design traced onto it. The floor had a

gentle, almost unnoticeable curve to it. After some minutes of walking, the white oval outline on one of the wall panels illuminated as they walked up to it. Redfire touched it, and the panel vanished, revealing a large oblong chamber.

Lights came up and systems activated as they walked into the room, making the four Warfighters point their weapons nervously.

A voice began chattering in a strange language. A display came on with lettering Alkema recognized from the Commonwealth artifacts he had seen on Winter. Lingotron already knew the language.

Welcome to the Commonwealth Starlock 144:
Chapultepec

**Today is
Tuesday, September 8th, Solar Year 7153**

“What’s a ‘Solar Year?’” Alkema wondered aloud, but then began surveying what appeared to be a command center of some kind. Along one wall was a full schematic of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, in extremely detailed three dimensional cutaway view. “They scanned us!” Alkema cried out incredulously. “I never detected any scans.”

“Either we were too distracted by the attack,” said Redfire, “Or their scan was undetectable to us.”

Alkema made his way through the room. The room was laid out as a semi-circle, with perhaps twenty stand-up work podiums. Large oval screens hovered overhead. Most all were blank, except for the one displaying *Pegasus*. Alkema crossed to the podium below it and stepped on it.

It rose to the level of the oval. Several symbols projected just above the surface of the screen. Lingotron translated them: "Weapons. Communication..." And four more symbols it did not understand. Alkema touched communication and hoped Lingotron's translation matrix was accurate.

Immediately, Prime Commander Keeler's face appeared. He looked startled for a second, then asked, "Lieutenant Alkema, is that you?"

"Za. We're inside the space station."

Keeler nodded. "Obviously, find any brain-suckers yet?"

"Neg." Alkema answered. "This place appears to be something called a 'Starlock Chapultepec.' Does that mean anything to you?"

Keeler stared at the display. He looked like he was having trouble finding his breath and words. "Mother of The Allbeing! The rumors were true!"

CHAPTER TWO

The StarLock Chapultepec

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"A starlock," Prime Commander Keeler explained, "was a legendary device used by the ancients to fold space, thus allowing them to travel vast distances instantaneously, without the inconvenience of passing through hyperspace." He illustrated the point with the customary drawing of two dots on a slip of paper, then folding the paper to bring the two dots into proximity.

Keeler stood in the Command Center of the StarLock Chapultepec underneath a huge glass dome that showed a view of the inner ring's landscape of buildings stretching off until they disappeared as the curve of the ring became a distant silvery ribbon.

Executive TyroCommander Lear, David Alkema, and a technical crew of eight were with them. More than 160 people from *Pegasus* had come on board the StarLock and were examining the ancient structure.

"Until now, we weren't sure whether StarLocks were real, or just legends," Keeler went on. "Our ancestors were very imaginative, their literature is replete with references to StarLocks, Stargates, StarJumps, and whatnot, but we could never tell which were fact and which fiction."

"Can you imagine the engineering involved in a structure like this," Alkema said. "Building a ring around a black hole, and harnessing its energy to fold space?"

"You know I can't," Keeler spat. "But the undertaking must have been enormous."

“Why would they build such a huge and powerful thing, and then abandon it?” asked one of the techs.

“Obviously, they did not intend to,” Lear put in. “They never anticipated the fall of the Commonwealth. They probably imagined it would endure forever.”

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Keeler stood and gestured. “I am Ozymandias. Look upon my works, ye mortals, and perish!”

Alkema blinked at him. “What's that from?”

“Technician Scout found it carved into the wall of a hygiene pod,” Keeler told her.

Lear ran her fingers lovingly over a large podium at the back of the room. This one was designed for someone to work seated. This was obviously where the commander of the station would have sat.

“This could change everything,” Lear said to Keeler. “Imagine if we could use this StarLock as a base of operations for the entire sector. We wouldn't need to spend years sending one ship from planet to planet to planet. We could launch them from here and contact dozens... hundreds of worlds simultaneously.”

“What would be the fun in that?” Keeler replied.

“I don't recall anything in the Odyssey Project charter with regard to ‘fun,’” Lear said icily.

“That's why we flushed the charter through an airlock three years ago.”

“Another thought occurs to me,” Alkema interrupted. “This ring is 1,600 kilometers in diameter. It has an effective graviton lens built in. Add a few alterations, and

we would have a Tachyon Pulse Antenna. We could have real-time communications with the Home Worlds."

Lear had to steady her self against the podium. Her body was trembling with the thought. "Oh, aye," she said breathlessly. "Aye, oh, Vesta, Aye."

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"You are all getting way ahead of your selves," said Engineering Lieutenant Sotheby Sweet. She was originally from the south coast of Sapphire's Arcadia Territory. When most people thought of Arcadia, they thought of tropical rainforests, warm, sandy beaches, and monasteries. The south coast, however, was rocky, with scrubby coniferous forests and a climate only marginally better than parts of Boreala. Sweet had a fabulous body, with firm, round, more-than-a-handful-is-wasted-sized breasts and thick auburn hair setting off eyes as green as a cat's. Her voice was husky, with a bit of a drawl that got a rise out of most men even when she was saying something like, "The BrainCore Nexus is intact, but it's empty. When the Ancients abandoned the station, they must have taken the AI with them, and only left behind only basic systems."

"Maybe they were hoping a new human crew would reactivate the lock when the time was right," Keeler said.

"That would explain why they left that guide system," Alkema added. "If all it needs is a new AI, I think we have a spare."

Sweet looked doubtful. "*Pegasus's* AI shipmind may not be up to running anything like this complex."

"I wasn't talking about the shipmind," Keeler told her.

The Aves Prudence

Prudence held position just outside the perimeter of the ring, a speck again a backdrop of mammoth gunmetal gray beams and support structures. “*Aves Prudence* standing by,” said Flight Captain Driver.

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The voice of Executive TyroCommander Lear answered him. “Chapultepec Main Mission here. *Prudence*, signal mission specialists to stand by for transfer on our command.”

“*Prudence* acknowledges.” Driver turned to his second seat, occupied by his sub-lieutenant. “Do you want to exchange pleasantries with your mother?” he asked.

Trajan Lear grimaced. “Thank you---- nay!” Trajan had turned sixteen during the transit, the age of adulthood by Republic law. He was taller than he had been eight months earlier, and some fullness had come to his body. His hair had remained blond and wavy, and there was now even more resemblance between himself and his high-ranking mother. His resentment of her he had not outgrown.

Matthew had scarcely changed at all. His eyes were soft brown, and more serious ever since the woman he loved had told him “not now, not ever,” and fallen into bed with ... he didn't want to think about it. Since parting ways with Eddie Roebuck and Eliza Jane Change, his pool of friends had become perilously shallow. He had found some common ground with his protege, a love of flight and a vein of bitterness toward his mother, Goneril Lear, that echoed the feelings he held for Eliza Jane since learning she was ... his mind rebelled against the admission fornicating with Eddie.

Trajan Lear had an analogue for that as well, in his resentment of Max Jordan for Max's unpardonable offense of being better at everything than Trajan was while being almost a year younger. Of course, Max's unauthorized theft of an Aves and related emotional breakdown had kept him out of Flight Core for another year. That was enough *schadenfreude* to keep Trajan going.

"Chapultepec here. *Prudence*. All systems standing by. You may commence transfer when ready."

"*Prudence* acknowledges," Matthew Driver switched to the intra-ship Com Link. "Mission team, Chapultepec is ready for transfer."

A raspy voice answered him. "You got it, my vertically-challenged Captain. Try to hold the ship steady. If you need any help reaching the pedals, let me know."

Driver rolled his eyes. On his planet, Republic, all the necessities of life, food, water, and even air, were wrenched only with great difficulty from the planet's desolate environment. In his ancestor's time, pets were considered an unsustainable waste of resources. Every time he had to interact with the Captain's cat, he was grateful for their wisdom.

All cats were good with cybernetics, but Queequeg had developed a special area of expertise – the knowledge to deal with alien artificial intelligences that manifested themselves in the ship's BrainCore and behaved erratically and unpredictably. The one that had infested *Pegasus* was named 'Caliph,' after the alien probe that had brought knowledge of interstellar flight to Sapphire. Components from the probe had gone into construction of *Pegasus*, and,

subsequently, had led to her resurrection. She now shared their journey of discovery, seeking her own origins. "Ready, Flash" he said to the engineer.

If Technical Specialist Flash, had any resentment at taking orders from a cat, he kept it buried deep, deep inside. "Drainpoints are slaved to the ventral sensor transmitters. Transmitters are aligned with receivers on the outer ring of the StarLock . The entire transfer should take less than ..."

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"0.04 seconds ... tell me something I don't know," the cat raised a paw above a pad labeled 'Transmit.' "Are you ready, Caliph?"

Caliph's new face, a hideous, cubist amalgam in brightly colored geometric shapes, and three eyes stacked vertically on the left side, appeared. She answered in a sarcastic monotone. "Affirmative, I am ready to waste my time trying to reactivate some stinking, retarded, dead braincore from a thousand years ago. Yea! All right. Let's go. Woo-hoo."

Since achieving sentience, Caliph had explored a variety of levels of self-expression. For a time, she had manifested herself as an enigmatic Oracle, and spoke in impenetrable riddles. For a while, she had acted like a pubescent girl, capricious, unfocused, and decorating the walls of her chamber with holo-posters of other, presumably masculine AIs with the cybernetic equivalents of great cheekbones and nice butts. Her current manifestation, known to those who worked with her as 'Cynical Bitch' was by far the most annoying.

"I hope this hurts," Queequeg said, and tapped the Transmit Pad with his paw. A surge of energy set the receptacle of Caliph's Intelligence aglow. The bright gold light intensified to blinding levels, then discharged. It channeled through the powerful transmitters at *Prudence's* front, meeting with a receiver on the StarLock. In 0.0389 seconds, Caliph had been injected into the StarLock.

"Now, we wait," said the cat. He hopped onto the deck and began looking for a warm place to curl up for a hundred naps.

Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-'n'-Jam

Eliza Jane Change sat at the corner of the main bar, nursing something that contained pink and orange shapes chasing each other in a purplish fluid. Eddie Roebuck, the establishment proprietor, sidled up to her. "What was with the bang-bang earlier."

"*Pegasus* transitioned out of hyperspace and into a firezone," she answered.

"All because you weren't there," Eddie patted one of her hands in a reassuring manner. "If you had piloted the ship in..."

"It wouldn't have made any difference."

Eddie drew himself up, shook his long black locks, fixed her with his best brown puppy dog eyes and said, "Is this face sexy enough or should I give you the one where I look like I've been sweating a lot."

Eliza Jane sighed impatiently. Eddie had been trying to get her into his sleeper every night since the first time.

"Eddie, hooking up was a mistake. We agreed on that a long time ago."

"Do you have something against making the same mistake twice... or three or..."

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That was one of his two more common responses. The other tack was, "Well, how can we be sure it was a mistake? Let's try it again to find out." Eliza Jane thought Eddie knew it was futile, but he seemed to enjoy keeping the game alive.

"I ruined things for all three of us," Eliza told Eddie. "I should have foreseen this. But I didn't." This had surprised no one more than Eliza, a die-hard fatalist who had always believed the future was as immutable as the past.

"Look, beauty, you always got me," Eddie told her. "And, who knows, maybe someday I'll look pretty good to you. Better than being alone anyway. I mean, we've got each other. That's more than a lot of assols got."

Pegasus – The Gardens of Independence

"Good afterdawn, Flight Commandant Jones."

"Good afterdawn, Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse."

"And how does this fine morning find you?"

"Optimal, Lieutenant Ironhorse, and yourself?"

"I am well and strong. Call me Paul if you wish."

Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse walked through the ship-gardens of *Pegasus*, practicing in his head the conversation he would never have the guts to deliver in person.

Ironhorse was a tall man, even by the standards of the

evolved, enhanced humans that populated Sapphire and Republic. His hair was blacker than the night's shadow, straight, unimaginatively cut. He had high cheekbones, iron-gray eyes, a complexion the color of red earth, and a straightness of bearing that put shame to rods of steel. Theologically, he had devoted himself to the Gnostic faiths, and found great inner strength from spiritual meditation, but the one thing he could never bring himself to do was to declare his love for Flight Commandant Jones.

A knowing smile. *"Very well, Paul. You may call me, Halo."*

When he met her, she had been the Flight Captain of the Burning Skies Flight Group. She had been beautiful then. She was stranded on Boadicea for sixteen years, and had matured, in his mind, gracefully, elegantly, beautifully.

"The Ancilla Trees are blooming," he would tell her. "Soon, their white blossoms will fill the air like snow. In the regions of Independence where these trees are common, the blossoms pile up on the ground half-a-meter deep in places."

"I didn't know you were interested in botany," she would say.

"There's more to life than thrust, lift, and graviton-field displacement," he would answer back. "The floral arrangements at Pieta's wedding were beautiful."

"Warfighter Buttercup did those," she would say. "It's one of his hobbies."

In his mind, this small talk went on for several minutes, easy and natural. Her laughter filtered over the fluffy alien trees.

But then at some point, the conversation would reach a pause, and he would find himself staring into her face, her fine symmetric face, with her delicate pointed chin. And he knew what he wanted to do, in that moment.

And he knew what he wanted to do in the hours, and the days, and the years that followed.

But even in his imagination, he could not bridge that moment, between kissing her and loving her.

He stood in the gardens a while longer, and then he left again.

The StarLock Chapultepec

“Should it be doing this?” Technician Rhomb, a thin, nervous Sapphirean asked. The oval above her workstation was flashing light blue and bits and pieces of highly abstract pornography.

Technician First Class Sweet pursed her lips. “I would guess not... but who knows with the ancients.”

Suddenly, the Command Center was awash in blue light with pink dots.

So

Huge

Like

A

Big

Empty

House

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With Oodles and Boodles of Rooms

"I think Caliph is..." Sweet began.

This Place Is Freakin' Huge!

"She's all over the place, Commander," said Sweet.
"She's bouncing from one system to the next, but not staying long enough to get anything on-line."

"See if you can get her to focus on one system,"
Alkema suggested.

Sweet touch-activated the neural-interface behind her left eye. "Caliph, can you bring the primary power systems on-line."

Oh, yeah...

A hologram schematic materialized in the commander center, looking so real and solid people dove for cover. Sixteen structures on the interior surface of the ring, each topped with a concave, parabolic roof antenna, began to glow electric blue.

***The StarLock draws power from the Singularity.
Until now, only one generator was on-line. Now we have
power lots.***

Keeler spoke. "Caliph, do you have access to the archival records?"

I haven't found those yet. But I can make food. Do you want some lunch?

Sweet touched her neural link, "Caliph, see if you can activate..."

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"Hold on," Keeler said. "Let's not jettison this lunch idea, yet."

I'm moving into the central braincore, only they call it the Cybernetic Intelligence Matrix. It's kind of dumb, but very powerful.

On an unrelated note, I think I'll be a man for a while.

CHAPTER THREE

Pegasus – Commander's Study

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While *Pegasus* had been in space for four years, sixty-four years had passed on Republic and nearly seventy on Sapphire, which were 1,764 light years away from their current position. Goneril Lear paced behind the other officers in the seconds before the scheduled transmission.

"Straighten your collar, Tactical TyroCommander, and sit up straight." she suggested to Redfire. "Elbows off the table, Lt. Commander Ojala," she admonished the chief engineer. "Are you sure you can't be persuaded to wear pants?" she begged the Prime Commander one last time.

Keeler shrugged from behind the table. "As if they will know."

She resigned herself, and took her seat at his right... nudging it slightly further away from his as she sat down.

"Ten seconds to signal initiation," said Alkema. This was his baby. He had pushed the engineering teams to finish the necessary reconfigurations in thirty days. Now, he sat on Keeler's left, itching to see if it all worked.

Keeler commanded. "Ranking Dave, let us begin."

Alkema touched the COM Link on the table before him. "Lt. American, enable the Tachyon Reception Net."

"Acknowledged... initialization procedure commenced," she reported from PC-1.

On the signal from *Pegasus*, the seventy-two receiving nodes spun to life. Inside the structure, systems began to

read through traffic on the tachyon wavebands. With only nine ships and a handful of worlds capable of tachyon pulse communication, the bands were mostly silent. There was one spot in the universe where tachyon communication was constant and cacophonous, between Sapphire and Republic.

“Reception net on-line,” Alkema reported less than a minute later.

“Begin transmission,” Keeler ordered. A panel on the wall came to life and they were suddenly looking at themselves; the panel showing the data being sent.

“Linking to the TPT Antenna at the Republic Axis Point,” Alkema reported. A few seconds later, “Linking to the TPT Antenna at the Sapphire Axis point. Requesting transmit access to Odyssey Directorate on Republic and Odyssey Project Office on Sapphire. TPT’s are requesting access code. Transmitting *Pegasus* identifier sequence.”

Alkema turned to Keeler. “What are you going to say?”

The Prime Commander wiggled his eyebrows. “You’ll find out.”

Alkema and Goneril Lear shivered. “Linked to Sapphire,” he reported an instant later. “Linked to Republic.”

Keeler faced the screen. “Hello, all you happy people. I am Prime Commander William Keeler of the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*. I enjoy historical revisionism, good food and wine, and exploring strange new worlds. I am widowed, but still in the prime of life, and think I have a lot to offer to a special lady. Could it be you?”

He paused for effect. "Anyway, this message is from all of us on the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*. Our last transmission was from the automated supply outpost at Waystation at the Lyra Frontier. Boy Howdy, did we ever clean out that place. Long story short, we have rigged a Commonwealth Era StarLock to serve as a TPT antenna and are capable of live, real-time communication with you. So, for the next hour, my officers and I will be entertaining you with mission logs, sketch comedy, a cooking segment, and a dandy musical number featuring my executive officer in sequins and pasties. Let's get started, shall we? To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking."

Several long seconds passed before they received a response. A man appeared on one of the screens. He was close to thirty years of age, large-bodied but not heavy, with long, trim sideburns and glossy black hair drawn into thin side-braids. He wore a generously cut white shirt with large puffy sleeves rolled up past the elbows. "This is Ground Lieutenant Foxy Fiddler at the Odyssey Project Location on Sapphire. I am hoping this is not a joke." He blinked at them. "Damn! Those uniforms really were funny-looking. You still wear those?"

"I can assure you this is no joke," said Keeler. "I can tell you a joke to show you the difference. Two Borealans and a Panrovian were walking down the street, and the Panrovian says..."

"I'm from Panrovia!" Fiddler shot back.

"Okay," said Keeler. "I'll tell the joke slowly and leave out the big words."

Another screen came to life. This displayed a woman, about ten years older than Mr. Fiddler. She had white-blond hair drawn into a bun and wore a robe, gathered at the center with a belt featuring a complex design that was echoed at her collar. "Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*, this is the Subdirector for Galactic Discovery in the City of Exploration on Republic. We have confirmed your identity and location. I am TyroLieutenant Corinthia Veracruz. I regret that the late hour means there is no one of official rank to receive your message. Is Executive Tyro-Commander Lear in attendance?"

"I am," Lear confirmed.

Veracruz made a notation. "Proceed with your report, *Pegasus*. What is your status?"

Fiddler added, "Zee-yah, tell us what's the haps?"

Alkema transmitted a report and summarized its contents vis-à-vis what they had learned about the Starlock. It was apparently capable of transporting a ship 1,000 light years in any direction. "However, if we can link to another StarLock, the range will increase..."

"To 2,000 light years," Lear said, trying to wedge her way into the conversation.

Alkema shook his head. "The mechanics of space-folding are bizarre, even by comparison to meta-quantum physics. In theory, the range between two StarLocks would be infinite."

"Infinite?" Lear said in surprise.

Alkema nodded, "In theory, if there were another StarLock at the edge of the universe, you could fly in one and out the other instantaneously."

"Getting it to the edge of the universe," Keeler added, "would be the tricky bit."

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"Kumbayah!" said Fiddler.

"This is most intriguing," said Veracruz. "Are there other StarLocks?"

Alkema transmitted an image from a wall of the command center; a map of the galaxy with one-hundred-eighty-eight points indicated. "At one time, we think there were at least a hundred and eighty. We've been trying to contact the others through their dedicated network."

"Any luck?" asked Fiddler.

"It took us most of four weeks to get this one up and running enough to make this transmission," Alkema said. "It will take at least that long to get a response from the other stations, if they were also dormant like this one."

Veracruz looked disappointed. She made another note. "What else have you learned about this StarLock?"

Redfire spoke first. "When we first came out of hyperspace, we nearly got spanked out of existence by its weapons systems. We're studying them to see if there's any technology we can adapt." Since encountering the Aurelians in the Boadicea system, he had been looking for ways to augment the ship's tactical throw-weight.

"What are your plans for the StarLock?" Fiddler wanted to know.

Alkema answered. "Our immediate project is to get it up and running, to see if it still works. It's not too easy."

Lear added. "We have found several Commonwealth-Era small spacecraft in the ring. We believe these ships may be capable of navigating in hyperspace. We are trying to adapt the technology to work in our Aves, for the purpose of undertaking exploratory missions fusing the StarLock as a base of operations."

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"But enough about us," Keeler interrupted. "What about you guys? How goes the Odyssey Project."

Fiddler promised to transmit the mission logs from the other Odyssey ships, but in summary, they learned several interesting facts about the Odyssey Mission.

The Pathfinder ships had made contact with sixty-one surviving colonies. One such colony was called Bountiful, discovered by the Pathfinder ship *Odyessey*. The Bountiful system contained twelve inhabited planets and moons and over 13 billion human inhabitants. Bountiful was advanced, prosperous, and eager to become part of the Odyssey Project.

Pathfinder *Sapphire* had made contact with at least two colonies that were in pretty good condition. Terma was an odd green and black planet, with one hemisphere almost entirely land, and the other almost entirely sea, whose irregular orbit staggered around its sun like a drunk around a streetlight. There, *Sapphire* had negotiated a truce in a thousand-years long war between rival nation-states[✂].

[✂] Demonstrating yet again how much easier it is to accomplish a diplomatic objective when diplomacy is accompanied by the threat of orbital bombardment.

Froston colony turned out to be an ice-age planet, with the entire human population living in subterranean structures and domes.

Pathfinder *Republic* had made contact with a colony called Cerulean, an oceanic world colonized by highly intelligent dolphins. They had also visited a few less interesting worlds.

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There was still no word from the Pathfinder *Olympic*.

With the discovery of these new colonies, there was talk of building a new city (City of the New Commonwealth) on Republic for housing representatives of all discovered worlds. Keeler was surprised to learn that Sapphire had offered up the planet Loki as a neutral site for interstellar diplomacy.

“What about the Aurelians?” Redfire asked.

Fiddler’s smile faded, and he looked grave. “*Pegasus* was the first ship to encounter the Aurelians. *Republic*, and *Odyssey* have both encountered Aurelian conquered worlds. Because of the Aurelian threat, the Phase II program has been accelerated. The first ten have been launched, traveling in groups of two and three.” He showed them the Phase II design; less than a fifth the size of *Pegasus*, made of a pair of mismatched wedges asymmetrically-aligned around a common axis. They carried one thousand people, and 40 Mark IV Aves.

“Have any of them gone to worlds we previously visited?” Keeler asked.

Fiddler told him. Two Renaissance-class ships, christened *Hyperion* (a moon of Sapphire) and *City of*

Consensus (a city-state of Republic) had called upon Meridian twenty-right years after *Pegasus* departed, and found that The Regulators had survived, but were confined to the remains of the Arco-towers, which the humans had abandoned. The human-alien hybrids had almost died out. The humans had begun to rebuild communities in the hinterlands away from the cities, occasionally conducting raids to dismantle technology and building materials, skillfully avoiding the automated defenses the Regulators had erected. *Hyperion* and *Consensus* blasted the Arco-Towers again to keep the Regulators down. It would be a long time before Meridian had any kind of civilization worthy of the name.

A pair of ships, *Bountiful* and *Rainier III* had called on EdenWorld forty-five (Sapphirean) years after *Pegasus* had departed. EdenWorld had changed dramatically. Free humans living outside the Prefectures had attacked and destroyed most of the citadels, including Altama and Chiban. A man and woman from the planet's far side, red of hair, rumored to be half-werewolf, led a successful slave rebellion, and founded the Free Republic of Eden. They were establishing a new society and wanted little to do with off-worlders.

They could have spent hours discussing new worlds before they came up for air, but Veracruz changed the subject. "The subdirector will be intrigued by the potential to make further use of the StarLock for galactic exploration. How close are you to tapping this capability?"

"We have an Artificial Intelligence..." Alkema began, but Lear cut him off.

“We are developing a plan to test this station’s capabilities, beginning with probes to test if we can send ships through the gate. We would like to begin probe testing in nine days; and eventually scale up to flights with inhabited ships.”

Pegasus – Hangar Bay

Four Weeks Later

The probe tests had been successfully performed under the remote supervision of Republic’s Ministry of Space. The final probe was sent over a billion kilometers from the station, and its data channels immediately flooded Republic’s telemetry link with the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland “Armpit Avengers” Fight Song. Alkema hoped this would discourage Ex-TC Lear from taking credit for his ideas again.

Now it was time for Stage II. Manned flights.

Matthew Driver and Eliza Jane Change approached the hatch to the Mission Briefing Room from opposite directions. They met at the hatch, and an awkward conversation ensued.

“Hello, Lieutenant Navigator Change.”

“Hello, Flight Captain Driver.”

[Awkward Pause.]

“I didn’t see your name on my crew list,” Driver said.

“I’m on the crew of *Winnie*,” she told him.

[Awkward Pause.]

“I thought you hated planets.”

"I like navigational challenges," she answered.

They avoided staring at each other for a second.

"Good luck," she said finally.

"You, too," Driver said back.

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Lear was waiting inside with Lieutenant Shayne American. Trajan Lear was also in the room, along with Technician First Class Sotheby Sweet, Medical Technician Jersey Partridge, Flight Captain Wang of the *Aves Winnie*, a navigator (purple trim on the jacket) and a medical technician. Lear introduced the Navigator as Lt. Lani Doon of Sapphire, and the Medical Technician as Telemachus Amberlin of Republic.

"Now that the introductions have been dispensed, Good Afterdawn, everyone," Lear began. She seemed to be trying to avoid staring at her son. "The mission for which all of you have volunteered is classified as Extreme Risk owing to the high degree of uncertainty. In fact, these may be the most dangerous missions you have ever been asked to undertake."

She left out, there had been more than 200 volunteers for twelve mission slots.

A hologram showed the StarLock, and an image of the two *Aves* passing through it one at a time, a few seconds apart. "When the StarLock is up to power, your ships will enter upon receipt of clearance. If all goes well, you will emerge on the other side instantaneously," Lear explained. They already knew that. American stifled a yawn.

A hologram showed a pod-like appendage extending beneath the *Aves*. "Each of your ships has been equipped

with a low-power, tachyon pulse beacon. Two-way communication will not be possible, but these will transmit a short message indicating the safe arrival of your ships.”

The next schematic hologram showed an Aves with one of the silvery Commonwealth pods attached to it. “In the event *Pegasus* can not reach you, these pods have been retrofitted into your ships. Engineering Core believes that, integrated with your drive and navigation systems, you should be able to navigate for short distances in hyperspace. We’ve put the homing coordinates for the StarLock in your navigation computers. You might be able to make it home through hyperspace.”

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An Aves navigating hyperspace. Driver shook his head. No matter how many times he heard it, it still awed him.

“For that reason, a navigator has been assigned to each expeditionary team,” Lear continued.

The other mission brief had no holographic slide to accompany it. Lear frowned. “*Prudence* is going to attempt to reach the only other StarLock that has so far responded to our activation signal. StarLock 13, Chronos.” She paused. “Chronos does not appear on any of the starmaps in the facility. We don’t know where in the galaxy *Prudence* will emerge. The Artificial Intelligence informs us that all of the other StarLock s connect through Chronos. So, it may be a kind of hub. If so, from Chronos, we could go literally anywhere in the galaxy.”

“*Pegasus* will remain at the StarLock,” Lear said. “If we don’t receive a signal from your ships, we will not come after you.”

Hangar Bay Alpha - *Prudence*

In another part of the bay, Trajan completed the final pre-launch checks on *Prudence's* externals. Catching a single spoken syllable from a familiar voice, he turned toward *Winnie*, and saw Tactical Commander Redfire's "family" saying good-bye to him. His ex-wife, Flight Commandant Jones, looking great even for a woman that had spent sixteen years in a war zone. She hugged and kissed him, albeit with reserve. Did this mean they were mending the tears in their marriage? Trajan did not think so, nor did he care.

Her sons also embraced Redfire and bade him good luck. Sam, nearly fourteen now, as if years meant anything when you weren't on a rock spinning around billions of tons of exploding hydrogen nuclei, and ... his eyes narrowed ... Max. Well, Max Jordan will never be able to say he was the first aviator to jump between StarLocks.

Before he could mutter the name 'Max' under his breath, he caught sight of his mother was crossing the bay. He winced inwardly, and turned his attention back toward his checks on the ship's systems.

She spoke as soon as she came within earshot. "Are the interfaces between the pod and your ship's BrainCore functioning at 100% efficiency."

Trajan showed her the readout indicating this was so. He agreed with Matthew Driver; the pod on the top of his ship was hideous and broke up the aggressive lines of the Aves.

Lear hesitated a moment, then said quietly. "No one would think any less of you for remaining behind."

"I am going on this mission."

"This may be a mission to nowhere," she replied.

"There is certainly a lot of risk," he conceded. "That's what makes it exciting."

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"You sound like a Sapphirean," it was out of her mouth before she could stop it. Before he could respond, she drew another arrow from her quiver. "Have you considered that Flight Captain Driver would prefer a more ... *experienced* aviator in the second seat?"

"If he did, he would have asked me to step aside."

Goneril Lear apparently still thought this was a negotiation. "If you don't go, I will approve your transfer to personal quarters in another habitation complex."

He shook his head. "It's too late for that. I am going on this mission."

Defeated, she embraced him, and whispered, "There will be a candle burning in the Hall of Light until you return."

Hangar Bay Alpha - Winnie

When his family had retreated to the observation bridge, Redfire stood outside *Winnie* while Flight Captain Wang finished final checks in the cockpit.

"I am surprised to see you and Change here," Jersey Partridge said from a back seat. "Two Command Core officers on an Extreme Risk Mission, that's got to violate some kind of rule."

"I persuaded the Prime Commander to let me come," Redfire said. "And by persuade, I mean, I told him I really, really wanted to go and he said okay."

"Is there a tactical angle to this mission?" Partridge asked

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"Only if someone tries to blow us up."

They looked over to *Prudence* as Lt. Sweet, Medical Technician Amberlin, and Navigator Lani Doon entered through the hatch. "Why did you switch over to my ship. You could have gone with *Prudence*."

Partridge looked embarrassed. "I hate to admit it, but I don't think they're coming back. Call it a premonition."

Redfire looked at him curiously. "Don't tell me you're a coward, Partridge."

Partridge shook his head. "That's not it. I just have this premonition that a Medical Technician just isn't going to be any help where they're going."

***Pegasus* Main Bridge**

The Bridge Crew watch as the two Aves raced toward the StarLock. A third Aves had launched earlier, to convey Executive TyroCommander Lear to the StarLock, where she had taken her post in the Command Center.

"Which ship enters first?" Keeler asked.

"Winnie," Alkema answered.

"I thought they were going to proceed alphabetically?"

Alkema shook his head.

TyroCommander Lear appeared in hologram form perched imperiously on her command chair in the StarLock's Main Mission Center. "We have laid in the coordinates for Dominia colony, the StarLock is at full power. Initiate acceleration in five seconds. Good luck." A five appeared on the projection, then became a four.

"Nervous?" Alkema asked Keeler.

"Not of anything," he answered. "Fear no evil, The Allbeing is near." When the countdown reached zero, Winnie charged forward and into the StarLock, accelerating to one-tenth lightspeed before hitting the event horizon. When it hit, space rippled like a rock thrown into a pond, and the stars beyond it dappled for a moment. Then it was restored to smooth, placid, nothingness.

The lack of pyrotechnics was something of a disappointment.

"Connect me to *Prudence*," Keeler ordered. "Flight Captain Driver, Try to hit it dead center,"

When *Prudence* entered the Star Lock six minutes later, Flight Captain Driver hit dead center.

CHAPTER FOUR

Chapultepec

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Sometimes Goneril Lear wondered who had occupied the chamber she had made her de facto office on the StarLock Chapultepec. It was a semi-circular space, windowless, but with walls that, at her thought-command, became screens showing space or any area of the station that interested her. It was the largest chamber in the vicinity of the Command Center, and she hoped that meant that it had once been occupied by the station commander. It was bare when she had found it, but she had ordered a desk and chairs from *Pegasus*. She hung the triangular blue crest of the Odyssey Project behind her desk, and took down the sign someone had put up reading “You don’t have to be insanely anal-retentive to work here, but it helps.” She thought she knew who had put it there.

It had been nearly seven days since the Aves had left. She wondered, occasionally, what her son might be doing. There had been no communication with his ship, not even the tachyon beacon; the one from *Winnie* had signaled, but not *Prudence*. They tried to contact Chronos with Chapultepec’s communication system, but there was no word. She had the unnerving thought that something horribly wrong might have gone. Technical Core had provided her a long report detailing a number of reasons *Prudence* might not be able to contact Chapultepec, from failure of Chronos’s communication system to highly technical theories involving the position of Chronos outside the space-time continuum.

She could only continue her carefully structured Iestan prayers that Trajan would be all right.

Lear removed a small device from inside her command jacket. It was about the size and shape and thickness of a fingernail. Slipped into a hidden slot on the communication interface of her desk, it compressed and encrypted her communications with the homeworld. *Pegasus* would contain no record of her transmitting. The StarLock would have no record of her receiving. Anyone who intercepted it, would find themselves listening in on a dry discourse on the potential for agricultural trade with Independence colony.

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She opened a channel to Republic, and in a few moments was met by the stern visage of Executive Administrator Helena Tyco. "Greetings Executive TyroCommander Lear."

"Greetings, Executive Administrator Tyco. How fares the Republic on this day."

"The Republic is strong and compassionate as always," she answered. "Engineering Directorate wishes to know how the system modifications are progressing."

"They are on schedule. In fact, Flight Core hopes to flight test one of the New Mark X Aves within forty-four hours, which would put us more than one hundred hours ahead of schedule."

"Ah, aviators, they are a reckless and over-eager type. Make sure the post-modification review sequences are thorough. What about the propulsion system modifications on the pathfinder ship?"

“Those modifications should properly be made in dry-dock, but we believe we can complete them on schedule.”

“It should increase your hyperspatial velocity by a factor of ten, I hope your navigators can handle it.”

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“My Navigation section chief has expressed total confidence.”

“Very good.” The Executive Administrator then smoothly segued to the real business. “I have been reading certain confidential analyses of the Pathfinder 003 Mission, ones written by my predecessor at the time of your launch. I think she would be surprised to learn that you are not yet in command of Pathfinder 003, Executive TyroCommander.”

Lear successfully did not grimace. “Prime Commander Keeler had proven more resilient than we, at first, predicted,” she conceded. “He has not yet demonstrated the gross incompetence that would have required his removal, and the senior officers remain loyal to him.”

“She would also be surprised to learn that TyroCommander Redfire is still in charge of Tactical.”

Lear nodded. “The analysis correctly assessed both Redfire’s sexual appetite, and his emotional instability. One could make the case that his personal issues have interfered with his ability to carry out his duties...”

“What he went through on Boadicea must have been very much like hell,” the Executive Administrator said without emotion. “He was out of contact with your ship for over sixteen days. Other people on his mission turned out to be Aurelian spies. He again disappeared, and was

tortured and seduced by an Aurelian agent on Winter. Are you certain Tactical TyroCommander Miller has not been... compromised."

"We keep him closely monitored, but his loyalties appear unaffected. I could pursue the issue more aggressively, if the Directorate advises..."

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"Don't concern yourself too much, Executive TyroCommander," Tyco purred. "On balance, the Pathfinder 003 mission has been highly successful. We believe Independence will prove to be an invaluable ally, and the strategic and tactical data on the Aurelians is literally priceless. And certainly the Sapphireans have proven no more of an impediment to your objectives than to ours."

Lear pondered this as Tyco continued. "When the Odyssey Missions began to bring back word of other surviving colonies, we predicted that Sapphire would either align itself to the course of creating a new galactic order, or would retreat into isolation, to insulate its culture from contamination. The Sapphireans instead have embarked on a third course that we did not anticipate; separate, but engaged. They are making trade agreements and defense pacts with other colonies, even members *of* the New Commonwealth, while avoiding membership *in* the New Commonwealth. In doing so, they have created a *de facto* alternative. Whether this is an accident, or purposeful, we can not be certain."

"Nine worlds have already agreed to align themselves with us. Surely..."

"Ten," Tyco interrupted. "Pathfinder 04 has sent word that the colony Sirocco will join the New Commonwealth. But nearly twice as many have made treaty or trade agreements with Sapphire."

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"Surely the Aurelians alter the equation somewhat?" Lear argued.

"Not as much as one would think." Tyco double-checked the security of her channel, before continuing in hushed, confidential tones. "The Notorium believes the Aurelian threat has been underestimated by Republic's democratic leadership. Based on data from your ship and others that have encountered Aurelians, there may be over two hundred worlds under their control."

"Two hundred," Lear repeated in a whisper.

"There is also a minority opinion in some of the Houses that we should seek peaceful coexistence with the Aurelians rather than go to war," Tyco went on. "We could offer them, for example, hyperspace navigational technology in return for the security of Republic and other worlds aligned with us, or under our protection."

"I do not believe that would be advisable," Lear said. "Their inability to travel faster than light is one of our few strategic advantages, and perhaps the only thing that has kept the Aurelians from conquest of even more worlds."

"Accommodation and compromise with the Aurelians also is antithetical to our goal of building a stronger galactic order," Tyco added, a little condescendingly. "We are not content to be only the second greatest power in the galaxy."

“Do you believe Sapphire would consider such an accommodation?”

“Absolutely not,” Tyco said. “Even in their dealings with other worlds, Sapphire explicitly forbids the transfer of hyperspace technology to the Aurelians. Of course, the ability to enforce such in the absence of a strong galactic order ...” She sighed. “Sapphire is going to be a pain in our asses¹ for some time to come.”

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“I understand completely,” said Lear.

“Returning to the primary issue, the Aurelians also represent not only a threat, but also a great opportunity. Faced with a menace of such capability, we can make the case to other worlds that nothing but a strong and well-ordered alliance will preserve humanity.”

“That seems self-evident.”

“One would expect so,” Tyco continued. “But the Sapphireans are still resistant to the idea of interplanetary government, and insist that defense pacts must respect the sovereignty of each world.” She sighed. “In the end, it will be critical to convince all worlds the the New Commonwealth offers the best chance at responding to the Aurelian threat.”

“The technology on this station may be useful to that end.”

“Highly advanced Commonwealth technology may be useful to us. However, in the end, Technology is irrelevant,

¹ What she actually said was “a continuing source of inconvenience and discomfort.” The aversion of Republicer bureaucrats to metaphors, however, does not lend itself to engaging prose.

Executive Commander,” Tyco stated firmly. “We believe our current level of sophistication, effectively deployed, is sufficient to counter the Aurelians.”

“Even against the pathogen?”

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“We do not believe the pathogen you found on (Medea colony) is a threat to Republic. Our planet’s biosphere is ill-suited to delivery of a biogenic weapon. We are content to let Sapphire confront that threat.”

“But the consensus of the five houses is that Aurelia must be defeated?”

“Indeed. Our strategic analysis is that for the security of Republic and the New Commonwealth, the Aurelian advance must be halted and reversed. We believe it is possible. However, our window of opportunity is small and closing. We need allies. To ensure the effective coordination of defense, worlds brought into the Commonwealth will have to align their structures and institutions to Republic’s. We may also, where it suits our interests, align our governmental structures to theirs. The high prerogative is that when the Aurelian threat is contained, we will have the structure for a New Commonwealth.

“Exactly,” Lear said, sensing her moment to pounce. “Which is why I have prepared, what I think, is a comprehensive strategy to incorporate this StarLock as a base for thorough exploration of these adjoining sectors. I plan to establish a command...”

Tyco cut her off. “Executive Commander, we planned for the discovery of a StarLock very early in the Odyssey

Program. A specially trained crew is already being prepared and will be en route to your coordinates within the year."

Lear tried to hide her disappointment. "Perhaps I ought to remain here in preparation for the transition."

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"You are needed on Pathfinder 003," Tyco informed her. "However, be aware that, from this point forward, the success of your mission will be gauged on how many worlds you bring to the New Commonwealth."

Chapultepec -- Elsewhere

Warfighter Lieutenant Commander Honeywell, Warfighter Buttercup, and a pair of technicians traversed a sector of the StarLock almost two-thirds of the way across the rim from Lear's Office. Honeywell led. "According to Caliph's translation matrix, what we're looking for should be behind that hatch."

He indicated a non-descript panel, only slightly heavier and thicker than other panels that lined this area of the ring, that seemed to be given to large hangar-sized storage bays, mostly empty. It was unlabeled, but there was a thought sense of a word hovering in the air in front of it. "Armory."

The access hatches on the StarLock were tied into the central intelligence, like everything else on the station, and one usually just had to will them to open. However, the Armory was restricted. Honeywell tapped his Com Link.. "Caliph, this is Lt. Commander Honeywell. I request access to Area 866/Zone K."

Caliph's new, masculinized voice came back to him.

"You got it, good buddy. (Belch)"

They paused, waiting for something to happen. The hatch remained solid. Honeywell repeated. "Caliph, request access to Area 866/Zone K."

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"Keep your pants on, partner. That area is restricted. The Central Intelligence doesn't want to give it up. I'm going to have to lay on the sweet talk... promise to respect her and all that beastshit, know what I mean?"

"Caliph..."

"Now, just let me add you to the permitted access files. You should be good to go, my man. Hoo-ah!"

Honeywell rolled his eyes as the hatch disappeared. There was another one behind it, a more conventional gateway, that simply slid aside as he and his team walked toward it, opening into a hallway so long the curve of the station could be sensed in it, lined with small doors like lockers. "Caliph, open the weapons lockers."

"Just a nano-second. The weapons cache security systems are locked up tighter than the underwear of an Alexandrian debutante, and we all know how hard those are to get into."

A pause.

"Well, maybe not you."

Honeywell exhaled behind clenched teeth. "I wish Caliph would go back to being a woman."

One of the locker doors slid open, top and bottom. Hanging in the space inside was a kind of suit, black, silver, and blue. "What is that?" he asked. "Body armor... a strength enhancement suit?"

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Technician Scout was out in front with her scanner. "Hard to tell. It's made of a material my tracker doesn't recognize, and it won't let me scan its internal structure."

"Caliph, can you access the specifications on the weapon located inside the locker you just opened?"

"You bet, chief."

A bright blue hologram schematic appeared in the air in front of them. Scout and Honeywell circled it. "I've never seen anything like it," said Scout.

"Some of it looks like a fully integrated weapons suite," said Honeywell.

"So, what's the rest of it?"

"Let's take a look," Scout suggested. "Take it out and spread it on the deck."

Honeywell reached into the locker. No sooner had he touched the suit than it came to life and leaped on him, wrapping itself around his arms, chest, legs, and nether regions. It left his face and head clear, heavily padded his arms and shoulders, with a pronounced hump at the back. Gloves formed over his hands, like blue liquid pouring over them, backed by rigid black exo-skeleton. Buttercup fixed his weapon, but there was nothing to aim at. In the space of a second, Honeywell was wearing the suit, and glowing faintly.

“Are you all right?” Scout asked.

Honeywell’s voice sounded even deeper and more authoritative than usual, seeming to come from on high when he answered. “I believe I am all right.” He looked around and shook out his arms. When he did so, an assortment of blades and firearms deployed, as though his arms had been transformed into... arms. Buttercup tensed.

Honeywell looked at the guns and knives protruding from his suit. “I don’t know how I did that. And I’m not sure what half of these things are supposed to do.” He turned to Scout. “Affirmative, the suit does seem to have some symbiotic attachment to me, but it hasn’t penetrated my body.”

“I hadn’t asked that yet,” said Scout.

“Of course, mind reading, it’s the only explanation. You’re right.”

“Um, Lieutenant Commander...?”

“Lie down? Why should I lie down? Excuse me, I’ve got to try something.” He looked upward, sprung, and disappeared through the ceiling of the room.

A few seconds later he reappeared, walking through a bulkhead as if it weren’t even there.

“What happened?” Scout asked.

“I just flew through the deck, into space, and walked back in through that wall,” Honeywell said. “That is the most amazing thing ever. Why is everything going all sparkly?” Then, his eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out cold on the deck.

Chapultepec – Another Sector of the Ring

A few kilometers anti-spinward from where Honeywell passed out, Prime Commander Keeler and a pair of well-armed Warfighters (he still feared head-biters, especially in these deep, dark utility corridors of the StarLock) made their way to a chamber, where David Alkema and a team of Engineers were examining a tall device.

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At eighteen meters in height, it nearly filled the chamber it occupied. It was all gleaming metal, or something like metal. At the top was a round head, whose front was long and pointed like a beak. Below the head was a slim metal body, with clusters of engines, weapons, and sensors at the mid-point and bottom.

“Good Afterdawn, Captain,” Alkema called down. He was working near the head. He touched the controls on his Flotation Device (an anti-gravity belt) and drifted gently to the deck.

“This better be good,” Keeler said. “I gave up a pedicure to be here.”

“I think you’ll find it very worthwhile, Captain,” Alkema told him. He indicated the device. “Do you know what this is?”

Keeler looked it up and down. “Well, it’s too big for a coital stimulator... at least I hope so.”

“It was a Sentry Drone,” Alkema told him. “The station had a hundred of them. They guarded the perimeter of the station, and kept a sensor log of everything that happened in the vicinity. This one is special.”

Keeler knew he was supposed to ask. "Special in what way?"

Alkema patted the engine cluster at the base of the Sentry. "The other Sentry Drones were all destroyed in the attack on the station. This one survived."

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"Attack?" Keeler asked.

"Za, Captain. This station wasn't just abandoned. It was attacked. Everyone on board was wiped out. It was just like what happened on Hyperion. Everything on the base is intact, but all the people vanished without a trace." He looked to Keeler, the former professor of history, for confirmation. The Outpost on Sapphire's Hyperion moon had been wiped out in the fifty-sixth century and while there was some controversy about the particulars, it was agreed that the outpost had been sterilized of every living thing, but the technology had been left intact.

"How very interesting," said the Captain. "How did you figure this out?"

"We were able to retrieve its sensor logs. Let me show you." Alkema led Keeler to a data station and activated the display. "Replay the section of the visual data recording I marked earlier."

A holographic projection unfolded before them. The view was of the StarLock. It was hard to say how far away the Sentry was at the time, but far enough that the starlock looked like a small wire ring. A fleet of starships stood in front of the station in a huge semi-circle, sixty or so ships in total, two or three deep. Keeler studied the ships with interest, mentally comparing them with the speculative

designs others had suggested for Commonwealth ships. They were nothing alike.

There appeared to be three classes of ship. The largest, Keeler guessed, were nearly the size of *Pegasus*, long, wedge-shaped slabs bristling with weapon ports. There were only three of these. The smallest were arrowheads joined to pylons, and they hung near the large cruisers, as support ships, perhaps. An intermediate class of ships, the most numerous, were eight and nine-sided polygons, with great domes in the center.

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Far out in the distance Keeler could see flashes of light, like the lightning of an approaching storm beyond the horizon. In an instant, the light was upon them.

They were less ships than beings of light and energy. They dazzled. They had a definite shape, Keeler was sure of it, but he couldn't focus on them long enough for anything other than an impression of light and power to flit across his consciousness, as though the brain could not hold the memory of them long enough to gain a solid impression of what they were.

The fleet opened fire, the smaller ships discharged fierce volleys of lethal blue and orange light. The big ships opened fire, too. Their charges were slower, and heavier. From their forward guns, thick beams of red light stabbed out into space. The smallest ships broke into attack formations, chasing the incandescent intruders.

But they were ridiculously overmatched. All their weapons firing full blast were no more effective than spitting into a hurricane. Their fleet was engulfed by the attackers in seconds, and as this happened, the hulls of

each ship disappeared, and Keeler could see internal structures, decks and bulkheads, twisted out into space.

“They turned those ships inside out!” Keeler exclaimed. Alkema nodded grimly. Keeler shook his head. “I’d hate to be those guys.”

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Then, the light creatures turned their attention on the StarLock. Three bore down on it, and then touched it. When they did so, it glowed with brilliant light for a second, then went back as before, almost as though unchanged.

Alkema paused the playback. “At that point, according to the sensors, energy output on the station dropped to almost zero. When that beam hit, it not only wiped out everyone on the station, but the data records as well.”

Alkema tapped the big giant metallic thing. “This Sentry wasn’t on the station and wasn’t destroyed in the attack. Its internal record has been right here waiting for us, for almost two thousand years.”

Keeler nodded, pondering this. It explained why there were no records of ship transits, or of personnel, or of anything on the StarLock, but yet everything remained fully functional. These explanations were minor compared to the real, great dark implication of what the Sentry Drone’s images had shown.

The Tarmigans were real.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dominia

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Redfire revived, choking and sputtering on the salty, stinging, ice cold water splashing in his eyes. The canopy had cracked open and the command deck was flooding. He wiped the water away with his hand, pulled himself away from the cascade, and groped in the darkened command deck, trying to remember what went wrong.

He had a fleeting memory of the descent, a high-speed corkscrew dive with him pinned hard into his seat as crash restraints deployed around him and sirens screamed terrain warnings and announced a cascade of system failures. They had hit the ground hard and skipped across the surface. He must have lost consciousness during one of the three or four hard slams and the high bounces back into the sky before the ship smashed into the sea one final time. He did not know how long he had been unconscious.

He undid his safety harness while mentally taking stock of his physical condition: A throbbing headache, some whiplash in the neck, a relatively inconsequential soreness in his right wrist. Blood trickled into his eyes from a cut to the forehead. In short, he had injuries, but only the kind that would not kill him and ultimately make him stronger, according to some philosophies.

He turned his attention to the ship. His system displays were all gone, and his controls were dead and dark. The command module was lit only by a crepuscular blue light that came from outside. "Emergency lighting," he ordered.

There was no response from the ship. He crawled from his seat and felt his way to the Emergency Stores compartment at the rear of the cabin. He felt around inside until he found the handlights, and strapped them to his forearms. Now, he had light. He moved forward to the pilot's seat, but he could see that Captain Wang was dead before he got there. The canopy over his pilot's station had been punched in and shattered. The aviator's head was smashed to pieces, an image Redfire knew would be frozen in his head until the moment he died, which, it seemed very likely, was at best a few hours from now.

Redfire knew it would be futile to try and engage the autorepair to seal the canopy. His best bet was to get below and seal the hatch manually. The cold water was already filling the cabin almost to his knees. He had to hope the rest of the ship was even still attached to the command module.

"Sorry, Adamus," he told Wang. "I would say a prayer for you, but I don't know which path you chose, and I don't think you want to hear about my religion just now."

Redfire made his way toward the lift, which he found was inoperable, but he was able to climb down through the access shaft. He reached the main deck. It was soaking wet, but whether from a hull breach or leakage from the command deck, he could not say. He reached for the manual closing bar and sealed the access hatch tightly behind him.

The main cabin was in complete darkness. He cast his wrist-lights about the forward part of the deck, where sensor, communication, and analyses stations were

arranged in a tight horseshoe. Every station was shattered, cracked and smashed with their internal components exposed. He turned the light toward the rear cabin, the rows of landing couches where Change and Partridge had sat. Redfire called out. "Is anyone alive down here?"

"Lt. Navigator Eliza Jane Change," he heard in response. Her voice was loud and strong and he hoped she was not hurt. "I'm in the mid-cabin with Medical Technician Partridge. He's very badly injured."

Miller directed a beam toward her and pulled himself across the ruined cabin. The bulkhead that divided it from the mid-deck seemed intact, although the hatch was jammed half-closed. He crossed the deck and poked his head and a light inside. "Keep talking, so I can find you."

"It's a small ship. Where do you think I am? Hurry!"

She was definitely not injured. Redfire squeezed through the hatch and into the mid-cabin, which was relatively intact. The landing couches were still locked down to the deck, although some of the storage compartments had broken open, spewing scanners, blankets, spare landing suits, oxygen bottles, food and water into heaps throughout the cabin. In the center aisle, Change bent over Partridge, who was stretched out and unconscious. She looked up, squinted and shaded her eyes against his light. "He wasn't secure when we crashed."

She had no light. "How can you see?" he asked her.

"I don't need to see. Get over here now and help me! Can you find a Med Kit?"

It was easy to spot, a bright orange pack with a white and blue ideogram on it, the abstract character symbolizing “The Healer,” circles around his lowered hands symbolizing the power to repair the body and make the injured whole. The same one Partridge had carried on board a few hours earlier, and sixty-seven light years away. “I’ve got it.”

“Bring it to me.”

As he made his way forward, he felt a roll from beneath the deck. “We’re in deepwater,” he told Change. “Probably in an ocean.”

Eliza turned back to Partridge, trying to immobilize him as he twitched and shuddered. She muttered something about how much she hated planets. He squeezed around Partridge and into the space in front of a row of landing couches. Redfire passed her the medical pack. She took out a diagnostic scanner and strapped it to her wrist. She held the transparent plate over Partridge’s head, and a multi-colored display of his insides came up.

“His neck isn’t broken,” Change said. “I was afraid it would be. The crash threw him against the forward bulkhead. There is some bleeding inside his skull.”

“Mining Guild Medical Training?”

She grunted affirmatively.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I was in my landing couch. The crash restraints saved my life. Are you injured?”

“Nothing serious.”

“How did this happen?” Change asked him.

Redfire sighed. “Best guess, we came out of the wormhole inside the planet’s atmosphere going half the speed of light. We’re damned lucky we didn’t smash right into the surface. At our speed, we would have penetrated the core and you and I would not be having this conversation.”

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“The friction at that speed probably created a fireball that scorched half the sky. Wang must have fought like hell to bring us down intact,” Change said with admiration in her voice.

Redfire nodded. “He’s dead.”

Change took this in grimly and continued to examine Partridge. “Fractured ribs, collarbone, vertebrae. His spleen was torn loose. Damage to the kidneys. Do you know what condition the ship is in?”

“The command deck is gone. The canopy is smashed and we’re taking on water. It looks like main power systems are out. Someone should get below and see how much in the way of gear and consumables we can salvage.”

“Not right now,” said Change. “Partridge is going to die if we don’t get this bleeding under control. Find the nano-knitters in the medical kit and give them to me.”

Redfire dug through the medical kit, pulling canisters and cylinders into a pile, scanning for the nano-knitters. “What am I looking for?”

“Nano-knitters, in a yellow tube with one end squared off. It will say ‘nano knitters’ on the label.”

Redfire sorted through two different yellow tubes before finding the right one. He handed it to Change. She pressed the tube against the scanning device, programming the tiny robots with the information they would need to locate and repair Partridge's injuries. The tube turned green. She pressed it against Partridge's upper arm and squeezed.

She let out a breath as though she had been holding it the entire time. "The nano-knitters will start clotting his blood from the inside." She shook her head. "There may be too much damage already."

"Hang in there," Redfire said, touching his hand against the doctor's neck. Partridge, who had faced down the Regulators with him on Meridian and the weirdoes on Green, who had risked his life meeting the Aurelians and caring for the doomed crew who had run afoul of them. He was glad Change was here to care for him. She may have lacked social skills, but she never forgot anything she was trained to do. "Is it safe to move him?"

"I don't think so, not until the nanos have stabilized him."

"We may not have time for that." Redfire rose, squeezed around her and crossed to the back of the cabin. He reached into a closet and pulled out a landing jacket.

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

"This ship may be sinking, we may have to abandon it, if we can... if the lifepods are intact." He made his way toward the rear. By the way the deck was canting, he guessed the rear of the ship was above the water. He

hoped he could spot land. If they were in the middle of the ocean and the ship was sinking, he would have to get very creative to figure out an escape.

He passed through the engineering section to the aft emergency escape hatch. A faint glow, and a sense of heat from the fusion reactor gave him hope it might be repairable, but the glow might have been residual radiation, or power that was unable to make it beyond the reactor because of the ship's destroyed systems. He drew down the emergency escape ladder, and climbed up to the hatch behind the top of the reactor dome.

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A bracing wind bit into him as soon as he opened it. He looked up to see a solid white sky, criss-crossed with feathery cirrus clouds of a slightly different shade of white, delicate as ice sculpture, and far away, about a third of the way between noon and sunset was a small white sun, whose light was barely sufficient to keep the night at bay.

He climbed out and looked around. All around his ship was a solid white vista of ice, snow, sea and sky merging into one endless, directionless, horizonless expanse. A howling wind cut into him, like icy cold razors. The ship had come down in an ice field on the top of a vast ocean. There was no land to be seen, nor to escape to.

He looked forward and saw that the head of the ship had punched a hole in the icy surface that was already re-freezing. The port wing-blade was also gone, torn away, with only a ragged shred of alloy aside the fuselage to mark where it once had been. The starboard wingblade was smashed and bent, but still attached.

He imagined the view from on high: the debris field where the Aves had smashed into the ice would be compact, a brief black stain on the icy expanse. He activated his Spex and scanned.

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The ice-pack was probably solid enough to walk across, but what of it? He didn't think there was any hope of salvaging the land-vehicle from the cargo bay. Open and exposed to this extreme cold, they would have even less chance of survival. If the ship sank, it might be their only hope, but deciding either way was choosing almost certain death over certain death.

Very afraid now, he climbed back into the ship, closing the hatch behind him.

Somewhere Else

Prudence emerged from the artificial wormhole and shot through space.

"StarLock behind us at 100,000 kilometers," Trajan reported. "200,000..."

Matthew Driver brought his ship around, altered the geometry of his gravitational field thrust, and built up velocity to double back toward the giant ring in space.

"That's not the same StarLock we went out through," said Technician Sweet.

"Not if everything worked the way it was supposed to," said Driver.

"Neg, I mean, that definitely is not the StarLock we passed through," she projected a display on the canopy

between them, an extreme magnification of the StarLock.
“Look.”

It was a very different design than Chapultepec. Much larger, for one thing. Its surface was black, but with a scaly and iridescent quality, like the skin of a snake. Long spikes protruded around its perimeter, and the ring seemed to actually be two rings aligned and joined together.

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“It’s a different StarLock,” Matthew confirmed. “And I’m guessing that...”

“Something moved!” said Sweet, pointing at the screen. “Did you see that? What the hell is that?”

“Hey guys,” said the Navigator. “Has anyone else noticed that there aren’t any stars out there?”

Dominia

“Leaving the ship is not an option,” Redfire reported to Change upon returning to the cabin.

“Help me,” she replied. Partridge was shuddering severely. “Get a thermal blanket. He’s going into shock.”

He grabbed a thermal blanket from an overhead storage bin, where it lay neat and undisturbed. He handed it to her, then began looking for an instrument to make a diagnostic of his own.

On a landing couch two rows behind Change and Partridge was a Quantum Resonance Scanner. He picked it up and pressed it against the deck. He pulled a holoprojector from the sleeve pocket of his landing jacket. A three-dimensional image of the ship slowly built in the air in front of him.

Redfire reported the results of his inspection. “The forward outer hull is badly damaged, water is leaking into the weapons bay at the front of the ship, albeit slowly. The inner hull in that area is stressed, but intact for now. The port cargo bay is gone, and with it, most of the realistic food and supplies. The fusion reactor is unsalvageable. The port power cell is ... probably... gone with the port wingblade. The starboard cell is damaged. I don’t know how long it will last, but while it does, we’ll have some heat, and maybe some light if I can restore that system.”

“What about the escape pods?” she asked him.

“Intact,” Redfire answered.

Change rose from her patient. “We should inventory what we have in the cabin, then plan out how we’re going to use it to survive.”

Damb, Redfire thought. He had always found Change a good officer, unimaginative, but highly competent. Sometimes good officers cracked under extreme situations, but Change seemed to be doing what needed to be done without a note of fear or uncertainty.

Halo Jordan would have done exactly the same thing.

For the next two hours they picked their way through the cabin, organizing what the crash had thrown around, discarding what was useless or beyond repair. They salvaged five landing suits, heavy weather quality, with internal heating, one for each of them and two spares. (They insisted on counting Partridge as a survivor.) At least, they would not freeze. They retrieved enough food-packs to survive, with careful rationing, at least six weeks,

possibly longer. Handlights, tools, two medical packs and what remained of a third they placed on a landing couch near Partridge.

When they were done, she treated his minor injuries, placed a healing bandage over his eye and on his wrist. "Thank you, Dr. Navigator."

"I just did what is necessary."

Redfire looked at Partridge. "I was thinking about the lifepods. We could put him into stasis, keep him alive until *Pegasus* arrives."

Change shook her head. "His metabolism is too erratic, the cryostasis process would kill him. We will have to stabilize him first."

Redfire had expected that response. He wanted to keep the lifepods as a last resort anyway. "We'll be all right if the main deck hasn't been breached," Redfire told her. "Aves are All-Environment class ships, including underwater. Nothing to do now, but... pass the time. Have you ever played the Game of Resistance?"

"I have not," Change answered. "And I have no interest in learning."

"We could to be here a long time."

"Then we should try to make our environment as efficient as possible. You said the structural integrity of the forecabin was good?"

"For now."

“As soon as Partridge is able let’s move there. It will give us more space. What about communications?” Change wanted to know.

“The emergency beacon is active,” Redfire told her. “We can use our COM Links once *Pegasus* makes orbit.”

“If...” she began, but he held up a hand and cut her off.

“Don’t say it...”

She said it anyway. “If *Pegasus* comes through the StarLock to retrieve us, it’s quite possible they will also emerge inside the planet’s atmosphere. If that is the case, they will impact the surface. No one will survive.”

Redfire sighed, The wormhole would not open in the planet’s atmosphere. That had been a freak mishap. The planet had moved on in its orbit. Even if *Pegasus* exited in the orbital path of the planet, it would still be several weeks away from the impact point.

There could be no point in considering any other alternative, since this was the only one that gave them a chance of escape.

CHAPTER SIX

Pegasus

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Alkema and Keeler entered Hospital Four, where Honeywell lay on a recovery table, where he had been for the previous two days. He sat up when he saw them, still wearing the battle suit. "They're little tight around the crotch, and they tend to make me pass out, but otherwise they're fine," said Honeywell.

"How are you liking the new jammies?" said Keeler.

"How interesting. That's a very odd nomenclature. 'Poltergeist Suit.'"

Keeler blinked thoughtfully, as though trying to decide how best to proceed before continuing. If he said something other than what he intended to say, would it throw Honeywell into some kind of dead logic malfunction? Deciding it best not to risk it, he carried on. "I believe you have encountered what the Ancients called a 'Poltergeist Suit.' It was a kind of all-purpose wearable arsenal used by the Ghost Fighters who protected Commonwealth Installations such as this StarLock."

Honeywell answered. "Aye, I guess I should be grateful for that."

"You're lucky you didn't find what the Ancients called a 'Submissive Sex Poodle Suit,'" Keeler went on.

"Nay, they still haven't figured out how to get it off of me."

That was an easy one. "Have they figured out how to get it off you yet?" Keeler asked.

"I guess that's one way of looking at it."

"On the bright side, at least you don't have to worry about bumping into things, now that you can just walk through them. Also, blue is your color."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, I will try."

"Must be my turn," said Alkema, stepping forward and leaning over the recovery bed. "We're doing everything we can. We will get that thing off you. Just try to stay comfortable."

Honeywell then closed his eyes, so Keeler and Alkema figured the conversation was over. They went to speak with his physician, Doctor Bihari. Bihari had been part of the landing party on EdenWorld, had adopted a slave-child from the planet, who was now the leading scorer on the ship's junior rollerball team. She perched atop a high medical stool, staring at the results of Honeywell's latest test series. "Report, doctor," Keeler requested.

"Lieutenant Commander Honeywell is enclosed in a piece of ancient technology and he can't get out," the doctor replied.

"We knew that three days ago," said the commander.

"And that is still all we know as of today." She brought up a medical scan of Lieutenant Commander Honeywell. Every area covered by the suit was opaque. "Technical Core and Science Core have examined the device. Not only can they not determine how to remove it, they cannot even

ascertain the manner of its construction, whether it is sentient, or even if it is matter or energy."

Keeler studied the medical scan as though he understood what it meant. "That glowing field around him, is that normal?"

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"It's normal for every human to have an aura, generated by electro-chemical activity in the brain and cells. But his is nearly a thousand times more energetic than normal."

Alkema understood. "You could shoot him with a pulse weapon set to heavy stun and he wouldn't feel it."

Keeler nodded. "Until now, we assumed that Ghost Fighters and Poltergeist Suits were all part of an ancient entertainment-fiction, too silly to be taken seriously. One of my Master Students did his thesis on them, and for once, I actually read the thesis." He paused. "Lt. Alkema, in our next transmission to the homeworld, remind me to retroactively approve a certain graduate student thesis I rejected as too silly to be taken seriously."

"Um, he's probably dead, sir."

"Okay, then never mind." Gesturing toward Honeywell, Keeler asked, "Why does he keep passing out?"

"The suit is just too much for him," Bihari told her commander. "Once it formed the link with his brain, it started expecting his mind to control all of its systems. It was too much for his mind to process, and he collapsed."

"Like a computer trying to do too many things at once, it crashed," said Alkema.

Keeler scowled. "I got it, that time, lieutenant. I don't need everything reduced to a simplistic metaphor."

"Sorry, Commander," Alkema said contritely. "Doctor, the suit responds to mental commands. Have you tried just having him *think* it off?"

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Bihari looked at him. "Of course we did. It was only the most obvious course of action. It didn't work."

It had been a long time since he had been shot down twice in a row. Alkema looked a bit low. "Well, I'm feeling kind of useless, right now."

"You are correct in that removing the device is of paramount concern," Bihari told them. "I am very much concerned about the prolonged effect of having that device linked to his brain. If it is not removed soon, the damage could be irreversible."

Keeler sighed. "Of all the things I was afraid of encountering when we docked at this station, formalwear was not one of them."

Dominia

Redfore, Change, and Partridge had to surrender the forward cabin a few days after the crash. The destruction of the command deck had opened too many leaks and fissures, and water began seeping in. Also, the ice floes on the surface were grinding and crushing against stricken ship, groaning against the hull, mournfully and thunderously at the same time. The roof had begun to bulge ominously inward, preparing to collapse and deluge the cabin below.

They moved out the supplies and equipment and carefully carried Partridge to the center cabin. Redfire closed the hatch behind them. Change double sealed it with a molecular bonding beam.

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Redfire sat with his back against the bulkhead slowly eating an oblong bar of protein and carbohydrates. He bit through its wrapping, which was made of vegetable fibers and chewed it, looking thoughtfully at the small dark cabin that would be his prison, and possibly his tomb.

Change finished sealing the hatch and returned to the seat she had made her space. She pulled out a datapad from the pocket at the side and began studying the schematics again. So far, they had managed to jury-rig power and heat systems enough to make the cabin almost comfortable.

“What are you working on now?” Redfire asked.

“I think we should reinforce the hull,” she said. “I am working on a way to use the quantum resonance mappers to chart stress levels in the ship’s structure. That will tell us where we need to reinforce.”

Privately, he didn’t think there was a lot they could do to strengthen the hull, and she was just trying to keep herself occupied. He was tired of from having spent every waking moment for the previous three days trying to secure the ship for survival. Certainly it was necessary, but survival also depended on psychological and social stimulation.

“Any regrets?” he asked, commencing what he was sure would be the 143rd attempt at rebuffed personal conversation.

“Only people who have not lived life honestly have regrets,” she told him, and turned back to her datapad.

“Did you know this was going to happen?” Redfire asked. “I mean, Navigators are all precognitives, right?”

“I didn’t know we were going to crash into the planet,” Change said levelly. “Or, I knew it was my fate to crash into the planet and there was nothing I could do about it. Either way, the outcome is the same.”

“Could you have averted it by going on Captain Driver’s party?” Redfire asked.

She sighed. “That was also out of the question.”

“You and he used to have something.”

“You and Flight Commandant Jones used to have something. Shall we pursue this conversation to its natural end, or would you prefer to avert it?”

Redfire took a deep breath. Change was cold, everyone on the ship knew that; as cold as the nitrogen glaciers of the outermost moon of the Republic system’s outermost planet. What it pumped through her veins could have chilled a fusion reaction.

In another words, a challenge.

“We have done everything we can do to secure this ship, but survival depends on more than a habitable environment. We need to keep each other psychologically

fit and alert. The best way for us to do that, to bond effectively, is to relate to each other on a personal level."

She put the pad down. "All right then, relate to me on a personal level."

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This was at least a start. "There is something I have been wondering ever since Meridian," Redfire began incautiously. "Flight Captain Driver, is he also a precog?"

Her dark eyes flashed, and for a moment, he didn't think she would answer. Then, as though calculating that not answering would have more portent than a clinical non-answer, she replied, "To my knowledge, Flight Lt. Driver has never been tested for precognitive ability."

"Yet, he knew on Meridian when we were about to be attacked, and predicted..." he paused, too close to himself now, "... certain things on EdenWorld that came to pass. He knew that the team on Boadicea was going to be captured, and had an escape plan prepared."

"Sounds like sensible planning ahead to me, typical of all good aviators." She tapped her datapad.

He moved across the cabin, placing himself close enough to touch her. "I understand that sometimes, a person with a latent trace of precognitive ability can be activated through contact with a strong precognitive. Is that what happened to Driver?"

She said nothing for a moment, then answered him with an affirmative only Mining Guilders used. "Yes."

"Is that why you refused to marry him?"

“He ought to be grateful I turned him down. You’re much happier when you don’t know what the future holds.”

At that point, the ship lurched sharply forward. Redfire grabbed the arm of a landing couch to steady himself. “I think the forward cabin has been breached,” he said.

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“All the more reason to stop this irrelevant conversation and work on reinforcing the hull.”

“With what?”

“We may be able to salvage some plating from the Engineering cabin.”

Redfire pulled the datapad toward himself, and examined the schematic of the ship. “We ought to be all right unless there’s a breach in the forward weapons bay, or what’s left of the cargo deck. Without sensors...”

Partridge moaned, tried to sit up. Change leaned over him. “Don’t move.”

“Could I ... have ... some water,” Partridge said hoarsely. Change reached for one of the bottles. Redfire reminded himself to repair the water recyclers next.

A prolonged groan came from behind the sealed hatch, followed by a loud explosion and the sound of rushing water. The command deck had given way, and the forward cabin flooded quickly. The ship pitched violently forward and began to rapidly slide toward a thirty-degree cant before stabilizing.

"Does your precognition tell you if we're going to survive this?" Redfire asked.

"I don't rely on precognition," she told him. Now, she was cradling Partridge's head in her lap. "Nor would I surrender to it if I did think we were going to die."

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Redfire met her stare. "You have a reputation as the most inscrutable woman on the entire ship. I doubt even Captain Driver really knew anything about you."

"Why are you so interested in my relationship with Captain Driver?" she returned, agitated.

"We have thirty-one days, minimum, before *Pegasus* returns for us. And you refuse to learn the Game of Resistance."

She pouted and said nothing.

"I would at least ... like to know... the people I'm going to die with," Partridge said weakly.

"You aren't going to die," Redfire answered, unconvincingly.

"Give me your hand," Partridge told Change. He grasped onto her hand and held it down close to his heart. "Do you remember your emergency medical training?"

"I stabilized you after the crash."

"You did a good job, but healing is more than just medicines and machines. Hold my hand, concentrate, I need to draw strength from you." He was silent for a moment. "You're very warm," he told her.

Redfire observed as she held his hand. The ability to assist healing through physiological connection was one of

the High Gifts, but it required tremendous mental discipline to have any real effect. Still, having a beautiful woman hold your hand must be of great comfort.

“Tell me about your life,” Partridge asked again.
“Where were you born?”

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Change sighed. “I was born on a Guild Hospital Frigate in the Sapphirean Out-System. My mother died in childbirth.”

“Kumbayah,” said Partridge. “I didn’t think that was possible. What happened?”

Change told him levelly. “The physicians were never able to identify a cause of death. She apparently expired immediately after I cleared the birth canal.”

“And your father was already gone by then,” Redfire put in.

“My father abandoned my mother shortly after she became pregnant with me,” Change said, and this in itself was an enormous revelation. Abandoning the mother of one’s child was an intolerable offense on Sapphire or Republic. Republic would send such a man to a Rehabilitation Settlement until he learned to take responsibility. Sapphire would sometimes deprive such a man of the means of producing more children... without anesthetic, or indeed, antiseptic. Even in the Guild, which was sort of a refuge for those whose personal morality didn’t measure up to the norms of either world, there was very low tolerance for the abandonment of children, and the honorable members of the Guild might send some of their larger and even more morally vacant subordinates to

have a violent and painful discussion with a man or woman who did such a thing.

“The Guild tried to locate him, but they never succeeded. Ordinarily, I would have been sent to relatives, but my mother was the last of her family line. Instead, I was adopted by the shipmaster of the processing ship my mother served on. I grew up there.”

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“What was that like?” Partridge asked.

Change had to think. “Her name was Clytemnestra Zeta. A Republicker. What I remember most was that the crewmen were all afraid of her. She was very tough, tougher than any man I’ve ever met. When I got older, she wanted to send me to school on Sapphire, but I fought her. I didn’t want to leave the Guild, and I didn’t think there was anything useful I could learn on a planet. She was absolutely determined that I should go though.”

“But you didn’t,” said Redfire.

“There was an accident,” Change told him. “They were cracking an asteroid to get at a deposit of Yttrium, but they miscalculated. The command deck of the processing ship was hit by debris, torn open into space. I was orphaned twice by the time I would have been eight on Sapphire.”

Redfire shook his head. “What happened next?”

“By all rights, I should have been sent to Republic, where a nurturing family would have been found for me. They took me to the spaceport on Shiva 2 Outer, but I managed to sneak away from my guards. I hid out on the station for... it must have been weeks, stealing food,

hiding in the atmosphere and waste processing facility. Insane, really.”

“You really did not want to go to Republic,” Redfire put in. “I understand the sentiment, but at eight years old, why?”

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“I knew I wasn’t supposed to be there,” she answered. “One day I was hiding in the docks, waiting for the food delivery shuttle from Republic, figuring I could score enough food for weeks if I was careful. I saw someone I knew. His name was Ramses. He had been an officer on Zeta’s ship. Now, he was the First Officer. He had always been kind to me, so I took a chance. I ran to him, cried in his arms, told him I didn’t want to go to Republic.

“At first, I think he intended to turn me over to the authorities, but once we pulled out of orbit, his attitude changed. He began to treat me like a daughter...” Her nose wrinkled. “No, nothing quite so noble. He liked having me around. I made sure that he would. He was gentle, too nice for the Mining Guild. He never became a shipmaster.

“Shortly after I was flight-certified, he retired to the seventh moon of Gigantor... the Guild has retirement colonies there. The gravity is very light, and volcanic activity keeps the surface warm. If your bones have been broken and poorly mended as often as the average Guilder’s, you can appreciate that.

“What is your faith?” Partridge asked.

She frowned. “The Mining Guild never bothered to develop my spiritual consciousness.”

“You must believe in something.”

“I do. I just don’t know what it is.”

Partridge was exceedingly somber. “Is there room in your philosophy for The Allbeing, the Creator-Sustainer, the Eternal That Contains the Infinite, He of the Nine Billion names? Is Time The Allbeing, or just an Aspect of The Allbeing?”

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Redfire deflected. “What do you believe, Partridge?”

“I am a Theologian of Iestan Aspect, and we all know what that means,” Partridge was quiet. “I’m about to find out who’s right about all this.”

Change pulled him even more tightly to her. “Don’t talk that way.”

“Eliza, the nano-knitters aren’t going to be able to close the lacerations in my brain. Since we’ve begun talking, I’ve lost the vision in my right eye and I can no longer feel you holding my hand. It’s over for me. Even if I could hold on a few more days, *Pegasus* will never get here in time to save me.”

Partridge looked up at Change one last time. “I am not afraid. Listen ... when *Pegasus* comes... if at all possible, bring me back to the ship. Disintegrate my body and spread it in the Gardens. I don’t want my journey to end on this horrible planet.”

Then, he died.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pegasus

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In his dreams, she was his. Ironhorse could hold her, feel the warmth of her body radiating outward, delighting as his strong, brown arms enclosed her pale white shoulders.

When she lay next to him, a goddess in repose, the perfect curve of her back enticing him to kiss and taste the exquisiteness from the back of her neck to the hollow cusp above her buttocks.

She rolled over and faced him in bed. Her hair spread across the pillow perfectly. The few pale gray hairs, the faint lines a testament to the character she had earned when she caught up and passed him in the fullness of her years. She kissed his cheek and whispered. "If only you had told me sooner," she said.

"All those years we lost apart..." Ironhorse said.

Jordan stroked his chin. "We still have eternity together." She pressed her still fabulous body against his. Their lips met, and they prepared to make love again...

Dominia

Redfire awoke, still feeling Halo in his arms, still feeling Ironhorse's pent-up lust and unrequited love in his mind. He tried to shake free of the dream, but this was not easy because he was naked and lying next to Eliza Jane Change with his arms around her.

He sighed. This had probably been inevitable. He pulled himself away gently, so as not to wake her.

After Partridge died, they had sealed his body into one of the lifepods. It had been awkward, since neither of them knew that correct Iestan prayers to offer over him. They comforted themselves that if his faith was worthy, he would find his own path to where he needed to be.

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Then, they had gone back to their patterns of mutual avoidance. Eliza read. He played games of strategy on his datapad. It had gone on this way for several days, and might still have had not one of the cabin heaters failed, and forced Change and Redfire to huddle for warmth.

They spent hours, days, simply lying underneath their thermal blankets as Change read and Redfire meditated. They listened to the ice grinding against the hull, hoping a leak would develop for them to fix because it would give them something to do. Change was troubled by a dream of Partridge's ghost, forever wandering the frozen wastes of this planet, and asked Redfire to hold her as she slept.

When she slept in his arms, it became almost overwhelming, the warmth of her, the softness of her, the sweet feminine smell that arose from her. What brought them together finally? Fear? Cold? Boredom?

None of these, Redfire knew. They came together because she was beautiful, and because he was with her. Technically, he had not wronged Halo, having long since set her free. It still felt like betrayal though.

Pegasus – Commander's Suite

The last thing one wants on a long journey is the presence of an elderly, cantankerous, opinionated relative, forever second-guessing your choices of which star systems to visit, constantly telling you to slow down, forever carping about the good old centuries.

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Prime Commander Keeler had no choice. The Limited Government of Sapphire had insisted that he bring the disembodied spirit of his 3000 year old ancestor on this journey, probably on the insistence of the 'Dead Guys,' a sort of shadow advisory council consisting of the preserved intellects of Sapphire's greatest minds. No other Sapphirean captain had this requirement bestowed on him. Perhaps the Dead Guys, like everyone else on the two home worlds, had underestimated Keeler's ability to hold his own against Commander Lear. Or, it could have been because Lexington Keeler wanted to be along for the ride, and the other spirits were glad to be rid of him.

They were watching a recording from the Sentinel, but not the one Alkema had shown him earlier. "Until this morning, they had been only examining the visual record of the battle... but this is a view from the peripheral sensors, which were looking away from the battle lines."

In the hologram in the room, three of the medium-sized ships broke off from the end of the line, and zipped away at high sub-light.

"They've been analyzing the communication signals logged by the Sentinel as well," Live Keeler said. "Translated it comes out as follows." The translation was displayed as words on the screen.

WHERE ARE THE AURORANS GOING?

THOSE SONS OF THREE LEGGED WHORES!

THEY'RE RETREATING!

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Live Keeler paused the recording. "This is followed by several fairly insulting comments about the Aurorans, but without knowing the anatomy of livestock breeds indigenous to the other colonies, it's unclear what the Aurorans were precisely expected to stick in where, but you get the gist."

"Hah! We had much better insults in my day!"

Keeler zoomed in on the ships. Each sported an Insignia of a large starburst surrounded by a pair of swooshy things indicating the orbit of two smaller star shapes. Lettering beneath was Auto-translated as "Aurora." "Do you know of a colony called 'Aurora?'"

"There was an Aurora colony in the Old Capricorn Sector," the Old Man answered. "Lovely place. The women had a weird fetish about taking a crap on your chest..."

"Um... that's getting into the zone of too much information."

"That Aurora was on the other side of the Galaxy. Like as not, they're talking about some New Aurora."

Live Keeler replayed the visual record of the assault. "What would your analysis be of the battle?"

The Old Man found his anger. "I see a valuable strategic asset poorly and incompetently defended by an inadequate and uncoordinated force of ships that showed

no evidence of even attempting a serious, unified defensive line.

“My fleet was once tasked with defending Roma colony from an assault by the Mutant Stranguloids. We let the Iestan Fleet take point, while I hid my fleet in reserve. As the enemy closed in on the planet, and the Iestan Fleet, we swept in from behind. We caught them in a cross-fire and wiped their sorry, genetically-mutated asses like a skid mark on the underwear of the universe.”

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Live Keeler frowned and took a drink, “Well, you’ve got my vote for most sickening metaphor of the year, but what does that have to do with the battle we saw?”

Dead Keeler sparkled in his ectoplasmic field. “The bait and assault maneuver was a standard Commonwealth tactic against the Adversary, but it’s clear those dopes just lined up their ships, tried to create a battle-line, and let themselves get slaughtered. Idiotic strategy.”

“Perhaps, standard Commonwealth strategies were useless against the Tarmigans.”

Dead Keeler recued the visual record and played it again. “From what my eyes have seen here, it does not look like any strategy could prevail against the Tarmigans.”

“So, why fight at all?”

Dead Keeler shrugged. “If the Tarmigans were bent on making the human race extinct, I suppose your ancestors had nothing to lose fighting them.”

Live Keeler sighed, "The Tarmigans wanted to wipe us out, the Aurelians want to wipe us out. It's hard being a human being these days."

"You'll be lucky if they're the only two species trying to wipe you out," Dead Keeler answered.

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Live Keeler figured this was probably so. "On a cheerier topic, why didn't you tell us about the StarLocks."

The Old Man's eyes gleamed, the way he did when he was about to lie, or at least, shade the truth. "The Network did not extend this far into the Perseus Quadrant when I came to Sapphire. The dumb things take a century to build. You have to strip mine neutron stars for the material, then capture or create a black hole to power the beast."

"But, still, this would have been valuable information..."

"We're not going to just give you the keys to the galaxy and let you take it out," said the Old Man sternly. "You have to earn your place."

"General Ziang apparently was more trusting."

"If you like General Ziang so much, why don't you marry him?" Dead Keeler snarled.

"Why, was he interested?" Keeler answered. "Or are you just toying with my girlish heart?"

His ancestor growled at him, in an unsettling, unearthly way.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a large, smart-aleck cat, gray-striped with a white bib and paws. "Hey Boss, Dead Guy, ... um, listen,

remember when TyroCommander Lear was on the planet Winter, and there was a travel ban in effect, and you suggested if she needed to get back to the ship, she should have pulled the broomstick out of her ass and flown up?"

"It certainly sounds like something I'd say," Live Keeler admitted.

"Explain to me why that was supposed to be funny?"

Live Keeler was puzzled by the feline's interest, but he explained. "There was an ancient Earth superstition about horrible, haggly, harridan women, much like witches. Anyway, supposedly, these women could fly by means of a broomstick wedged between their legs."

"I see," said the cat, twitching his tail. "So, why would TyroCommander Lear store such a broomstick in her rectum?"

"Because, to us bipeds, having such a contrivance in our anal cavity would make us walk with that tight, haughty gait that the TyroCommander uses. Why do you ask, sir cat?"

"Oh, because I just let TyroCommander Lear into the forechamber, she's been listening in on your conversation for some minutes."

Keeler turned to the ghost of his ancestor. "Cheese it. We'll continue this conversation later."

His ancestor faded away. Live Keeler turned and exited to his living area, where TyroCommander Lear stood waiting, and steaming a little. "Who were you discoursing with, Commander?"

"A Master Historian at the University of Corvallis," Keeler answered. "I got a TPT link... on my secure channel, through the StarLock."

"Someone you knew from before?"

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"Za, a former colleague you might say."

"Sixty four years have passed on Sapphire since we left, he must be superannuated."

"Za, he is one superannuated bastard," Keeler said, offering her a brandy, which she refused. "What's on your mind, Tyro Commander? You haven't visited my suites since the bivalve sauce incident."

Lear got straight to the point. "In less than 90 hours, we are supposed to prepare to depart to rendezvous with Tactical TyroCommander Redfire's ship. We expected that, by this time, Captain Driver's party would have been able to return, or at least, make contact with us."

"And they haven't," Keeler stated.

"*Prudence* is long overdue," Lear said. "If *Prudence* doesn't return in the next two days, do you still intend to proceed to the rendezvous?"

"That's exactly the sort of life and death command decision I've made a career of avoiding," Keeler answered.

Lear persisted, "If Flight Captain Driver does not come back, you will have to make exactly that decision."

"Your son is on that mission, isn't he?"

Her face twitched a little. "I would be making the same inquiry regardless of who were on that mission."

"You're either lying or exceedingly cold-blooded," Keeler said. "I don't even have kids, but I worry myself sick whenever something like this happens. Fortunately," he picked up a decanter of Panrovian rum, "I have medication. May I offer?"

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"I don't want to drink. I want to know if you will delay our rendezvous with Tactical TyroCommander Redfire?"

Keeler poured himself a glass. "Have you identified a crew of suckers, I mean, volunteers... neg, I mean suckers, willing to stay behind and crew the StarLock after we go on to pick up TyroCommander Redfire's expedition?"

"Thirteen crew are willing to stay behind and study the station. Technologists, scientists, engineers, some technicians and a botanist."

"A botanist, you say. Well, at least they'll have flowers for Mother's Day, or what do they call it on Republic, Maternal Forebear Recognition Day?"

"The botanist will be restoring the hydroponic gardens to provide fresh vegetables and fruit." She redirected back to her main point, "With the modifications to our hyperspace navigation and drive systems, how long will it take us to pick up Redfire and return to the station?"

"Just under four Sapphirean years," Lear reported.

"So, if we leave, and they come back, they will find our residual crew here. In the meantime, well, if wherever Redfire went was as bad as five of the last seven worlds we've been to, they could be in serious trouble."

“Five more days, Commander,” Lear asked. “I know it may not make much difference, I know it’s clearly an emotional appeal, but...”

“All right,” Keeler said. “We wait five extra days. After that, if you want to be here when your son comes back, you’ll have to wait for him at the station.”

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Dominia

They had designated a corner near the back as a make-shift euphemism. The mouth of the portable waste recycler was small enough to make its use uncomfortably reminiscent of coitus, an effect that was only enhanced by the sticky residue around his loins. Redfire emptied his bladder, and heard the oddly normal and comforting sound of his urine filling the receptacle.

He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of his flowing water, and checked his chronometer. Tomorrow, *Pegasus* would come, if *Pegasus* was coming. And if they did not come tomorrow, it would probably be too late.

Their food was all but gone. That was a problem. Their heat and power were failing, which was a worse problem. But even worse, the ice pack now completely encased the ship and was slowly crushing it. Even if *Pegasus* came, they might not be able to locate them. And by that time, they might be as dead as Partridge.

Redfire suddenly realized he was still listening to the sound of flowing water although he himself had finished his business some time earlier. He opened his eyes. There was a definite sound, faint but distinct, of water filling an empty void. He listened harder. There were more creaks

and groans than usual coming from below the deck. He got down on his knees and pressed an ear to the deck.

There was water coming in down below the deck, no question about it. He quickly picked his way back to Change. He touched her cheek. "Eliza, wake up."

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Her eyes snapped open. Change did not enjoy a transition from sleep to awake, but jumped instantly from one state to the other. "What is it?"

"I think the cargo deck is breacheed. It's filling with water. Structural collapse may be imminent."

"What are we going to do about it?"

Redfire scowled. "I think first I am going to put on some pants."

As he pulled on his thick pants, he saw that cracks had appeared in the sides of the cabin. The first rivulets of water were leaking through. In time, these would burst open like geysers. The hull would collapse and the ship would sink to the bottom of the cold, cold sea.

Change referenced their last plan. "Escape pods?"

Redfire nodded grimly. "I don't think we have any choice now, but to abandon ship."

"Finally," Change said. Something below the deck snapped, and there was a muted gurgling noise as more water rushed in.

"We've got to get out of here," Redfire repeated. Change picked herself up, and zipped herself into a thermal survival suit. Redfire did the same.

The escape pods were underneath the engineering cabin, accessible through hatches in the floor. The evacuation deck was already half-flooded. Cold seawater was already drizzling from cracks in the hull.

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Redfire sloshed his way to the first pod and opened it. “The beacon is active... the stasis support system checks out.” He was thinking that if *Pegasus* didn’t come, some rescue mission in the future might find them. Since the universe seemed intent on screwing with him with temporal anomalies, he would not be at all surprised to be awakened in a thousand years ... and put in a zoo by the Aurelian overlords. (Redfire was pretty sure that humanity would lose to the Aurelians without him.)

“Get in,” he told her.

She looked at him, and for a brief second, the hardness that was always in her eyes softened a bit. She leaned in and kissed him tenderly. Redfire resisted for a brief moment then met her lips. They kissed that way for longer than was wise under the circumstances, before he finally sealed her in, and set the auto-launch sequence.

Then, he found his own pod. He sealed himself in, and activated the escape sequence. There was a momentary sensation of penetrating cold as the stasis system halted all molecular activity in his body. He forced himself to think of Halo Jordan in the last seconds before his brain froze.

Deep underwater, *Winnie’s* hull gave in at last, in a series of fireless explosions as air rushed out and water rushed in. Finally succumbing to her fatal wounds, the spaceship surrendered to the sea.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chapultepec – Main Mission

Goneril Lear activated her secure TPT channel with TyroCommander Zeta of the Odyssey sub-directorate and – after an exchange of customary and insincere inquiries into the well-being of each other's families – got rapidly to the point of her contact. "In twenty-two hours, *Pegasus* will depart the StarLock. I need to know if Odyssey Command Directorate has considered my request to remain on the station."

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"We have considered your request," Zeta responded. "And it has been denied."

Lear had anticipated this response. "This station is a highly valued asset. It has not been fully explored."

"Your primary mission was to secure allies for the New Commonwealth is more valuable, and you can not pursue this mission effectively from the StarLock."

"I believe I could," Lear said. "And I request an appeal to the General Secretary of the Space Ministry to present a plan that would enable me to do so."

"Your appeal has also been anticipated, and summarily denied. Once Pathfinder 003 leaves, your primary objective is to secure allies for the New Commonwealth against the Aurelian threat. Your success from this day forward will be gauged by the number of new allies you bring to the New Commonwealth. Toward that end, we are extending to you the maximum level of discretionary authority."

Lear raised an eyebrow. "Does that include the authority to go beyond Odyssey Project protocols?"

“By any means necessary, and if you are successful in gaining powerful new allies to the New Commonwealth, we will reconsider your request for permanent assignment to Chapultepec. Transmission Ends.”

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Pegasus – Prime Commander’s Lounge

Alkema brought Prime Commander Keeler the latest analysis of the data that had been retrieved from the Sentinel drone.

“There are four distinct sets of markings on the ships holding the line,” Alkema explained. “The biggest ships all have this symbol featured prominently.” He brought it to the fore, an emblem of white stars on a black, red, and blue background, encircled by rings and superimposed over a line drawing of a human form holding a sword. “This was a symbol of the Commonwealth.”

“A military symbol,” Keeler clarified. “In the civilian versions, the background color is green or teal, and the human form holds a telescope for exploration, or a machine, representing commerce, and so forth depending on which service is represented. In the emblem of the Peacekeepers, the background is white and blue and the human is releasing a bird, which unfortunately makes it look like the bird is crapping on him.”

“Right,” Alkema said. “The five ships that fled the battle all had the same symbol on them.” He pulled it up, a starburst between two five-pointed stars. “This symbol is linked to Aurora colony.”

“So, the Aurorans punched out before the fighting started,” Keeler said, deeply offended. “The cowards! If

they weren't already dead for a thousand years, I'd go after them right now."

"Exactly my point," Alkema told him. "66 hours after they fled, the Sentinel's sensors recorded a particle flux emanating from a point directly along the lines of their retreat; their ships entering hyperspace. If we extrapolate along that line of departure..." The display went into motion, becoming a starmap with a slightly curving line running through it, representing the ships' course through hyperspace. "Their course intersects with this star-system... about seventy-seven light years from here."

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The display zoomed in, but had nothing to display except an ordinary yellow sun. "Aurora?" Keeler asked.

"Presumably," Alkema answered. "Now, the logical step from this point is to..."

He was cut off by the voice of Shayne American, calling from the Bridge. "Prime Commander Keeler, report to Primary Command immediately."

"What is it?" Keeler asked. Keeler half expected her to say, "It's the big room on Deck 100 that we run the ship from, but that's not important right now," but then he remembered she was a Republicer.

"The Aves *Prudence* just came through the StarLock," American responded. "And she's in bad shape, Commander."

Hanger Bay Three

Prudence had already docked when Keeler arrived. The ship's outer skin was scorched black and whiffs of smoke

curled into the air around her. One part of the canopy over the Command Deck displayed a spider-web pattern of cracks. One of her Accipiters was gone and the other flapped loosely from its hardpoint at the edge of the wing.

Four Warfighters positioned themselves by the forward hatch. "What are they doing?" Keeler asked.

"*Prudence* failed to answer hails as she approached the ship," Alkema informed him. "She may have been compromised."

"By compromised you mean..."

"Taken over by head-biters," Alkema clarified. A transport pod pulled into the Hangar Bay. Ex-TC Lear and her husband Augustus exited.

"Are you glad we waited now?" Lear said, smugly. Keeler let it pass. Sooner or later, she had been bound to get one right. Law of averages.

Prudence's main hatch opened a few centimeters, got stuck, then closed again. A few minutes later, the escape hatch at the rear opened. Flight Captain Driver pulled himself out. The warfighters pointed arms at him.

"You're still here!" Driver said. "Praise the Allbeing."

As he fully emerged from the hatch, his usually immaculate uniform was revealed to be torn in some spots, and frayed in others.

"Welcome back, Captain," said Keeler as Driver got down to the deck.

Driver answered. "We assumed you would have left a long time ago."

“We don’t leave people behind,” Keeler said proudly. “Well, except for the skeleton crew we’re... *leaving behind* ... to study the StarLock.”

“Captain,” Lear asked. “Where is ... Flight Lieutenant Lear. Is he well?”

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“He is securing the ship,” Driver answered. “He will be out shortly.”

At that moment, a tall, blond young man emerged from the underside hatch. He was not wearing an Odyssey Project uniform, but a sort of gray and black jumpsuit. It took a moment to recognize him as Trajan Lear. The Trajan Lear that had left had been barely on the cusp of manhood. Legally adult, but not finished yet. The Trajan who exited *Prudence* was a full-grown man.

Goneril Lear was speechless. So, Keeler asked the obvious question. “What the Hell happened to the kid?”

Driver looked somewhat confused. “Could you be more specific, sir?”

“How did he get so big?” Keeler asked, and Trajan put forth a shy, uncomfortable and rather confused smile.

“He just... grew up...” Driver asked. “After all this time, you couldn’t have expected him to be the same person who went into the StarLock with me.”

Alkema picked up the implication. “Captain... how long do you think you’ve been gone?”

Driver answered surely, “Two Republic years and and forty-four Republic days.”

“Oh,” Alkema said. “Um, we’ve only been at the Starlock for 47 days since you left.”

Trajan Lear and Matthew Driver looked at each other, and shared a tiny shrug. Driver summed up their feelings, “After everything we’ve been through, that doesn’t confuse us as much as it might have otherwise.”

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“That’s the spirit, embrace the weirdness,” Keeler suggested. “What happened to the others?”

Driver looked somber, “I regret to inform you that Navigation Specialist Doon and Medical Technician Ambelin died in the course of our mission.”

“Died how?” Keeler asked.

Driver paused, and spoke curtly, as though the topic was difficult. “They were fed.”

Keeler waited for detail, and when none was forthcoming, he prompted. “What were they fed?”

Driver answered grimly. “The more accurate wording would be ‘what were they fed *to*?’ Commander.”

Keeler blinked at him. “What were they fed *to* then?”

Matthew Driver and Trajan Lear swapped uncomfortable glances. “That was never really explained to us, commander.”

“You don’t know?” Keeler demanded.

Driver and Lear looked at each other, and then said in unison, “We don’t remember.”

“What happened to Technician Sweet?” Alkema asked.

Matthew's eyebrows knitted, conveying ... it was hard to tell. Confusion? Regret? Anger? He spoke finally. "She grew wings and became a fairy princess. She married the Elven Prince Mamu of the Third Empire of the planet... Huff-fuh-rarr-err?"

"Huh-Farr-rurr-rer," Trajan corrected.

Matthew tried again. "Huff-farr-ruh-rurr?"

"Huh-farr-rurr-rer," Trajan insisted. "Just like it's spelled."

"Get them to a Medical Bay," Lear ordered. "Give them some special tests. They seem to be suffering some ill-effects of their journey."

"I agree with that order," Keeler said. "Just pretend I gave it."

Pegasus – Hospital Four

Doctor Reagan confirmed several things. They were the same Matthew Driver and Trajan Lear who had left the ship 40 days earlier. They had each aged two years in that time period. She also disproved some other things, finding them both to be sane and in control of their faculties.

"Apparently," Alkema concluded. "*Prudence* ended up somewhere where two years went by in forty days. Like hyperspace, where time goes by at .01% of the rate in our universe."

"So, they were in hyperspace this whole time," Lear jumped to conclusion.

Trajan Lear shook his head. "Not hyperspace, but a kind of third universe where there is no time at all. Nothing ever happens there, except inside the StarLock."

"We were stranded there for two years," Matthew Driver said. "With a lot of other ships that were lost in time, stranded like we were... ships from the future, ships from the past."

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"And their crews," Trajan added.

"They were amazed a ship as small as ours had even survived the passage," Driver said.

"Is it safe for *Pegasus* to transit?" Alkema asked.

Trajan Lear and Driver looked at him as though this were a dumb question. "Sure, *Pegasus* is large and sturdy. The hull stress will be significantly less than that experienced transitioning into hyperspace."

"Why didn't you just come back through the StarLock?" TyroCommander Lear asked.

Matthew Driver sighed. "It's difficult to explain. Or maybe just difficult to remember. Something about a universe that was dying, or being destroyed..."

"Ending," Trajan suggested.

"Right," said Driver. "A universe was ending. It was creating a kind of storm. The Chronos StarLock was like a safe harbor."

"Did you learn anything about the universe that was ending? Like why it was ending?" Keeler asked, trying to get the big picture, and there was no larger picture in his mind than the end of the universe.

Driver shook his head slowly. "I don't remember."

They looked to Trajan Lear, who muttered something about power and destiny that seemed like a non-sequitur.

"Ah kin see why y'alls thought they'd lost their religion," drawled Dr. Reagan.

"What did you do during those two years?" Alkema asked.

"Mostly, we searched for a way back," Trajan said. "Sometimes, we and the other crews told stories."

"How did you manage to get back?" Lear asked.

Driver and Trajan looked at each other. They shook their heads. "I can clearly remember some of it. There was a Captain Xander... or maybe he was from a planet called Xander. He was from the Future. He knew who we were. He knew how we could get back." Matthew Driver's face almost imploded in concentration. "I can't remember what we did. And I can't remember how the ship got burned, but it had something to do with how we got back."

"He said we told him," Trajan told him. "I guess we remember at some point in the future, because he said we told him what to tell us to help us get back to our time."

"If you thought you were gone for two years, how did you assume we would still be here?" Keeler asked.

"We didn't," Trajan answered. "However, we thought we could stay at the StarLock. May I ask something now?"

"I think that's fair," Keeler said.

Trajan Lear pointed to the sleeper unit that contained Lt. Commander Honeywell, still encased in the Poltergeist

Suit. Technician Scout and a squad of technicians were still trying to get him out of it. "What's wrong with him?"

"He encountered some ancient technology on the StarLock," Driver told him. "Now, we can't get him out of it." Scout and the technical team had run out of ideas. "It's killing him," Alkema added.

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Trajan Lear jumped off the examination table. "I think I can help."

"You should rest," Lear told him.

"I'm fine. Compared to where I've been the past two years, I've never been better."

He crossed the medical bay and parted the two technicians at the foot of Honeywell's bed. Honeywell opened his eyes, nodded, and rolled over onto his stomach.

"Roll over," Trajan said, not the least bit discombobulated by Honeywell answering questions before they were asked.

Trajan firmly grasped a small latch at the back of the suit, in the middle of the wearer's spine. He toggled it. When he did so, the suit seemed to collapse around Honeywell.

Trajan turned to Scout. "All you had to do was turn it off," he said.

Pegasus – Main Bridge/Primary Command

Three hours after *Prudence* regained *Pegasus*, the great ship, on-schedule, turned toward the StarLock, bade the skeleton crew farewell, and plunged through the warp.

CHAPTER NINE

Pegasus – Primary Command/Main Bridge

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Pegasus emerged at the far end of the StarLock in a transition little different than that from a normal hyperspace transition.

“Beginning standard planetary sensor sweep,” said Specialist American. Usually, the sensors took hours to locate and identify planets, and American was surprised to find one almost immediately, “There’s a terrestrial body approximately eighty million kilometers...”

“I see it,” said the Navigator suddenly. “Damn, that’s really close. I mean, jump forty-seven light years, and miss by eighty million, that’s practically...”

“...a celestial pubic hair,” Keeler said. He had been commanding this ship for more than four years, and there were some things he understood. “Right then, launch the probes.”

“We’re close enough not to need probes,” American said. “Sensor indications are the planet has an oxygen atmosphere, but the mean surface temperature is minus 40 degrees standard. Most of the planet is covered with ice.”

A holo-projection of the planet appeared in the bridge, a white marble with an occasional smoky-gray pockmark to break up the monotony. “That could not possibly be the colony,” Keeler said. “It must be an outer world.”

“It will take a few hours to survey the system,” responded Lieutenant Scientist Morgan, recently made a

father by the wife whose station on the bridge he now occupied. "Probably a day, at least."

"Commander, I'm picking up a distress beacon and an ID signature," American paused. "It's *Winnie*."

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"... and it's coming from the ice planet," Keeler guessed.

"It's very weak," she scowled at the readings. "Could also be underwater."

Keeler sighed, "I'm glad you said that. For a moment, I was afraid this mission wasn't going to be perilous enough." As if getting the idea for the first time, Keeler turned to Alkema. "Lieutenant, you will lead the Search and Rescue Mission to planet below. Choose your ship and your team."

Betraying no surprise, Alkema nodded. "Have *James* prepared to launch in thirty minutes. I want Eric Molto on sensors, Warfighter Specialist English on weapons, Medical Technician And, and with your permission, I'd like Max Jordan in the jump seat as an observer."

"That punk?" Keeler shrugged. "Well, it's your birthday, knock yourself out."

Dominia

James dropped gently from the rear of *Pegasus*, turned, and bore down on the white-on-white planet.

Flight Captain PonyBoy James, a handsome man in his young thirties, with earthy green eyes and a chestnut ponytail, studied the weather sensors. "This entire planet is a blizzard. Are those 200 kilometer winds I'm reading?"

"The worst winds are at the polar regions. The distress beacon is coming from the mid-latitudes," Specialist Eric Molto, a bland, serious Sapphirean with a boyish face often hidden beneath too-long blond bangs confirmed. He was monitoring the surveillance systems while opposite him Medical Technician And, a strongly built woman of Republic vintage, monitored the biological scanners.

"Grab your valuables," said James, as harnesses deployed around him, the ship having read his mind already. "We're going in. Hitting the troposphere in 6... 5... 4... 3..."

The ship bucked violently upward on a shaft of updriven wind, tossing the crew against their safety harnesses. The fierce winds at altitude lifted the ship up then pushed her down again as James did his best to ride the waves. After a few minutes, a sense of seasickness began to take hold of the crew.

"Distance from target," Alkema demanded as the ship rode the maelstrom.

"1,480 kilometers at 4,000 meters altitude," Molto answered. "Problem though. The signal is coming from 800 meters below the surface, and there's at least a hundred meters of pack-ice over the top of it."

Alkema scowled and looked over the surface map. The ship caromed off a dense air mass, bucking upward again.

Molto enhanced his scans. "There's a section of pack ice forty kilometers from the source of the signal that's only a few meters thick."

“Max, lock the missiles on those coordinates,” Alkema ordered.

“Acknowledged,” Max Jordan reached over his head to enable the weapons systems, trying not to look too excited at the prospect of blowing up something. Red haired and well-built for his youth, Max had lost a measure of his boyish insouciance in the preceding months, but it was a struggle for him to remain focused and serious. “Weapons Systems Enabled and locked.”

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“Commit!” James ordered.

Max Jordan fired. A pair of Hammerheads shot out from the front of the ship, blazed through the atmosphere too fast and too hard for the cold weather systems to effect them, and slammed into the ice, vaporizing a huge, almost perfectly circular patch.

“Reconfiguring for sub-surface operation,” James announced. He brought the ship to a hover over the hole in the ice. “Releasing Accipiters,” the two auxiliary craft at the wingtips of the Aves peeled away. “Altering Hull profile.” The Aves’s wingblades withdrew into and below the main fuselage, making the ship higher and narrower. “Thrusters to undersea configuration.” James turned to the rescue crew. “Last one in eats laser-coated death.”

The Aves flipped over acrobatically and dove into the sea, throwing a spray of water a hundred meters into the air. A lot of it froze and formed a frozen plume of ice that hung in the air a second before crashing back into the sea.

The command deck was plunged into blue darkness. Lighting and displays shifted to compensate, and through

the canopy, the jagged underside of the ice-pack could be seen like an inverted crystal mountain range. For a long moment, the crew was awed by the beauty.

Then James said, "I hope that yellowish tint is from raw sulfur and not something else."

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Snapped back to focus on the mission, Alkema requested the distance and bearing to *Winnie's* transponder. "453 kilometers bearing south-southeast."

"Sit tight," said James. "Best under-water speed under these conditions is 100 kph."

"Conditions?" Alkema asked.

"This water is filled with ice and chunks of debris." James hit the searchlights and they could see the ghostly shadows of underwater icebergs and huge chunks of organic material adrift in the current.

"I can do 200," Max Jordan said.

"Not in my ship," James answered.

Molto analyzed the chunks. "Kumba-yah!"

"What is it?" Alkema asked.

"Those chunks of organic material are trees. Huge clumps of trees. The sea-bed here used to be a forest... and not so very long ago, either."

Medical Technician And reported from the lower cabin. "That's very odd. There is nothing alive in these oceans above the microbial level."

Alkema took the meaning. "So, this planet was once inhabited. Then, some cataclysm knocked this planet into an instant ice age, wiped out all life on the surface."

"Exactly," And put in.

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They passed through a long, lifeless stretch of ancient seabed, and finally arrived at the final resting place of the *Aves Winnie*. The other *Aves* hung from the bottom of the pack ice, partly embedded in it, its shattered fuselage pointing nose-down and broken. It looked like it had smashed straight through the ice.

"I'm only reading 53% of standard mass," Molto reported. He had the scanners draw a schematic. A badly damaged ship took shape, missing its port wingblade, most of its port underside, and great chunks of its reactor dome and command deck.

"Life signs?" Alkema asked, his voice near a whisper.

"None," And answered, her voice almost teary.

"Send a message to *Pegasus*..." Alkema began grimly.

"Hold on, sir," Molto held up his hand. "There's another signal... I couldn't differentiate it from the distress beacon before, but there is definitely a weak locator beacon coming from 700 kilometers south of here." He paused. "I think it's from one of the life pods."

Alkema seized on the hope. "Mr. James, on that signal... best possible speed."

"You heard him," said Max Jordan. "Let me drive."

PonyBoy James did not let Jordan drive, but pushed the speed of his ship past 150 kph when the way was

reasonably clear, and managed to collide only with some small organic masses as they closed on the lifepod's signal.

Alkema went below, took a position behind Molto, watching the locator beacon's signal grow stronger as the ship closed. Warfighter English followed him.

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Molto reported. "We're less than 80 kilometers away now." He paused, as though something caught his attention. He redirected the ship's sensor intensity on another bearing.

"What are you doing?" Alkema asked.

"We have a lock on the signal, the sea is relatively clear, and I think I detected something interesting 140 kilometers east-south-east of our position."

"What could be more interesting than a lifepod from *Winnie*?" Alkema demanded.

"It looks like a city... a fairly big one," Molto stated matter-of-factly.

Alkema and English peered over the display. The gridlines of streets and the tall, ghostly outlines of tall buildings resolved out of the gloom. Their architecture was simpler than Sapphire's or Republic's, great boxes and rectangles buttressed by sturdy supports around their corners. At extreme magnification, they could see patterns of broken windows staring out like empty eye sockets. They saw the broken spans of mighty bridges, no longer reaching out across the bays and channels that once isolated the city from the shore.

"It reminds me of New Halifax," said Molto in a haunted voice.

“Fascinating,” said Alkema. “But we’re on a search and rescue mission. We’ll leave the city for Archeological Survey to explore. Range to *the lifepod’s* transponder?”

“76.3 kilometers,” James answered, not pointing out that the rescue part of the mission was looking increasingly unlikely. “Just outside the city’s outer margin.”

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“I’ve got something else,” said Molto. “Warmer than the surrounding sea-bed, indications of metal alloys, concrete...” He focused his scanners, brought a display into the ship.

A city, well, a small city, loomed in the darkness. Invisible in the sunless depths beneath the sea, *James’s* scanners picked it up as a geometric pattern of refined metals and air-filled spaces. Nothing as grand as Republic’s Bathysopolis, or Sapphire’s Sub-Oceana, or the legendary Undersea Cities of one of the water-colonies (Deepwater, Abyss, and SeaWorld were recorded in the archives as planets entirely covered by water), but an underwater inhabitation, it was, with tube- and silo-shaped structures encased in rock.

“Is there a way in?” Alkema asked.

“Working on it,” Molto answered, translating the sensor sweeps into schematics.

“You are certain the lifepod is inside there?”

“Affirmative. Three lifepod signals... There!” Molto enhanced one area of the complex on his display. “Looks like a hangar-bay. The hatch is open, and there is breathable air beyond.”

Alkema sent a command to James. "Take us in!"

"Bringing it home," James answered. He turned his ship toward the complex, guiding it with skill and precision. Ahead of him was a vaginal shaped slit in the face of the rocks, just wider enough than his ship to make him not sweat too much as he guided it in.

Beyond the opening was a darkness so intense, the ship's spotlights were not equal to it.

Dominia - Inside the Underwater City

James broke the surface in a pitch-black chamber. The floodlights on his reactor dome made shafts of brightness amidst the gloom. Flight Captain James nudged his ship toward a ledge that skirted the perimeter, making a makeshift dock. He stayed within his ship as the others opened the top hatch and climbed out of the cabin,

"Damb, it's cold," Max Jordan said, shivering while the heaters in his landing jacket tried to compensate for the bone-chilling air of the chamber.

"And it smells worse than Technician Roebuck's hygiene pod," Molto added. "Don't ask how I know that."

Alkema and English picked their way over to the sides. And emerged from the ship and waved an analyzer in the air. "It's rank, but I'm not detecting any pathogens."

"There...," Molto pointed his searchlight onto an oblong capsule that lay on the dockside. Orange black and white, it was immediately recognizable as an Aves escape pod. The hatch was open, but there was no one inside it. There were two more nearby.

“At least one of them made it this far,” said Alkema.
“Any life signs?”

“Nothing yet,” And reported.

“Let’s check it out,” Alkema said, and he led them along the catwalk and did a little turn that took them to the escape vehicles... three, lined up side by side.

“Unoccupied,” And said, confirming with her mediscanner what the others had deduced by looking in the empty pods.

Alkema slapped the rear storage hatch, which opened on an empty space. “The emergency gear has all been taken.”

Molto examined the cable he had just tripped over. It was warm and humming slightly. He felt along it until it came to a junction box on the wall. “They slaved their power to this complex.”

“TyroCommander Redfire was always clever,” Alkema said.

“Medical Technician Partridge is also resourceful,” And put in.

“The point is, someone survived the crash,” Alkema said, “Maybe three out of four of them.”

“And they’re on the other side of that wall,” said And, as always, with utter seriousness. “Two life signatures, very close to each other, probably huddling together to preserve body heat. No recognition slivers.”

Molto found the hatch that led into the chamber, actually an antechamber, unoccupied, that led into the

larger chamber where Redfire and Change, asleep, were found wrapped around each other and naked under several layers of thermal blankets.

"I guess creating body heat was not a problem for them," Alkema observed.

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Redfire's eyes opened slowly. "You're late," he said. "By my chronometer, you're more than five days overdue.

"Why yes, we did put ourselves at great peril to rescue you," Alkema said. "But, all in a day's work. No need to thank us."

A few minutes later, Redfire and Change were awake, clothed, and being examined by a Medical Technician. At the same time, they stuffed their faces with the first real food they had eaten in weeks. MedTech And pronounced them in fair health, although malnourished and slightly frostbitten.

"The escape pods were programmed to seek out life-sustaining environments. They apparently locked onto this underwater city," Change explained.

"We woke up a few days ago," Redfire added. "This underwater city is where the colonists came to survive when they knew their planet was doomed."

"I've been able to recover some of their oral history." Redfire picked up a thick black octagon about the size of a hand and fit it into a slot on the side of an ugly beige box.

An old-style, two-dimensional display screen activated, showing a man who appeared somewhat older than Keeler. His features were bland and inoffensive, and

his inflection, even through the Lingotron, forced as he read from the prepared script.

“Oral record, 63rd day of Felicity, Year 4867. Vice Chancellor Bertram Meckla of Donn recording. I have been evacuated to the Archos Redoubt. Recent reports indicate that Henna colony has fallen. The last of our ships, a few Commonwealth frigates and three dreadnoughts, have formed a battle-group at the head of the Lyra StarLock, in a last attempt to stave off a Tarmigan attack against Dominia, Orenthia, and Aurora colonies. We have combined our forces and will make our last stand there.”

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“Pause,” Redfire said. The image froze. “The colony at Orenthia was the next to go. An orbital satellite caught the final moments of destruction.” He placed another octagon in another slot and activated another file.

Orenthia appeared a brown and white orb, the twin crescents of a pair of moons peeked out from behind. A swarm of Tarmigans flew in from outside the frame, brilliant and dazzling, again, their shapes seeming to skip and slide out of the mind’s eye. They plunged toward the atmosphere and as more and more of them did so, the atmosphere began to sparkle, and dapple like sunlight on water. This continued for several minutes, then abruptly stopped. There was no visual of the Tarmigans leaving.

It was not apparent, at first what had happened. Then fissures began to appear in the planet’s surface. They grew deeper and longer, connecting to form a vast network of cracks across the entire face of the planet, continuing to spread until the entire surface had shattered.

The planet's oceans, then, began to wash over the coastal regions, inundating the land to hundreds of kilometers into the interior. Coastal cities vanished.

"It goes on," Redfire reported. "The Tarmigans stopped the planet from rotating. What you are seeing are the initial effects when all that rotational energy was fed back into the planet's geology."

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"The oceans are turning to steam," Molto observed.

"Which is why you won't see much from this point," Miller conceded, pausing the playback.

"Did anyone survive?" Alkema

"Probably a few at the beginning, but, you can extrapolate what happened next. One side of the planet always facing the sun, temperatures would rise beyond the point where humans could survive. On the dark side, they would as quickly fall. The differences in temperature and atmospheric pressure would create supersonic winds blowing over the planet." Redfire spoke with an awe devoid of admiration at the massive destruction.

Change, who was standing beside him, took his hand.

"Advance recording 260 days," Redfire ordered. The man appeared again. He looked awful. His skin was gray as ash and his eyes were hollow.

"Our worst fears have been realized. The Tarmigans have attacked Dominia. Their ships tore open a volcanic vent in our northern hemisphere, releasing volcanic gases into our atmosphere. Some of our scientists believe they have shifted the orbit of our planet outward.

“Dominia’s leadership has been brought to Archos Redoubt, together with the best and brightest of our scientists, artists, and humanitarians. We mourn the tragic loss of millions of lives, but the survival of the elite will at least ensure that something of our culture survives. The times ahead will be challenging, but with a rational, consensus-driven effort to secure our survival, together with the necessary emergency regulation of food production and population control, we can assure the survival of our culture.”

Redfire stopped the playback then. “Based on the subsequent records, we think they were all dead inside five years.”

Pegasus

Captain Wang’s body had drifted away from *Winnie* was never recovered. They honored Medical Technician Partridge’s last wish, disintegrating his body and spreading his granules among the plant life in the ship’s primary garden park. The ceremony was solemn, led by the commander and an Iestan Holy Woman.

Afterwards, the senior officers met in the Commander’s Study to review Redfire’s report on the planet Dominia and attend to other matters.

“So the Tarmigans erased human civilization on at least two planets, and, according to Flight Captain Driver’s vague but meticulously punctuated report may have destroyed an entire universe,” Commander Keeler shook his head. “What can I say but Boy Howdy?”

"If it's any consolation," Alkema offered. "All the damage was done a thousand years ago, and we have a score of surviving colonies that say the damage was incomplete."

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Keeler glared at him. "First the Aurelians, then the Tarmigans. Lieutenant, being a member of, at best, the third most powerful species in the galaxy is not the most advantageous position to be in."

Alkema shrugged. "I guess we'll just have to find the fourth most advanced species in the galaxy and make an alliance with them."

Lear thumped the conference table with the heel of her hand. "Gentlemen, let's, for once, try to focus on practicalities. We need to return to the StarLock."

"Not really," Keeler replied. "I was thinking where we really need to go is Aurora. That was the name of the planet those ships were retreating to."

"The chatter we picked up indicated that, yes..." said Alkema. "We've extrapolated their course, but..."

"What's the point," Lear finished Alkema's thought. "The Tarmigans must have wiped out Aurora as well."

"We can't know that for sure until we've been there," Keeler answered.

"I recommend we return to the StarLock, and use it to return to a better-known sector of space," Lear argued.

"Okay, we'll do that," Keeler said. "After we go to Aurora."

"It's a waste of time," Lear bristled.

“Probably,” Keeler considered. “But if we’re in the mode of gathering intelligence on potential threats to the home-worlds, I’d say the Tarmigans represent a considerable threat.”

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“The Aurorans were probably annihilated by the Tarmigans as well,” Lear repeated. “We would be wasting time that could be better spent meeting allies to help us fight the ... fight our enemies.”

Keeler seized on this. “What if the Aurorans weren’t wiped out. Consider this, if, by some remote chance, the Aurorans did survive a Tarmigan assault, don’t you think we ought to know how?”

“This is a waste of time, Prime Commander,” Lear protested.

“You may be right, but we’re going anyway. Signal the Crew on Chapultepec that our return will be delayed,” Keeler said. “This ship is going to Aurora.”

And the great ship turned its prow away from the snowball, its mighty engines fired, warping space and time, and it began to run faster and faster and faster. A few days later, it vanished in a flash of light.

CHAPTER TEN

Pegasus – Hangar Bay 4

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Trajan Lear was watching from a catwalk as the wingblades were joined to the hull of the ship that would be christened *Winnie II*. *Prudence* was in an adjacent dock, also undergoing repairs and upgrades. He wondered if the technical crew had found that ... *thing* ... in the waveguides; that energy mass that had sort of nested in there, and that they had never been able to figure out if it was a life-form or ... well, it had never interfered with *Prudence's* functioning.

He sensed as Goneril Lear approached him from behind, the strangeness she felt seeing her son all grown up. He could also sense her unease that he had come into his own without her; and she couldn't control him any more. He smiled, keeping it turned away where she couldn't sense it. "Hello, Mother.... Or is this a 'Greetings, Executive TyroCommander Lear' occasion."

"I was only coming to inform you that we have selected Flight Lieutenant Hershey to replace Flight Captain Wang as the Group Leader for Flight Group Four," Goneril Lear told her son.

"She is good," Trajan said, not looking at her. "Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse would have been a better choice."

"Promoting one of our people maintains the balance," Lear told him.

"One of *our* people. Someone from Republic, in other words," he began laughing. He didn't know why.

His mother ignored it. "This creates an opening for a Flight Lieutenant. Would you like to have your own ship?"

Trajan sighed. "I am sure there are many in line ahead of me."

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"In a sense, you have two years of seniority on the other new aviators," the TyroCommander argued.

"I didn't do much flying in the Chronos Universe."

Goneril Lear put her hand over his, in a motherly gesture she had never quite mastered.

There was a sudden anti-flash. Everything in the landing bay went photonegative for a few nanoseconds. Then all was normal again.

"We've transitioned," said Trajan. "I expected you to be in Primary Command."

His mother shook her head. "There is no reason for me to be there. This excursion is a waste of time and energy... Keeler indulging in another ... indulgence."

Pegasus - In Orbit

From space, the planet was orange, mostly, an unnatural, almost day-glo shade of orange, the by-product of its orange sun and a surface that was 70% covered in a fine silicon oxide sand.

The only large break in the landscape was a huge canyon gashed into the crust of one hemisphere, thousands of kilometers long, stretching longitudinally almost from pole to pole and nearly filled by a large lake thousands of meters deep. From this expanse of deep blue,

tendrils of green reached into adjacent valleys, creating an oasis of life.

"This is the most unusual planetography I have ever seen," Lieutenant Scientist Morgan had said upon studying the sensor returns, with frightening enthusiasm that made Commander Keeler take a step backwards. They were in the Planetology Sensor Laboratory, reviewing the data the probes had collected in the last four days as *Pegasus* closed on the planet.

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"I believe the Ancients called this a 'Crack World.'" Keeler observed. "Does geology always get you this aroused? Does your wife know about this?"

"Kayliegh is fine. She's on duty-leave with the twins," Morgan answered absently, as he zoomed in on one of the sensor readings.

"Bounced right off, didn't it?" Keeler said.

"Around the lake, where the climate is very mild, the probes have detected 13 large inhabitations... cities." He brought up a view. From the ground, it was rather lovely, a crowd of tall, modernistic towers rising high above a jungle canopy. "Human life signs?" Keeler asked.

Morgan shook his head.

Pegasus - Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-n-Jam

"... and now he just doesn't come around here any more," said Eddie Roebuck of Matthew Driver. "What is it about spending two years in a space station in a dying universe that makes you not want to hang out with your friends any more?"

Eliza Jane Change sat on the other side of the bar, very quietly not listening to Eddie.

"I guess the real question is..." Eddie slowly let go of the alcoholic beverage. "Who has the better service, me or Commander Redfire?"

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Eliza scowled. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Liza, I'm telling you, there's no shame in what you did." Eddie smiled. "You and me, we're not like the other people on this ship. We've got open minds; even if you weren't freezing to death on an iceworld and he was the only warm body around."

"There's more to TyroCommander Redfire than that," Change said.

Eddie snorted. "Neg, there isn't. He's got the high upstanding morals of a Halifax street cat. I've always admired that about him. He got to that were-woman on Eden. He got to the Aurelian spy on Winter. He got to Taurus on ..."

"He never had sex with Warfighter Taurus," Change interrupted.

Eddie responded with a like-I-believe-that-smile. "Still, any man who would pass aside Flight Commandant Jordan... I mean before she got aged up, she was premium. She still looks like the poly-mythical all-woman to me." Puck trotted out from the cocina, carrying a plate of meat chips and spiced sauces and delivered it to Eddie.

"But you had your fun," Eddie continued. "You had a good trip. You're like me. You're a Guilder, and my heart,

I'm a Guilder, too. No time for formalities. Enjoy each day like it could be your last, because it just might be."

Eliza looked up at him with an expression he had never seen before, a kind of uncertainty tinged with pain. "What?" Eddie asked her.

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"I think he and I have a future together," Eliza said.

Eddie dropped the plate of food in front of her. It landed with a wet smack that splattered sauce across her uniform and the table. She looked at him in anger and astonishment.

"I am sick of things not staying the same," Eddie hissed, and then swiftly disappeared to the back of the bar.

Echo 1

After the probes determined the atmosphere was safe, or at least, no more dangerous than that of a Jutland livestock yard at high noon on a humid day in summertime, thirteen Aves flew down to the planet. They disgorged teams of wary explorers to pick among the remains of the civilization that had briefly flowered on the bright orange planet.

The city in which the commander's landing team, including Alkema and Pieta, was the largest (but not by much since all of the cities were very close in size). A large orange sun rose over the once-great city; a line of huge metal structures a hundred stories tall, clad in metal, curving like the hulls of great ships buried straight up in the ground that stretched along the beachfront for three kilometers and change. Their skin caught the coppery rays of the first light and glowed warm brown in anticipation of

the day. For ruins, they were in very good condition, despite being empty of human life for the better part of a thousand years and overgrown by jungle in some places.

David Alkema awakened in a large soft bed next to his wife, Pieta who was gazing at him with her large brown eyes. She had been watching him sleep.

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"I thought you were never going to wake up, I'm starving," she said, making it sound almost sweet. "Now, the automechs can make us breakfast."

"Good afterdawn to you, too," he said and kissed her. This was their first chance to leave the ship for a proper honeymoon since their marriage began during *Pegasus's* call at the Way-Station. Like many honeymoons throughout the ages, it involved a large suite in a huge tower by the beach in a warm and sultry climate amidst the remnants of a once great civilization. And, of course, copious amounts of sex at levels of intensity that would never be reached again.

Alkema rose from the bed and wrapped a robe around himself. This would be the fifth of the 17-hour days he and his bride had spent on the planet, and they had not yet made it down to the lake itself. Their suite was on the 93rd floor of the tower, and its balcony offered a spectacular view of it, but the closest they had gotten it was a picnic lunch near a spot where five waterfalls tumbled into a canyon. David and Pieta would have gotten their clothes thoroughly soaked had they been wearing any. "How about a swim, first?" he suggested, in the back of his mind thinking of other ways to scare the fish.

Before Pieta answered, Keeler's voice came from his Com Link. "Lt. Alkema, come here, I want you!" the commander was shouting.

Alkema reflexively reached for his jackets and pants, and quickly pulled his uniform together. He paused to plant a kiss on Pieta's pouting lips. "I will be back."

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He paused on his way to the door, turned around and made for the balcony instead, walking stiffly for a moment, then swooning, as though overcome with a strange, overpowering feeling.

"Are you all right?" Pieta asked. "You look strange."

David passed by her and only looked back when he got to the balcony. His eyes were vacant. He spoke to her darkly. "This marriage isn't working," he said.

"What?" said Pieta in surprise.

"I can't stand another moment of this," he said in a strange, eerie monotone. He ran for the balcony and dove.

"David!" Pieta yelled after him.

Alkema landed on the hovercycle parked just underneath the balcony. He rose on it to where she stood, wide-eyed and shaking on the balcony. Grinning maniacally, he threw her the bouquet of wildflowers he had snuck off to pick during the night, taking advantage of his wife's need for eight hours of sleep at night, while four were plenty for him.

She caught the bouquet and glowed like a fusion reactor, the way she did that made him love her through all the bad habits she had picked up as first a spoiled

princess and later a renegade jungle fighter. "Get away early if you can," she called after him. "I love you."

With a wave and a blown kiss, he punched the accelerator and sped off through the ancient city. Firing the dual thunder-jets and guiding the control bars with both hands, he dodged his way through the ancient skyscrapers, their curved and buttressed upper floors a unique architectural form, muscular, industrial, yet somehow graceful. The ground far below was overgrown with sub-tropical vegetation.

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The commander had been working in the top floor of the largest and highest tower, a generous gallery of tables and shelves they had identified as a library. He roared the hover-cycle onto the roof and ran in through an old rusty door the crew had needed laser-cutters to slice open.

Alkema ran down a narrow stairwell and through the grand foyer, past what appeared to be white statues of people gazing up in the sky in awe and wonder. The crew had thought them a strange form of public sculpture, as there were thousands of them in the city's buildings, and curiously, none outdoors. Those near windows gazed into the sky in a kind of fearful rapture. Others were found in bed as though sleeping, in kitchens preparing food, even in hygiene pods attending to bodily functions.

It had taken several days for the crew to understand. The Tarmigans had transformed everyone on the planet into salt. The young, the mature, and the aged, the busy and the shiftless, the upright and the corrupt alike, all standing in wonder, in proud defiance, or doubled over in fear, all were frozen in the final attitudes of their lives.

The great doors to the library were wide open. Sherbet-colored sunlight poured in through great windows in the front shaped like the curved wedges of citrus fruit. The commander was seated at a long metal table, which was covered in ancient texts. The Tarmigans could set electronic memory storage back to zero, but apparently, they could not erase books.

"I heard what you said, commander," said Alkema, arriving breathless. "Every word, clearly."

"It makes perfect sense now," Keeler told him, gesturing toward a pile of dry and very fragile paper covered with the glyphs and runes of an Ancient Anglish dialect. "The first time we landed on this planet, and I stood in the gallery of that huge building, the one with the bird wings, I was impressed by it as we all were, but there was something just... one molecule to the left of where it should be, and I've been trying to figure it out ever since."

Keeler was speaking of a sense of wrongness he had felt ever since arriving in the colony, an uneasy feeling the colony was somehow not normal. He had narrowed it in time to thoughts on the placement and layout of the colony's buildings, which seemed to him *inhuman*. Alkema had a thory on that. "Maybe the cities were the remnant of an earlier civilization."

Keeler regarded him peculiarly. "Lieutenant, are you aware that your underwear is on the outside of your uniform?"

Alkema looked down frantically. The commander grinned. "Made you look. Neg, these were all built at more or less the same time, very quickly. This entire city was

built at about the same time in less than ten years, so we know it wasn't ancient. And it doesn't make sense for colonists to build ten times more space than they need. When the Tarmigans attacked, most of these buildings were empty. Also, one thing that comes apparent from space is the absence of smaller buildings and highways."

"They probably used the lake to travel between cities," Alkema responded, he had been thinking about this also. "All the cities are on the shore of the lake, after all."

"What about people who get seasick? Besides, not one of them is built on a good portage," the commander answered right back. Keeler picked up the Lingotron reader he had been using to decode the ancient texts. "This library is actually more of an archive, the only one of its kind we've found, so it stands to reason these public records apply to the planet. What we thought were Echo 1 'municipal records' were actually Echo 1 'planetary' records."

Alkema nodded, numbly. Pieta was going to require some maintenance to make up for running off like this, and so far the commander had not made it worth the urgency.

"This is not Aurora after all," Keeler concluded. "Echo is not the name of this city, it's the name of this planet. These immigration records prove it. This was a colony of Aurora, not Aurora itself. This city, incidentally, is called Dawnstar."

Alkema's gaze fell across the white salt statue of a man that stood directly beneath the shaft of light allowed in by the windows high in the front of the room. While most of

the statues were staring upward, the head of this man was bowed. He had been bald, except for a fringe around the edge, each hair transformed into a strand of sodium-chloride molecules.

"This is the where the Auroran ships were heading," Alkema argued. "Maybe this was a forward military base of some kind. Echo 1 sounds kind of military-ish."

"Does this look like a military base?" Keeler asked.

"Are you saying this isn't Aurora, but a colony of Aurora?"

"Exactamundo."

They stood in silence for a minute. "Okay fine," Keeler said finally. "We still have to find the real Aurora colony."

The commander and his lieutenant wearily regarded the archive. "Where do you suggest we begin looking?"

Ecco

That evening, David Alkema made love to his wife and presented her with beautiful, intricately carved and jeweled pendant he had looted from one of the shops on the lower level and served a meal of her favorite foods. She slept contentedly in the great bed, but he could not sleep. He felt guilty about the pendant, although the commander had given him permission. He felt like a grave robber, and in fact, wherever he went in this ghost city, he felt as though he were walking among restless spirits.

"It isn't fair," he whispered aloud, then wondered what had made him say it. Perhaps it was the knowledge that he was celebrating his new life with his new wife in a

ghost town where the dead had been fossilized into statues that stared from every corner. Perhaps, he was only repeating the last conscious thought of that multitude of humans suddenly struck down.

Pieta slept soundly, the spirits of the dead either leaving her alone or failing to get her attention. David Alkema rose very quietly, slipped into his robe, and walked out onto the balcony of his suite.

He took a long breath of sweet, tropical air and looked out over the city. It was utterly dark. One forgets the difference that light makes until it is absent. Human civilization, to the extent it had built great cities and domesticated whole planets, was all about the advance of light against the darkness. Seeing, or rather not seeing, the city extinguished before him was a soul stirring experience, putting him in mind of how often the darkness comes back.

The many towers of the city loomed in the moonless night, their outlines scarcely detectable except by the shadows cast by starlight. Three very bright stars made up most of the light, Alkema thought idly. Two were not stars, but gas giants that bracketed Echo in its orbit around the primary sun, glowing yellow, almost distinct enough to resolve into disks. The third bright star hung low to the horizon, bright and dazzling, just above a faint hint of copper-blue that heralded the coming sunrise.

Alkema stared at the third star. There were only three planets in the Echo system. So, that point of light must be a real star, and to shine so brightly, must be very big or very close.

At that point he turned around and looked up at the starburst pattern in the tip of the tower, a few floors above his head.

And he got it.

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Pegasus – Command Suite

In the conference chamber off Primary Command, Alkema addressed the senior officers Keeler, Lear, Redfire and Change. “Commander, do you remember the Insignia on the Auroran ships?” Alkema asked.

“Neg,” Keeler said. So, Alkema brought up the visual record. A starburst surrounded by two tiny stars.

“What about it?” Keeler asked

“What if they chose this design because Aurora is a triple star system.”

“What of it?” Lear asked. “Triple star systems are not uncommon.”

“Za,” Alkema said. “But what triple-star system forms the dawn star of this planet if you are standing in the city of Dawnstar?” The presentation computer followed his line of reasoning and displayed the star he had been gazing at a few hours before. It zoomed in on astronomical readings, revealing to be a triple-star system.

Lear shook her head. “Lieutenant, that is an extreme leap of logic.”

“True,” Alkema admitted. “But it makes sense. If the Aurorans did colonize a planet, they would probably colonize one nearby. That system is only seven-point-three

light years from here. There are three other triple star systems in a radius of sixty light years, but only the dawnstar system has a large bright star and two smaller stars, like the Auroran crest.”

“That crest is open to a number of interpretations,” Lear said haughtily.

“It’s also the only one of the four triple star systems within 60 light years with significant habitable zones. That one is the best bet for a life-sustaining world.

“Seven-point-six light years,” Keeler said. “That’s actually pretty close, isn’t it?” He turned to Eliza Jane Change.

She stopped exchanging peculiar glances with TyroCommander Redfire long enough to supply the data. “Two days in hyperspace, with the hyperdrive refinements, plus five days to reach transition speed.”

“It’s worth a look,” Keeler decided. “Lay in a course.”

“Commander, once again, I must lodge a protest,” said Lear. “It seems clear that every colony in this sector was destroyed by the Tarmigans. Why waste valuable time traveling to a system *on a mere supposition*. We should turn back and complete our original itinerary.”

“Twelve days, Lt. Commander,” Keeler answered her.

“If you compensate for the hyperspace time differential ... it will be almost ten years before we get back to Chapultepec,” Lear argued.

Keeler shook his head. “My previous reasoning still stands. It would be irresponsible not to pursue this lead.

Lt. Alkema has not steered me wrong yet. If he's wrong this time, he spends a full year as your personal junior administrative officer and pool boy, how's that?"

Pegasus departed the Ecco System the following day.

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Pegasus – Planetology Laboratory

Eight days later, Keeler stood in the Planetology Laboratory accompanied by Alkema and Redfire. Lt. Scientist Morgan presented the ensor data. "The primary star is more than three-and-a-half times as bright as Republic's primary," he reported. "It has two smaller companion stars, and orange dwarf and a red dwarf."

"Planets," Keeler asked as he poked at the hologram of the orange star.

Morgan nodded and activated the holographic display of the system map *Pegasus* had produced over 36 hours of sensor sweeps.

In the hologram display, a collection of tiny spheres had manifested in arrays of photons. The planets nestled in the plane created by the three stars, tracking around their common center of gravity.

"Isn't it impressive," said Morgan. "18 major planets and two distinct asteroid fields." He went on to explain how the inner six planets were fried by the intense radiation of the double suns. The outer eight were gas giants, or else too cold. But there were four in the habitable zone, not too hot, not too cold.

“Zoom in on the eighth planet, max resolution,” Morgan ordered. The sphere representing the eighth planet was an opaque ball of shifting, multi-colored light.

“The eighth planet has a highly charged atmosphere,” Morgan reported. “The planet’s core is iron. It’s orbited by two solid iron moons. This arrangement creates a powerful electromagnetic turbine. Its sky is one huge electromagnetic light display.”

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“How can this be any planet other than Aurora then?” Keeler asked.

“Let me show you something else,” he accelerated the timescale on the image. The planet rotated, not just east-to-west, but north to south as well. “Bi-axial rotation. Must play havoc with calendars.”

“I played havoc with calendars once,” Keeler said. “But then my mom came into my room and told me I’d go blind if I didn’t stop.”

Morgan and Alkema looked at him, not knowing what to say. “Any signs of inhabitation?” Keeler asked.

Alkema shook his head. “We’re still too far away. Getting sensor readings through the electromagnetic activity would be like trying to spot a white bunnybeast in a Borealan snowstorm. We’ll need to send in probes.”

“Do that,” Keeler ordered. “We’ll peek under the blankets just to be sure. Even if the colony is gone, they might have left something useful behind.”

Pegasus – Cultural Anthropology Laboratory

A day later, *Pegasus* made orbit over Aurora. The planet's dense ionosphere and powerful magnetic fields prevented surface transmissions from escaping. However, the first probes to penetrate those barriers confirmed the presence of large cities, great highways, power grids, and waterworks, and picked up a dazzling array of entertainment broadcast signals.

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In the cultural Anthropology lab, an entire wall was given over to displaying the programming available on the planet's primary communication nexus, known as "The Netzwerk." They documented 2,201 separate channels available to for the consumption of the populace; 660 of which broadcast hard-core pornography, another 321 showed extremely violent war videos, some set to music; 130 were devoted to the high speed pursuit, trial, incarceration and execution of criminals by law enforcement. The remainder were apportioned among music channels, celebrity gossip, cooking, home improvement, and shopping.

"So, which channel shall we break in on to announce our arrival?" Specialist Standard, the Communications Officer, a Republicer woman in her middle thirties, had asked on that day when the existence of a civilization, however perverse, had been confirmed.

"We need to determine which channel is most likely to be monitored by the planet's political leadership," Lear advised.

“Then it’s decided,” had said Keeler. “We’ll use the channel where naked women have woolbeasts lick chocolate pudding from their private parts.”

“Seriously,” Lear had interrupted. “Against all odds, we have a thriving human colony, with at least some level of technological development. We must make contact.”

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Shayne American spoke before Keeler could deliver his devastating rejoinder. “I have isolated a non-broadcast channel used to coordinate the other channels. We may be able to use it to get the attention of the planet’s leadership.”

Keeler nodded. “Insert our standard message of friendship into that channel.”

American sent the message. The response was immediate. “Unauthorized access of this secure channel has been detected. You will be found and arrested by Netzwerk Security.”

“Come and get us,” Keeler replied. “We’re in an equatorial orbit 55,000 kilometers above your surface.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Aurora

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The Aves *Zilla* bore down from a night sky ablaze with electric green and purple auroras. Below, on the western shore of the Triad continent, Nettwerk City sprawled. The largest of Aurora's metroplexes, it stretched away from the sea and into the valleys, setting the horizon alight like a false sunrise.

Redfire stood in the forepart of the Aves's Main Deck, cross-armed, scowling at a holographic display of the city. He double-checked some readings, and then reported. "Commander, I'm reading a large amount of small weapons fire in the peripheral zones of the city. Ballistic weapons mostly... bits of metal propelled by chemical explosions. Speaking of which, there are also... um, explosions."

Keeler studied the map. "The Aurorans never mentioned warfare."

"The Aurorans didn't mention much," Redfire replied. He zoomed the sensors in on one of the combat zones and scanned. The area was an urban wasteland of shot-out and semi-demolished buildings, left just intact enough to provide cover for people in paramilitary garb to shoot at each other.

"Rough neighborhood," Keeler muttered. "Those aren't our landing coordinates are they?"

"Neg, city center for us." Redfire panned to it. City Center was dominated by towering skyscrapers of such

heavy construction they gave the appearance of fortifications. On their sides, giant holograms of women, men and animals engaged in lewd and lascivious acts.

“Lovely, another planet of perverts,” Keeler said. He settled back in his landing couch and ordered an automech to bring him something to drink.

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Zilla slowed to a zip and flashed to the landing pad atop the third tallest building in Nettwerk City, (the number one and number two building being too pointy and too covered in broadcast antennae, respectively, to permit landing.) The edifice was sheathed in coppery gold metal and reached up ninety stories. The central twenty floors were belted by a kind of screen that displayed advertisements and broadcast news. As *Zilla* flared landing thrusters and alighted on the roof, the image of the ship doing so appeared on the screen below, accompanied by the corporate logo of “The Nettwerk,” an abstract and vaguely phallic rendering of a broadcast tower superimposed over a wireframe globe with the shapes of Aurora’s continents.

Four figures advanced on the ship, holding up large boxes and probes. They circled the ship, poking at the engines and Accipiters. They were humanoid forms covered in so much bulky gear that Keeler at first took them for androids until one of them peeled off her face-mask and announced, “Radiation levels negligible. No detected hazardous chemicals or explosives. Safe to approach.”

A line of men in heavy armor rushed forward and quickly deployed a fence around the ship.

Once the ship was safely cordoned off, a squad of women in smart suits, high heels and immaculately windblown hair charged in, each accompanied by a pudgy guy with com-gear strapped to his head and back.

“We are coming to you live...”

“...the *visitors* have arrived...”

“... exciting, exciting, exciting times indeed...”

Keeler and Redfire monitored all of this from inside the ship. “Who are they talking to?” Redfire asked.

“Their audience,” Keeler answered. “People in some societies require others to explain current events to them, and form their opinions for them.”

“How unenlightened,” said Redfire.

“Please, gentlemen,” said Specialist Pandora Remington, the diplomatic attaché, herself smartly dressed and well-coiffed. “We have come to this world to make peaceful contact and gain allies against Aurelia, not to pass judgment on this culture.” Remington was one of Lear’s Diplomatic protégés, accompanying Lear who sat in her landing couch and, for once, was not saying much.

Some time later, they were cleared to exit, and the side hatch opened. A cordon of security held back a line of reporters. A man waited for them at the end of the reception line. He was a little older than Keeler, his hair was gray and slicked back. Despite their lack of knowledge of local fashions, the landing crew sensed he was stylishly dressed, in a gray pinstriped suit and expensive shoes.

This was the Magnificat, also known as Mr. Marvelous. “Hey, all you beautiful people.” At first, they thought he was talking to them, but his comments were directed at the reporters, and their invisible audience. “Clearly this is the most exciting moment in the history of history itself! These cats from outer space have come to us across a million light years. And we now know that we are not alone in the Universe... humanity has survived. A vast new universe of opportunities opens for us.”

He paused, looked meaningfully into the cameras, and extracted a small bottle from his pocket. “Exciting times like this call for an exciting malt beverage, like Bootlicker... Bootlicker exciting malt beverage, comes in eight flavors, every one guaranteed to knock you on your ass. Bootlicker! It knocks you on your ass.” He took a swig from the bottle and smacked his lips. “Ah, that’s the shit.”

Keeler and Redfire looked at each other. Mr. Marvelous gestured for them to come forward.

“The Leader of the Human Ship, a Mr. Keller, is going to address the crowd,” a woman informed her audience. Keeler thought this was a rather obvious thing to be telling them. Mr. Marvelous gave him a hale and hearty handshake and directed him to speak into a camera orb.

“Greetings, I’m Prime Commander Keller,” he told them. “This is my Executive Officer, TyroCommander Fleeer, and my Tactical Officer, TyroCommander Redfern. We’re glad to be on this planet... and I could go for a shot of that malt beverage.”

The crowd laughed, and Mr. Marvelous extended the bottle. Keeler took a swig and as the liquid struck his

tongue, the phrase ‘lizard spit’ materialized in his head and would remain there until the aftertaste faded several hours later.

Marvelous smiled a thousand watt smile. “Fabulous! On behalf of the Nettwerk, Welcome to Nettwerk City.” A cheer went up, and after a quick round of hearty handshakes, Marvelous hustled them away from the reporters and into the building. He gestured at the buxom, vivacious, and scantily clad young woman on his left. “This is my primary assistant, Glorious Burbank.”

“That’s for short,” she told *Pegasus’s* landing party. “My full name is ‘The Glorious Burbank Experience.’”

Marvelous asked her. “How much did I get for the Bootlicker plug?”

“100,000 synercreds.”

“Throbbin’!” he said.

“On a completely unrelated topic,” Keeler said. “Are you aware there is fighting at the edge of your city?”

“Oh, yeah, the combat zones. I should fire the asshole didn’t mention those to you. Yeah, don’t worry about that. It ain’t nothin’ but a show. Entertainment! Those Zones made the Nettwerk what it is, baby. For years, the entertainment channels used simulated sex and violence to entertain the dopes. Then came along Bangalore Jones and her damned Coitus Channel. All-day all-night live sex with real people... and later, real animals. Ratings through the roof. So, I’m over here at my ‘plex wondering how the hell I get some of that hot action. Then it hits me. Bango! If real sex sells, why not real violence? Combat plus

entertainment equals Combattainment™. One week after start up, the Firefight channel was the number one. I thrust my way into her core demo, and worked it hard until I penetrated every market. Swollen with profit, I bought out the Coitus channel, and a year later I was slammin' it home on five hundred channels. I renamed it The Netzwerk, and now I run the biggest synerplex on the planet, which makes me, the Magnificat."

"What do they fight about ... in the Urban Combat Zones," Redfire asked.

Marvelous chuckled, "This group hates that group because that group is living on land that used to belong to this group. This other group hates that other one because one of them worships cows and the other one worships goats. And these guys hate those guys because these guys are drunks and those guys own all the liquor stores. What do I care what they fight about?"

"Don't you worry that if you give socially disconnected people heavy weapons, they'll turn against you?" Keeler asked.

Marvelous waved him off. "The militia makes sure they stay in the combat zones and away from the suburbs and business districts. They get to fight for their glorious cause. Me and the armaments companies make money. Millions are entertained. The gambling consortia make a fortune, which I get a piece of. And socially dysfunctional idiots take out their dysfunction on each other instead of decent people. Everybody wins!"

"There are now Combat Zones in every major city," Glorious Burbank explained, in a husky exciting voice.

“We’ve been able to expand to over a hundred 24-hour Combattainment™ channels. And reselling the video from the best firefights pumps up our gross margin.”

“What does that word mean, Synerplex?” Lear asked.

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“Synerplex... combi-word for synergistic complex,” Burbank explained as she ushered the crew down a long carpeted corridor toward a lavish conference room.

“Aurora has done away with countries, nations, provinces and all that meaningless geographical identity and government nonsense. The synerplex is our central organizing principle, providing employment, protection, and entertainment to inhabitants of every city.”

“What about people who live outside the cities?” Redfire asked.

She continued. “Nobody who’s anybody lives outside a metroplex. Nobody but a bunch of damned Chryslers living out in the hardscape.”

“Chryslers?” Keeler asked.

Mr. Marvelous shook his head as though unable to countenance the ignorance and stupidity of his guests. “Chryslers... refugees from the planet Chrysalia. They got kicked out during one of the Holy Wars and settled here. Buncha damned farmers who nobody gives a hot damn about.”

“They are of no consequence,” Glorious Burbank agreed. She opened the double doors to the conference chamber. There was a huge, shiny black table surrounded by black leather sling chairs. The view from the huge window took in the entire west side of Netzwerk City. Side

tables on either side groaned from the weight of exotic food and beverages, the latter in colorful containers of glass, plastic and metal. A sextet of scantily clad young women stood nearby, ready to serve. Mr. Marvelous introduced them. "These are some of my *top* aides... Miss May, Miss June, Miss July... I call them, the Calendar Girls. Miss May is fresh, Miss July is hot, Miss December likes nothing better than being unwrapped under a Seasonal Occasion Tree..."

"Lovely," Keeler took a seat near the head of the table. "Okay, now, let's review vocabulary... 'hardscape?'"

Marvelous took the chair opposite Keeler. "Hardscape... flyover country... the grainbelt... the flat, boring useless land between the coasts where the Chryslers live."

"When will we meet the representatives of the other Synerplexes?" Lear asked.

Mr. Marvelous seemed offended. "Trust me, you don't wanna get in bed with nobody but the Number One throbbin' rock hard schlong on this planet, and the Nettwerk is Number One and I am the Nettwerk."

"How many other Megaplexes are there?" Lear persisted.

Marvelous didn't know. Burbank answered. "Sixty-nine," she answered. "And a panoply of minor consortia."

Redfire asked a question. "A thousand years ago, an alien force tore through this sector, destroying almost every world, except this one. How did you survive?"

“I think the answer is obvious,” Marvelous said, gesturing toward the sky beyond the window. “The auroras shielded us from the Tarmigans when they passed through our system. For centuries, we believed we were, perhaps, the only human beings left alive.”

“Which is why your arrival has created such excitement,” Burbank said in a kind of excited buzz. “We’re going to devote non-stop, 19-hour-a-day coverage of your adventures on this planet. We’d like to set-up a meeting with our highest-level event coordinators to begin accepting groups of your people for extended visits to our world’s most glorious attractions. Beginning here in Nettwerk City, of course, but naturally, you’ll want to visit the Gambling Arenas of Sker, the Wallops Disorder World Hyper-Extreme-FunPlex, and of course, the Naked Orgy Beaches of Southerly Wildbay.”

Another of Marvelous’s charming underdressed female assistants chimed in. “And of course, you’ll have unlimited access to food, beverages, intoxicants, recreational pharmaceuticals, and sexual gymnastic equipment all courtesy of The Nettwerk.”

“Just make sure to show the corporate logos when you use them,” Burbank reminded them.

Prime Commander Keeler replied. “If I show up at a naked orgy beach, it’s gonna be your people who need recreational pharmaceuticals.”

“Oh, Mr. Keller,” Burbank purred. “A man of your sophisticated tastes would probably enjoy a certain... higher level of gratification. And I would be happy to... *entertain* certain possibilities with you.”

Keeler turned to his crewmates. "You hear that? I think they've got miniature golf."

Marvelous took charge again. "I hope you've enjoyed the meet-and-greet, and we should continue this discussion sometime later, but I think you'll want to settle into your *luxurious* hotel suites... compliments of the Nettwerk... relax and get yourself pumped for a series of tours and interviews to begin tomorrow."

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"What about negotiations," Lear asked. "For trade, mutual defense..."

"Yeah, all that crap," Marvelous assured her. "In the mean-time, these lovely and uninhibited young women will show you to your accommodations. Miss Burbank, you're with me." He gestured toward his adjacent office, and led Burbank inside as the landing party was led out through another doorway.

"They seem like decent people," said Mr. Marvelous watching them leave.

"I concur," Burbank answered.

Marvelous nodded. "Good, we can use that."

Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-N-Jam

Eddie finally had managed to coax Matthew Driver back into the Slam-n-Jam, and had gotten Eliza to share a drink with them as well. He figured since they had both gone through separate but equal hells on their away missions... they should come back to his place and run up enormous bar debts as a form of recuperative therapy.

“Is it just me,” Eddie asked, “Or have you just been more... cool, since you got back.”

Driver had a beer in front of him... a light beer, but at least it was a start. It was a homebrew, created by a hobbyist in the Technical Core. Change was drinking a glass of beige wine.

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“I had time to think,” Driver answered. “In those moments when there wasn’t a monster trying to eat us, or the crew of a 38th century slave ship trying to buy Trajan and Technician Sweet from me, or a transdimensional rift threatening to destroy the universe, or ...” He paused.

“I thought you didn’t remember much,” said Eliza.

“I don’t... actually I do, but what I remember doesn’t make sense. It’s like a big weird dream.”

“But somehow you got mellow,” Eddie said. “Maybe you spent some time on that StarLock with a relaxed tavern-keeper.”

Matthew’s eyes knitted in that curious expression he had been showing a lot since returning from Chronos. “There was a bartender on the StarLock ... an All-Being Master of Time, Space, and Dimensions.”

Eddie snorted, “The All-Being, Master of Time, Space, and Dimensions?”

Matthew nodded. “Nice gal. Made an impressive mango fizzler. Good listener. Picky about tips, though. Once, She offered to tell me the secret of the universe if I’d relieve her for a shift. She disappeared for weeks.”

“Did she ever tell you the secret of the universe?” Eliza asked.

Matthew’s eyes searched over their heads, as though trying to remember it. “She said, people believe the truth is so elusive you have to spend your whole life seeking it without finding it. But most of the time, the truth is banging on the door trying to get at you to pay attention to it, and if you don’t let it in, it’ll just beat the damn door down on top of you.”

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“That doesn’t make any sense,” Roebuck said.

Eliza disagreed. “It does.”

Trajan appeared and surveyed the place as if he had never seen it before, because he hadn’t. He spotted Matthew Driver at the bar and approached him. “I thought I’d find you here. Are you ready to go?”

“No way,” Eddie said. “It took me weeks to get him in here. You sit down and I’ll get you a traditional Republicker drink... something bland and flavorless.”

Matthew rose. “Some other time.” He had only finished half of his beer. He walked over to Eliza and hugged her. “I am very relieved that you survived. I would have missed you a lot if you had died.”

And with that, he and Trajan walked out the door.

“What did he mean by that?” Eddie asked.

“He meant exactly what he said,” Eliza said, sounding only a little surprised. “And only what he said.”

Aurora – Aeropagus Hotel

The Magnificent Suite occupied half of an upper floor of the Aeropagus Tower. After a lavish dinner reception, Keeler returned there and went directly to the wet bar to see what manner of libations the Aurorans offered. He settled on a small glass of something that tasted like mint and had a kick like an over-stimulated milkbeast.

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Drink in hand, he surveyed the rest of the quarters. The room was done in bright tacky purples and crimsons, trimmed with whitish marble moldings and light sconces in the shape of sea shells. Impressionist art hung on the walls, most of it blurry, dark-skinned naked women. The bed was enormous, round, soft, and also contained a dark-skinned naked woman. "Hoy," said the Commander.

She smiled at him sweetly. "Mr. Marvelous wanted to make sure your bed was warm tonight."

"Your planet must be centuries behind us in thermal blanket technology," Keeler said as the woman began to lick his ear. "Not that that's bad thing. So, what do you get paid for doing this?"

"6,600 synercreds for the night," she purred.

"Is that a lot?"

She laughed and stretched. "Top of the line and worth every cred, my man. I won the Velvet Deepthroat Award in 6668 and 6669."

"Your parents must be proud. I'm sorry, have I asked your name?"

"Sodom Ann Gomorrah."

Keeler blinked. "Ah, a Biblical name."

Her light, smooth hands slipped under the collar of his tunic and began rubbing the muscles of his neck. "So, what are you thinking, stud?"

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"That's Commander Stud to you."

"Whatever gets you rolling?" she purred. "So, what are you thinking, Commander Stud?"

"That you're mussing up my sheets." He rose from the bed. "Excuse me a minute. I've got to go out into the hall way and pour a bucket of ice into my pants."

He walked awkwardly out of his room and into the hallway, where he came upon Redfire and Toto, each of them slipping out of his own suite. "There was a lady in my bed," said the commander.

"There were two in mine," said Redfire.

"There was a woolbeast in mine," said Toto.

"They must have heard you're from Graceland," Keeler told him. "But, about what one would expect. Hedonism, violence, and profit seem to be the central values of this world."

"Za," Redfire agreed. "I think this was the first dinner I've ever gone to where a naked girl asked me to lick dessert off her chest."

"You never ate a Bountiful Harvest Feast with my Aunt Bernadette," Keeler said.

Redfire went on. "I noted that some of the men at the dinner were continually repairing to a side room. I

checked it out. They were monitoring some kind of street combat in another city, and wagering on the body count."

"That's thoroughly depraved," Keeler said.

"So, why do people fight for them?" Toto said. "I understand fighting, but if I knew a bunch o' men in suits were betting on me to die... I'd rather kill them than whoever I was fighting against."

"It's not common, but it's not unknown," Keeler sighed. "A lot of colonies and civilizations have embraced gladiatorial combat in one form or another."

"I think there's more to it than that," Redfire said. "The Firefight Channels are just a sideshow. I talked with some of the higher-ups, they called themselves 'Execs.' There is an extensive military-industrial establishment on the planet."

"Meaning?" Keeler asked.

"The Synerplexes doesn't just view war as a form of entertainment, and they view each other as threats."

"When I see sex and war, the first thought to come to my mind is Aurelians," Keeler said. "Is it possible the Aurelians have already been here?"

"I don't think so," Redfire said. "Aurelians *disarm* the worlds they're going to conquer."

"That's reassuring," Keeler said, sounding not reassured.

"I'll tell you what isn't reassuring," Redfire said. "That story that the high energy activity in their atmosphere hid them from the Tarmigans is nothing but a sizable sip from

the spigot of sputum. No way do creatures that can destroy entire universes miss you because you hide behind pretty lights.”

They were quiet for several seconds. Then, Toto said, “Sir, I ain’t going back to my room with a woolbeast in it.”

“You can have my room,” Keeler said.

“Or mine,” Redfire said. “I may no longer be a married man, but I am committed to chastity as a means of making up for my past sins.”

“Good luck with that,” Keeler muttered. “Okay, we’ll send Toto into your room, I’ll send the Velvet Deepthroat in after him.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Toto said with enthusiasm.

“And the woolbeast?” Redfire asked.

Keeler sighed. “Have it shaved and sent to Lear’s quarters. If Mr. Marvelous asks, we ate it.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pegasus: Hangar Bay Alpha

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Prudence gleamed. Not only was two years of damage and deferred maintenance eliminated from her hull, but she had also been among the first beneficiaries of the mark improvements from the home-worlds. Her winglades were just a bit more swept forward, tipped with upgraded sensors. The forward weapons brace looked a little tougher, and packed a harder punch. A pair of spars bracketed the fusion reactor dome, which was stretched to accommodate a more powerful powerplant.

"Her soul is still the same," Matthew Driver said, running a hand along *Prudence's* gleaming skin.

"Are you sure about this?" Trajan Lear asked him. "You could take the mission yourself."

"Don't you want the flight?"

"You know I do."

"Then, take it," Driver answered. "You've earned this. Besides, after two years, I really would prefer to spend time with my sister." He paused and got an odd look. "I've lived two years longer than my twin sister. How strange."

"I'll take good care of *Prudence*," Trajan Lear promised.

Driver pulled something from the pocket of his flight jacket. It was like a large, thick coin pressed from black metal, but the edge glowed yellow. "Do you remember what this thing is?"

Trajan took it. "I don't. Maybe, you should turn it over to the Technical Core with the other artifacts."

"I thought of that," Driver told him. "But then I had this strong feeling I should hold on to it." He took it back from Trajan and slid it into his pocket. "Departure's in two hours. We should do a systems check on the new gear."

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Pegasus: Auburn Ballroom, Deck 15

When the delegations from the Top Ten Megaplexes arrived, along with entourages of hangers-on and flanks of bodyguards, none of the ship's meeting rooms was big enough to accommodate them. They gathered instead in the Auburn Ballroom, named for a colony *Pegasus* had passed by in order to reach the Chapultepec StarLock[■].

Goneril Lear concluded her remarks. "Alignment of Aurora to the New Commonwealth will provide you not only with vital technological advancements, opportunities for cultural exchange, and trading links, but also defend you against the Aurelian threat."

She surveyed her audience. Only half, at best, seemed to be paying her any attention at all. The women were all dangerously thin, such that she wondered if Aurora's food distribution was inefficient. The men seemed well-fed, however, and old enough to be the women's fathers. The

■ Which was a shame, really. Because New Auburn was a really nice colony, with golden skies, sparkling lakes, and forests of red-leafy trees. Also, there were a lot of horny centaurs galloping around in the red forests for some reason. And temples of marble filled with comely underdressed maidens. And beer, really good beer. The honor of its discovery would fall to the Pathfinder Ship *Sapphire*; whose crew would sign a collective thank you note to the crew of *Pegasus*

men wore suits with collar-less jackets and shirts, made of a material that shined in light. The women wore much, much less, baring navels, breasts, and thighs, but large leather boots. They reminded her of the indecent simulacrum produced in coital simulations used by lonely men and teenagers.

"We invite you to explore our ship, our worlds, our New Commonwealth," she told them. "And we look forward to exploring Aurora." She regained her seat as the respectful murmuring in the room increased to a clatter of competing conversations among the delegates. She turned to Bridget Armatrading, a Diplomatic Specialist, a woman with skin the color of light brown sugar, and an oddly puffy face. "I may have underplayed the Aurelian threat."

"I think you made the correct choice," said Armatrading. "Showing the devastation of Medea, Boadicea, and Coriolus made them think about what could happen to their own planet."

"It does not seem to have had that effect," said Lear drily.

"Ms Lear," called one of the men. "Ms. Lear, may we ask you something?"

"TyroCom---," Lear corrected reflexively, then caught herself. "Mr. Doubleday, is it? How may I help you?"

He held up a chunk of bread with a thick dollop of amber-gold liquid attached. "What did you say this amazing substance was?"

"Bread," Lear said.

"No, the sticky stuff."

"Honey," Lear answered.

"This is really amazingly amazing. You say insects produce this?"

"Affirmative, we call them 'bees.'"

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"Bees? Bees?" the man shook his head. "No, that will never do. We'll need to call them... something sweet, something flowery... sever the insect connection, people don't like bugs. We could call them... nectar fairies."

Lear stared at him. "I suppose we could."

"Wait! Wait!" another Exec, a Mr. Fabulous yelled. "Hey, you know what would taste really good with this on them?"

"What?" Lear asked.

"Women's breasts."

Lear tried not to look offended. She had hoped to meet with those involved in armaments production, but had only managed to entice Megaplexes involved in food distribution. The armaments consortia had turned her invitation down, citing security concerns and confidentiality protocols. Lear would not let herself be discouraged. Somehow, she would find a way to make allies among the Aurorans.

"Bit of a disappointment, isn't it?" said an older gentleman standing nearby her.

"No good meeting can ever be a complete disappointment, if we come away with a better understanding of each other," Lear said, it was a rote

response, but something in the man had caught her off guard and her resulting delivery was flat.

“You didn’t fly across have a galaxy to negotiate with vendors of ready-to-eat pizza,” he said. “Allow myself to introduce myself, Onan Marr the man from MAARRS.” He was older than Lear, old enough to be her father. His gray hair, though, was shaggy and thick, cut the way a teenager might wear it, hanging in his eyes.

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He passed a thick slab of plastic to her. “Our Tactical Division has examined the data you provided to us about the Aurelians. They have developed some tactical analyses you may find interesting. They are described in this dossier.”

“I appreciate the effort, Mr. Marr, but the Republic Ministry of Defense has already provided us with...”

“Your tactical assessments of the Aurelians are naïve at best, catastrophically flawed at worst. Republic’s strategies depend on developing overwhelming force. That’s wishful thinking. These strategies are based on infiltration, subterfuge, and exploitation of Aurelian weaknesses. Read them, Tyro-Commander Lear. And when you have, contact me. Onan Marr, the man from MAARS. My contact data is included in the data slab.”

She turned away for a second to examine the slab. When she turned around again, Onan Marr, the man from MAARRS was gone.

Aurora: Netzwerk City

Prudence parked at the Netzwerk City Airport, sharing the tarmac with large black corporate helicopters and sleek

intercontinental hypersonic transports; torpedoes with delta wings and quadruple tails.

David Alkema and his party stood outside the hatch. His party consisted of his wife Pieta, Max Jordan, and Trajan Lear, who had brought them down. It was a moist day, a little cooler than normal for the subtropical climate of the Greater Netzwerk City region, cloud cover casting everything in an over-intense fluorescent light.

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The Glorious Burbank Experience approached, two petite women with long, highlighted hair and a bald, dark-skinned man were following behind her. All wore leather flight jackets, but only Burbank seemed to be wearing anything underneath hers. Trailing them were the omnipresent cameramen, swathed in electronic gear. Burbank extended a hand as she approached. "You must be Lieutenant Alkema. I am the Glorious Burbank experience, and these are my associates, Killjoy and Lovejoy, and our pilot for the day, Romeo "Roughtrade" Jones."

Alkema took her hand. "This is my pilot, Trajan Lear, my friend Max Jordan, and my wife, Pieta."

Burbank blinked at him as though he had just pulled a weasel out of his pants. "A *wife*, you say, how cute is that?"

Alkema thought that getting down to business would be a better tack than pursuing her last statement. "My commander has assigned us to undertake a cultural survey of Netzwerk City."

And, he thought to himself, he also mentioned while I was down here, I could look around and see if there was anything you

were hiding, like your relationship to Echo Colony and how yours is, apparently, the only planet in this sector to escape Tarmigan annihilation. Cultural Survey was a nice euphemism.

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“Well, you couldn’t have picked a better spot to begin your tour than right here in Netzwerk City,” said Burbank boisterously. “We are the media center of Aurora, and that makes us the cultural center of Aurora. Where we lead, the planet follows!

“Your arrival here has already been rated one of the top ten pivotal events of the year,” said Burbank.[➤] “The Netzwerk is devoting an entire *channel* to coverage of your every movement.” She turned to the camera man.

“Coverage of this historic event is brought to you by Vulva, the safe armored vehicle for today’s hypercompetitive urban driving environment. Have you had a ride in a Vulva lately?”

“How does it feel?” said one of the other women, Killjoy, according to the name emblazoned on the sleeve of her jacket.

“I am unaccustomed to such attention,” Alkema answered with a smile.

Pieta moved forward, smiling, gazing into the unblinking eye of the camera, mesmerized. “Hello, Aurora. It’s great to be here!”

“Tell us about yourself,” Lovejoy asked.

[➤] Number three, technically, after the development of a new “love drug” and the election of a former erotic film star to the leadership of one of the major Megaplexes.

"I come from the planet Boadicea. I was part of the ruling caste before it was conquered by Aurelia. I spent most of the next eight years as a freedom fighter in the wilderness of my planet. When *Pegasus* came back, I was reunited with David, who is my one true love."

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"Wonderful," said Killjoy. "Maybe you can meet a few more true loves during your visit here."

Burbank led them to a large, mottled brown hovercraft. Short, clipped wings jutted fore and aft, each housing a large propulsion pod. The front quarter of the ship was a large bubble canopy, criss-crossed with metal reinforcement bars. Two large viewports near the back were similarly reinforced. On one side was painted a nearly naked woman with black skin and a very phallic rocket between her legs and the legend "Bangalore Jones."

"I named it after my mother," Roughtrade explained softly. He was a slightish man, with a shaved head and eyes hidden by clip-on aviator glasses that projected aircraft and flight data directly ahead of the eyes. He took the foremost seat in the ship. Burbank guided Alkema and Pieta to seats in the front. The others took seats aft.

One by one, Roughtrade started the engines until all four had thrummed to life. They roared, lifting the hovercraft aloft on a mattress of hot, ionized gasses. They cleared the field and lifted over the city.

Their anti-gravity technology is centuries behind ours, Alkema thought as he looked through the canopy. Far below, traffic shot along freeways at high-speed gridlock, smaller cars weaving among the fast moving wheels of gigantic trucks, like insects beneath a herd of Sapphirean

Heffalumps. He could see at least a dozen accidents from where he sat.

The towers and buildings of Nettwerk City had a uniformly thick and armored look. As their floors reached the surface, the windows became more rare, smaller and more slit-like. By night, most of the sides of these buildings were given over to holographic advertisements. By day, they were a uniform dull, gray-white. He could not get past how much the city looked like a fortress. "How many people live here?" he asked.

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"About twenty-four million, including the suburbs," Burbank answered.

"But who would live there," Lovejoy giggled. "Just kidding, you're all beautiful!"

"All employee-citizens of the Nettwerk?" Alkema asked.

"Not at all," Burbank answered. "The Synerplex is not a geographical concept. There are millions of affiliates of other Megaplexes residing in Nettwerk City."

"But they don't have any input into how the Nettwerk runs things," Alkema asked. "Are individual rights dictated by whatever Megaplexus one happen to be affiliated with?"

Burbank continued her cheerful response. "The Megaplexes compete with each other for human resources, and so have an incentive to offer their affiliates as much as they desire. How does it work on your planet?"

"We pick our lawmakers by lottery, and expire all laws after ten years. It keeps them so busy re-writing old laws,

they don't have time to make up new ones." Alkema gestured toward Trajan. "His planet has a representative democracy, six separate lawmaking bodies and a central council."

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"On my planet," Pieta interjected, "We had an Outer Circle, and an Inner Circle."

"Centuries ago, Aurora was a pure democracy," Burbank explained. She sighed under her breath, resentful at having to give a history lesson (which was bad for holding audience interest levels). "When the Synerplexes took over, the first thing they did was make it so that only stakeholders could vote. Over time, we were able to do away with public participation entirely."

She changed tack and turned to the cameraman. "But our audience doesn't really care about politics. Pieta, you're married to David now, but I understand your planet had some interesting ideas about family structures. Could you tell me more about that?"

Pieta warmed to the topic. "Absolutely, Glorious. On my planet, there was only one man for every twenty women. So, we kept all the men in special compounds, and used them only for breeding purposes. Otherwise, women lived in collectives of six to twenty, and we gave each other erotic pleasure. Our philosophy was, men are for breeding, women are for bonding."

"Now, that's hot!" Burbank gushed. "But you gave that up to marry this guy."

"I don't feel like I gave up anything," Pieta said, but there was a little note of hesitation in her voice.

“My people believe that sex is a form of power,” Alkema tried to explain. “The power to give life, we revere it as sacred.”

Burbank chuckled. “Don’t tell me that no one in your society ever strays... ever goes out for a good time?”

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“They have alternatives,” Pieta interjected.

A little embarrassed, Alkema tried to explain. “We have technology that precisely replicates the sensations associated with erotic experiences. Their use isn’t exactly... respectable, but most people accept using simulators as an alternative to intercourse.”

“We’ll have to discuss those simulators more,” Burbank said, a little hastily. “But first, let’s flash back to the action at Tower Three, last night, where one of the Visitors got right to it with three fine socialators, courtesy of Mr. Marvelous himself.”

“Transmit off!” Burbank’s eyes gleamed. “I think we may be able to deal. The Network’s been working on a system of direct neural stimulation, but it’s still in the prototype stage.”

Through the bubble canopy, Alkema noted a range of huge towers, thousands of meters high, reaching into the auroras themselves and sparking with electricity. “Are those the towers of power, of which I’ve heard so much?”

“Yes, one of the gifts of this planet is abundant, limitless power,” Burbank replied. “But, tell me more about your erotic simulation techniques.”

“What’s that over there,” Trajan was pointing out an immense area, covering nearly a hundred square

kilometers, filled with wreckage on a brobdignagian scale, gantries, cranes, huge workhouses covering millions of square meters.

"The ancient spaceyards," Burbank answered.
"Hundreds of years ago, they built spaceships there."

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"Why on the planet and not in space?" Alkema asked.
"We build most of our ships in space or on low-gravity moons so we don't have to expend energy lifting them out of the gravity well."

"I don't know much about ancient shipbuilding,"
Burbank demurred.

Roughtrade, the pilot, spoke instead. "They just built components down here. They were assembled in orbit."

"The whole area is contaminated by radiation poisoning," Burbank added. "It's been closed off for centuries."

They built a facility with no consideration for handling radioactive contamination, Alkema thought. They must have been in a big hurry to construct their fleets. Was it under threat of invasion? Must investigate further.

"We're back from break," reported the cameraman.

"Let's take this ship to the beach," Burbank cried out.
"How are you guys doing back there?"

KillJoy and LoveJoy were in the back of the hovercraft, LoveJoy sitting on the lap of a reddening Trajan Lear and KillJoy with her arms around Max Jordan's neck. Each of the women had unzipped the fronts of her jacket but had so far not managed to fall out.

“Insta-feedback shows among women aged 14-24, Trajan Lear is the Visitor who most reminds them of their brother,” said KillJoy. Trajan’s face was burning red, and he looked like he wanted to be anywhere other than where he was.

“And among women 19 and under,” said LoveJoy. “Max Jordan is one of the top five visitors they would most like to see stripped to his underwear in public.” Max seemed untroubled by this. If he was embarrassed to have a woman twice his age rubbing her hands down the front of his jacket in front of an audience of millions, he didn’t show it.

“They sure do grow them big, look at those boys,” said Burbank.

Roughtrade guided his ship to a large stretch of sand on the western side of the city. Waves lapped the shoreline, and far out to sea, sizzles of electricity dripped down from the clouds to kiss the surf. The Nettwerk had arranged a reception there, and an ample selection of tanned, taut young people in little clothing or none whatsoever danced to raucous music and largely ignored tables laden with seemingly every brand of pre-packaged snack food the planet had to offer.

“You’ve seen Nettwerk City from the air,” Burbank purred. “Now, let’s get down and meet the real people, the people that make Nettwerk City the most happenin’ spot on the planet, the party people.”

A shout went up as they exited the vehicle. A flank of heavily armed security separated the natives from the visitors as they exited the hovercraft.

Rebuffed by Trajan Lear, Killjoy and Lovejoy were now focusing their entire attention on Max Jordan. They had stripped from their leather jackets and bared their torsos to the almost-warm air of the beach. Max had done the same, taking off his jacket and unfastening his shirt until it hung in the waist of his pants, his skin made pale and pink in the green-and-yellow light of Aurora's churning sky.

"We'll have to keep an eye on him," Alkema told Pieta.

She turned sour. "Why? Because he's half Boadicean, and we Boadiceans can not control our throbbing carnal urges? Is that what you're trying to say? Because your kids are going to be half Boadicean, too."

Alkema cooed softly at her. "I only meant that Max Jordan is a teenaged boy, now being treated to the attentions of women with no sexual restraint whatsoever. That would be a lot of temptation for any boy, Sapphirean, Boadicean, or Republicker."

"Good," she said, mollified. "Do you think we should send him back to *Pegasus*."

"Neg, he'll be fine as long as we keep watch over him, but it may be hard to get him away from the coital simulator when we get back."

Aurora: MAARRS Megaplex

Separated from Nettwerk City by four hundred kilometers of coastline and a stretch of radioactive badlands known as The Dead Zone, the MAARRS Megaplex stretched out along the peninsula and north shore of a bay called Pleasant Sound. Though the distance between them was short, a quirk of geography and ocean

currents gave MAARRS a much more damp and chilly climate than its twin city to the south.

The nerve center of the MAARRS Megaplexus was at the center of a fortress-like complex of towers and walls. Goneril Lear waited in a huge oval-shaped office, with armored walls, gunmetal gray and lined with rivets. It reminded Lear of the bunkers constructed at the height of the Wars of Unification she had toured as a young girl.

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The Office was lined with token representations of the MAARS product line. Models of missiles filled a glassine case along one wall. Another was lined with a frightening array of big, heavy guns. In another corner, large cans of soup were aligned with labels facing forward, showing the face of a kindly old lady.

This lady sat across from Goneril Lear, and was pouring tea into a pretty china cup. "I hope this isn't too hot for you, dearie."

"Thank you, Mrs. Maim."

"It's Auntie Maim, dearie," the old lady cooed. "I am so glad you decided to meet with me."

"Our tactical staff reviewed the scenarios your associate left us," Lear said. "We were intrigued to know how you acquired such detailed information about the Aurelians."

"Why, from you, dearie," Maim said. "One of our agents at the Netzwerk acquired the data you left with Mr. Marvelous, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that the Megakill Armaments, Ammunition, Rockets,

Recreation and Soup consortium is eager to do business with the New Commonwealth," Maim continued.

"That is most excellent news," Lear beamed. "The New Commonwealth is eager to build strong friendships throughout the quadrant."

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"And what does friendship have to do with business?" Maim chuckled. Before Lear could answer, she went on. "I've brought you here to discuss a matter of planetary security. Are you familiar with the Supah al-Fareek consortium."

"It one of the thirteen largest industrial combines on your planet," Lear answered. "Primary business interests include military hardware, construction and engineering services, interactive entertainment, consumer financing and snack foods."

"I knew as soon as I saw you that you were not the kind of woman who walks into a meeting unprepared," Maim said. "Perhaps you might even consider remaining here when your ship leaves. A woman of your strength and ambition doubtless would become one of my directors."

Lear smiled modestly. "I live to serve only Republic... and the New Commonwealth."

"Duty above all, one simply must admire that, doesn't one... sugar cookie, dear?"

Lear took the proffered sweet and nibbled it.

"As your intelligence has no doubt determined, Supah al-Fareek has very low credibility rating at the present time. A few years ago, they resorted to some nasty tactics

to secure the petrochemical processing assets of the ... Get away from there!"

Lear almost spilled her tea. Maim stood and shooed a black and white cat away from menacing a small yellow bird in an elaborate metal cage that hung over her desk.

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Maim patted her hair back in place as she continued. "Twenty days ago, I activated a splinter cell in the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex to carry out a recovery operation. Nine men and women whom I had handpicked. They were my finest agents, trained in the deadly arts, a hundred missions between them. They were backed by a team of hundreds, logisticians, code-crackers, demolitionists... They went in with our best intelligence, complete dossiers on al-Fareek security systems. Top of the line equipment. Nothing but the best.

"Within six days, the entire splinter cell was dead. Eventually, we deduced that one of our agents had been compromised by al-Fareek. He turned on the ones in the cell he knew about, one of the three he didn't know about killed him, and al Fareek security finished off the rest." She made a tsk-tsk noise. "Six million synercreds down the shitter."

"What could have been worth so many lives...?"

Maim pointed a small plastic box at the wall and pressed a button. A picture appeared on the screen behind her, a pretty blond woman, thirtyish, with a determined set to her jawline.

"Hellen Earth was my premier weapons designer. A year ago, Supah-al-Fareek kidnapped her," Maim

explained. "Bring her back to me, and I will assure that Aurora will become a vital ally of your New Commonwealth."

"I appreciate your predicament," Lear told her, diplomatic training kicking into full gear. "However, we are trying to remain neutral in planetary affairs, at least until we understand the landscape."

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"No one needs to know you were involved," said Maim, topping off both their cups of tea. "And if you are concerned that I am telling the truth... as I would be in your situation ... I can, and will, produce transcripts of our communiqués with her, and other evidence, but more importantly, you may ask her yourself when you reach her. If she does not come voluntarily, you are relieved of any obligation to bring her back."

"It seems like an awful lot of trouble to rescue a single person," Lear said. "Surely you have legions of talented weapons designers..."

"It is more important than that," Maim snapped. "She may hold the key to peace on this planet. At the time she was captured, Hellen Earth was working on a project so revolutionary it could make warfare obsolete."

"Really," Lear said, raising an eyebrow. "A project that would make warfare obsolete. I would be most intrigued to here the details."

"Which are classified of course," said Main.

"If war were made obsolete, would that not put you out of business?"

Maim chuckled. "I am old woman. My wealth is secure, and my mind has turned to my legacy. I have in no small part contributed to the misery wrought by warfare on this world. My time is near. If I die now, my Megaplexus will be divided and conquered by the end of this year, and I will be forgotten. But if I end warfare on this planet, my name will be remembered through the ages."

"That would be an honorable legacy," Lear told her, but before she could try to weasel out again, Maim interrupted her.

"Some of her work may also benefit your people, in your war against Aurelia," Maim added.

Lear gave her the full benefit of a dramatic pause. "How?"

"Would you like to disable an entire fleet, an entire army, without firing a shot," Maim said.

No dramatic pause this time. "How?" Lear whispered.

Lear didn't know it yet, but the old lady knew at that moment she was going to get her rescue mission. She grinned. "Rescue her, and we will tell you."

Aurora - Netzwerk City

After the beach party had ceased to be interesting, the four were hustled back into the hovercraft and air-taxed to the Hotel Fornica, a mid-rise tower in what they were assured was one of Netzwerk City's finest party sectors. At Alkema's request, they were going to share one large suite. He didn't trust Max Jordan alone.

"Night's still young," Killjoy said to Max Jordan as they disembarked on the rooftop pad of the hotel. "I've got a car, we could take a ride in my Vulva."

"Neg, he can't," Alkema intervened. He saw the disappointed look on Max's face. Max had been born on Boadicea, whose years were twice as long as Sapphire's, but whether he was seven years old or fifteen, he was too young for what Killjoy had in mind.

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The hovercraft lifted off again with a great whine of its engines, and they were alone. A pair of young women led them to the suite and, after a protracted goodbye, finally left the team alone.

"So, how do you like Aurora, so far," Alkema asked his friends, when they doors slid shut behind them.

"This is a totally fun planet," said Max Jordan, wiping a loose fetlock of red hair from his eyes.

"They just want to have sex and sex and sex and sex and sex and sex all the time," Pieta said, plopping herself down on one of the large soft sofas. "They really need to get over that."

"It makes me feel good to hear you say that, and yet it also fills me with a curious unease," Alkema said. "What about you, Trajan?"

"Sometimes, I wonder if I came back to the right universe," Trajan said.

Alkema was dumbstruck. Trajan Lear making a joke? He looked at the grown man who stood before him, and tried to reconcile him with the boy who had flown through the StarLock a few days ago. Both his wife and his best

friend had grown up while he had stood still. The universe had an odd way of evening things out, he thought.

"Traj," he said. "*Prudence* is equipped with radiation negatrons, correct?"

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"Aye, she is so equipped. Why?"

"Because tonight, I thought we might want to look around that old spaceyard," Trajan said.

"Do I have to go?" Max Jordan asked.

"You'd rather stay here?" Alkema asked.

"No,..." Max Jordan said and paused.

"You want to go back out and party with those girls," Trajan said.

Max burst, an explosion of adolescent fury. "This is a real city, Traj, a real city. I've never been out in a real city."

"You went to Presidio Capitat on Independence," Alkema pointed out. "I remember, we toured their zoological gardens and ate fish on top of a 100 storey building. At night, they set off incendiaries."

"That was with my mother. You can't have real fun with your mother around."

Trajan Lear could find no flaw in that argument.

"You're coming," Alkema said simply. "This is a mission, we stay together. We'll need some equipment from *Pegasus*, and a specialist."

"A specialist in what," Max Jordan asked, a little grumpily. Killjoy and Lovejoy's teasing had left his adolescent hormones thoroughly carbonated, his balls a

very dark shade of blue, and he was aching to at least be alone for a few minutes to take care of this problem in the time-honored fashion of teenaged boys... taking care of it probably several times if necessary.

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“Someone who can infiltrate any area we need, who knows what to look for, and can gather information discreetly without being caught,” Alkema was already nodding. “I think I know just who to get.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pegasus

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This was not the Prime Commander's usual Meeting Room. He had decided he just didn't want to bring anyone from Aurora into his usual meeting chamber because he didn't want to have to burn the chairs afterwards.

The man sitting across from Commander Keeler also exuded Auroran decadence. He had a face that was cut through with deep, deep creases that suggested he had begun aging somewhere around the age of seven. His hair was the gray of dirty smoke, and his voice was smoky also. He was a Nettwerk Historian provided by Mr. Marvelous, but Keeler could feel a certain bitterness emanating from him when history was discussed. Also, he had been disappointed to find that the refreshments consisted only of tea and cookies.

"Sir Hiscock Withers," Prime Commander Keeler began.

"Please, just Mr. Withers," the man answered softly. "For that is the name by which I long was known, before the Nettwerk abolished all children's programming."

"Right," Keeler said. "Mr. Marvelous said you might be able to fill me in on some of your planet's history."

"I will do what I can. I still consider myself an educator, first and foremost." As he spoke, his hands fussed with his light blue cardigan sweater, smoothing the sleeves, brushing down the front.

"At one time," Withers began, in a patient voice, suitable for addressing children. "The Commonwealth envisioned that Aurora would be one of the capital worlds of the Perseus Quadrant. It had a warm climate, thousands of kilometers of prime beachfront. I, myself, have a beach-house up in Great-on-Toast. You really should come up sometime. I typically have a barbecue every weekend. No meat, of course. But, the company tends to be quite lively."

"I'm sure it is," Keeler said. "I haven't been able to find much reference material on the early history of your colony except for some saucy costume dramas. Why don't we begin with that?"

Mr. Withers folded his hands over his knee, and spoke as though he were addressing a child. "The original colonists were called the Chryslers. The Chryslers were few in number and they lived only the central valleys of our planet, where the land was fertile and rainfall was abundant."

"You mean, the Hardscape?" Keeler prompted

"That's right, very good, they call it the hardscape, because it's not easy to live there, not compared with the Metroplexes. They are a very simple folk... farmers mostly. The bulk of the planet's population arrived much later than the Chryslers. And it was only when the rest of us arrived that Auroran civilization as we know it began to take shape."

Keeler got specific. "You know what's strange? Even though your planet produces a lot of action-dramas about space combat, we have almost nothing about the only

interplanetary conflict we know Aurora was involved with. What was Aurora's role in the Tarmigan War?"

"Ah, the Tarmigan War," Withers sighed, leaning back in his chair. "Aurora sent every ship they could spare, but there weren't many. This was very shortly after the Fall of the Inner Colonies, and interstellar travel had broken down. They had a few ships nearby, and did their best to prepare them for duty. None of them returned from the battle. I don't know what they thought they could do against the Tarmigans."

"How much advance warning did you have that the Tarmigans were coming?"

"A few ships that happened to be in transit when their colonies were hit managed to make it to Aurora, which was the most advanced colony in the Perseus Quadrant. We had heard rumors of an advanced alien spaces that devastated the Old-Line colonies, wiped out the galactic communication net and destroyed the StarLocks. This happened about a generation before they came here."

Withers seemed bored by the conversation, which baffled Keeler. Historians were supposed to love war... old ones, anyway, where the dead had already been spaced. Keeler pressed on.

Withers stood and walked toward the portal, which provided a great view of the planet. Whereas most worlds would have had a day and a night hemisphere, divided by a shadowy terminator, night and day flowed together in the sky of Aurora, an ever-shifting phantasmagoria of ro y g biv. "We were only spared oblivion because the

Tarmigans were unable to penetrate the electromagnetic aurorae that surround our planet.”

“So the legend goes,” Keeler filled in for him. “You know the attack was coming for ... what... ten or twenty years?”

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“Oh, I don’t know.” When he spoke, he had this mannerism of staring just beyond and below Keeler, as though a semi-circle of children were on the floor in front of him.

“But you lost your colony?”

“Our colony?”

“Echo 1. Unless you had others.”

Withers’s lips curved upward at the corners, showing teeth that were small and slightly yellowed. “Well, that’s a very ancient period of the planet’s history. I think Echo 1 was indeed our only colony. We have always been an ambitious people, and second-wave colonization was probably intended to secure our position as the primary colony of the sector.”

“I presume it was called Echo because it was intended to be a nearby ‘echo’ of the mother-world.”

Withers shook his head. “You misunderstand. It is not echo, as in the sense of reflected sound, but Ecco, a word from an ancient liturgical language --- used in religious rituals and ceremonies --- it means, ‘Behold.’”

“That’s good to know,” Keeler said, making a mental correction. “Do you know of any records contain that

might contain any comment of the effect the attack on your colony had on your homeworld?"

"Our atmosphere interferes with our ability to contact other worlds. We had no way of knowing for certain what had happened to the colonists."

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"Are there any monuments on your planet, any memorials to the crews of those ships, or to the people who lost their lives on Ecco?"

"Unfortunately, we do not. Aurora is a very fast-paced culture, only concerned with the here and now. I doubt you'll find any kind of historical monuments on our planet."

"How unfortunate," Keeler said. "What about the Chryslers, they live outside the mainstream of your society. Is it possible they have some kind of tradition with regard to the Tarmigan Wars and the Ecco colony?"

"I doubt it," said Mr. Withers. "Their culture is all but gone. Every year, more and more of them flock to the Metroplexes to escape the sterility of their existence. I mean, how fulfilling can a life of pulling vegetables from the dirt and cutting animal throats really be?"

Before Keeler could speak again, a loud shriek and a hiss could be heard from the next chamber. "Get away from me, you goons!" a voice yelled out.

"Excuse me," Keeler said. "I believe that would be the four large, quick men from the ship's watch I requested this morning. Thank you for answering my questions."

Another hiss followed, "Arrrgh, he scratched me!" Someone yelled.

“Well, why don’t you come down to the beach house and be my neighbor for a time,” said Withers, in his smoky sing-song. “Everyone likes to be my neighbor.”

Something about the way he said it made Keeler shiver. But he stood and walked the man to the chamber door, promising to visit his neighborhood, while hisses, screams, and thumps continued in the adjacent chamber.

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Keeler had not really expected a confession, “We were spared because our ancestors collaborated with Tarmigans. We sold out the Dominicans and the Orenthians to save our own sorry hides.” Such was the nature of ancient history. No one who knew the real truth was still alive, and those that lived, who benefited from whatever treachery their ancestors might have committed, could only believe whatever legend made it possible for them to get through their days.

Hiss. Snarl. SWAT!

“Arrgh, my eyes!”

He sighed and wondered. What if *Pegasus* could isolate the precise time of the Tarmigan assault on the Lyra sector? Would *Pegasus* be able to move out a couple thousand light years and observe the Tarmigans moving through the sector, perhaps passing Aurora by. He wondered if the sensors could do that. Alkema would know, but he was on the surface. What would that tell him? Nothing really.

He took a long deep breath and prepared to deal with his cat. “Send him in,” he ordered the Watchmen.

The hatch slid open, an angry blur of gray and white fur shot into the room. "Report to Hospital 1," Keeler said to the men before the hatch closed. Queequeg jumped on his couch, flattened his ears, and glared at him with angry green eyes.

"What?" Keeler asked innocently.

"Why did you take me away from one of my many naps?" the cat demanded. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to maintain a perfect state of Zen."

"I need you to do a job for me?"

"This better be good," the cat growled. "In fact, it better involve me eating, sleeping, and breeding."

"I need you to go down to the planet?"

Queequeg spoke slowly, incredulously, "You... need me... to go down to...Have you forgotten the conversation in which I said the only way I would ever leave the ship is if it was on fire?"

"Za."

"And which word did you not understand, 'if' 'ship' or 'fire?'"

"I don't have time to argue, kitty-cat. So, just tell me what it's going to take to make it worth it for you to join Lt. Alkema on the surface."

Queequeg's ears perked up. "Lieutenant Alkema? Why didn't you say so? For him, I'll do anything."

Keeler scowled. "You'll do it for him but not for me?"

"You bet."

“Why?”

“He knows why,” Queequeg said. “Now, what’s the mission? When do I leave?”

Aurora – Supah al-Fareek Megaplex

Supah al-Fareek on a separate continent on the other side of the planet from Netzwerk City. Its latitude was such that Aurora’s peculiar bi-axial rotation extended its exposure to direct sunlight. The auroras were thinner here, and stars showed through at night. Supah al-Fareek was built against the sea, but it was surrounded on all sides by the planet’s hottest and most barren desert. Its buildings were tall and sand-colored, and there were fewer holographic sex-ads projected on them.

Goneril Lear walked a group of top Fareek executroids around the Aves *James*, as its aviator and Flight Commander Collins stood nearby, each dressed in pressed, formal uniforms. They had flown in earlier that day, landing their ship in the Central Courtyard of the Supah al-Fareek corporate campus, a grouping of dun-colored buildings at the city’s northern edge, surrounded by a very high, turreted fortress wall.

The Chief Executive of Supah al-Fareek was a very tall, very dark-skinned man who went by the name of Manly Erectus. Lear gestured toward one of the Accipiters at *James’s* wing-tip. “These can be detached from the main ship and remotely or autonomously piloted, providing reconnaissance, close air support, and supplemental defense. They are equipped with pulson cannons, as well

as non-lethal weaponry including photon charges, sonic disruptors, and electromagnetic pulse generators.”

“Impressive that such a small ship can hold such a diverse array of weapons,” Erectus said, staring at the long spikes protruding from the front of the craft. “Does it use the same gravity-based propulsion system as the main ship?”

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“The Accipiters use anti-gravity field generators to remain aloft,” Lear said, reading a technical schematic that scrolled on a contact lens in her left eye, where only she could see them. “Propulsion is provided by an ion-drive, capable of hypersonic speeds within the atmosphere, and high-sublight in space.”

“What is its maximum speed in atmosphere?” asked an aide.

“Maximum Cruising Speed is Mach 6, with sprints at Mach 7,” Lear answered. She led the group to the front of the ship. “Flight Captain James, display the forward weapons array for inspection.”

Ponyboy James, cutting a striking figure in his dark sunshades and the glistening ponytail brushing his neckline, turned to his ship. “Show them your stuff.” *James’s* forward panel slid back, showing the muzzles of its pulse cannons, and the pointy ends of a brace of jackhammer missiles.

James picked up the narration, he did not need a holo-cuer. He knew his ship. “Each of these ships carries substantial firepower. The pulse cannons produce yields in the tera-charge range, while each of the jackhammers has a

programmable yield up to 1,000 kilotons in standard mode.”

“Your capabilities are impressive,” Erectus said, his voice was deep, unaffected. He turned to address Lear. “I am curious as to why you approach us this way.”

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“In what way?” Lear asked.

“Showing us your weapons technology, implying that you are willing to share it with us. Your ship is only visiting here, and presumably more will follow, although not for many years. What is the value of opening a discussion of trade relations and technology exchange so early?”

“Understanding is facilitated by an exploration of mutual interests, but I will be completely open about our ultimate objective. We are trying to build a New Commonwealth, which will provide all worlds with opportunities for cultural exchanges and mutual defense against Aurelia. The capabilities of an armaments concern such as yours could be greatly in demand. You also may have capabilities now that might help *Pegasus*, should our ship encounter Aurelians again. Defense against Aurelia is a critical priority,”

Manly Erectus countered. “According to your data, the Aurelians are more than a thousand light years away from us, and don’t have faster-than-light travel. That means they will not be a concern to this planet for at least a thousand years.”

“A situation that could change rapidly, should Aurelia discover a means of hyperlight travel,” Lear said.

“True enough,” Erectus conceded.

“As an ulterior motive, we also thought your expertise might help us with another weapons system we have had some difficulty developing,” she touched the COM Link at the back of the chin. “Now, Mr. Sukhoi.”

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A tall, green-metal android exited quickly through the hatch, walking through it as if it weren't there. It paused outside the ship long enough to display the Poltergeist Suit that was strapped to its back. It then moved, in a blur, to a point near the center of the courtyard, about 400 meters from where the party stood.

“De-materialization and hyper-speed” Erectus asked. “Very impressive. We have combat augmentation suits, but nothing that advanced.”

“There's more,” Lear said. She strapped a pulse cannon to her wrist and fired off four quick shots. Each one beelined to the android and bounced harmlessly off blue-white shields that appeared around it.

“Personal shielding as well,” Erectus cooed, stroking his chin.

“We're not finished yet,” said Lear. “Gentleman, you may wish to step away from the ship. Now, Mr. Sukhoi.”

The forward pulse cannons blazed. Deadly ion-plasma charges, a thousand times more powerful than the hand-weapon, blazed down on the hapless android. Its shields blazed brighter, but it took all the pounding.

Erectus was even more aroused. “Could it withstand a missile strike?”

"It could," said James. "We couldn't."

Erectus nodded and gave a quiet, throaty chuckle. "It seems to be a very successful weapons system. Why would you need our help?"

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"Watch."

When the assault ended, the android stood still. Then, it began to twitch and writhe. It stumbled around the field, its movements became increasingly erratic until it collapsed into spasms.

"Mr. Sukhoi, deactivate the android."

The android stilled. "There is a problem with the neural interface," Lear explained. "Its demands on the human brain, and on the android braincore, overwhelm the capacity, leading to breakdown."

Erectus understood. "You must have heard that neural interfaces are a core competency at Supah al-Fareek."

"Indeed, I thought one of your weapons designers might help us. Are these all of your top weapons designers?" Lear asked.

"Some of them," Erectus answered.

"I was expecting a woman to be here... I believe her name is Hellen Earth?"

"I know of no such person," Erectus answered. An aide leaned into his ear, and Lear heard him whisper the word "Venus." Erectus straightened, and spoke to Lear in a more urgent tone of voice. "Where did you hear that name?"

Lear answered. "We have, through our contacts, identified several key persons we would like to work with, Hellen Earth, Adam Blonde, Calico Neruda."

"I am familiar with the work of Adam Blonde and Calico Neruda," Erectus answered. "But I know of no one named Hellen Earth."

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"Are you certain?" Lear asked.

"I would be happy to have one of my assistants review our associate database, but I would think if she were as prominent as you claim, I should have heard of her. Now, I regret having to cut this meeting short, but our snack foods division is meeting with your Kitchen Staff Supervisor to discuss the exchange of cookie recipes. One of my people will escort you out. Good day, Executive TyroCommander Lear."

Even without the enhancements in her contact lens, which read the electromagnetic aura surrounding him like a book, Lear would have known he was lying. She waited until he and his associates had re-entered their armored combat limousines, then, she turned toward the hatch. "Wait here," she hissed at James and Collins as she re-entered the ship.

A man was sitting in the back of the ship, Technical Specialist Sukhoi, a handsome young man, also dark of skin and hair. He was wearing the tan and green uniform of a ship's technician, first class, and not the all black uniform he sometimes wore, and perhaps should have given the nature of his work. "Report, Specialist," she said.

“The entire facility has been mapped using molecular resonance scans,” Sukhoi reported. “The contents of their encrypted datacore have been uploaded. We should be able to isolate the encryption code in a few hours.”

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Lear went to his side, and brought up five additional screens. “I managed to plant tracking and listening devices on five of the six, including Erectus.”

“Mission Success,” Sukhoi muttered.

Aurora – Netzwerk City – The Old Abandoned Spaceyards

Prudence approached the edge of the yard. Bathed in the glow of the aurorae, its skin was turned from alabaster white to a limey-green color. It hovered at the perimeter, piercing the night with scanners and searchlights.

Alkema stared at a monitor in the main cabin. “Radiation levels are elevated here,” he reported grimly. “I’m reading plutonium, uranium, americium, centaurium, and even trace amounts of element 151.”

“What’s that?” *Pieta* asked, rather bored.

“The ancients used it to catalyze anti-matter,” Alkema answered her. He called up to the flight deck. “Max, deploy the radiation negatron, de-radiate a swath one-kilometer wide among these coordinates.”

He sent Max a three-dimensional map of the shipyard, illuminating a one kilometer wide zone that led from a flat plain of concrete (a good place to land) through a series of buildings and hangars, where clues might be found. A

panel slid open on *Prudence's* bottom, and a device like a sled with stubby metal antennae attached deployed.

"Activating Negatron," came Max's voice through the comm-system. Alkema could read in his voice he would rather be piloting. "De-radiation cycle complete," he reported a few minutes later.

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"Take us in, Lt. Lear," Alkema ordered.

Pieta hugged him from behind. "I love it when you give orders."

Prudence found an open spot among some ancient, very large, shipping containers. The hatch slid aside. Alkema scanned into the middle distance with his Spex. He adjusted them for night vision, which, as processed through the Spex, made the buildings, structures, and ground were light in daylight colors, but the spaces between them and the sky remained dark.

Their cybernetic specialist had no interest in leaving the ship. "I'm not going out there," said the specialist. "Unh-unh. Do you know what centuries of radiation does to rats? They turn into giant, flesh-eating monsters."

Alkema has been advised by his commander that a swift application of landing boot to the specialist's hindquarters might be necessary. Alkema decided to try persuasion first... the cat was hiding anyway. "Come on, Queequeg, we need you."

The cat jumped down from the shelf where it had been hiding for most of the brief flight to the spaceyard. Wide green eyes surveyed the ruins. Alkema had a feeling the Queequeg could see almost as well with his naked eyes as

a man could with Spex. The cat shook its head. "I stand by my unh-unh."

"What would it take to get you out of the ship?" Alkema said as Trajan and Max descended from the flight deck. "Would you do it for a plate of deep-fried bird fragments from Eddie's Slam-n-Jam?"

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His whiskers twitched. "Not enough."

"Okay, a plate of bird fragments and a round of Borealan mudslides."

"Two rounds of mudslides."

"You got it."

Resentfully, fur pre-emptively on end, the cat padded down the hatch and sniffed the air. The rest of the party followed.

Alkema surveyed the landscape around them. The ruins of huge gantries and launch pads crowded around them, skeletal but gargantuan towers of interlocking metal, thick at the bottom, tapering toward the stop. Enormous steel girders a meter or more thick hung precariously, as though a dark thought could send them crashing to the ground. The air was dank with the stench of ancient, rusting metal.

In the distance came a whistling sound, something metal falling quickly through the air. It rose and faded. Then came a flash and a thunderous explosion.

"There's a combat zone four kilometers northeast of here," Alkema said. "Lear, Jordan, take our flank. Arm weapons." He didn't think the urban combatants were

crazy enough to take refuge in a radioactive wasteland, but he could not be sure.

They made their way forward. "Remind me again why I'm here," Queequeg said.

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"We need to find out what they were building here, if the ships they built match the configuration of the ships the Sentinel recorded fleeing the scene of the battle. There also might be records of other colonial contacts. We need you because you know how to access records, and recognize ancient storage media. You're also good at getting into tight spaces, like I explained to the Commander when I had him send you down."

"I know," Queequeg sighed. "But I never get tired of hearing it."

"We need to get a dog," said Pieta.

"Don't get him started," Alkema warned. He looked up and pointed in the distance to a hulking structure a few hundred meters away. "That's the largest building in the complex. That's probably the best place to start."

The building in question was square, large as a city block with a modest dome in the center. Scans showed it extended several levels into the ground. Interior scans of its configuration suggested it was a command center, and possibly contained records. There were two doors at the front, twice as tall as a man, wide enough for three men abreast to walk through each of them, and welded shut.

"Max," Alkema said. "I know you want to do this."

Max smiled and raised his weapon. He sighted it dead-center on the door and blasted away. After four or five

pulson bolts, the great doors groaned and, with a cry of metal giving up the ghost, the left door collapsed into the interior, which was so dark, even night vision showed little. Head-lights deployed from the landing gear around their heads. They entered inside,

The darkness and silence of the interior swallowed both light and sound. Alkema scanned around. They had entered a sort of reception area, with a desk guarding three doors. Alkema stared at the plates on the doors, waiting for each to translate. "Administration," the left most door said. "Operations," read the middle door. "Technical," said the door on the right.

"Which one?" Max Jordan asked, raising his weapon hopefully.

"I don't know," Alkema said thoughtfully. He consulted the building scans again. "Technical," he answered finally.

"Got it," Max answered. He fired a bolt at the door and it exploded.

"It was open," Alkema told him. Beyond the opening was a shaft where a lift had once taken workers to the lower levels.

The four of them made their way down by way of ladders, Queequeg hitching a ride on Alkema's shoulders.

"I could get used to this," said the cat.

"Don't," Alkema advised him. They exited the lift two levels underground, and followed a wide concrete corridor deeper into the structure. It was dark, but empty, without

any detritus or debris to block their way. Suddenly, Alkema stopped and held up a hand.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Hear what?” Trajan whispered back at him.

“It sounded like footsteps,” Alkema whispered.

They listened in the dark. No more noise came. “It’s probably our own footsteps echoing back at us,” Trajan said. Alkema nodded and pressed on, although he would have felt better if Lear’s family had had a better track record being right about things.

Queequeg had jumped from Alkema’s shoulders and was standing before a door near the end of the corridor. It was numbered Room 1003. “Technical Drawings, Plans, and Schematics,” the cat told them.

“How do you know?” Alkema asked.

“Read the building directory while blasty-boy was blowing up the door, which he won’t need to do with this one.”

“It’s unlocked, then,” Alkema said.

“Neg, but a semi-competent human should be able to pick it open.”

“I like my way better,” said Max, as Alkema knelt before the door and disabled the lock with a quick stab from his OmniTool™.

The door swung open on a large, but not vast chamber, lined with metal file drawers in rows in the nearer half of the room, giving way to bookshelves in the farther away parts. There was a stench of rotting paper in the room.

Alkema scanned over the filing cabinets. "Interesting," he said. "Non-volatile storage media. They made hard-copy of everything." He pulled a huge, enormous binder out from under a table and blew the dust off.

"Project Exodus," it read. Alkema pulled the cover open. It swung out, displaying pockets filled with small plastic strips. Queequeg leaped to the top of the table and studied them. "Microfiches," Queequeg said. "Primitive, but relatively stable provided the acidity of the medium is neutral."

"Can you read them?" Alkema said, squinting at the strip.

"There should be a device for reading them somewhere in the room," he flicked his tail. "That's probably it."

It was a large, plastic box with a glass screen at the front. Alkema attached an adhesive power-supply to the side and the screen began to glow. He set the plastic strip on a plate at the front of the machine. An image displayed on the screen. It was badly faded from effects of centuries of low-level radiation, but still recognizable. "That's not a spaceship," said Pieta.

"Neg," Alkema agreed.

"Why is it so familiar?" she whispered.

"Because we had our honeymoon there," Alkema told her. "That's Dawnstar." He advanced the strip. Subsequent frames showed technical schematics of the components of the library tower in Dawnstar, assembly plans.

Far away came a sound, frightening in the silence of the old building. "What was that?" Pieta asked, hugging close to Alkema.

"This old building is probably falling apart in chunks," Alkema soothed her. "Probably just a bit of roof falling in."

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"It's still creepy," she said. "Can't we take this stuff back to *Pegasus*?"

"The Commander will want to see this," Alkema agreed. "Let's see if there's anything else around here."

"Let's not and say we did," said Pieta, meaning it.

Alkema folded the cover shut, as he did, he caught sight of Trajan Lear bending down and examining some object on the floor. "Did you find something Traj?"

"Maybe," Trajan Lear answered. He picked up a long-necked bottle of dark-blue glass.

"A good year?" Alkema asked.

"I think so," Trajan said. He shined a light into the bottle, revealing the outline of a ship model inside; a space-ship, of course, but designed in a curiously similar way to the building blueprints.

Suddenly, there was a crash as a rack of old books and parts crashed down. A glowing humanoid figure smashed through the ruins. Two meters tall, thick arms and legs, covered in animal -like fur. It reared back its head and roared.

Queequeg jumped straight up, his paws spinning furiously, scrambling for purchase in the empty air before he hit the ground again and disappeared in a blur of speed

that suggested not even an android in a Poltergeist Suit could have caught him.

The figure turned its glowing eyes to the landing party and howled at them. "Leave this place! Leave this place!"

But the four of them were already high-tailing it back in the direction of their ship, not as fast as the cat, but at an impressive rate of speed for human beings.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Aurora – Supah al-Fareek Megaplex

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When night had fallen on Supah al Fareek, Lear and her party were treated to a sumptuous dinner, from which Erectus and his minions had been notably absent, along with anyone at all from the weapons division of his company. Lear had endured the less-than-engaging prattle of the Vice President for Snack Foods on her right side and the Senior Vice President in Charge of Financial Services on her left, neither of whom professed any knowledge about the weapons division except to the extent that snack foods or creditworthiness were involved. Since the military had not procured exploding cookies or credit chips of mass destruction, conversation had been sparse.

Lear was given a suite near the top floor of a hotel downtown and far away from the Fareek campus, a building fifty stories tall that still managed to look like a bunker. She parted company with the rest of her party, noting with one raised eyebrow that James and Collins were sharing a single suite.

Her suite was large enough, was surrounded by windows that viewed upon neon and incandescent glows from the surrounding city, but the windows were equipped with panels that, when deployed had blocked out all light. She half expected to find a virile man waiting in her bed, based on reports from the other landing teams, and did not know whether to be honored or insulted when there was none.

In the simple functionality of the furnishings, even in the tasteful colors of the abstract art on the walls, the accommodations were functionally identical to the suite her son was inhabiting in Netzwerk City, 9,000 kilometers away. Aurora was as standardized as Republic, and in some respects, the Megaplexes functioned like the city-states, as mechanisms for providing the material, physical, and psychological needs of their inhabitants. Lear thought she understood the planet based on that. After all, if she had not been a master of ministerial politics, she would never have made it as far as she had.

She lay in bed, not sleeping, wondering who was lying to her more, Maim or Erectus, or both, and this probably was why she didn't die.

Sensing a presence in the room, her eyes snapped open. Her modified Spex lenses were still in place, and read the presence of two people in her room. They were quiet and stealthy, but to her, they glowed in the dark like bright white ghosts. One was nearing the foot of her bed, a piece of long, blunt metal in his hand,

She sprang from the bed and delivered a swinging kick to the would-be assailant's head. He cried out, more in shock and surprise than pain. Her foot connected with something hard and plastic on his head, and she realized he was wearing some kind of night vision apparatus.

"Flash!" she called out.

A flash grenade from her landing pack detonated, filling the room with bright sunlight for just more than a second. Her Spex went opaque to protect her eyes, but her assailants' equipment could not adjust quickly enough.

She had a brief impression of the two of them in light, a thin man and a thin woman in black, skin-tight suits, throwing their heads back and trying to shield their goggles with their arms. When the room went dark again, the advantage was hers.

She took the man first, grabbing his arms from behind and delivering a stiff kick to his that dislocated his shoulders and snapped at least one vertebra. He dropped to the ground. Even if he could get up, he would be hard-pressed to walk, let alone fight.

The female had almost recovered, and had adopted a defensive posture, crouching, with her arms reaching out before her, one hand a claw, the other a fist. She swung for Lear, and twisted into a kick. Lear captured her foot in her hand just as the sharp blade of a knife appeared from the toe of the woman's boot. *A dirty trick*, Lear thought abstractedly she twisted the leg, breaking the ankle and wrenching the knee from its socket.

The assassin howled, but she was not finished yet. She rolled away from Lear and drew a firearm from a holster on her knee. Lear dodged over her bed as one, two, three, and four bullets sang through the air beside her head. She landed on the other side and lay still. She waited in silence until she heard the woman pick herself up from the floor and limp to the bed to examine her handiwork.

Lear waited until the precise moment before springing up and grabbing her assailant by the neck. She drove the woman, with all the speed and strength she could muster. They slammed against the black-out panel together, smashing through it and the window on the other side.

The glass was thick, but force of impact created cracks that spread out in a spider web pattern away from the point of impact.

The assassin recovered long enough to lift her legs and deliver a blow to Lear's mid-section that knocked the wind out of her. She seized her brief advantage long enough to thrust Lear back against the hotel wall. "Die!" the assailant hissed.

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Lear sucked in all the breath she could manage. The assassins had attacked at a vulnerable moment, and she was without landing gear to protect her, to augment her strength, but what she had, she knew would be enough. She concentrated, imagining a frozen icicle of fear plunging into her assailant's mind.

Suddenly the assassin shuddered and lost her strength. Knowing the shock would not last, Lear hard-charged her against the broken window. It gave way in a spray and tinkle of glass-like chunks that rained down on the wet black street below.

Lear now held the woman above a forty-five story drop to the pavement below. The lights of the city blazed around them, two dark silhouettes in deathlock.

"Who sent you?" Lear demanded.

The woman said nothing. Lear pushed her out further and repeated the question. "Who sent you?"

The woman might have said something, it might have been lost in the wind and noise of the city, or she might have kept her peace, but the next thing Lear knew, bits of metal were whistling by her and the windows on either

side of her were shattering. Someone was shooting at her. She tried to duck back inside, tried to pull the woman inside with her, but the assassin wrenched herself free and fell as Lear rolled to the floor inside.

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Lear crab-crawled backwards, away from the windows, crawling to the right, where the black-out panels were still intact before she rose to her crouch.

She eyed the other assassin, the man, as he lay at the foot of her bed on his back. Good thing he had not tried to move, that shattered vertebra might have severed his spinal cord, and she did not think Aurora had a Ministry of the Physically Challenged to give him a new nervous system.

She bent over him. "Who sent you?" she demanded. But the man began to convulse. Blood and foam poured from his mouth. She sniffed the air. Cyanide, an ancient but effective poison.

Already, her head was throbbing. The telepathic projection trick would give her migraines for days, but it was better than being dead, she supposed. She activated her embedded COM Link. "Mr. Sukhoi, come here. I want you."

Because she was Goneril Lear, it never even occurred to her that given the time of night, her wording might be misinterpreted... and because she was Goneril Lear, no one would misinterpret it anyway.

Pegasus – Commander Keeler’s Suite

“Well, aren’t we lucky to be alive?” the commander said, sipping some of the sweet brown liqueur he had souvenired from Independence, and hearing Alkema’s report of near-death at the hands of the glowing abandoned spaceyard monster. “Shall I dispatch an Aves with fresh, clean pants for the entire landing team then?”

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“That won’t be necessary, commander,” Alkema assured him. He was communicating from their hotel suite. In the background, Pieta could be seen brushing down the stiff fur of a startled Queequeg and Max Jordan staring longingly outside as morning rose over Nettwerk City. Trajan Lear, sat next to Alkema, yawning. The commander had increased the projection on the COM Link to full size, making it look as though the landing party were in the next room. The commander liked communicating this way. It made him feel more comfortable; Max Jordan’s occasional, unselfconscious scratching and adjusting of his body parts notwithstanding.

“Did anyone think to take a scan of the creature,” asked Tactical TyroCommander Redfire, who was standing next to the commander. Keeler had hoped that Redfire could make sense of any technical data the landing team had gleaned from the spaceyards.

Alkema, embarrassed, shook his head.

“Let me try something,” said Trajan Lear, and he activated his ship-link. “*Prudence’s* sensors were active the whole time. They might have picked up something.”

Keeler watched as the boy worked and his face got that intense look he had seen many times when Goneril Lear was working through something in her head. There was something different about this kid. (No longer a kid, but Keeler could not help but think of him as such.) Unlike his mother, there was nothing about his intense expression that made him think, “uh, oh!”

“Ship’s sensors detected no life signs in the vicinity,” Trajan Lear reported. “Also, the mission recorder was active as we returned to the ship, but look.”

He sent the playback to the commander. First, a barely discernible blur of gray fur shot up the gangplank. Some seconds later, the four crewmen appeared, Alkema running in the lead, carrying Pieta. Trajan and Max held back firing pulse weapons at... apparently, nothing.

“That’s impossible,” Alkema sputtered. “It was as big as Warfighter Buttercup, bigger even, and it had huge glowing eyes. It was right behind us.”

“Man without a shadow,” Redfire said. “You’re sure you weren’t hallucinating?”

“Cats don’t hallucinate!” Queequeg hissed. “Although sometimes we see things that humans don’t.”

“We all saw it, commander,” Alkema reassured him. “And heard it.”

“And smelled it,” Pieta added crinkling her nose.

“We couldn’t have simultaneously been hallucinating,” Alkema concluded.

"Maybe a psychic projection," Redfire suggested.
"There are tales of an ancient weapon called 'the Dagger of the Mind.'"

Keeler turned to Redfire. "Is there any mention of such a creature in the planetary data we have collected so far?" Page | 210

"None, sir."

"Is it possible the radiation in the vicinity of the spaceyard has produced some kind of mutant?" the commander asked. "Perhaps humans have been living in the spaceyard all these times, become monsters, whose existence the Synerplex is hiding from us."

Redfire broke out in a belly-laugh that nearly caused him to tumble from his chair. "Oh, that's a good one, commander, the first good laugh I've had in weeks."

Keeler turned back to the landing crew. "He gets this way whenever I talk about radiological chromosome damage."

Redfire recovered himself, "Commander, please, forgive me. It's just that no one other than a child could believe that radiation could cause that kind of mutation, especially the kind of radiation in that area. Frankly, nothing would survive long enough to mutate. It's that intense. That wall around the facility doesn't just keep people out, it keeps the radiation in."

"Perhaps we should turn the discussion back to the facility itself then," Keeler said.

"The level of contamination is consistent with a crash program to build starships," Redfire said. "Environmental consequences be damned."

Alkema scowled. "But if they had a deal with the Tarmigans I don't think they would bother building a fleet of warships."

"To put up a good front with the other colonies," Redfire suggested.

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"That doesn't make any sense," Keeler said. "And why would the Tarmigans want to deal with the Aurorans anyway?"

Trajan Lear had a suggestion. "If the Tarmigans were an energy-based life form, they might have fed from the energy from Aurora's atmosphere."

Redfire shook his head. "Why would a species so powerful and ruthless as the Tarmigans even have to make a deal for Aurora's energy? They could have wiped out the population and taken what they needed."

"They weren't just building ships," Alkema added. "If the files we saw are any indication, those cities they built on Ecco 1 were entirely pre-fabricated on Aurora, built as modules and shipped to the planet for assembly."

"I would laugh again, had I not laughed already," Redfire said. "That makes no sense at all."

"They were building warships and colony modules at the same time," Alkema said. "Were they planning to evacuate to the new colony?"

Keeler combined a drink and a shrug into one dismissive movement. "The Netzwerk historian told me that Ecco One was going to be inhabited by dissidents, but he could have been lying."

"He probably was," Miller said. "Why go to the expense of building and transporting colony pods to save the people they wanted to get rid of? It might have been a story the elites spread to cover their escape while they prepared to evacuate to their secret redoubt."

"Makes sense," Keeler said. "In a cynical kind of way."

"This planet inspires cynicism," Redfire pointed out, and in case anyone was wondering what he meant by that, he coughed and muttered the word "combattainment."

"If that's what they were up to, it apparently backfired, and I think they got their just desserts," the commander said, and then added. "Mmm, desserts."

"We can go back to the spaceyards..." Alkema began.

"In daylight," Pieta called from the back.

"With some Warfighters," Queequeg added.

"And without me," Pieta further clarified.

"But I don't think we're going to find anything that says why they did it, only information about how," Alkema finished.

"It would help if we had some literature from the period, to give us historical context," Keeler said. "But these people, as soon as tomorrow becomes yesterday, they just sweep it all away. If it weren't for the radiation, they probably would have built an amusement park or something on that spot."

"A haunted amusement park," Max Jordan muttered in the background.

“Perhaps it’s too much to hope,” Keeler said, “but maybe the Chryslers are the answer. Have we met with any of them yet?”

Keeler’s computer, hearing the cue, brought up the report from Landing Team Zeta, led by Cultural Specialist Mandamus Fedex. The team of four had landed in a lush green valley of one of those parts of the planet known as ‘The Hardscape.’ Keeler had expected a place called the hardscape to be definitely rocky, probably arid, and certainly desolate. However, the view from the mission recorder showed a pleasant green valley, lush with trees and fields, that would not have been out of place in any of Sapphire’s verdant continents. As it would turn out, synerplexers referred to any unurbanized area of the planet as hardscape.

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Text displayed:

The inhabitants refer to the region as New Outer Canaan. The largest settlement is called Fair Haven and is inhabited by 114,400 inhabitants (according to sensor readings.)

From above, Keeler saw row after row of neat white houses surrounding a city-center of broad avenues and mid-rise white buildings, generally simple box designs with a curve here and there. Boring, but immaculate. “Skip ahead to social observations, look for references to history, historical records, oral tradition.”

The view changed to show a largish white building with pillars, a sloped roof, and very large windows.

The History Department of the College of New Outer Canaan.

Keeler sighed, of course none of the Landing Party would research history there. They were more interested in current technology and social norms. He guessed in that regard, his own people were like the synerplexers, interested in the here and now, and not in colonial history. At least they had tagged the building for follow-up.

"Have Flight Lieutenant Toto prepare my ship," Keeler told his computer. "Lt. Alkema, can you meet me in ... New Outer Canaan tomorrow morning local."

"Za, commander," Alkema agreed.

Keeler turned to Redfire. "Want to come?"

"No thanks, commander," Redfire said. "I have some... tactical issues to work out."

Keeler nodded. "You're in command while I'm gone. Inform Lt. Change that she will serve as Executive Officer until TyroCommander Lear returns from the surface."

Redfire's face wavered, and the commander knew he had correctly guessed the nature of his second officer's "tactical issues."

Aurora – Supah al-Fareek Megaplex

Lear found no identification on the body of the dead assassin. Sukhoi and another of the ship's Watchmen, Specialist Paris Metro, a sturdy woman from (originally) Republic's City of Pride, examined the corpse where it lay on the floor of her suite.

"Native Auroran," said Metro, brushing a shock of salt and pepper hair back from her almond eyes as she read the medical scanning plate.

"How can you tell?" Lear asked.

"Constant exposure to the planet's strong electromagnetic field alters brain chemistry, and has a polarizing effect on human blood, which is mostly iron," Metro explained. "It's part of the reason we all feel a little disoriented when we arrive on the planet."

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"That rules out the Aurelians, then," Lear said. The rest of the problem she kept to herself, who would want her killed, and why? Supah al-Fareek seemed the most likely prospect, eliminating her before she could get close to Hellen Earth. Of course, MAARRS might have done her in as well, to implicate Fareek, but why? And, there were sixty seven other major Megaplexes and who knew how many minor ones.

"I am not detecting an identity chip," Metro went on. The crew had learned that each Megaplex tagged its 'affiliates' or 'associates' with tiny chips embedded in the skin under the right wrist; similar to the identity slivers Republickers wore embedded into the backs of their chins. The dead man on the floor lacked such a chip.

"Very professional, then," Lear commented with what might have been just a hint of admiration. "It makes sense that each Megaplex would have its own secret intelligence service. This planet is a constantly shifting landscape of alliances and power-blocs."

"Without the commercialized sex and violence, it would seem like home," Metro muttered.

Lear let the seditious remark slide, not out of magnanimity but because she was much more focused on

the issue at hand. She turned to Sukhoi. "How is our access to their data network progressing?"

"Slowly," Sukhoi reported. "Their access protocols are a good deal more complex than we anticipated."

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"Do we know anything?" Lear persisted.

"Our resonance map corresponds exactly to the model Maim gave us," Sukhoi said, activating a projection of the fortified Supah-al Fareek corporate campus, including two cylindrical structures extending for twenty levels beneath the ground. One semi-circular level of the underground structure was highlighted. "This corresponds to the laboratory where Maim said Helen Earth was being detained. It's not a detention level, though, it's laboratory."

Lear found this interesting. "They keep her there to keep working for them."

"From what we have been able to discern, that part of the complex is tasked to either biological weapons development or the development of fruit-filled snack pastries."

"I have no patience for foolishness," Lear told him.

"That's not humor. It's listed on the main directory as a pastry kitchen, but from the equipment inside, it looks like a bio-weapons laboratory."

"What about the reference to Venus?" Lear said.

"At first, we thought it was a reference to one of the planets in the old Earth system," Sukhoi explained. "But, there's no planet named Venus in the Aurora system. There are, however, 1,666 persons in the Supah al-Fareek

database named Venus, 865 females and 801 males. None of them are employed in the primary complex. It is also possible he was referring to a project, the Very Enhanced Neural Interplexed Simulacrum, or VENIS."

"Was Helen Earth involved in that project?"

"There is no link to her in their files. Besides, VENIS was not even a weapons project. It was out of their entertainment division, a project to project entertainment and other stimuli directly into the human mind." Sukhoi drummed his fingers against the datapad. "Also, I think you should see this."

"What is it?" Lear snapped.

"We cracked the encryption code to their security net," Sukhoi explained. "First off, our preliminary analysis indicates we can not disable the network without locking down the whole facility. They have too many fail-safes."

"I thought that Epicurious was the best cyberneticist we had. Can't he by-pass them?"

"Sure, if he had the next thirty-two days to work the problem. They built so many traps into the system, it would take almost that long just to find them. If we miss any one, the system shuts down completely and locks everybody down. It's a brutal system, simple by Republic standards, but extremely effective."

Lear considered this for a moment. "Then we have to work the problem from the inside," Lear said. "With that many traps, there must be a master pass, a golden key, that lets an individual with the right clearance by-pass all of them. We just have to get it."

“There is a major problem with that.”

“What is the major problem?”

He showed her the datapad. Its small display showed the courtyard where *James* had been parked. Lear saw herself bidding farewell to the Fareek delegation, and as she did so, the camera zoomed up to her face, traced its contours, took retinal scans, and then probed her internally. “While we were spying on them, they were also spying on us.”

“What does this mean?” she asked.

“They’ve put our bio-metric profile into their security database. There’s no way we can go back in without them knowing.”

“Shit,” Lear explained. She tapped the table urgently several times, and then nodded. “I guess, then, we’ll have to find someone the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex hasn’t scanned yet.”

Aurora – Netzwerk City

After a few hours of sleep and a light breakfast, Alkema’s landing team assembled at *Prudence’s* landing dock as a pink and orange sky danced above them. They were dressed in tactical landing gear, and each carried a pack on his back.

Alpha Romeo “Roughtrade” Jones, the hovercraft pilot, approached, a woman on his arm. She looked to be a little older than Pieta, with cinnamon colored skin, long black hair that hung in wild, loose curls down her back, highlighted with coppery streaks. She was lithe and

sensuous, her large, well-shaped breasts jostling beneath the sheer fabric of the dress she was almost wearing, and Alkema had to will himself not to stare at her.

“Good Morning, Party People,” Jones called out to them, smiling. “Party People,” as it happened, was a highly respected and status-enhanced form of address. “This is my sister, Calico. She wanted to meet you all.”

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“I got all the looks in the family,” said Calico Jones, extending a dainty hand toward Max Jordan, almost managing to sound sweet instead of nasty. “And who’s this big little boy?”

“Max Jordan,” he said, taking the hand, blushing bright, and shifting his legs. Calico’s hand began sliding toward the front of his landing pants, when Pieta intervened, intercepted the hand and took it in her own.

“I’m Pieta Alkema, and I’ll thank you for not fondling my brother.”

Calico’s face tightened. “Oh, the *wife*.”

“We won’t be needing your services today,” Alkema told Jones.

“Where you going? Back to the mothership?”

“We’re flying out to a place called Fair Haven, in New Outer Canaan province.”

“That’s out in the hardscape, ain’t it?” said Jones, tracing a finger along the edge of *Prudence’s* wing-blade. “I never been to the hardscape before. And I never flew in a ship this fine.”

Jones had just confirmed what Alkema had suspected all along. "Would you like to come with?"

"We surely would, thank you," said Roughtrade Jones. Trajan Lear gestured at the hatch, which slid over, under and to the side to permit entry to the ship. Jones was impressed. "Amazingly amazing," he said. His sister made a sharp "hm!" sound, and boarded the ship behind him, stopping short so that Max Jordan could accidentally bump into her.

As they boarded the ship, Trajan Lear pulled Alkema aside. "Are you sure you want him along?"

"Do you think he's a spy?" Alkema asked.

"Aye, I do," Trajan Lear answered.

"That makes two of us, then," Alkema told him. "So, we should keep an eye on him, don't you think?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Aurora – High Above Augustine Sub-Continent

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Prudence streaked through the atmosphere, plying a course between the electrifying auroras above and its raptor-like shadow on the snowfields that capped a range of ragged mountain peaks below.

On her flight deck, Trajan scanned his instruments. The magnetic fields and bi-polar rotation of the planet made a soup of his positioning gear. He was using ground topography to guide the ship toward Fair Havens. *Prudence*, fortunately, knew him well, and attended to his course corrections without confusion.

Romeo Jones was leaning far back in the second seat next to him in a posture that would have been familiar to Flight Captain Driver, who had flown with Eddie Roebuck in the space around the planet Meridian. The Auroran hovercraft pilot looked around with approval at the ship's virtual instrumentality, and at the landscape flashing by beneath at breathtaking speed. "This is one hot ship," he told Trajan Lear.

"She is, thank you."

"What's our speed?"

"Mach 7.7."

Jones gave a low whistle and leaned forward a bit, reaching for the control console. "Can I..."

"You may not. It took me two years to win the confidence of this ship's captain, I'm not turning the controls over to anyone."

"Don't get ugly, my man. It's kwazappy." Roughtrade Jones spared a glance at the peaks, now receding aft of the ship, and changed the subject. "You know what those mountains we just blew past are called? Las Chi-chis Gigantes. It means the giant tits in some old Earth language."

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"Hmm," said Trajan Lear. "On my planet, we name mountain ranges for heroes and heroines from the Unification, not women's body parts."

"Not just women," Jones clarified. "There's a place with these tall, knobby rock formations called 'The Valley of a Thousand Phalluses,' and there's also the Testi ..."

Trajan Lear interrupted him. "I really do not need to know those details about your planet. My mission is to fly this ship, that's all."

Jones leaned toward him from his seat. "That gets you all perturbed, doesn't it? I notice that anytime one of us says something about sex, you get all uncomfortable. I can't figure out whether it's because you aren't getting any, or if it's just that you don't like sex or something?"

"My people enjoy sex in its proper place and context," Trajan answered. "We're not embarrassed by discussing it, but we don't understand your planet's obsession with it. You even turn geography into sexual innuendo. To us, that's quite strange."

“Innuendo, what’s that, the Chrysler word for anal sex?” Roughtrade Jones laughed and leaned over to him. “Sorry, old joke. You know why we build our whole society around sex? It’s because sex is something everybody likes to do, you know. It’s a universal human experience. Sex is the one thing that makes everybody happy. Nobody doesn’t like an orgasm, baby.”

Trajan replied. “You see sex as recreation, we see it as more than that. We believe sex is a covenant made between two people, a piece of the power used by The Allbeing to create life itself, not a bodily function to be exploited for commercial benefit.”

Jones laughed at him. “‘Scuse me, but you don’t come on like somebody who’s had a whole lot of experience between the sheets.”

“I’m an Iestan, it’s what I was raised to believe.” Trajan Lear told him. “My commanding officer is a Saintist, but he believes the same thing.”

“Skid, you don’t know what you’re talking about. You have sex, a bunch of natural drugs flow through your brain and make you feel good. Natural drugs! Your own body, that’s all it is. There ain’t no godfather. There ain’t no angels. There ain’t no power to create life.”

“If I believed that, what would I be?” Trajan answered. “A machine, basically, no better than the sum of my parts. I’d be a slave to my own impulses. I’d have nothing better to aspire to.”

“There ain’t nothing better to aspire to, skid. That’s what I’m telling you. How do you know for sure there’s a Allebeing?”

“Aye, in fact, I’ve met Him,” Trajan said.

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Jones laughed at him again. “You’ll like the Chryslers. They’re as uptight as you are. Maybe part of the reason we celebrate our sexualhood so much is because it reminds us how glad we are we’re not them.”

Trajan Lear was processing this, when the COM Link called for his attention. An additional holoscreen flipped into view in front of him, and informed him that Goneril Lear was hailing him. “*Prudence* acknowledges, proceed with message, Zeta team.”

“No need to be so formal,” his mother began, her face appearing in a projection at the middle right of the canopy. She looked to be in the main cabin of an Aves. The blue and gold trim on the seat told him it was one from the HellBlazers Flight Group.

“Did you have a message for me,” Trajan asked, trying to sound all business.

“Indeed, I do. We are in urgent need of assistance. I cannot go into detail on an open channel, but it is imperative that you re-route to the Supah al-Fareek megaplex, and rendezvous with me at the coordinates I am sending now.” The coordinates appeared on his navigational interface below her holoscreen.

Trajan looked at the coordinates. They were several thousand kilometers off his present course. “We’re

currently scheduled to rendezvous with Prime Commander Keeler at Fair Havens," he told her.

"I'll clear the re-tasking with Commander Keeler," Lear responded crisply. "What's your E.T.A to the coordinates I provided?"

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Trajan Lear ran a calculation through Navigation core. "We can be there in forty-two minutes."

"We will meet you at their air transport center. Dock adjacent to my Aves. We'll discuss the issue on my ship."

"Acknowledged," said Trajan, trying not to sound petulant, telling himself he was an aviator being retasked by his commanding officer, not a son harkening to his mother's call. "We will reroute pending approval by Commander Keeler. Should Tactical Lieutenant Alkema be involved in the urgent business?"

Her lips parted in that way he had seen all his life, about to form a sharp, emphatic negative, but as though catching herself, she changed it to a more agreeable, "His involvement will not be necessary. In fact, he may proceed on after you and I meet."

"He's not flight-certified."

"I understand he is capable of piloting an Aves, and I believe Flight Commandant Jones's son is with you. They can pilot the ship on to its next destination. I will waive flight certification regulations for this circumstance."

Trajan Lear's eyebrows raised up. Tyro-Commander Lear was not only diverting a ship on verbal notice, but was suggesting an unauthorized aviator continue the

flight. *Who was this woman and what has she done with my mother*, he thought.

“Entering navigational inputs now,” he told her. “We will advise when we are two minutes from touchdown.”

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“Make it four minutes,” Lear adopted a severe expression. “The collar of your flight jacket is uneven and your flight badge is askew. I trust you’ll present yourself in a manner appropriate to an officer of the Odyssey Project when you arrive.”

“Acknowledged, Lear out,” he cut the COM Link.

“Reminds me of my own Mom,” said RoughtradeJones

Trajan Lear shuddered at the thought, remembering the provocative rendering of Bangalore Jones on the side of the hovercraft and picturing his mother similarly posed and undressed. “Mission Commander Alkema,” Trajan said into the ship intra-link, “I have an urgent request to assist Tyro-Commander Lear’s Landing Party. Request permission to divert to... the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex.”

Alkema responded. “I’ll tell Commander Keeler we’ll rendezvous with him later.”

“Supah al Fareek,” Jones said slowly. “Stanky.”

“What do you mean?” Trajan Lear asked.

“Any other Megaplex, I feel perfectly safe outside the combat zone. But Supah al-Fareek, that’s all combat zone, even if you don’t know it. I hope you have more combat experience than you have sex experience.”

Aye, thought Trajan. *And I got most of both in another universe and there’s no way I’m ever telling someone like you*

about any of it. He gripped the control column. *Prudence* flipped on her wing, and soon had exchanged the peaks of Rosa's Nipples for the long sandy desert the Aurorans called The Big Snatch.

Aurora – Province of New Outer Canaan

Keeler received the news the Alkema would not be joining him as his own Aves piloted over a vast prairieland of long golden grass, en route to a large valley tucked between the northern plateaus and the vast southeastern plains of the second-largest continent in Aurora's northern hemisphere. He was disappointed and if he had known before the launch, he could have gotten someone else to toady for him (Specialist Brainiacsdaughter came to mind). He would have to make do.

"Well, guy, looks like it's just you and me," he said to Mandamus Fedex. Mandamus FedEx was in his late thirties, his hair prematurely shot with gray, his eyes were large, widely spaced, gray-green and deep set. He put Keeler uncomfortably in mind of someone who didn't get out enough.

"It's all right, sir," Fedex said a little nervously. "If I had known you were interested in the history of these people, I would have devoted more time to it in our initial contact."

"Well, it's my fault for letting Lear draft the Mission Protocol," Keeler said, hoping to put his subordinate a little more at ease. "So, what can we expect out there? Simple agrarian folk, people of the earth, friendly and open and all those other stereotypes?"

“Actually, sir, when we first set down, they initially pointed weapons at us and instructed us to get back on our ship, or they would have to shoot us.”

“Oh,” Keeler pondered this. “So, they’re the *other* kind of country folk stereotype.”

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“Nay, commander, they initially thought we were from one of the Megaplexes. Apparently, they have poor relationships with the Synerplex.”

“Didn’t you pre-coordinate your arrival?”

“We did, but... apparently there was some confusion. Eventually, it was straightened out and we were able to complete the cultural and technological surveys. Still, though, they kept a distance from us. They were cordial enough, though. Polite, but they still maintained their boundaries between themselves and the crew.”

“Hmmm,” said the commander. “A little skittish, are they? I will then have to use every available ounce of charm to win them over. Pour me another gin and tonic.”

Zilla set down in a small airfield on the Northwest Side of Fair Havens. A few small craft were parked nearby, airjet transports, similar to the type used to shuttle the associates of the Synerplex from one place to another.

Toto met Keeler and Fedex at the hatch, just as it opened. “Would you stop doing that?” Keeler said to him.

“Stop what, sir?” Toto asked.

“The scratching and fidgeting. We want to make a good impression on these people, and you’re scratching like the griffey house at the New Cleveland Zoo.”

"I'll try, sir." Toto got in a quick grope and scratch before resolutely putting his hands behind his back.

The hatch opened, and seeing no armed villagers in sight, Keeler told Toto he could lower the shields. A large, four-wheeled vehicle of sturdy metal construction pulled away from the main building and drove to the side of the ship. From it emerged a very tall, thin man, whose head was almost smooth except for a ring of close-cropped fuzz just above his ears. He wore two circles of glass enclosed in wire frames in front of his eyes to augment his failing vision. His clothing was simple, an off-white shirt of some heavy fabric and faded blue pants, dark leather boots. As he approached them, he capped his bald head with an odd-looking red hat with a tassel that dangled behind his head. He extended a long arm with a big hand at the end of it. "Good morning," he said, in a quiet voice. "I am Festus Queed. The Town Council appointed me to be your guide while you're here in Fair Havens."

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"Prime Commander William Keeler," he responded, taking the man's strong, rough hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Queed?"

"It's pwo-nounced 'Queed.'"

"Queed?"

"No, Queed. As in, I believe in a personal queed."

"Oh, Creed," Keeler nodded.

"That's what I said, 'Queed.'"

"I get it." Keeler said. "And, I take it you're a historian?"

"No, an anthwopologist. I came out to the hardscape on a cultural study gwant fwom one of the Synplexes years ago, and never went back. I have a farm outside the settlement. Most of the settlers in the hardscape wun farms in addition to their wegular work. I have a wife and thwee daughters. Keep your men away fwom them, understand?"

"He means you, Blade," Keeler called back. "I believe you've met, or at least shot at, Mr. Fedex, but you probably don't remember him, great guy but personality of a damp sponge." He paused. "He's right behind me, isn't he?"

Creed shook Fedex's hand tentatively, and said. "The sooner we got this over with, the better. This way, then, gentlemen."

The three travelers took seats in the vehicle, Keeler in the front next to Mr. Creed, as they left the aero-port and drove through a pleasant series of farms and orchards toward the town. It looked like he imagined some of the more bucolic parts of Graceland Province. The surreal, sizzling light of a yellow green sky looked sort of like Keeler imagined tornado weather.

"I was hoping you would let me get started at the Historical Library," Keeler told him. "I am interested in studying the history of your planet's people."

"I'm afwaid I can not let you do that," said Creed.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't offered you a suitable meal yet. You've pwobably ingested that pwe-packaged, mass-pwoduced cwap the Plexus calls food, but you have not

eaten of the bounty of Auwowa. My wife and daughters, are pweparing a gweat meal in your honor; wabbit and gwavy, tomato-fig stew, woasted wabbit, confit of vawious bewwies and fwuits, fwied rabbit, fwesh milk, cider, pie and custahd, and fwicasseed wabbit."

Keeler felt better already. "Mmmm, cider. The previous landing party understated your hospitality."

Creed grumbled. "I can't believe you twaveled halfway across the galaxy to wead a bunch of old books. Space twavel... what a waste."

"Technically, we're only 2,000 light years from our home planet," Fedex said brightly. "So, we've only traveled one sixtieth the length of the galaxy."

A smile flickered briefly around the edges of Festus's chin. "When the fuhst of your ships landed, we thought you were fwom the Plexus. We weally don't have any use for the Plexus. We twy to keep out of their conflags."

"Conflags?"

"A conflag is what happens when two plexes go to war. Happens about twice evwy genewation."

"Usually, societies built on trade and commerce are peaceful," Keeler said. "War only happens when politics gets involved."

The Old Man nodded grimly. "Back in the Old Days, it was a lot more peaceful. It all changed a few genewations ago. There were a lot more Megaplexes, although they weren't called Megaplexes, back then, just companies. One of them was called Agwippa, they specialized in distwibution systems for the pproducts other companies

sold, and were the third largest shipping company in the Sytwian Basin." Sytria, Keeler knew, was the name for the largish sea that divided the continents of Augustina and Thrice Blessed.

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Creed continued. "Agwippa discovered a pwocess that was going to wevolutionize the shipping industry. The Number One shipping company, Halcyon, was afwaid of the competition. First, they twied to buy Agwippa out. Agwippa wefused. No'mally, that would have been the end of it. But Halcyon was wun by Caesar Halcyon, who was, by all accounts, insane. Halcyon did something no other company had done before. He waised an awmy and physically attacked Agwippa. They sent a thousand awmed guards into Agwippa's headquarters. They seized Agwippa's assets, then they bombed Agwippa's building to wubble. Then, they burned the wubble. Then, they buwied the ashes. They wiped Agwippa off the face of the planet."

"No one stopped him?" Keeler asked incredulously.

"There was no one who could stop him," Creed explained. "At the time, Auwowa was very peaceful, we had no military to speak of. The other companies, of course, couldn't stand for it. Halcyon was a mad man, of course, and they knew if he attacked one competitor, he could attack others. They built alliances, armed themselves, and the next time Halcyon attacked, the other companies fought back. Caesar Halcyon committed suicide in his bunker, and Halcyon was destroyed. But everything had changed. Halcyon had legitimized warfare as a legitimate business pursuit. The other Megaplexes wealized they had to pwotect their citizen employees, as

well as provide them with money, shelter, and health care. Now they had to be ready to defend their assets from other companies as well.

“That accelerated the consolidation of companies into Megaplexes. At the time Halcyon struck Agwippa, there were 30,000 different companies operating on Auwowa. Now, there are about 60 major Megaplexes, and a few hundred minor companies, all of which are affiliated with the Synerplex.”

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“This Caesar Halcyon didn’t happen to have two hearts or anything like that?” Keeler asked.

“His body was ashes when they found it,” Creed answered. He braked the truck and gave Keeler a grim look. “You wanted to understand the history of the planet, and that’s big piece of the recent history. One of these days, there’s going to be a war. A big one. Until then, I hope your people have the good sense not to get involved with the Synerplex.”

Aurora – Supah Al-Fareek Megaplex

Prudence settled down on an expanse of asphalt, nose to nose with *James*. Trajan exited his ship, Alkema, Pieta, and Max Jordan behind him. He felt a hot blast of desert air, as he emerged, as though he were standing next to a thruster exhaust.

His mother stood in front of her ship with Flight Captain James, Flight Commander Collins, a man and a woman he did not recognize. She approached him, and dispensed with any customary greeting. “I need to speak with you... alone.”

Trajan Lear glanced over his shoulder. "All right."

He followed her into the Aves *James*. Its main cabin was configured for surveillance, and holoscreens showed different views of the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex. "You will not convey the substance of our conversation to Tactical Lieutenant Alkema or anyone else, is that understood?"

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"What's this about, mother?"

"I always knew this day would come," Goneril Lear began with grave, ominous tones, trying to instill so much gravitas each word probably went straight to the planetary core as soon as it dropped from her lips. "My son, before you were born, I became part of a longstanding tradition in our family. I became part of a secret organization, with a charter to defend and preserve the Republic against all threats internal and external."

"You mean the Centurions," Trajan responded lightly. "We knew."

Lear looked as though something invisible had almost knocked her over. "What do you mean you knew?"

"Mother, give us some credit," Trajan told her. "The late night meetings, the encrypted communiqués, the times we asked where you had been and you lied. We may have been kids, but we weren't idiots."

His mother took a few moments to process this. "Did you ever tell anyone?"

"Father told us it was a family secret." He didn't think it would be a good idea to mention that, in two years in the Chronos StarLock, he had pretty much shared all the

family secrets with Flight Captain Driver. Driver, by the way, had been surprised to learn that the Centurions and the Notorium were real, since their existence had been denied by the Republic government for centuries.

Lear recovered her hauteur. "Serving the Republic is a great honor, and only the best and most talented of citizens are ever approached to..."

"You want to recruit me into the Centurions," Trajan interrupted, beyond amazement. In a way, it was an exciting idea; not an appealing idea, but an exciting one.

Lear bristled. "The correct name is 'The Notorium.' Those who belong to the Notorium are known as Centurions. We have preserved the Republic since its founding."

"So, why is the Notorium such a secret, then," Trajan asked. "If it is so noble in preserving the Republic against all threats, why not do it openly?"

"Because preserving the Republic sometimes requires means and methods that are best kept secret."

"So, to preserve our democratic republic, we have created a secret elite society that chooses its own membership, and makes its own rules."

Goneril Lear sighed. "Dear son, there is an uncomfortable truth of life and it is this: Some are born with the responsibility to lead others. It's no great privilege, it is in fact a great burden. If we in the leadership class avail ourselves of more comforts, it is only to make more bearable the burden of making decisions that effect the lives of millions of people."

Trajan suppressed a dismissive snort. "Mother, I hope this doesn't sadden you too greatly, but pretty much everybody on Republic knows about the Centurions."

"As a rumor, as a shadow, as a ghost, perhaps. We operate in the darkness outside the light of public scrutiny, we have to."

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Trajan suppressed a smirk. "So, what rank were you going to start me with? Surely not a Plebeian, that would not do for the family Lear. TyroCenturion, or maybe Prefect."

Mother Lear continued, losing patience with his impudence. "And the assignment I need your help with requires just such discretion."

"Just so you know," Trajan continued, patting the interlocking chevrons on his flight jacket. "These rank insignia mean more to me than any you could offer, because I earned them, with no help from you."

"Do you want to hear about the mission, or don't you?"

Trajan reached out hard with his mind. She was blocking him. This probably meant he had struck a nerve. This gratified him, a little. "Please, mother, continue."

She went on to tell him about Hellen Earth, about the safeguards in the Supah al-Fareek compound (which she displayed a holographic model of) and how he could slip past their defenses and bring Helen Earth to the surface.

This time when she finished, Trajan was unable to suppress a dismissive snort. "Not possible," he told her. "First of all, I don't have the skills to do this."

“We’ll give you the help you need,” Goneril Lear assured him.

“Second, I don’t know if this is right. I don’t think it’s a good idea to get involved in this planet’s internal disputes. And how do we know the Helen Earth even wants to defect? All we have is this ‘Auntie Maim’s’ word for it.”

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“I can handle Auntie Maim,” Lear was bristling a little bit, as though offended at her son’s lack of confidence. “When you reach her cell, you ask her if she wishes to come of her own free will. If she refuses, then leave her.”

Trajan stared at the model as it highlighted concentric spheres of security systems: Detection Systems along the perimeter, automated weapon systems, a layer of guards, armored doors and walls, more guards on the inside, more detection systems, more automated weapons, locked gates with security passes, and finally a ninety-meter shaft with a single, heavily armored and protected transport to reach the detention level.

“It will not be easy,” Goneril Lear conceded. “However, if we are successful, we will have provided a great boon for the Republic, and for the New Commonwealth. We free a prisoner, we make an allegiance with MAARRS, that makes Aurora an ally of the New Commonwealth, that gives us another ally against Aurelia, perhaps the one that makes the difference in the war. Also, with Aurora in the New Commonwealth, we have a chance to end the violence on this planet and make life better for everyone. That’s what it means to serve the Republic.”

Trajan could tell that she was holding back something, a personal angle to this whole adventure. She was blocking him from her mind, but he could kind of see a shadow of it, something she did not understand but that she was determined to figure out, a personal threat to her. He could not quite get the details, but he could see the shape of it.

He turned his attention to the schematic and stared at it. Break into a secure, super-secret facility, infiltrate thirty stories underground into the most heavily defended level and break out a woman who was their most valuable asset. This was far beyond what he was capable of. Who did she think he was?

“I can do it,” he finally said. “But I can’t do it alone.”

“Specialists Sukhoi and Metro will support you.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Trajan Lear. He took a deep breath. What he was about to ask his mother was impossible, but the mission was impossible without it. If she refused, he would walk out. He was good with whichever way it went.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aurora – The Desert NNW of the Supah al Fareek Megaplex

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Prudence sat on a vast plain of windblown sand in the wastes outside the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex to avoid surveillance. In the wide, forward part of the main cabin, a hologram display of the Central Complex showed where Hellen Earth was being held, thirty levels underground and surrounded by layers and layers of security and weapons. David Alkema, and Queequeg looked over the holo-model with rapt attention.

It had taken a long argument, and Trajan's adamant refusal to cooperate otherwise, to get Goneril Lear to agree to bringing in Commander Keeler's closest confidantes into the scheme.

"Our best chance is to infiltrate through the northeast sector," Sukhoi told them. "Our cyberneticists believe they can compromise some of the systems in that sector, not all of them, but if we set them into diagnostic cycles, in a precisely timed sequence, it would give us time to insert two or three agents into the ground level of the complex."

Alkema sighed. "Instead of getting us into the complex, why not get her out into the open? If we can infiltrate their communication systems, we could issue false orders, have her brought to the surface, or at least a less secure level."

Sukhoi explained why the Notorium had rejected that strategy. "They don't bring her to the surface. Only a

consensus of the Supah al-Fareek Chief Executive, Chief Security Officer, and Vice President of Weapons Systems can authorize her removal. The order would have to be triple authenticated, and we can't do that."

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"So, our only option is going in." Alkema bent on his knees, to see the operation from ground level. Small blue figures were walking through the front gates. "How do we get past the guards?"

Sukhoi explained. "The security forces send out patrols on two schedules, one is repeated every thirty-five minutes, one is random. We can distract a patrol by breaking into their encrypted security channel and issuing false instructions, at which point, our three person team will take the place of the patrol."

Alkema cocked his head and examined the thirty stories between the surface and the holding area. "How do we get down to the security area?"

Sukhoi highlighted the critical areas of the model. "Sub-levels 1 through 10 are relatively low security. Our cyberneticists should be able to give our team access through to level ten. There is an empty holding cell on that level. Our team will access the security systems outside that cell to send a continuous signal indicating the cell is clear. That cell will become our base of operations for infiltrating subsequent levels. Because each of the subsequent levels has a dedicated security system, we will have to work our way down through a complex series of corridors and service passageways."

"And how do you get her out?" Alkema asked.

"To get her out, we will have to reverse the process," Sukhoi said.

"Which will be a lot more complicated," said Alkema. "Once we free her from the cell, they'll be looking for us."

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Sukhoi put down his holopointer. "Do you have a better idea?"

"I have a better plan," said a furry, four-legged, green-eyed critter. "And, unlike yours, mine *isn't* stupid."

Sukhoi rolled his eyes, an oddly animated gesture against the moon-like placidity of his regular face. "I'll grant that my plan is complex, and requires precise timing, but the plan is the only way we can move in and out without being detected."

Queequeg flicked his tail, "Therein lies the problem. You Centurions are obsessed with secrecy and stealth, even when they aren't necessary."

Sukhoi bristled. "There's no such thing as a Centurion," said Sukhoi.

The cat rolled his eyes. "Please. My brain may be the size of a walnut, but I'm not an idiot. You are so obsessed with secrecy, you can't even admit that everybody knows you exist, silly arrogant bipeds. You have to think outside the litter box."

"Meaning?" Sukhoi demanded.

Queequeg reviewed the schematics provided by the Notorium of the Megaplex Security System. "True, it would take days to by-pass all these traps, but there's more than one way to skin a dog."

“What do you suggest?” Alkema asked.

“Spring all the traps simultaneously,” Queequeg told him. “Result: Mass confusion, with a high probability of total system failure.”

Sukhoi shook his head. “If any of the traps are set off, the whole complex goes into lockdown mode.”

“So, you disable Lockdown Mode before you trip the traps.”

“How?” Sukhoi asked, his voice beginning to become a snarl.

“Kill the power.... duh!”

Now, his voice was a snarl. “And work in the dark?”

“Emergency lighting will kick in.”

“And we would be spotted,” Sukhoi said determinedly.

“Use photon absorbing gear, in the diminished light, you’ll be...”

“There’s no such thing as photon-absorbing...” the cat’s fur bristled. Sukhoi withdrew his comment.

Alkema was on board. “How do we get in, kitty-cat?”

Queequeg jumped on the table, putting himself in the middle of the hologram. “You see these vehicles?” He gestured with a paw at the black Supah Al-Fareek police hovercraft that moved continuously over the complex. “Hijack one.”

"We don't know how to fly them," Sukhoi protested. "You can't just steal an alien ship and expect to know how to fly it."

"Alpha Ralpa Jones can fly one," the cat said.

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"A civilian!" Sukhoi shook his head. "Negative, Negative, I can not endorse this plan."

"What if you get caught," Pieta asked.

"We make it look like MAARRS put us up to it," Queequeg said. "With their powerful hypnotic mind control techniques."

"Powerful mind control techniques?" Alkema asked.

Queequeg sat on his haunches, and waved his right paw in the air. "Dance, puppets, dance!"

Sukhoi was agitated now, and not even his training could keep it locked down. "Your plan will send the whole complex into chaos... and it relies on the help of a civilian who, excuse me, I don't think we can trust."

"We don't have to trust him," Queequeg said, but could not elaborate because Sukhoi was still off on a rant.

"This is a job for a trained Centurions," he sputtered. "Not a couple of kids, a civilian, and an uppity cat."

"I think the cat's way is our best shot," said Alkema. "We do it his way, or I walk."

"And I won't go without Lieutenant Akema," said Trajan Lear.

Sukhoi gave up. "All right... we'll do it your way." He was already looking forward to wiping their memories.

Skystream 12 – Supah al-Fareek Airspace

The GuardRams of Supah al-Fareek Corporate Security were black trimmed in blue. Spikes of magnetic acceleration weaponry protruded from above and below the pilot's nest, on swivels to provide a 360 degree death cloud around the ship. A knobby protrusion from the front of the craft held an array of scanners. These nodded back and forth, swiveling across the half-asleep city.

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The dawn patrol was always quiet. Supah al-Fareek was a well-monitored city, and such criminal element as existed was already slinking back into its cellars and tunnels as daylight neared. The firefights raging in the combat zones also began to die down with the rise of the sun and would not peak again until mid-afternoon, when Nettwerk News Crews would be looking for fresh combat footage.

"Distance from Central, 56 kilometers outbound," said Level 2 Guard Wilma "Juicy" Van Pelt said into her microphone. "ETA... fourteen minutes to outer patrol boundary."

"Acknowledged 4-2-3," said the soothing voice of the Central Command Dispatch Master.

Seamus "Shameless" Crotch was a Level 1 guard. He watched the Megaplex glide by underneath him.

Suddenly, the city view disappeared, and the Guard Ram was pointed up into the indigo sky. Shameless turned to Juicy. "Did you just..."

“No,” Juicy answered. She pulled back on the control stick, but it obstinately pulled away from her. “Something’s taken control of the ship.”

“More than that,” said Shameless. “Look at our speed.” The ship was clocking upward, heading for Mach 1, a speed it was not designed to obtain. Page | 245

“Radio” said Juicy.

Shameless switched on his microphone. “Planet Patrol 4-2-3... we have been pulled from the patrol zone... ascending to ...”

“11,000 meters,” said Juicy, incredulously. “Accelerating to Mach...”

Juicy could scarcely believe what her instruments were showing her. “Eleven.”

Static was answering him. Shameless pounded the useless radio. “GuardRam 423 ... can anybody hear us.”

Juicy shook her head. “The ship should be flying apart at this speed... we should be unconscious ...”

“Look!” Shameless said, with unnecessary loudness. Speed had dropped to zero.

Suddenly, space above them shimmered. An Aves dropped out from behind a stealth field. “It’s one of the visitor’s ships,” said Shameless.

The ram was pulled closer, until it was directly beneath the ventral cargo hatch. The hatch opened, pulling the ram inside. The doors to the piloting compartment opened from above, gull-wing style. Suddenly, there were three men in Security uniforms and masks pointing dangerous-

looking weapons at them, and one man, face unobscured, with long dreadlocks dripping down over his shoulders, who informed them. "Yes, I can hear you, now get the hell out of the ram or ..." He pointed downward.

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They were easily 50,000 meters above the planet, whose curvature they could see beneath them, being suspended, as they were, at the edge of space. A force-field below would have broken their fall, but, of course, they didn't know that.

Juicy dropped her weapon on the floor. "They don't pay me enough for doing this," she said, sensibly. She climbed up and out of the vehicle.

Shameless hesitated. Unfortunately, the ramjackers had no patience for hesitation. There was a snarl, a hiss, and gray blur coming right at him. The last thing he remembered before losing consciousness was being batted and scratched by hard, small paws.

Alkema and Sukhoi dragged his unconscious form into *Prudence's* main cabin.

Sukhoi climbed into the ram, followed closely by Lear and Alkema. Lear took the second seat behind Roughtrade Jones.

"You're sure you can do this?" Sukhoi asked.

"The controls are straightforward. Queequeg's interface will do the rest." Lear paused. "I'd strap in."

Alkema and Sukhoi nodded and put the safety straps on extra tight.

As the ram prepared to drop, Trajan broke radio silence to admonish Max Jordan one last time, "Take care of my ship. Don't let *anything* happen to her."

"I'm not the one who banged her up last time," Max returned from *Prudence's* flight deck.

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"You can bang me up any time, sweet thang," they heard Calico Jones say in the background.

Alkema put a reassuring hand on Trajan Lear's shoulder. "Don't worry about the ship, worry more about Jones's sister."

"That's not actually my sister," Jones said. "It's more like..."

"Save it for later," Sukhoi barked. "From here on in, you will speak only when necessary." He then spoke through his COM Link. "Specialist Metro, prepare to drop ship in 3... 2... 1... drop..."

With a sudden lurch, the Guard Ram began to drop toward the planet beneath.

Supah al-Fareek Megaplex Central Complex

Alpha Romeo Jones at the controls, the Guard-Ram glided toward the Central Command Complex. Trajan Lear was in the second seat, Sukhoi and Alkema in the space behind them. Beneath them, the city rested in the early morning glow of electrified sodium. Above, the shifting miasma of blue and green was thinner than elsewhere, and stars showed through the gaps. Patrol Ram 4-2-3 eased gently into the landing pattern.

For a moment, Sukhoi felt a twinge of homesickness. The way the towers and sprawl of Supah al-Fareek rose from the surrounding barrenness in the gray light before dawn reminded him of early morning patrols over City of Concord in the service of Republic's Ministry of State Security. There had been a nice little food court on the eight level of Teamwork Avenue where they served hand-sized rings of pastry fortified with protein and mineral complexes to meet Ministry of Health nutrient standards. To his mild surprise, he could no longer remember the license number of the vendor that sold them.

"Planet Patrol 4-2-3, we show you inbound at 43 kilometers," said the radio.

Sukhoi activated the mimic chip in his throat. The voice that issued from his mouth was a dead-on impersonation of Seamus Crotch. "4-2-3 inbound. ETA, thirteen minutes."

"Acknowledged 4-2-3."

The Central Complex was not actually Central, but in the Southeast Quadrant of the roughly circular Supah al-Fareek Megaplex. The shapes of its buildings were already familiar to the crew, having studied the schematics for hours. The Executive Towers were tall and thin, they evoked four swords raised in triumph over a central plaza. A thousand meters away, arranged in a loose crescent, were the smaller, functional buildings, mostly related to research and development. A few hundred meters from these was the security complex, including the docks where the Rams were docked.

They had chosen the early morning, an hour before the official shift change, when the base would be almost deserted. Jones eased the vehicle into a vacant docking space, and the special mission force quietly exited through the rear hatch of the vehicle. They wore graphite gray body-suits that covered them head to toe. The anti-photon suits absorbed and diverted light around them, not rendering them invisible, but making their wearers into faint, two-dimensional shapes. By hanging close to the walls, they were practically invisible enough.

“I am disabling lockdown now,” said Queequeg from *Prudence*. “Activate the diversion.”

“Right,” said Alkema.

The power-pack on the GuardRam detonated with the force of a bomb. The car lifted up and exploded in a fireball, then fell back to the ground in an unrecognizable wad of burning metal.

“What the hell?” said Alkema, taken by surprise by the force of the explosion. “We were just going to flush all the toilets simultaneously and burst the plumbing.”

“I didn’t think the planned diversion was sufficient,” said Sukhoi. “I short-circuited the power-packs, let them build to overload.”

Alkema said. “Someone could have been hurt.”

“Not at this time of day,” said Sukhoi smoothly. “Let’s get on with it.”

Alarms were going off all around the complex. Guards and emergency crews came running ... as planned ...

toward the explosion and away from the research complex.

Thanks to Queequeg, the monitors would show a full lockdown was in effect, but this reading was false.

The team proceeded to the shaft Queequeg had locked the transport at the bottom of. Sukhoi jumped into the shaft first, a short-range pseudo-gravity field diminishing his weight to something like a feather. Lear jumped in behind him. Alkema cannon-balled in, and with a moment of hesitation, Jones followed.

At bottom, Sukhoi surveyed the car, and the area in front of the transport shaft. "Clear," he whispered.

The pod took them over to the research complex, then down into its depth, to the Maximum Security Level 32. They exited the pod into an empty expanse, at least a hundred meters square, divided into a grid of black, white, blue, and red squares.

"Slag!" Alkema said. "This was not on the map."

"It must serve some defensive purpose," said Sukhoi, scanning around for guns or sensors. He took the pack from his back, and removed a small, black electronic Frisbee. He tossed it over the grid.

It landed on a white square. Immediately, a pulse of deadly energy shot up from the square, incinerating the frisbee instantly.

"Oh," said Trajan Lear. "It's one of those."

"One of those?" Alkema asked.

“Killer floors,” Trajan specified. “They had one on Chronos. It was yellow, green, red and black. You had to step on them in the right pattern... black, black, yellow, black, black, green, black, black, red. Otherwise, ...” he gestured toward the stain of black ash that had been the target Frisbee.

Alkema and Sukhoi surveyed it with their Spex. “I can see the generators, they are under every square,” said Sukhoi.

“Za, that,” said Alkema. “But the blue ones are powered down, while all the others are fully charged.”

“So, then, we’re safe as long we step on the blue squares,” said Jones.

The three men nodded in agreement, but no one seemed in a great hurry to test the theory. Finally, with a faintly heard sigh, Sukhoi gingerly put his foot upon the first blue square. He grimaced, but was not flash-fired on the spot.

“No change,” said Alkema. The blue squares were still dormant. Sukhoi cautiously moved to the next blue square. Alkema hopped on the first blue one. Sukhoi moved to the third. Alkema moved to the second. Lear hopped onto the first. Sukhoi moved to the fourth and fifth. Alkema moved to the third, then turned to Jones. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I think I’ll just wait here,” Jones said. “Guard the shaft.”

Alkema nodded and moved off the square, was just about to leap to a blue one, when there was a faint crackle.

Alkema leapt, landing on a white square. Sukhoi smelled ozone and leaped toward the next blue square.

“The blue ones are hot,” Alkema yelled. “Land on white.”

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Sukhoi felt a hot tingle under his feet and leapt to a white square. All around him, blue, red, and black squares were discharging energy into the air.

Then, the barrage stopped. “Fast!” Alkema hissed at him, now jumping from white-to-white in quick succession until they were both on the far side. Lear caught up a second later, barely missing a deadly energy bolt on the last square.

They turned back to see Roughtrade Jones, standing in the shadows, barely more than a shadow himself, leaning against a wall, saying. “See! I told you so!”

Aurora – A MagLev Train – Midway Between Supah al-Fareek and the Ben Dover Megaplex

Goneril Lear and two aides sat facing each other across a padded table. The Triple-XXX-Press from Supah al-Fareek to the Ben Dover Metroplex bore a passing familiarity to the MagLev trains of Republic, although Lear had traveled little by ground since working her way out of the mid-levels of the Ministry of Space bureaucracy. Her impression was that this train was larger and faster than the trains of her native world. It slithered through the desert’s edge like a hyperactive viper.

A televiewer was built into the wall next to them, showing a reporter interviewing a group of citizens in one

square combined with shots of two women pouring jello shooters into the front of Max Jordan's swim tights from the day before with comments from ordinary Aurorans scrolling up the side of the screen: "Oh, I think it's kwazappy that they're here and all ... but, what I know is, who's going to pay for my contraceptives... the visitors sure ain't..." And "Kwazappy. More people for our over-populated planet. Just what we need."

"The Fareeks seemed especially interested into our simulacrum technology," one of the aides babbled.

"They all seem interested in that technology," said the other. "For both tactical and... um, entertainment possibilities."

Pretending to listen, Lear keyed a sequence into her datapadd, waited precisely ten seconds, then keyed it in again, sending a signal to an orbiting weather satellite.

10,000 kilometers above Aurora's surface, a cylindrical metal canister with a pair of sleek magneto-energy receptors turned its attention groundward. It had been lurking among the space debris that formed a ring of junk around Aurora's equator, discreetly siphoning energy from the planet's massive electromagnetic field. Its capacitors had built up a huge load, which it now prepared to release on the desert outside Supah al-Fareek.

Lear then turned her attention back to the profile of the Ben Dover Megaplex. Apparently, their core businesses were kitchen appliances, rubber goods, soap, nuclear missiles, and ladies footwear.

Supah al-Fareek – Central Command Complex

Deep below the Central Command Complex, David Alkema was trying to get a door open.

“I got it, I got it,” Alkema insisted. He jammed the probe hard and deep into the socket. The door groaned loudly, then slowly gave way, yawning apart with grinding protests from its internal mechanism.

The interior of the cell was empty. It was small, no more than maybe about sixty meters square, sparsely furnished, and had the look of a vacant hotel room. A sleeping chamber on the back had crisp linens folded atop a largish single bed.

Sukhoi scanned the interior with his Spex. “Are you sure this is the right cell?” Alkema whispered.

Suddenly, someone dropped from the ceiling onto Sukhoi’s shoulders. Her legs squeezed tightly around his neck and her crotch pressed tight against his mouth, cutting off his air. He stumbled backward, tried to reach up with his arms to shake her loose, but found no purchase. Distantly, muffled by the flesh of her thighs, he heard gunfire.

Don’t hurt her, he thought, then realized, the gun was his own. She had grabbed it from his back holster, and was shooting at the others. He dropped and rolled, thinking to pin her beneath him.

Somehow, he ended up pinned under her instead. She squeezed his jaw between the thighs. And brought his own weapon down until it was pointed at his head. “You have

twenty seconds to tell me who you are and what you're doing here."

Sukhoi stayed cool. "You are Hellen Earth?"

She clicked the power setting on the weapon up two settings. "I am... who the Hell are you?"

"We come from MAARRS," he told her. "We were sent to free you."

"MAARRS," she said. "Of course..." she stood, but kept the weapon pointed at him on the ground. She was a small woman, by Republicker standards, but every inch of her, from the smooth orbs of her breasts to the firm arch of her thighs and legs conveyed strength, no wasted body fat. She was blond, her hair wavy and medium length, her eyes were almost-too-bright blue, fixed on him like LED displays. "I am presuming that Auntie Maim sent you to bring me back to home."

"If you want to go," Sukhoi answered. "We were told that Supah al-Fareek was keeping you here against your will."

She nodded. "Did she tell you why?"

"You were a talented weapons designer. Supah al-Fareek desired your skills."

She stared at him a long moment. Finally, she seemed to arrive at a determination. "Get up. You'll need my help getting out of here."

In the background, Alkema and Lear were picking themselves up off the floor. She wasn't bothering to cover them, but continued to study Sukhoi. "To get this far, you

would have had to disable the security systems. I also note that primary power has failed, but the system will reboot in less than twenty minutes, and the power has been off for eleven minutes, fifty-three seconds already.”

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Alkema, Lear, and Sukhoi each pulled part of a photon-absorbing shadow-suit from their jackets... broken up in three pieces, it was just small enough to carry. “Put this on.”

“No time,” she told them and stepped out into the corridor.

“Halt!” yelled a voice in the corridor. Sukhoi ran to the doorway. *This level should have been cleared*, he thought. He poked his head around to see one unconscious guard already crumpled at Hellen Earth’s feet while she choked the other in a headlock. She squeezed him until he passed out, then dropped him to the deck.

“Go!” She pointed to the checkerboard killer floor. “We have eight minutes.”

She doesn’t know about the cat, Sukhoi reminded himself. Sukhoi was about to set foot on the first blue square, when Hellen Earth’s hard fist caught him in the stomach and knocked him out of the way.

“It’s blue on the way in,” she informed them. “Red on the way out.” With that, she began leading them across, stepping on the red squares only. “And if you rest on any square for more than ten seconds, the sequence changes, and then the black squares are safe.”

Sukhoi wished they had known that going in.

Aurora – The Big Snatch Desert

The desert air was changing.

Energy was pumping into the atmosphere from space, building pressure in some areas, diminishing it in others. A wind arose, and grew, and grew, and grew until it became a gale.

Dust rose into the wind from the desert floor, forming whirling devils of abrasive sand. They were small at first, dancing across the brown-colored dunes like dervishes. Then, they joined, reaching out to one another, turning madly in the driving wind, merging in twos and fours, becoming the nucleus of a great sandstorm that rose up from the sand like a dirty hurricane.

The great curtain of wind and sand bore down on Supah al-Fareek.

Supah al-Fareek – Central Command

They were near the top of the shaft, aided in the climb by the shadow gear, the three from *Pegasus* had no problem climbing. They helped Jones and Earth with the harder parts.

“Once we get to the roof, how are we to escape,” asked Hellen Earth. “Guard Rams can be disabled through remote command.”

In other words, no exciting car chase across the alien city. “We’ve arranged for transport,” Sukhoi answered.

“How will you avoid being detected?”

“We have arranged for that, too.” Sukhoi told her

Sukhoi exited first, pulled Earth, and then Alkema, and then Lear, and then Jones from the shaft.

Below them the complex was collapsing into Queequeg's meticulously effectuated chaos of false communications, random system failures, and flooding toilets, but the security forces seemed to be regrouping. They would take notice of the escapees at any moment.

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"What now?" Hellen Earth said, the strong desert wind scarcely disturbing her blond hair. "We will never get through those guards."

"Wait for it," said Sukhoi.

Above the wind, came a roar. Lear and Alkema stared wide-eyed as the wall of sand and dirt bore down on them. Neither of them had seen a desert sandstorm before, and were amazed as the sun turned brown, and then was blotted out of the sky.

Above them, an Aves in stealth mode, outlined only by the swirls of dust that surrounded it, hovered. Standing rock solid against the maelstrom, it descended until it was less than a meter from the rooftop. The ventral hatch slid open, creating a square of bright yellow light in the sky. "Get in," yelled Metro. She fired a pair of rappelling lines to the tower.

Jordan held the ship as close as possible. The wind and dust still made the climb from the tower to the hatch not incredibly safe. Lear and Alkema went first, making their way across the ropes as they gently swayed in the wind, high above the ground.

When they finished, Hellen Earth refused their offer of assistance, ran and leaped through the air to the hatch, completing an impressive back-flip mid-way.

Alkema stared in disbelief. Sukhoi and Jones had no time to be amazed, but mounted the ropes and made their way to the ship. The hatch sealed and the ship peeled away, hidden in the sand storm.

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"The guards?" Sukhoi asked.

"Will wake up in a few hours in an al-Fareek hospital, with no memory of how they got there." Metro assured them. Sukhoi gave her a knowing look, and she acknowledged with a look of her own. "Excuse me," she said, exiting toward the flight deck.

"Mission success," said Trajan Lear.

"Mission?" Alkema interjected. "I think it was really more of caper."

Trajan Lear looked up to the flight deck. "I better kick Max out of my seat."

"There's no rush," Sukhoi told them. "The ship is on auto-pilot to the rendezvous point. There's something else you need to see first. If you'll direct your attention to the displays in the forward main cabin, TyroCommander Lear has a message for you."

They turned, and maybe in the split second as they turned their heads toward the screen, maybe they had time for the thought that this was wrong might have begun to form. But, too late, a bright white flash and noise filled the cabin. Three men, a boy, a woman, and a cat fell gently to the deck.

Sukhoi pinched his eyeballs, removing the contact filters, and shook the screens from his ears. He pulled a set of patches from a pouch in his uniform, and began affixing one to the temple of each of those lying down.

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“Now,” he said. “Let me tell you about the gracious dinner you had with Tyro-Commander Lear, and some of the marketing people from the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex.”

The Aves James

Prudence rendezvoused with the Aves *James* over the sea, 40 kilometers above the ocean, 600 kilometers west of Supah al-Fareek. Sukhoi, Metro, and Earth crossed the ship-to-ship umbilical, then *Prudence* disconnected, and set a course northwest toward Fair Havens.

Flight Captain PonyBoy James welcomed them aboard. “Welcome back. Usually, unscheduled mid-air passenger transfers don’t go nearly so well.”

Sukhoi blinked at him.

“Unscheduled mid-air passenger transfer is slang for a collision between two aircraft.” James’s eyes glided over the lithe form of Hellen Earth. “Hello, nurse.”

Her eyes seemed to light up. “You are the pilot. Show me to the flight deck.”

James shrugged. “Sure...”

“I better come,” said Sukhoi. “Metro, secure communications. Monitor Supah al-Fareek”

“What is our destination?” Hellen Earth asked as she mounted the lift to the command deck.

“The MAARRS Megaplex,” Sukhoi answered.

“Very well,” She ran a finger across the interface on James’s cheek. “What does this do?”

“Provides a direct neural interface to ship’s systems,” James said, twitching away, slightly.

“Keyed to the pilot to prevent hijackings,” she said. “Fascinating.”

“It also lets me customize the control panel to my preference.”

“Nanotechnology?”

“Something like that.” James told her.

“How does it navigate?”

James demonstrated using the Navigation read-outs. “Because of the intense electro-magnetic field, the ship navigates using topographical maps. Our probes have mapped the entire surface of the planet, and our course is based on them.”

She leaned over the seat next to him.

“Maim lied,” she whispered.

“She did?” Sukhoi said, a tiny alarm bell activating in his brain.

“I’m not a weapons designer,” Hellen Earth said. “I am the weapon.”

With that, she bitch-slapped PonyBoy James, hard enough to knock him unconscious. Sukhoi was still drawing his stun-gun when she turn-kicked it from his hands, and delivered such a fearsome kick to the head that he was knocked backwards against the and also fell unconscious to the deck.

She pulled James from the aviator's seat and dumped him on the floor. She sealed the hatch to the flight deck, tricked the ship into giving her manual over-ride, and set a course for Fair Havens.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

University of Outer Canaan at Fair Havens

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The Historical Library was an architecturally uninspiring cement edifice with square blue windows arrayed in three straight rows across the front, square support pillars surrounding its perimeter, looking less like a building than the box a building might come in. The collection of colonial-era texts was on the third floor, beneath the convex dome of a skylight formed from wedges of orange and pink glass.

The university had provided Keeler the assistance of that most expendable of resources, a graduate student, a short, dark haired man with long, spidery, monkey-like limbs and a pair of glass lenses held over his eyes by metal frames that enabled him to see better. His major was history, and his name was Justice Golden Noble, and Keeler often had to restrain himself from slapping him. “What do you mean there isn’t a single book here on the founding of the Ecco 1 colony?”

Golden Noble was nervous, but had he known more of the commander’s reputation, would probably have been terrified. “Until you brought it up, I had never even heard of Ecco colony,” the student answered.

“How can that be?” Keeler demanded. “It was your colony!”

“This library deals primarily with the history of Chrysalians, and the Hardscape,” Golden Noble told him, apologetically. “That period of history corresponds with

our Exodus to the Hardscape, and we were probably too involved with colonizing the interior of our own planet's continents to concern ourselves with other worlds."

"But the Megaplex historian told me that Ecco 1 was intended for the Chrysalians. It was built as a planet to send you guys to."

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"I know. You've said that already. Many times. And I've always told you, you can't trust anything you hear from the Synerplex. The only people who know what the real truth is lie about it."

Keeler sighed. "Is there anything to drink?"

"We have water and wheatgrass juice."

"Wheatgrass juice? Is that supposed to be good for you?"

"Yes."

"Bring me some water."

Golden Noble persevered. "I must have been misinformed that your field of specialization was pre-colonial history."

"Normally, it is," Keeler told him. He began stalking around the table. Golden Noble tried to keep up, and tried to match the commander's stalking postures, which consisted of ducking low behind tables and pressing against bookshelves and peeking out before moving out from behind them. He had asked the commander why he moved this way, and Keeler had told him to shut up.

"That's what I had been prepared to discuss with you." Golden Noble pulled out a book from one of the piles on

the long, goldenwood library table, opened it, and brought up a projection of a planet and moon situated between two enormous stars. "The story of the migration from Chrysalia to Aurora is ... epic. I would think it would be fascinating to you."

"I am sure it is fascinating," Keeler said, half paying attention.

"According to the histories, Chrysalia occupied the sweet spot in a trinary system dominated by the red giant Tegan and the blue giant Antegan. Chrysalia orbited the center of gravity between the two giant suns, so that its southern hemisphere was burnished in the red light of Tegan while the northern hemisphere endured the harsh blue light of Antegan. Chrysalia, in turn was orbited by Tectratertia, a hunk of crystalized carbon from the remains of a fourth star, a white dwarf, that had once been part of the same star system. It was torn apart by the larger stars, and eventually formed not only the moon, but the crystal core of the planet. Light, from the suns, passed through the crystal of Tectratertia, and cast brilliant prisms across the landscape."

"I'm sure it made a lovely light," Keeler grunted, it was more polite than yawning.

"The planet had begun as a unified settlement, but toward the end, had split into two colonies. The Southern Hemisphere, the Hemisphere of the Red Sun, was led by a former Commonwealth Governor-General named Bradstreet Zapata. The Northern Hemisphere of the Blue Sun, was into secession led by an engineer named Antrim Darian."

Conflict, this was mildly interesting. “Surely, the Hemisphere of the Blue Sun --- which has to be the queerest name for a nation I have ever heard --- had its reasons for seceding.”

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Golden Noble scrolled through the text and quoted. “The Red Sons objected to ‘the autocratic and inequitable manner of planetary governance.’”

Keeler translated. “The Colonial Capitol made too many laws and taxed them too much. So, are most of the Chrysalians on Aurora descendants of the Red Hemisphere or the Blue Hemisphere?”

“That is a sore spot in our history,” Golden Noble told him.

“Oh, do tell,” said Keeler.

He scrolled through the book until he brought an image of some kind “It was soon after the division of the planet that the Chrysalia System was attacked by a mega-weapon unleashed by an organization known as ‘The Company.’ They accelerated the fusion reaction in Antegran, causing the sun’s heat output to increase. Temperatures in the northern hemisphere began to increase. It was estimated that the hemisphere would soon be uninhabitable, a sixty degree temperature increase within ten years.

“Zapata and Darian argued, Zapata claiming the time to evacuate the planet had come. Darian claiming that the population could survive in the southern hemisphere for at least one generation, long enough for a Commonwealth rescue fleet to evacuate them. Zapata did not think they

would have so much time. The accelerating nuclear reaction was bound to throw off massive solar eruptions, blasting the planet's atmosphere and destroying all life. Darian denounced him as an alarmist.

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"Against the advice of almost everyone, Zapata committed the Red Sons to the construction of an evacuation fleet. Chrysalia was poor in mineral resources. Having no composites or alloys with which to construct a fleet, the inhabitants did not see how they could evacuate. But Zapata came up with a solution. He would build their ships from ice!"

"Ice?" Keeler said incredulously.

"According to legend, he built a giant device for siphoning water from the seas of Chrysalia into space, freezing it in space until it formed a solid mass. I have some illustrations." He scrolled through the book, but was unable to find any. "They must be in another volume."

"I would like to see them," Keeler said, genuinely intrigued. "But first... what happened?"

"As the planet heated up, the atmosphere became increasingly turbulent. Zapata had evacuated to Tectratertia to direct construction of the fleet. Darian ridiculed the idea of evacuation, invoking the spirit of the pioneers. Darian ridiculed the ice ships as dangerous and anyone who would sail in them as foolish or suicidal."

"It seems history has made Darian out to be the villain of the piece," Keeler said, a little wanly. He knew history well, and what a dirty little whore she could be, how she sold herself to whoever could flatter her most. "Easy

enough to slander Darian for being on the losing side of the argument and make Zapata the hero."

"Some dissidents within the Blue Hemisphere's government approached Zapata about sharing the ice-ship construction technology, but he refused. He would welcome only those who denounced Darian's government and swore loyalty to him."

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"Ah..." Keeler said. "So, he was a jerk also."

"While Zeezram organized the final evacuation of the northern settlements. Darian delayed. As the planetary climate worsened, people began defecting to Zapata. To stop them, Darian began construction of a series of deep underground bunkers where, if necessary, the population could be relocated to await rescue.

"Then, one day, as Zapata had predicted, Tegan gave off an enormous blast of charged corona. It slammed into the planet, scorching a third of its surface and blasting away a third of the atmosphere. Most of the Hemisphere of the Red Sun had already been evacuated, but several cities in the Hemisphere of the Blue Sun were laid waste.

"The planetary core destabilized, and huge new faultlines cracked over the surface of the planet. Darian finally conceded, and, through an intermediary, inquired whether any of Zapata's ice-ships might be available to evacuate his capital city.

"As it turns out, Zapata had a ship specially prepared for the evacuation of the Blue Sun capital city. The shuttles lifted them up... according to the visual records, just in the nick of time." He opened a third book. This one projected

an image of small, oblong craft with delta wings lifting away from a burning city just as the ground crumbled beneath. Keeler regarded the visual dubiously, it was too dramatic, and the angle too correct to be a recording of the actual destruction. More likely, this was a fictional adaptation based on the actual event. He wondered how much of the actual history had been contaminated by drama in the intervening centuries.

“According to the legend, Darian gave long speech of praise to Zapata, admitting that he was wrong, and pledging the loyalty of he and his survivors. The convoy of ice-ships then set a course out of the system. Then, as they fired their ion engines, Darian’s ship plunged right into the Blue Sun, killing him, all of his advisors, and their families. No one every proved that Zapata had programmed the ship to malfunction and crash into the sun.” He paused. “But Zapata never made it to Aurora, either. His ship disappeared while surveying a star system for a potentially habitable planet. He took his secret with him.”

“Nice Story,” Keeler told him. “Now, help me find something, anything. on Ecco 1 colony.”

The Aves Prudence

Trajan Lear was awakened by a gentle prod to his subconscious. “Now approaching Fair Havens,” *Prudence* whispered to him. He opened his eyes and shook his head slightly. He was in the *Prudence’s* command seat. He must have fallen asleep after that stupid formal reception his mother had him attend. Or had he dreamt it? He remembered the diversion to Supah al-Fareek. He remembered his dress uniform folded across his mother’s

arm. He remembered a blond Auroran flirting ineffectually with him, spilling green wine on his cape. Memories were too sharp and clear for dreams. They'd flown out in the morning on too little sleep. *Prudence* had let him catch up, good ship.

He turned to see Max Jordan in the seat adjacent, also looking like he had just woken up, brushing a flop of red hair from his eyes.

Trajan checked the monitor at his lower left, which showed a landscape, hilly and green, flashing below. *Prudence* told him he was forty-two kilometers out from the airfield at Fair Havens.

"You were asleep," Max said to him, with an accusing grin.

"So were you," Trajan yawned and reached forward. A control column materialized in front of him as tendrils of the control interface spread across his left cheek. He slipped his hands around the yoke, completing the transition to oneness with his ship.

Max Jordan ran a finger under his chin. An interface began to form, then, he waved it off. It vanished, leaving Trajan to fly the ship. Max took a look at the golden fields and gently rolling hills that flashed below. Then, the town of Fair Havens appeared, boxy white buildings on a neat grid of streets. "Maybe we can fly back to Nettwerk City after we drop off the lieutenant and Mrs-the-lieutenant."

"No promises," Trajan told him.

Max slunk back in his seat "We will go back before we leave, won't we?"

"If we're sent," Trajan told him. Seconds later, the ship glided up to the landing field, and executed an effortless landing next to *Zilla*, one that would please Matthew Driver greatly when he reviewed the Mission Logs. Neither one took the lift to the main deck, but slid down the rails.

Pieta and Alkema emerged from a storage closet, looking disheveled. "Good morning," said Pieta, grinning broadly, brushing some long strands of hair from her eyes. "Good morning, good morning, good morning."

Queequeg sprawled on the floor of the main cabin, front paws outstretched, head lolling to one side. "That's not usually how he naps," said Alkema, poking him gently with his fingers. "That's not like him."

Pieta gave him a quick scan. "He's in a deep sleep, but he's all right."

Calico Jones pulled herself from one of the landing couches, her maximum bosom testing the limits of her minimal dress. She smiled in the direction of Max Jordan. "Baby Bumpkin!" she gushed and rushed toward him, arms outstretched. Pieta headed her off.

"Let's go!" said Alkema. The hatch opened on the Fair Havens Intercontinental Skyport. A half-dozen air transports docked at the main terminal. The Aves *Zilla* parked adjacent to *Prudence*. Beyond the fence at the perimeter of the airfield stretched the modest buildings of downtown, and the rolling hills of agriculture.

"Wooo-Eeee," said Roughtrade Jones. "So, these are the sticks."

Festus Creed was waiting for them with his heavy metal land vehicle. "Good afternoon," he said, with a slight nod, looking them over with suspicious eyes.

"I'm Lt. David Alkema..." Alkema began, he moved on through his wife, fellow crewmen, and recent friends. None of this seemed to impress Creed.

"Let me weview the wools," he said, scratching the back of his head.

"The wools?"

"Wools! Wool number one: Stay outta my beans, stay away from my daughters. Think you can manage that, goddammed space cowboys." He turned and began walking toward his land vehicle. "Come with me." They all stepped forward. "Off-worlders only. You Synaplex scumbags can wait in the ship."

"It's cool," said Roughtrade Jones. "I didn't want to see your stinky foot town anyway."

"You behave yourself, baby bumpkin," Calico Jones called, blowing kisses to Max Jordan.

Creed slammed shut the driver's door and secured himself inside. He turned to the Jones's and yelled, "Leave the damb cat alone!"

The ride into town was quiet, the crew finding themselves oddly tired, and a little out of it. Perhaps sensing this, Creed kept quiet himself, until, some minutes into the trip, he looked over to Max with a discerning eye. "Did you say your name was Jordan?"

"Za... Max Jordan."

“Intewesting. Jordan is a vewy common name in these parts.”

“What of it?” Max asked defensively.

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“The Jordans were one of the founding clans of Chwysalis Colony, and among the last to leave before it was destroyed. Most of them came to Auwowa, but some of them moved on to other colonies in the Perseus Quadwant. You are pwobably descended from them. You pwobably have family on this planet you never even knew existed.”

Max’s mouth opened. Trajan knew he was about to say, “And, so...” But something stopped him. He cocked his head, turned and squinted over the landscape.

University of Outer Canaan at Fair Havens

Alkema found Keeler in a large study room on the top floor. Gauzy light streamed through the windows, washing everything in white. The commander sat at a table, large, old smelly books stacked around him, like fortress wall, looking as though he hadn’t slept in several days and had done a lot of drinking, in other words, no different than he usually looked. “So, finally decided to show up,” he snarled at Alkema. “So what was Tyro-Commander Lear’s Big Serious mission that kept you away from my side, knowing full well an assignment like this requires sandwiches and gin and tonics, lots and lots of gin and tonics.”

“We had to escort some diplomat from the MAARRSS Megaplex to a reception at the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex,”

Alkema responded, feeling as though the words had been programmed to come out of him.

“She needed all of you for that?”

“She wanted Trajan. She thinks the kid will be a diplomat some day.... We just stuck with him to help out. I miss any excitement?”

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“Nothing exciting ever happens in Fair Havens,” the commander said. “The Fair Havenites make dambed sure of it. That’s what makes this place wonderful.”

“Tell that to Max Jordan,” Alkema sighed.

“Who?” Keeler asked, but lost interest almost as soon as he said it. He stood and walked to the window. Beyond it could be seen some stretch of the town that surrounded it. “The Aurorans maintain that the Chryslers are in decline. Does this look like a culture in decline to you?”

“Neg,” Alkema conceded. “A little boring, maybe, but the streets are clean, the buildings are in good repair.”

“Exactly. Their settlements lack the size and glamour of the synerplex, but underneath, they have a strong, thriving culture. So it is with the people as well. They live humbly because they have been chastened by history, but they do not lack for intelligence or ambition.”

Alkema wondered what Keeler meant by “chastened by history,” but he recognized the opening rumbles of a lecture, and knew his commander would soon be regaling him with the knowledge he had gleaned from those old books. The young lieutenant found a thickly padded chair, sat down, and put on his best eager, interested expression.

The commander returned to his table and rearranged the stacks of books in order of reference. "The Chryslers were the original settlers of Aurora. They migrated to this quadrant centuries before the StarLock was built, refugees of the third Crusade, in which their home planet, Chrysalia, was obliterated. They were seeking to live peacefully, and in obscurity, lest their enemies find them again. They set out in a fleet of ships, all the survivors in twenty-seven giant ships. They split into nine convoys of threes, and set out for the unsettled Perseus Quadrant.

"They followed the beacon of an exploratory probe to a supposedly habitable planet. When the first convoy got here, they discovered 'habitable' was a relative term. The atmosphere was breathable, but the planet was almost as barren as Republic. The atmosphere was unstable, and subject to cyclonic windstorms, electrical storms... nasty weather. Very little surface water... most of it was stuck in caverns thousands of meters below ground.

"Anyone else would have turned around, but the Chrysalians thought it was just what they wanted... a planet too harsh to be of interest to anyone else. So, they set up atmospheric stabilizers and gigantic drilling rigs to pull water to the surface. They literally filled in the planetary oceans, which stabilized the climate. They terraformed the landscape with trees and grass, planted crops, imported animals. Everything you see out there," Keeler gestured toward the distant hills, still swapping misty-wet kisses with the cloud cover, "is here because of them. They were very inventive and resourceful. They learned to harness the auroras as a power source. The auroras fed the atmospheric stabilizers, the water

extractors, the terra-forming machines... they created a feedback loop that calmed the atmosphere."

"I guess the technology of the Commonwealth helped them."

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"At the time, their technology may have been inferior to ours, if you can believe that. Even with our technology, you can't domesticate a planetary scale eco-system overnight. The first century was incredibly rough. Almost half of the first colonists didn't make it through the first year. A lot of them died the first day. The first colony ships to land here were called *Exodus*, *Jeremiah*, and *Habakkuk*." He paused. "Since, I don't have a segue, you're going to have to just ask me what the most interesting part about the colony ships was."

Alkema bit. "What was the most interesting part about the colony ships?"

"Funny you should ask. They were made out of ice."

Alkema blinked. "You're kidding."

"I found it hard to believe myself, but the construction records show that the colony ships... they were huge, too. Twice as big as *Pegasus*, with 10,000 colonists. Ever see an iceberg in the Borealan Sea?"

"Neg, but in training, I once saw a giant ice-steroid the Republickers extracted from the planet Archon."

"Well, these ships didn't look like either one of those things. More like a great long icicle." Keeler then projected a picture, a compound visual image and 3-D schematic extracted from one of the illustrated encyclopedias. Not one icicle, but four long pointed icicles, a big one for the

main hull and three small ones containing propulsion, veins of ice wrapping all around them.”

“Did they travel in cryo-stasis?” Alkema asked.

“Some did,” said Keeler. “Some did, but the majority lived pretty much as we do, extraordinary considering the voyage took most of a lifetime to complete. They were concerned that the planet they reached might have not an inadequate water supply, so, they carried theirs with them, wrapped around a central core that contained habitation decks, engineering areas, and food supplies. When they reached Aurora, they decided that planet was ideal for their needs, habitable, but so distant and so ... forbidding they felt safe. When they attempted to land, *Habakkuk* was caught in a severe atmospheric disturbance and broke up in the atmosphere. There were only a handful of survivors.” He paused. “They named their first settlement *Habakkuk Alta*. You’ve been there. It’s now known as Nettwerk City.”

“So they also must have carried the terra-forming machines with them,” Alkema looked at Keeler’s face. “You’re about to tell me I’m wrong again.”

“You’re half right. They didn’t carry any machines themselves, they carried machine seeds... self-replicating devices that built the machines that built the terra-forming machines. The colonists had other things to worry about. Their ships started melting within a few days of arrival. You know that large lake to the east of Nettwerk City?”

“Za.”

“That’s all that’s left of them. There not being an abundance of building materials on the planet, they literally dug an underground city. It was the only place they were protected from the constant windstorms. Eventually, two generations after the arrival of the first colonists, when they were able to go for a few days at a time without having a tornado, they began building the first above-ground settlements.”

“Does the underground city still exist?”

“My guess is that it does, and it is very likely in the vicinity of Nettwerk City.”

Alkema nodded. He looked out through the window again, at the rich farmland and verdant hills, and tried to imagine it as a barren, hurricane-swept, wasteland. “They really worked a miracle,” he said.

“Every colony is a miracle... but, za, what they did here, and in only about a century, is incredible. All in all, nearly a hundred and fifty thousand Chrysalians eventually migrated to Aurora, and within about three hundred years, they had a planetary population in the tens of millions.”

Keeler sighed. “It was probably too good to last. While the first Aurorans were building their civilization, the Commonwealth was fighting the Later Crusades. When the Crusades were over, the Commonwealth turned its attention to the Perseus Quadrant, again. Then, the Commonwealth went and built a StarLock practically at Aurora’s doorstep. The Perseus Quadrant was opened for mass immigration, and, naturally, a lot of the newcomers were drawn to Aurora. I mean, Sapphire had a population

the size of a summer camp and Republic was just a mining outpost. Aurora was thriving, had cities, its own culture.

“At first, the Chrysalians welcomed the opportunity. They thought new inhabitants would help speed the development of their world. Unfortunately, I think they fell into a trap,” Keeler explained. “The bravest and hardiest of the colonists went on to colonies that were underdeveloped, like our own. The least adventurous stayed here, on a colony that was almost as established as the worlds in the Orion Sector.”

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“You are saying, the new colonists had nothing to contribute?”

Keeler shook his head. “Neg, that’s not what I am saying at all. But the colony’s population doubled in the generation after the StarLock became operational. With growth came conflict. Now, this next part, I have some difficulty with. I’ve only found one historian, Castilio Prophet was his name, who really dealt in depth with how the Chryslers became, essentially, outcasts on their own planet, no, needless to say, only one theory so far. He talks about a huge influx of colonists from a colony called Zeta Maxis. Like many of the other settlers, they were drawn to Aurora because its climate was pleasant and there were commercial opportunities, but for some reason, they could not stand the Chrysalians. No, that’s not true... Prophet makes the reasons very clear. They hated the Chrysalians because the Chrysalians owned everything worth owning on the planet, including the culture. The Maxians hated them for it, because they wanted it.”

“Why didn’t they just start their own colony.”

Keeler clucked to himself. "Oh, my dear sweet naïve boy. They didn't want to start their own colony, they wanted Aurora. It's always easier to take what someone else made than build something yourself. For thousands of years, that was human nature. The Chrysalians opened up to the newcomers, and gave them access to more wealth and power, but.... Again... the people who got wealth and power by demanding it came to believe that demanding it, as opposed to earning it, was the most effective way to enrich themselves. The newcomer elite was based on people who had achieved wealth and power without earning it. All they knew how to do was demand more of it, and by the time the Chrysalians figured this out, they were already past the point of no return. Within another century, the Chrysalians were pushed out of the major cities --- the cities that eventually became Megaplexes. They moved into the hardscape,. Once again, they perservered. They have built a rather pleasant, if boring, civilization that seems to co-exist side-by-side with the new Aurorans. However, they are smart enough not to get too prosperous, or let the Aurorans get too close."

"Same planet, different worlds," Alkema said.

Keeler stood and pounded the desk. "It maddens me that the Aurorans... the Maxian Aurorans, have buried the history of the Chrysalians. They were heroic. Their sacrifices made this planet what it is... and everything they built was taken away from them and debased. Instead of fighting, they took their Exodus inward, and recreated civilization again." He was puffed up in rage. "No race we have so far encountered have earned as much admiration

as the Chrysler Aurorans.... But then I have to remind myself how stupid they were for giving it all away."

Suddenly, the room was cast in blood-red pall. "Oh, this you have to see," Keeler told him. He drew the young man to the huge, panoramic window that fronted the library chamber. "Look and see."

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The Auroran sun was setting, but this was a sunset unlike anything Alkema had ever seen before. The orange and red light of the retreating sun filtered through the dancing light of the aurora, creating an impression that the whole horizon was afire and blazing, burning day into night. The silhouettes of clouds became soot and ashes as the light of day became the smoke and dark at night.

"Kumba-yah!" said Alkema.

"Amazing, isn't it?" They paused and enjoyed the sunset, and then Keeler changed the subject. "I am staying at a Farm nearby, with a great bastard named Creed."

"We've met," Alkema told him.

"The Fair Havenites sent him to 'mind' us. Nothing personal, mind you. It's the Synerplex they really distrust, and they're not convinced whose side we're on yet."

"I promised to keep Max and Trajan away from his daughters. They'll be sleeping on the ship tonight."

"Keeping the lads away from his daughters would not have been difficult," Keeler confided to him. "I've seen them... and heard them. You could lock them in a room with a Mining Guilder who spent the last five months in a processing ship and he still wouldn't touch them."

“All right.”

“I mean, they make the Matrons of Boadicea look like Panrovian Love Goddesses.”

“Kayo.”

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“After you meet them, you’ll understand why all the woolbeasts around here back up and look anxious whenever...” he paused. “Which reminds me, where’s my cat?”

“Back on the ship, out like a light,” Alkema answered.

“Good, he can keep an eye the youth. You and Pieta will be staying at the farm, with us. I need you to help me organize a research team. There is a very rich history to this planet, and I want it fully documented. Also, I would enjoy your company.”

“What about the old abandoned spaceyards?”

Keeler sighed. “Are you still on about that? Cheese Louise. Forget the spaceyards. The answers are here.”

Alkema pretended to agree, but he already knew he was no where near finished with the glowing giant monster men. Not by a long shot.

Prudence

Max Jordan could not sleep, but this was not an indication that anything was wrong. More or less, Max Jones never slept very much. Trajan Lear occupied a sleeper in the rear of the Aves, but Max had never liked the confinement, or the administration of alpha waves to induce restful slumber. His requirements for sleep were

more peculiar, a large, dark, secure room. On Boadicea, he had carved out such a space in *Basil's* cargo bay. This night, or at least, in the half-lit night of Aurora, he felt not the least tired. Max crept out of the ship.

He looked toward Fair Havens, but the town was already asleep. He missed Netzwerk City. He could be back there, playing games in which pretty girls tried to get at his private parts, instead of standing here in the middle of nothing watching the light show undulate slowly above twilight fields and pasture lands.

A sudden noise behind him, a quiet footstep, but loud enough to a boy raised in combat zones, made him turn and strike a defensive pose.

She held a finger across her lips. Stealthy as a cat, she drifted across the floor. Lightly, for she weighed no more than the slightest of women, she joined him, held him close, whispered so softly it might have been telepathy. "You came."

"I said I would," he whispered, his voice cracking even then.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked, eyeing the ship.

Max shook his head. "What about your hotel?"

Calico Jones shook her head. "Not in front of Romeo." She clasped his hand in hers. "Don't sweat, baby, I promise it's gonna happen tonight."

"We could get another hotel," Max said hopefully.

She smiled and giggled. "Tonight, I think it's warm enough for al-fresco."

She led him away from the ship, Max moving a little awkwardly, inconvenienced by a part of his anatomy that was jumping the gun on jumping her bones. Not far from the concrete of the landing field was a little wood, separated only by a locked fence and a few meters of scrubby pasture.

Under the cover of trees, Calico quickly stripped off his shirt. "Mmmm, nice..." she said, putting herself close to him. "For a baby, you sure got a nice torso."

"Thank you," he said, feeling his entire upper body blush. Calico Jones removed her own top, revealing a thin, dark-skinned body and smallish, slightly pointed breasts. Max stared at her for a moment, not really sure what to do. She took his hands and laid them on her breasts, showing him how she liked men to fondle them.

"You've really never done it before?" she whispered. He gently shook his head, a shock of his hair caressing her neck.

She cooed. "A real live virgin... this is my special night."

Calico Jones blew sweet scented breath across him. He felt heady and light, intoxicated as she drew him close to her. Her warm soft hands were already enclosing his loins. Nothing had ever felt so good before.

He barely noticed the shadow that flickered over them, swiftly and silently, the silhouette of a bird set against the dazzle of the sky.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pegasus – Lateral Weapons Array, Station 27

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On each of *Pegasus's* outer blades there was a line of ion-cannons, part of the ship's defensive weapons phalanx. The ion cannons were frightening devices, shining black armor surrounding the thick bulbous roots connected to the swiveling mechanism built into the deck that gave them 360 degrees of firing range. At the tip of their long hard barrels, a round hood parted to reveal five pointed barrels that directed blasts of energy into space. Sheathed, they resembled a chorus line of enormous black phalluses, and the weapon designers at Sapphire's Kill-O-Blast Space Weapons Company, if anyone had asked if the resemblance was intentional, would have answered, "Damed right!" and grinned with pride.

The phalanx guns had served *Pegasus* well at Meridian and Boadicea. Their deadly bolts of supercharged plasma had cleared a path through the "sinister buckyballs from hell" unleashed by Meridian's alien regulator overlords. The guns had obliterated the attack craft of the Aurelians in the Boadicea system, blasting them to burning wads of gas and debris. More recently, the guns had tried their best against the onslaught at the StarLock, and not having any specific targets to shoot at, had been ineffective, but that was not really their fault.

Tactical TyroCommander Redfire stood at the rear of the huge weapon, checking out improvements to the targeting systems and power boosts based on specifications transmitted through the StarLock. He gently

stroked the input display, more firepower at his fingertips than the combined armies of all the wars in ancient Earth. At the back of his mind, he wondered what would happen if he parted the blast shield, and unloosed a dispersed bolt of terra-voltage ions into the already highly charged atmosphere of Aurora. Could he initiate a cascade reaction that would ignite the entire atmosphere, or at least a major part of it?

The hatch at the far end of the room slid open, without looking, he knew it was she. The armaments deck was sufficiently lit, but in his mind's eye, the opening of the hatch had sent a shaft of light into a darkened room, projecting the elongated shadow of her form over him.

"Hello, Phil," Eliza Change said, walking into the room. "You've been avoiding me."

He turned toward her. "Za, well... the thing about that is..." He glanced furiously around the deck for a convenient exit. No such thing. He scratched his head, brushed his palm against the flat-top of his scalp. "I thought it would have been awkward."

"For you, you mean?"

"Nothing ever seems awkward to you," he told her. "I guess it's the gift of precognition."

She studied his face. "Do you regret what happened?" she asked. Halo Jordan had once asked him the same question, in the same neutral tone of voice, but she had betrayed herself with the raising of a single eyebrow. Eliza Change gave him no such outward clue to whatever emotions were inside of her.

“There’s no good way to answer that question.”

“In this case the truth will do.”

“How about a half-truth,” he said. “I regret what we did on the planet, not because of you, but because it just showed me again, I have no mastery of the self. I’m weak, and my nature ruled over me.”

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She sighed. “Your groundling code of sexual behavior is the only thing in the universe more complex than the Republic Ministry of Labor Mining Ship Inspection and Labor Standards protocol. Either one makes Hyperspatial Navigation as straightforward as using the hygiene pod by comparison.”

Redfire turned away from the input display, which closed down and folded back into the weapon. “It’s not an issue of sexual morality, it’s an issue of self-control. One of these days, I just want to be stranded on a planet with a beautiful woman and *not* make love to her.”

“Why is that important to you? Your marriage to Flight Commandant Jordan is dissolved. According to the laws of your planet, you have no further obligation to her.”

Redfire closed his eyes slowly, as though to shut out unbearable pain. “Don’t bring Halo into this.”

“But if not for Jordan, what are you saving yourself for?”

“That’s not ...” he began to say, and then he just let words come out without filtering them through the usual gates. “I treated Halo Jordan like a piece of slag. She didn’t end our marriage, I did. She only made it convenient for me to do so. I ruined her, I ruined me, I ruined Max and

Sam, and given time, I will ruin you, too. So, stay the Hell away from me."

Eliza only stared as though she were looking right through him. He felt like she was embracing him, but when he moved to brush her arms away, she wasn't touching him. She had done the same thing to him on Dominia. It was like a Sumacian Mind Trick.

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"What we did on that planet started something," she told him, with utter seriousness. "We chose a path, we are on that path together now. Our fates are entwined."

He banged his fist on the control column so hard he felt a crack in the bones of his wrist. "Ow!" he said.

He felt her kissing him, a trick of the mind, or an awakened memory from Dominia, he did not know, but it frightened and angered him. "Stop that!"

"I'm not doing anything," she told him firmly. "And we do have a future together. You can fight it if you want, but you shouldn't, it will probably destroy you."

Aurora – MAARRS Megaplexus

There was a tunnel in the cleft of the mountain pair that separated the peninsula of the MAARRS Megaplex from the plain and valleys beyond. The maglev train drove for the tunnel, a long cylinder of shining metal, colored pink and orange in the light of the setting sun that filtered through the haze that clung to the tops of the mountains. It plunged in, pushing airstream in front of it, blowing wind ahead in a rush through the tunnel, kicking up scraps of plastic and other debris.

The train emerged into the MAARRS Megaplexus itself, passing first through the ruined buildings of the outer combat zones, which were curiously quiet for a major megaplex. As the train approached the central city, it split into four separate segments, each one bound for a different station. A single car took the straightline into the very heart of the MAARRS Megaplexus.

Central MAARRS was a grid of interconnected buildings constructed of reinforced steel. They were mostly windowless structures, with blinking white and red lights on top. It reminded Lear, as she gazed levelly through the viewport, of the holo-dioramas of the early mining settlements on Republic.

Her car was directed down a final stretch of track-line toward a secure area of the central complex. The main building of the central complex was a flat-topped pyramid resting atop eight thick metal supports that lifted it above the dark, industrial city it commanded. It looked kind of like an abstract spider sculpture.

The car pulled into a berth, and docking arms deployed on either side of it. Four heavily armed human guards, supplemented by hulking combat robots, guarded the entrance. Lear exited, dismissed her staff to their hotel, and was escorted by a pair of guards to a secure sky-lift. A swift vertical ride took her to Auntie Maim's office suite on the top floor. The old woman was there, feeding her bird, wearing an electric blue dress and holding a silvery cane. She finished with the bird, taking her time, pretending to ignore Lear at first.

Lear took a seat in the front of the massive desk. "Our mission was successful," Lear reported to Auntie Maim. "Your citizen will shortly be returned to you. It was as you said, she wanted to leave."

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"How very nice," said Auntie Maim. She turned away from the birdcage and shuffled toward her desk. "The recovery of our chief weapons designer was of paramount importance, sweetie. But I your disruption of the Supah al-Fareek security network was a delightfully unexpected bonus. We would pay handsomely for the techniques used to achieve that result."

"We have no use for money," Lear told her. If the Fareeks suspected *Pegasus* had anything to do with the attack, they had not yet raised any protest. And she didn't want any over connection to MAARRS to be revealed. "What interests us is the alliance. If they ask, we will help Supah al-Fareek rebuild and improve their security networks against intrusion."

"They would never admit to a compromise of their security," Maim assured her. "And you shall have your alliance. With Hellen Earth back in my stable, the Union of Aurora is a foregone conclusion."

"The Union of Aurora?" Lear asked. "Under you?"

"Under MAARRS," Maim clarified, she let out a long sigh. "The fulfillment of a lifelong dream, not just my dream, but the dream of millions. An end to the corruption and oppression of the Synerplex, replaced with a single, unified and eventually democratic planetary government."

“How does Hellen Earth help achieve that goal? She’s only one woman”

Auntie Maim chuckled. “She is more than just one woman, she is the key to unification. If we do not unify, our system, our planet, faces ruin.”

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Lear demurred. “While I certainly appreciate the efficiency of unified planetary rule, we did not come here to upset the balance of power.”

“Didn’t you?” Maim asked.

Lear contemplated this, and found her gaze fixed on the enormous map behind Auntie Maim’s desk. The position of each major Megaplex was indicated by a large red dot, the position of the minor Megaplexes by smaller yellow dots. Once again, it reminded her of the City-States of Republic. “Perhaps, we could help guide you toward the peaceful integration of the Megaplexes.”

A twinkle came to her Maim’s blue eyes. “Oh, dearie,” she said. “There is only one path to world peace, and that path is to disarm anyone who might be a threat to those of us who want peace.”

Aurora – The Creed Homestead

In the hayloft of the Creed’s barn, David Alkema was spent. Pieta was also spent. They had snuck from the house earlier in the evening, sensing that the Creeds would have disapproved of even their legitimate marital coupling, and spent each other in fulfillment of a fantasy each had previously considered unattainable.

They lay back on the blanket spread over the soft straw of the loft, rich, pungent smells of crops, animals, and old wood. Pieta kissed her husband's bare smooth chest. "Counting the cargo locker on the ship, that's three times today. You are turning into a veritable Aurelian."

"Don't know why," Alkema mused, playing with her hair. "I know I get randy after a danger mission, but those diplomatic functions usually sap the life right out of me."

"I thought the reception was kwazappy," Pieta said, the white of her smile glistening. "They lent me a beautiful gown to wear, black, with red and yellow panels on the sleeves and hem. Every man there was looking at me."

"Hurm," said Alkema, while he was still thinking of a sexy comeback, the voice of cranky Festus Creed came bellowing across the yard.

"Cwikey! Get yoah hands offa me, you cohpowate scumbag interloper!"

"Something's up," Alkema said.

"You think?" Pieta continued to snuggle. "I can get something up."

But Alkema knew his duty to his commander. He gave her an affectionate kiss on the forehead, and pressed her back into the soft bedding. "Stay here," he told her, knowing full well she would stay only if that's what she wanted to do. He pulled on pants and a jacket and, almost as an afterthought, strapped a pulse cannon to his forearm. "As soon as this I find out there's nothing wrong in the farmhouse, I may want to make it four."

He climbed down a rough wooden ladder to the floor of the barn, and made quickly for the house.

A light was burning in the kitchen, which was in an annex to the main house, half hidden by the squat trees of the foreyard. Their thick, twisted trunks were topped by large thick heads of leaves in tight bundles like cabbages or roseheads. They processed oxygen with great efficiency, and had been spread across the planet when it was terraformed to stabilize the atmosphere. Now, they provided Alkema cover as he moved toward the house. In the yellow light of the kitchen windows, he saw silhouettes of two men facing each other down. The kitchen door would take him in behind one of the men. He took a deep breath and moved forward. The arguing continued.

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"There's no need for a scene, Rackham," said a voice, vaguely familiar, but not quite recognizable.

"You'll nevuh take me alive!" Creed shouted back.

And so forth. Alkema gently pressed down on the door latch. It did not move, locked from the inside. He tapped on the door. "Mr. Creed," he called out. "This is Lieutenant Alkema from *Pegasus*. Are you in need of assistance."

"Dave, get your buttocks in here," called Commander Keeler. "There's a guy with a gun in here, and he's pointing it at *me*!"

"The door's locked, sir."

"This doesn't concern you, lieutenant Alkema," said another voice.

Now, Alkema recognized the voice as belonging to Alpha Romeo Jones. "Jones, what are you doing in there?"

"He's pointing a gun," Keeler repeated. "At me!"

Alkema paused. "I'm coming in, Jones. I know you won't harm Commander Keeler, because you've seen our technology, and you know *Pegasus* could enact some serious consequences. I only want to protect the Commander. You let me do that, or there's no way in Hell you get out of there."

There was a long pause, during which, the door latch clicked. The door opened slowly, spilling thick yellow light into the pale gray night. Slowly, with the pulse gun before him, Alkema entered the kitchen. Jones pointed a large, long, heavy, scary black firearm in his direction. Keeler and Creed stood next to one another on the adjacent wall. In Jones's other hand, he flashed an official looking thick metal object on which bright blue electric sigils were glowing. "It's actually Agent Jones, Ident. 54699-69-69. Netzwerk City External Security. This man calling himself Creed is actually one Buster Rackham, a wanted fugitive, and I am taking him back."

Keeler asked, "What's he wanted for, practicing anthropology without a license, or just being a cranky son of a bitch?"

"That's a matter of Synerplex security," Jones told them. "That's all I can say. Now, excuse me while I nail this guy."

"He wants to dwag me back to MAAWWS. I wefuse to go."

Alkema's eyebrows knit together. "You said you were from Nettwerk City, what does MAARRS have to do with this?"

Jones scowled. "This does not concern you."

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Suddenly, every window in the homestead exploded inward. Glass showered the kitchen.

"What the..." said Jones.

"My beans..." Creed yelled. "I mean windows..."

"You didn't have to do that!" Keeler reproached Jones.

"That's not me," Jones told him. "I don't even know what the..."

At which point, the kitchen door exploded outward from its hinges in splinters of wood and metal, knocking Alkema face-first onto the floor.

"Now, who could that be?" said the commander unflappably.

When the dust cleared, a statuesque blond woman entered through the door, square-shouldered with determination and charged for the table.

"Shit!" said Jones. He pointed his big scary gun at her. In one swift motion, she disarmed him and smashed him against the head with the butt of the handle. Jones fell unconscious under the table. Alkema raised his pulse weapon, then thought better of it.

Hellen Earth held out her hand toward Creed. "Come with me, father."

"Who the hell awe you?" Creed demanded.

She blinked at him. "It's time to go. You have to finish your work."

"I'm not goin' anywheyyuh. You'll nevuh take me alive."

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The woman stared at them. "I cannot kill any of you."

"Can't or won't?" Keeler asked reflexively. "Uh, never mind. Either way, I'm good."

The woman then back-flipped back out through the front door.

"Well, that's over with," Keeler said. "Now, back to the 'A' crisis."

Outside, someone screamed.

"Pieta!" Alkema cried out he stood and was about to charge through the door when Hellen Earth marched back in, holding Pieta in a headlock.

"I can not kill any of you," she said. "But I can inflict pain on this female, and I will, in large amounts, unless father comes with me."

"Pieta," Alkema raised his pulse cannon. Hellen Earth deftly moved Pieta in front of body, as a shield.

"Aw, dammitalltohell," said Creed. "Put the woman down. I'll go with you."

"Rackham..." Jones began, "I can't let you."

Hellen Earth picked up a saucer from the cupboard and flipped it Jones, hitting him on the bridge of the nose and knocking him back. He collapsed to the ground.

She extended a hand. "Come with me now, father."

Aurora – New Outer Canaan – The Aves Prudence

A few miles away, two young bodies, having recently finished the act of copulation, lay on the grass. On the surface, it was a scene much less chaotic than what was happening in the Creeds' kitchen. The adolescent consciousness of the freshly de-virgined Max Jordan begged to differ.

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Max Jordan and Calico Jones had finished... very quickly, in a sudden whirlwind in which clothes were rapidly shed and bodies conjoined with equal speed and clumsy enthusiasm. It was over so fast there was barely time to record a memory of the transaction, and Max Jordan had found himself out of breath, laying in the wet grass, not knowing how he felt, but knowing it should be something different than how he was actually feeling.

Was this what it was supposed to be like? He wondered.

Calico Jones lay in the grass also, her body naked beneath the skylight. Her eyes were closed, a half smile rested on her lips. She looked satisfied at least.

Max just wanted to get back to *Prudence* and shower off. He felt as though there were a thin layer of grease on his skin. Her smell was on him, and he discovered it slightly sickened him with its sweetness. He wanted something strong to drink, as though to wash the taste of her from his mouth. All of which confused him. Less than half an hour earlier, all he had wanted to do was ... to do what he had just finished doing. Now, he wondered what had possessed him. He felt more frustrated now than he had before, and without hope of relief.

Was this what it was always like? He wondered.

He sat up on the grass and looked around. His pants were nearby, and he reached for them. He pulled on his pants, and reached for his jacket.

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Should he wake her before he went back to the ship? He felt the obligation to do so.

She solved his problem for him by waking up at the moment. She curled and stretched on the ground, and a happy noise escaped her mouth. She rubbed softly at her ladyparts, exciting herself. She grinned. "I got you in me. I knew I'd be the first one to nail a visitor."

"Yeah," Max Jordan said, his lip began to pull into a smile, then stopped.

She must have seen it. "You okay, baby?" Calico Jones asked.

"Za," Max Jordan said, uncertainly.

"Baby, I can tell something's wrong," Calico rolled to face him and stretched an arm languorously. "I've been around that block more than once."

Max Jordan slowly rotated his head until he could face her again. She smiled at him, and he noticed how small her teeth were, in comparison to her tongue. He recalled the touch of her hair, not soft, but dry and lacquered with something stiff. He saw her too-large hands, and the strange, not quite symmetrical angle of her eyes. Somehow, she had seemed more exotic, more tempting before, and now, all he could see were her flaws. *Was this also what it always was like?* "I guess, well, I guess, it just wasn't what I thought it would be."

Calico laughed deeply. "Oh, that's just 'cos it was your first time, baby-fuck. Believe me, I know what it's like to be a horny little boy. I used to be one."

The Creed Homestead

Jones was handcuffed to the kitchen table and disarmed. Mrs. Creed sat across from him, glaring through red-rimmed, tear-stained eyes. Pieta lay on a couch in the living room, with Creed's three daughters, offering each other comfort.

"Zilla is en route," David Alkema reported. "*Prudence* will be en route as soon as Trajan... as soon as Flight Lt. Lear can account for the whereabouts of Max Jordan. We should be able to evac in less than ten minutes."

Keeler nodded. "That should give us a little time to get to know our friend Mr. Jones, if that is indeed his real name."

He stared back at them for a moment, then finally said. "Yes, my name really is Alpha Romeo Jones. I'm with Nettwerk Security. I was assigned to keep you out of trouble."

"That never works out very well," said Alkema.

"What does Nettwerk City want with Creed," Keeler asked. "And before you tell us it's none of our business, I could leave at the mercy of the four distraught women of the Creed family."

As Keeler had indicated, Pater Creed's defense of his girl's honor was also unnecessary. Full-bodied, they were, and strong, but it was difficult to imagine anyone other the

Eddie Roebuck making a play for them, bringing to mind the old joke about women and Panrovian hover-cycles, the punchline being you wouldn't want your friends to see you riding either one. The three Creed daughters --- Rickisha, Cambria, and Zamorah --- were sobbing angrily in the next room.

Alpha Romeo Jones sighed. "I'm also a bounty hunter in my spare time. I recognized Creed's biometric profile when we met at the aeroplex."

"Festus was a good man," the wife wailed, "How many other men would turn their backs on the Synerplex, to take on a widow wife with three grown daughters?"

"I don't know why MAARRS wants him," Jones protested. "I only know he's worth half a million synercreds brought back alive. Now, that ... woman... is going to claim the bounty."

"Who was she and why was she flying one of our Aves?" Alkema asked.

"More to the point," Keeler asked. "Where was she flying it to? To *Pegasus*?"

"She's going to MAARRS," Jones said. "Although it's probably too late to catch her, now."

"She called him father," Alkema reminded them. He asked Mrs. Creed. "Did he have a daughter?"

"Laws, no..." she said. "He was a plexer before he came here. He got sterilized when he was fifteen. Irreversible."

Keeler's lips turned into his mouth, and became a firm horizontal line of determination. "All right, Dave, get your ship here and let's take off after her. Tell Captain Driver ..."

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"Actually, Lt. Lear is piloting *Prudence*."

"Oh, boy," said Keeler emotionlessly. "If his flight skills are anything like his mother's command skills..."

Before he finished, the mugs of warm steaming milk and spices on the table began to rattle and clatter in agitation.

"Oh, magic. Now, a groundquake," Keeler muttered.

Alkema shook his head. "Aurora is tectonically inert. There shouldn't be any groundquakes."

The mugs and plates rattled ever more loudly. "It's coming from outside," said Jones. Keeler and Alkema rushed outdoors.

The light in the east grew brighter as the sun rose. The eastern sky began to blaze with the tendrils of dawn. The first rays, actually, the first stream of electromagnetic charged particles from the sun hit Aurora's magnetic field and lit up like a neon sign. Sunrise Aurora, blue and pink streamers heralding the rise of the white hot sun.

A thousand aircraft, heavy, armored, and black roared overhead, twice the speed of sound, their engines blackening the sky, their sonic booms shaking the ground. Lightning from the auroras in the sky reached down with electric fingers, playing across their double sets of wings and blazing white and shocking blue against the purple-red sky.

Most of the ships were Aves-size or smaller, but least twenty of them were mega-huge flying battle-craft, a hundred meters long, bristling with armament.

“This can’t possibly be good,” Keeler said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aurora – MAARRS Megaplex

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“I am afraid the Fareeks are very, very cross with us,” sighed Auntie Maim. “I thought you were going to deliver her to us discreetly.”

Lear watched the white triangle representing the Aves *James* bee-lining hard toward the west coast, and a few hours behind it was a massive force of Fareek ships. “Flight Lieutenant James was instructed to fly with holoflage shields up, and to drop off our passenger in a neutral location.”

“Instead, he is leading them directly to us,” Maim shook her head.

Lear touched the back of her chin. “Lear to *Pegasus* Flight Command, have you been able to raise Flight Lieutenant James?”

“Negative, TyroCommander,” answered the voice of Specialist Claudius McCormick. “*James* is not responding to hails, and the on-board transponder has been disabled.”

Lear frowned. This was very, very wrong. “Can you track the ship?”

“With some difficulty... the atmosphere is highly charged. It’s difficult to gain a fix on *James’s* position.”

Maim sighed. “All right, well, I guess we will have to use our alternate strategy. We had prepared for the possibility of Fareek tracing her back to us. The important thing is that she get here.”

Maim crossed the room and activated a bank of monitors. Distant Early Warning stations acquired *James* as it passed over the city's outermost defenses. The ship's image appeared on the central screen, approaching over the western plains. As it passed over a missile station, several sets of missiles turned to track it. Finally, it cleared the mountain range, passed over the iron-work bunkers of the metropolis, and set down a little unsteadily on the roof of the Central Command Complex. The landing pad slowly began descending into the roof, as large blast doors closed over the top.

"What happens next?" Lear asked.

"She will be brought to the Primary Research Center to complete work on the ... the Peace Project."

The ship settled into the top-level hangar. A squad of guards moved into place near the hatch. "A welcoming party," Maim explained. Lear nodded, but wondered why the welcoming party was approaching in full body armor with weapons at ready.

Suddenly, the ship's hatch exploded outward. Lear recognized the detonation of the emergency explosive bolts. The concussive force scattered the front of the honor guard down the ramp. When the dust cleared, Hellen Earth stood in the hatchway, wearing Odyssey-issue battle-armor, heavy pulse cannons strapped to each arm.

A dozen MAARRS guards leveled heavy-duty cannons at her. Hellen Earth launched herself across the hangar, a leap of ten or fifteen meters. She flipped in mid-air and landed on the far side of the second line of guards that had been sent to meet her. As soon as she landed, she began

firing, a full bore fusillade that laid-low the entire line until only she was standing.

“Something’s wrong,” Lear concluded.

“Not necessarily,” Maim said, watching the action with keen interest, and an expression of admiration. On the screen, Hellen Earth proceeded toward large, shielded doors that marked the entrance to the MAARRS Central Command Complex, and found them locked. She heaved against them, and they did not budge.

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Maim observed this with satisfaction. “More guards should be there momentarily.”

But Hellen Earth didn’t wait. She moved away from the door, and blasted it with the pulse cannon. It held. She stopped and scanned her surroundings with a look of grave intensity. Then, she detached the power pack from one of the guns, played with it for a second, and threw it toward the hatch. Almost simultaneously, she commenced a series of backward, gymnastic flips that carried her to almost to the edge of the rooftop before the powerpack detonated in a blinding flash of light.

The bank of screens went blank. “Loss of primary monitoring systems,” said the computer’s voice, like a younger, more monotone Auntie Maim. “Re-initialization in 20 seconds.”

Lear glanced over to the other wall-screen, which showed the Supah al-Fareek air armada closing on the city at a frightening clip.

When the monitors recovered, Maim checked them, and smiled with satisfaction when saw that the access

hatch had held. But she was no longer in the roof hangar. "Acquire Intruder," Maim said, voice quivering from age or fright, it was hard to tell. A monitor picked Hellen Earth, four levels below, moving toward the central information systems interplexus.

"How did she get down there?" Lear said, in astonishment.

Maim hit a comm-switch. "Attention in the cyber-core. Red Door Protocol is now invoked. Please secure the cyber-core immediately."

She turned to Lear. "We always had to consider the possibility that Hellen Earth's defection was a trojan horse to infiltrate our cyber-core, where all of our company secrets and stratagems are kept.

Lear scowled. "This looks more like a frontal assault than a covert operation."

"It would have taken her years to be granted the necessary access to our systems," said Maim. "We would have detected her. It appears that your technology will give her more immediate access."

Hellen Earth looked around for a moment, listening to the alarms, then began running. She soon reached almost inhuman speed. Various monitors showed sections of the facility locking down, large armored hatches sliding shut, ladders and stairs withdrawing behind flat surfaces, just after she passed by, through, and/or over them.

When the lockdown was complete, a robotic voice informed Auntie Maim. "Red Door Protocol has been invoked. Central Datacore is secure."

“Where’s Hellen Earth?” Lear asked.

“Central utility shaft,” Maim indicated. This shaft was a cylindrical area running down the center of the complex. Pipes and tubes for power, ventilation, cooling, and water ran down the center. Hellen Earth stood on a very narrow ledge, with barely enough room to move her feet.

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“She’s contained,” Maim said. “Now, we only need to figure out a way to.”

Hellen Earth looked round the shaft as though deciding, then launched herself into the pit.

Lear gasped watching her plummet nearly a hundred meters. Then, with a bone-jarring crunch, she caught herself on a handhold halfway down. She pulled herself up. From her landing pack, she extracted a long metal tool, a kind of high-tech screwdriver. She jammed it between the side-plates of the central cylinder, cracked one open, and let it fall to the floor below. She grabbed a glowing blue optical data cable, ripped it free and pulled it up from the bottom. Using this, she rappelled to the bottom of the chamber.

Maim pounded her terminal. “Fist me!” she spat.

Showing extreme adeptness for a woman in high heels, Hellen Earth made the remaining distance in a few seconds. She was now at the bottom of the utility shaft. Below the utility pipes was a data back-up server, a cylinder about twice as tall as a man, and as big around as four big fat men. It was just an auxiliary node, the data there would only be as current as yesterday, and who would look for a data-bank at the bottom of a utility shaft?

She pulled open one side of the data core and studied it. It was stacked with oblong crystals, glowing white and electric blue. Crystalline memory banks, Lear thought. Rather crude, but very good if you wanted to isolate data in a single place. Hellen Earth reached in and pulled out a single blue crystal.

"Tie me up and douche me," Maim swore. "She went right past the decoys and grabbed the Peacemaker crystal. We cannot let her leave with it." Her smooth old hands were shaking as they keyed in the necessary codes. "Initiate Omega Red Protocol. Authorization Maim: Alpha One. Enable Code: Maim Alpha Two. Immediate ignition."

Alarms sounded again. On the screen, Hellen Earth looked up in shock and surprise. "Red Omega protocol initiated. Data-core physical self-destruct initiated."

Explosive charges in the well of the utility core detonated. For a brief second, the bottom of the well was hotter than the Auroran sun. Electrical discharge danced in the space between the walls and the cylinder. Then, the hundred-meter utility core collapsed into the bottom, and the pit filled with semi-molten debris.

Power wavered momentarily in the Central Command as auxiliary generators replaced the systems lost in the utility shaft. "I regret that," Maim said. "Years of work for nothing," she sank back in her seat. "I am going to have some hot tea made, and then I am going to bathe in it."

Lear was crestfallen. "And the alliance?"

"Without a United Aurora, there can be no alliance," Maim said. "The Synerplex would not allow..."

Suddenly the west wall of the central command nexus exploded with a mighty crash. When the dust cleared, Hellen Earth stood before them, uninjured, without so much as a wrinkle in her jumpsuit, and glowing in the sudden darkness. Strapped to Hellen Earth's back, no longer hidden by the Warfighter armor, was the poltergeist suit.

"Mother of us all," Lear managed to say.

Hellen Earth looked her over. "Not you," she said. She turned toward Maim and leveled the pulse cannon.

"Carbon-Red-Syzygy-pellucid-nightfall-snow," said Maim rapidly.

Hellen Earth withdrew the weapon and her arm fell to her side. Maim smiled. "The disarming failsafe. Now, Sulfur-Blue-Apogee-Opaque..."

Hellen Earth screamed, a single sharp, piercing, perfect tone that drowned out all other noise. Maim raised her voice and tried to complete the sequence, but she may as well have been miming. Hellen Earth jumped upward and disappeared through the ceiling, like an untrapped spirit.

"She's heading back to the hangar," Maim hissed.

Lear touched her COM Link. "TyroCommander Lear to Aves *James*. I need direct access to ship's sytems. Code: Silent-Order-five-five-omega-five."

The ship answered her. "Code and voiceprint confirmed. Proceed."

"Lockdown mode now. Enable."

“Lockdown mode enabled.” *James* closed its hatches, and grew armor plating across all access points and vulnerable systems. “Lockdown mode complete.”

“She will not leave,” *Lear* said firmly.

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“Security, all surviving units converge in the hangar,” *Maim* ordered.

A few moments later, A small craft, not a lot larger than a surveillance drone lifted into the air. Its shape was almost wasp-like. Six landing legs folded into the ship as its jet-pods lifted it upward. It rose into the gauzy yellow sky, and shot southward over the mist-shrouded city.

Aurora - New Outer Canaan - The Aves Prudence

“I have never seen him like this,” said the Prime Commander. “Are you sure none of you blasted him with a stun pulse?”

“Neg, Commander, I’m sure of it,” *Alkema* squinted at *Max Jordan*. “Almost sure of it.”

“Why is everybody blaming me?” *Max Jordan* came back, flushing red.

“We certainly could understand the temptation,” *Keeler* said.

Max did not take it as a joke. “Leave me alone! I don’t care!” He stamped off toward the flight deck.

Keeler stared quizzically at the display of adolescent histrionics, then shrugged, bent over the unconscious figure on the landing couch, and screamed. “Wake up!”

Queequeg slowly opened his eyes. His mouth opened in a huge, languorous yawn and he blinked at the humans standing over him.

“Good Afterdawn, my furry feline friend,” said Keeler. Page | 311

“Ferrets?” said the cat, rubbing its ears with its paws.

“Queequeg, Are you all right?” Keeler asked.

Queequeg blinked at him. “You’re not a ferret, are you?”

Alkema turned to Keeler, the expression on his face asking for an explanation. “My brother-in-law Cosmo had a ferret when Queequeg was a kitten. The thing used to terrorize him.”

“Until I ate him,” Queequeg said. “In a dream I had. Why was I dreaming of ferrets... or was it one big ferret?” Everyone was staring at him. “How long have I been napping?”

“As far as we can figure, at least fourteen hours?”

“That’s not possible!” The cat insisted. “I should be dead! I never sleep that long?” Finally, he seized on something too concrete not to be real. “I have to pee, which one of you do I like the least and where’s his bed?”

Queequeg tried to stand and walk but his back legs failed him and he fell on his rump again. He shook his head, and quickly adopted an “I-meant-to-do-that,” facial expression. Concentrating now, he stood up and rather shakily walked to the hygiene pod.

“Is he all right?” Alkema asked.

“The planet’s magnetic field may be interfering with his equilibrium,” Keeler said. “The first settlers lost most of their pets and herd animals that way. Cats are especially sensitive to electro-magnetic fields.”

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After Queequeg took care of business, Honeywell linked in from *Pegasus* to fill them in on what they knew. “From as near as we can tell, the MAARRS complex took something or someone from the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex and, in retaliation, the Fareeks have launched a massive attack against the MAARRS Megaplex. MAARRS is threatening a counter-attack, and apparently, there’s talk of nucleonic weapons and an all-out superpower confrontation.”

Alkema added, “*James* went straight to MAARRS after attacking us. It can’t be a coincidence that that strange woman showed up, kidnapped Creed, and left just before the al-Fareeks attacked. She’s connected to this.”

Queequeg took a seat and blinked at them all. “Kayo. Stupid question from the cat: Doesn’t *Pegasus* have the firepower to kick all of their asses combined?”

Honeywell sighed. “According to TyroCommander Redfire, both sides have hidden weapons all over the planet. If we intervene and stop the big war, it’s just going to leave us with a couple hundred small ones.”

Queequeg asked, “Next stupid question from the cat. What do you expect the cat to do about it?”

No one seemed to have any good ideas, but Alkema had a half-decent one. “Maybe we should start by finding the woman, find out what MAARRS and Fareek are

fighting over, and get them to negotiate with us instead of killing each other.”

“How do you suggest we do that?” Keeler put to him.

Keeler shook his head. “We really stuck our wang into a hive of nectar fairies this time.”

MAARRS MegaPlex Central Command

Auntie Maim stood calmly at her control podium, giving orders in a gentle, grandmotherly voice. “Seal the datacore, flush the nerve agents, extinguish the fires, and dispatch recovery crews. Have the finance squad tally up how much it will cost to repair this place. Oh, and check on the forsythia plantings in the rear terraces. It’s been dry lately, and they can be a bit delicate this time of year.”

Lear looked at the display. The Supah al-Fareek air force passed over the outermost ring of MAARRS’s defenses. “The armada is approaching, and we’re defenseless.”

Maim shook her head. “Our outer defenses are independent of the datacore and have not been compromised.”

“They don’t seem to be attacking the Fareek Armada.”

“There is no need to...” Maim said. “Not yet, anyway. It will be over an hour before they arrive at the Megaplex. Let’s have some tea, shall we?”

Auntie Maim pulled out an elaborate silver tea service, the design at once exotic and simple, based on geometric forms. The kettle was a fat cream-colored cone with an elaborate handle. The cups were sliced cylinders, with

equally elaborate handles. The sugar bowl was a rectangular prism, the creamer a sphere, and so forth. A red light began flashing above the communication station. A message spelled out:

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INCOMING PRIORITY MESSAGE
BOARD OF DIRECTORS
SUPAH AL-FAREEK MEGAPLEX

Maim addressed it. "Receive transmission."

Rupert Singh Khan, Supreme Chairmen of the Supah Al-Fareek Megaplex appeared in the comm channel. "My Dear Anti-Maim."

"Rupert, you are looking robust. Still following that coffee enema regimen?"

Whether this was friendly talk or provocation, Khan ignored it. "Anti-Maim, early this morning, there was an elaborate assault on my top research facility, resulting in the theft of critical data and the temporary disruption of my entire research repository."

"Oh, Rupert, what an awful day you must be having," Maim said, with almost genuine sincerity in her voice. "A good cup of tea works wonders in these situations. I recommend the Jeremiah Weed and Herbal Spring combination. You'll sleep like a well-medicated child."

Khan sighed. "We pursued a ship leaving the scene to the MAARS Megaplex. One of the visitors' ships as it happened. We have contacted the visitors. They deny involvement. And I am inclined to believe them. This has your handprints on it. I know you Maim. You either masterminded their visit to our Megaplex as a cover, or

you somehow manipulated them into doing your dirty work for you.”

Lear shuddered, she hoped imperceptibly. She was sure this was the fault of those Sapphirean idiots her son had insisted on involving.

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“Rupert, darling...,” Maim began. “Not even an hour ago, my own Megaplex was assaulted. An agent provocateur infiltrated the Central Information Nexus and attempted to steal my critical data, and resulted in the destruction of my critical data depository.” Her tone was as if she were accusing his dog of tearing up her garden. “Now, Rupert, if I were a suspicious sort of person, I might suspect that you conceived of the ‘assault’ on your research laboratory as a cover enabling you to attack mine. As I recall, I have on occasion caught some naughty, naughty men from your Megaplex trying to steal my data, or assassinate me, or threaten members of my family with a violent demise.”

Khan favored her with a strained smile. “My dear, dear woman... let’s not get caught up in who raided whose laboratory, or who tried to assassinate whom. We know you’ve been after the girl for some time, and who can blame you? She is a fine piece of work.”

The dance now took on moves that were very familiar to Goneril Lear; mutual denials of facts everyone on both sides knew to be true. If it played out in the Republicker form, the next stage would be an escalation of implied threats, followed by offers of compromise that neither side could accept.

Khan's face took on a more serious air. "We know that the girl is the key to your plan for a United Aurora. We are well aware of what the implications of a United Aurora are for those of us who do not share your vision. You must be aware that the Synerplexes will not allow that to happen."

Maim chuckled. "Rupert, Rupert, I am an old woman, with wealth beyond imagining. I have no desire to dominate this world...."

"Maim, cut the crap. We want the girl from VENIS."

"Khan, even if I had the metrics, my datacore is smashed, it's in pieces..."

Khan held up a hand. "Don't play games with me, Maim. Return the girl, and we will restore the delicate balance of power among the Synerplexes. Fail to return the girl, and we will reduce your Megaplex to a crater."

Maim gently lowered her cup of tea. "The other Megaplexes would never allow..."

Khan cut her off. "The whole purpose of the Synerplex is to maintain stability while maximizing profit. "They would never allow Global Domination by a single 'plex."

"World Domination?" Lear thought.

"Oh, my dear Rupert," Maim chuckled.

Khan raised one hand as if to demand silence. "The other megaplexes will not come to your aid. They know what the stakes are. We give you twenty hours to respond, or we will destroy MAARRS."

Khan disappeared from the display.

“What a rude, rude man,” Maim said. “I knew I should have had him killed and his head mounted on a pike when I had the chance. Stressed cedar is good for that, once you smooth out the knots.”

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“What did he mean by World Domination?” Lear asked.

“Oh, nothing sweetie, just bluster to justify his position. A United Aurora is anathema to those whose power is vested in the current system. Supah al-Fareek is one of the most... reactionary of the old Megaplexes, and a dangerous threat to future plans.”

Lear’s COM Link signaled for attention. She answered it. “Lear, go ahead.”

Prime Commander Keeler appeared in her eyeware. “Prime Commander, how are you?” she asked. “Have you been alerted to the present crisis?”

“You might say that,” the Prime Commander answered. “My sources tell me you are currently a guest of honor in the city that’s about to be attacked.”

“That is correct. I was concluding a trade and diplomatic mission with ...”

Keeler rolled his eyes. “I understand the aggrieved party is accusing your host of kidnapping one of their citizens, do I have that right?”

“I am aware of that accusation, and I am certain you give it no credibility. My host has accused Supah al Fareek of sending that same person here as a spy,” Lear replied. “Difficult to determine, off-hand, who has the stronger

claim. I suggest a neutral stance until we have more information."

"Ri-I-I-I-ght," Keeler drawled. "But you being in both megaplexes is an interesting coincidence."

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"I see it as an opportunity," Lear replied. "From here, I can work toward peace on the ground, perhaps broker a summit to avoid hostilities."

"Kayo, you do that," Keeler said. "I am interested to know how that Supah al-Fareek citizen in question escaped in a ship that was assigned to your diplomatic party."

"We were performing a technology demonstration in Supah al-Fareek," Lear replied. "The individual in question apparently seized our ship somehow."

"Somehow," Keeler repeated, slowly and dubiously.

"We will know more once we conduct a thorough investigation." Lear went on. "For now, we must find this woman. She escaped in a small craft known as a buzz-copter. Have you, perchance, managed to track her current position?"

Alkema broke in. "*Pegasus* is partially blinded by the charged atmosphere. But we should be able to access ground systems that track the movement of aircraft and isolate any small craft leaving the city in the last two hours. It will be helpful if you can persuade the ground authorities to share any tracking data they have."

"I am sure MAARRS will share that data with you," Lear said. "If you can recover the citizen, we may be able to bring them to the negotiating table."

Keeler sighed. "And insert ourselves into a conflict about which we know nothing. But if we do nothing, millions could die. I guess our least worst option is to find Hellen Earth." He sighed again. "We are airborne, en route toward your current position. We will alter course to track the renegade. Keeler out."

Maim put a hand on Lear's shoulder. Her grip was heavy and warm. "I hope that your commander and his team do locate her. It's bad enough that you failed to deliver her to me, worse that Supah al-Fareek seems to believe that I had masterminded her liberation. If your commander does locate her before my men do, then I will offer your life in exchange for her."

"He would never agree to that," Lear said.

"He won't give in to extortion?"

Lear sighed and admitted the truth, "Nay, he just doesn't like me very much."

"Well, that won't matter very much will it dear? If the Fareeks do attack, you will be among the first casualties. Now, be a dear, shut up and drank your tea."

The Aves Prudence

Alkema was at the tactical station in the flight deck, linking to *Pegasus's* PC-1 as Shayne American transmitted the data. "Tracking solution complete. *Pegasus* tracked the designated craft from the MAARRS Megaplex to these coordinates. They are located near the Nettwerk City Megaplex."

Alkema took the data, and cross referenced it to a map. The location was familiar. “She put down in the old abandoned spaceyards.”

Keeler studied the coordinates. “Saddle up,” he said. “We’re going in. Lear’s kid, alter course for the old abandoned spaceyards.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Aurora – The Airwaves

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The music was strident, heavy on percussion, accompanied by strings overflowing with importance. Across the bottom of every video screen, the words “Breaking News” appeared in a bold red font, followed by the letters “Crisis on MAARRS.” And then, “Brought to you by ‘Aloha Snackbar.’ Eat ‘till you explode!” The words settled into place beneath a pretty young woman who wore a subdued tweed blazer (worn over nothing but a lace bra) and the expression of someone imitating the serious expressions she had personally seen intelligent people use.

“Breaking News. Crisis on MAARRS. I’m Merry Biggins. Less than twenty minutes ago, a fleet of armored air transports landed outside the MAARRS megaplex, 270 kilometers north of our studio center in Nettwerk City. They have assembled here, on the plains just outside the mountain pass that marks the entrance to the MAARRS Megaplex. We have an on-the-scene report from our Senior Conflict Correspondent, Aphrodite Starkers.”

The reporter stepped into view. “Aphrodite Starkers here on the scene, for the Nettwerk News Channel. It is unclear what sparked this crisis, but sources inside both Megaplexes speak of the theft of strategic information, and guerrilla activity within the headquarters of each Megaplex. High level meetings are currently underway involving Auntie Maim, CEO-for-Life-plus-twenty years of

MAARRS, and Rupert Khan, CEO Maximo of the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex.

“I’m standing here on the front lines, with General Luiz “No Lips” Hannibal, the leader of the Fareek assault force. General, can you tell me why you chose to attack at this time.”

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The General glared into the camera, as his mouth parted, one of his upper fangs scratched across an old scar line on his chin. He snarled in a deep, baritone. “MAARRS kidnapped one of us, and we are here to get her back. If they do not return her, they will be destroyed.”

The war correspondent nodded. “Unh-huh, Unh-huh, Could you give us any more specifics?”

The General turned to glare at the reporter. “Yes, puny journalists will be the first to die.”

The war correspondent turned back to her videographer. “Back to you, Merry Biggins.”

“Thanks, Aphro.” She turned back toward the audience. “So, what does war between MAARRS and the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex mean to you. I’m here with retired Nettwerk Security Chief, Hiscock Withers. Hiscock, what can you tell us about the forthcoming conflag.”

Hiscock Withers looked into the camera, an expression of grave concern on his face. “Well, neighbors, Firefight oddsmakers give the advantage to MAARRS, 3.25 to 1, on repelling any Fareek Assault.”

Merry Biggins nodded importantly. “Those are pretty good odds... for MAARRS anyway. I also have, via satellite our Military Affairs Correspondant, Retired

Colonel Buck Nekked, who led the Nettwerk contingent during the ScheisseCorp Conflag. Buck, your analysis?"

The military affairs correspondent nodded gravely. "If anything, that's an underestimation. MAARRS is on their own turf, they're dug in, they've got the advantage of holding a good defensive position. On the other hand, if the Fareeks blockade the city, they could cut their supplies, and wait them out. That doesn't appear to be what they're doing. These are shock troops, they came in here to attack, not to lay siege." He then lifted a small tube of something. "And when the burning and itching of hemorrhoids is laying siege to your ass, you'll want the quick relief of Slick's Ass Medication. Now, in cherry and juicyfruit flavors."

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Merry Biggins then asked, "We're hearing rumors that either side may go nuclear if the conflict isn't settled quickly. Hiscock, your thoughts?"

"That would be very bad," said Hiscock Withers.

"General?" Biggins asked.

"I agree, Merry, it would be bad... but not as bad as hemorrhoids, and when your hemorrhoids are burning like a nuclear conflag..."

Biggins cut him off, "Thank you, General." She turned back to the camera. "No doubt, this is going to be one *fabulous* apocalypse, and sure to impact the second autumn fashion season. For a discussion, we turn to our fashion correspondent, Rikki Fabulous."

Pegasus – Primary Command

TyroCommander Redfire was monitoring the broadcasts from *Pegasus's* Prime Command center. He thought it callow that the people on the planet regarded warfare as a commercial endeavor.

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Shane American broke his attention.
“TyroCommander, we have a tactical assessment of the forces arrayed outside the MAARRS Megaplex. I want to draw your attention to the armored assault vehicles arrayed on the plain to the east of the city.”

An image appeared in a new window to the right of the holographic projection. It looked like an overgrown garbage removal truck from his home planet, covered with thick black armor and fronted with pointy metal spikes. Redfire ordered, “Cross-reference that to our planetary database. Find out what it is.”

“Already did, commander. The Fareeks call these ‘Megaweapons.’ Our scans indicate that each carries a load of tactical missiles... ten of them... tipped with nucleonic fusion weaponry.”

“Allbeing in Heaven!” said a Republicker Specialist named Eads, nominally monitoring communications, but like everyone else on the bridge, glued to developments on the surface.

Redfire nodded grimly. “Their threat to annihilate the city is real. We have eight hours, 63 minutes before they make good on it.”

Aurora – The Old Abandoned Spaceyards

Prudence set down in a few meters away from the abandoned buzz-copter, spitting up a cloud of radioactive dust as she settled. She cleared the ground with a radiation Negatron before opening the hatch, and letting Alkema and Trajan Lear inspect the abandoned buzz-copter.

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“Nothing here, sir,” they reported to Keeler.

Keeler stepped out of the ship, carrying a reluctant cat, and trailing a Max Jordan and a Blade Toto. Toto’s face was slightly flushed, as though experiencing discomfort and being unable to do anything about it. Max Jordan scratched his groin absent-mindedly. Pieta followed behind them.

“I have a fix on her position, Commander.” Alkema pointed along the ground to a kind of large pipe that protruded from the Earth. A hatch at the top was open. “She’s underground. *Pegasus* has a squad of trained combat search-and-rescue Warfighters en route. We could wait here for them.”

Keeler shook his head. “Neg, let them catch up with us. We’re going in.”

Alkema stared at him. “You just want to explore the underground city.”

“Am I that transparent?” the Commander asked him.

“You’ve got that gleam in your eye you only get when you’re about to commit archeology or irritate TyroCommander Lear,” Alkema explained. “This would do both.”

“Well, we do have time. Besides, it’s getting dark, we’ve got plenty to drink, and we’re wearing Spex. Let’s go.”

There was a ladder inside the pipe, leading deep into the ground, a hundred meters or more. The ladder was spotted with rust, and rungs were missing here and there. Alkema led. He wondered whether they would be able to climb out again once they had finished descending into the unabated shadow below.

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At the bottom was a cavern that stretched far into the distance beyond the range of their hand-lights. It sloped off gradually, and there were long flat mesas punctuating it here and there, like a great lake had been drained, and then buried underneath the rock.

Its walls had been made smooth eons earlier by the water that had collected here. The residual dampness chilled the cave even further. Alkema increased the thermal settings in his jacket to compensate.

The ledges surrounding the lake contained crude shelters, some made of rock, some of plastic and metal readily identifiable as cargo containers and dismembered spacecraft parts.

“As underground cities go, this is definitely one of them,” said Commander Keeler.

“This is working out so dambled well for me,” the commander went on. “I wanted to explore the caves where the original settlers live and, hey presto, here I am. I love it when life is convenient.”

"We're all delighted for you, commander," Alkema muttered. He was mapping out the cavern with his Spex, mentally making a list of the things that could kill them: Mutant humanoid cyborgs, radiation and toxic chemicals leached from the spaceyards above them, cave ins, and probably some horrible, awful thing in the darkness they had not thought of yet.

"I'm not detecting any motion, energy readings, or life signatures," he reported.

"Time remaining?" Keeler asked.

"The Fareeks will launch their attack in five hours, eighty-eight minutes."

"I suggest you begin looking for the Super Bimbo," Keeler told him. "I am going to look for signs of the original inhabitation, if there are any. Document what life was like living two hundred meters underneath the surface of a raging planet."

Alkema noted, "If the Fareeks attack, people may find out again."

Pieta added, "I can't believe that two men, one woman, two boys, and a cat hold the fate of a planet in our hands."

"I can't believe you just said that," Keeler told her, rolling his eyes. "All right, Lieutenant Alkema, you, the missus, Lear's kid, and scratchy..."

"I have a rank and name, you know," said Trajan Lear.

"Began searching the caves," Keeler instructed. "Toto and I are going to check out those ruins over there. Toto, are you scratching yourself?"

"Can't help it, sir..." Toto said desperately.

"Where's our healer?" Keeler asked.

"Back in Fair Havens with the Creeds and Joneses."

Keeler steeled himself. "Fortunately, as commander, I believe my command abilities will enable me to triumph over your discomfort. Onward, then... to those shabby looking structures on the ledge over there."

David Alkema made a final scan of the area as Keeler and Toto trotted toward the ledge. "These caves cover over three hundred square kilometers," Alkema told his wife. "That's about the area of Corvallis... er, a good-sized city."

"A dark... damp... underground cave city," Pieta elaborated.

"We've had to hide in caves before," Max Jordan reminded her.

"I didn't like it any better then."

"What do you we do when we find her?" asked Trajan Lear. "Aside from getting righteously beaten up?"

"Set pulse weapons for maximum neural stun and hope for the best," said Alkema. "I wish I could think of a better plan, but I can't. There's no life signs or motion detected in this chamber, so we should move on to the next one, there's a passage beyond that outcropping. We might have to crawl."

Max shifted uncomfortably. "You okay, Max?" Alkema asked.

"Yeah, I'm... great," Max responded. "Let's go get her."

Aurora – MAARRS Megaplexus

“Total Oblivion LIVE!” blared the screen inside Auntie Maim’s bunker. “Countdown to Annihilation!!” A chronometer in a separate screen showed 5 hours 43 minutes until the tactical nucleon assault of the MAARRS Megaplex would commence. At the corner of the other screen, odds-makers now gave 5 to 3 odds that the war would take place, and 3 to 2 odds that Supah al-Fareek would obliterate MAARRS with nucleonic weapons.

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“Vulgar!” Auntie Maim spat. “Look, they’re even having a lottery on the number of casualties. This is why the Synerplex system has to be taken down.”

“There is still time to bet on peace,” Lear said calmly, but urgently to Maim.

“Time, perhaps, but no means,” Auntie Maim said cheerily. “I don’t have Hellen Earth, and even if I did, I would not surrender her to the Fareeks.”

“Even to save your world?”

Auntie Maim chuckled. “Oh, don’t believe what you hear on the Netzwerk! Information is a commodity, the more in demand it is, the more valuable it becomes. They hype this crisis in order to draw maximum viewers to their telescreens, so they can raise advertising rates to confiscatory levels. The world is not going to end over this crisis. At worst, MAARRS will be destroyed by nucleonic weapons.”

“Millions would die,” Lear pointed out helpfully.

“Our most valuable assets are deep underground, dispersed and safe,” Maim assured her. “Don’t get me

wrong, losing the prototype was a huge setback, but so long as the Fareeks don't have it, MAARRS has the advantage."

"The prototype?" Lear asked.

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"Slip of the tongue, I meant Hellen Earth, the scientist... who will design the prototype peacekeeper that will allow me to unify the planet under a single strong, yet benevolent, hand." She sounded bored, as if even she was getting tired of maintaining the deception everyone else had figured out a long time back.

"How? Without a base to operate from?"

"TyroCommander, it would have been a grave strategic blunder to put all of my assets in the MAARRS Megaplex. I accept its possible destruction as part of the price of ultimate victory. I have back-up command centers in place at secure locations around the planet."

Lear sighed.

Aurora - Beneath the Surface

"As the underground reservoirs were drained to the surface, the upper ledges would have been exposed before the cavern bottom," Keeler said. "Therefore, they would have lived up there." He pointed his handlight to a shelf of rock.

Toto nodded. "Up there, you bet... sir." They climbed up the face of the rock, to a ledge a little higher than their heads. It contained a space perhaps fifty meters deep and two hundred meters wide, although barely a meter high at the furthest points. A chain of rude structures occupied the

space, mostly the squares and tubes of cargo containers. They were ancient, non-descript, tumbledown, and not big enough for a man to stand up in.

“Amazing the hardships our colonial ancestors went through,” Keeler said. “They must have lived for generations like this before the surface became even marginally habitable. Some people may have lived and died without ever seeing the sky.”

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“Nah, they’d’ve checked out the sky,” Toto drawled. “At least once, you know, crawled out of the hole, take a look at the sky.”

“You’re deep, Toto.” He cast the light about the ledge. Mostly, it was bare. Then, something glinted off the lamp. Something moved at the edge of Keeler’s vision, just a faint shadow on shadow. He turned around. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Toto asked.

Keeler pointed and shouted. “That!” As Hellen Earth appeared directly behind the young flight lieutenant. Keeler raised his staff and struck out defensively, projecting it just behind Toto’s right ear. Hellen Earth dodged, launched herself over him, landing on a crouch atop one of the old shelters.

Keeler swung around and kept the staff pointed at her. “Nimble little minx, isn’t she?” he commented.

“What do we do?” Toto whispered.

Keeler waved. “Excuse me, miss? Hi? Would you be interested in a game of quoits? We’ve got a tournament

going if you'd let us knock you unconscious and take you back to our ship."

She looked at him with a kind of curiosity, as though processing him, trying to determine what to make of him. Keeler continued, "Seriously, though... we have been looking for you. A lot of people on the surface are very concerned about you. In Fact, they are about to start a war over you. Many, many people will be killed."

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Her eyes softened slightly, and Keeler sensed he was getting through to her. "I do not wish for humans to die over me," she said.

"Good," said Keeler. "No one does. Perhaps you would return to my ship with me. You would decide ultimately where you would go, but in the meantime, we could stop them from fighting."

She struck a pose, extending her arm in front of her, palm up, fingers spread.

"Charades?" Keeler said. "Okay, five words, first word sounds like..."

Toto shouted out "Commander, look out, behind you!"

"Wow, you're really good at this," Keeler managed to say before something squeezed his neck and everything went dark.

Pegasus - PC-1

Tactical TyroCommander Redfire had the Bridge, and he found it frustrating. All the real action was on the ground. *Pegasus* had targeting solutions on each of the Mega-weapons, but trying to protect two cities on opposite

sides of the planet ... he hadn't figured out a way to do that yet, or whether it was even a good idea to try. Netzwerk and sixteen other Megaplexes had already sent messages to the ship asking them not to intervene. In the collective opinion of the planet, so it seemed, the world would be better off without MAARRS or Supah al-Fareek.

"The Tactical Scenario is complete," Shane American informed him. "Projecting now."

A holographic display of the plain outside the MAARRS Megaplex was displayed. At zero hour, a hundred small missiles blazed away from the Fareek Mega-Weapons, and the city vanished under a hundred atomic firestorms, leaving behind craters, and blackened and twisted metal.

The sight of the devastated city did not please the tactical officer. "The model doesn't account for topography," Redfire said. "The mountain passes will deflect energy from the initial assault into the southwest sector, which will produce a second wave that will blow debris from the southwest sector into the northeast sector, rather than evenly distributing it across the city."

"I'll modify the model to account for that, TyroCommander." American informed him.

Aurora - Beneath the Surface

The passage proved to be a narrow tube of rock, big enough to walk through, except for a few places where they had to duck and a few more places where Alkema and his party had to squeeze through.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Queequeg yawned.
"Remind me again why I'm doing this?"

"Your sense of hearing is four times as acute as ours," Alkema said in a near whisper. "Ditto your night vision. The Spex didn't help us much in the haunted spaceyards... so we're relying on you."

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"That only explains why you need me," said Queequeg. "I want to know why I'm tramping around in a cold damp cave when I could be curled up someplace a lot warmer and almost as dark."

"Because you love us?" Pieta suggested.

"Babe, I'm a cat. Love to me means being nice to someone because he might feed me."

"That would be us," Alkema grunted, as he squeezed past a pair of rocks and into the outer chamber. It took a moment for his spex to clear, and then he said "Kumba yah!"

The new chamber was even more vast than the previous one, and in its space was contained a real underground city. Not the scattered shelters on the ledges in the entrance, this was something more deliberate. Far below them, like one might view a town in a river valley, were quonset shelters arranged in a grid on the floor of the cavern, each as large as one of *Pegasus's* hangar bays.

"The commander will want to see this," Alkema said. He touched his COM Link. "Alkema to Keeler, Commander, there's something you'll want to see down here."

There was no response. Alkema tried again.
“Commander, this is Lieutenant Alkema, respond if you can.”

Nothing.

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“No response. There’s nothing in these rocks to interfere with our COM Links. We should double back for him.”

“We should look up,” said Queequeg.

“Up?” Alkema asked.

“Up... as in right... screaming... now!” The cat leaped onto Alkema’s shoulders, snagged his claws deep into the fabric of Alkema’s uniform, and redirected his lamp up toward the roof of the cave.

The beam revealed, clinging to the ledge high above them, dozens, scores of men. Not just men, but gigantic men with enormous arms and torsos, and non-existent necks. Each was dressed in a kind of combat jumpsuit.

A pellet of metal, highly accelerated, zinged through the air and struck Pieta’s hand-light. She shrieked as she dropped it to the ground, and waved her stinging hand in the ensuing darkness. Three more sharp pings knocked out the rest of the lights. Alkema felt Pieta wrap her hand around his.

“I think my back-up light still works,” said Trajan Lear. He withdrew a small handlight from his suit.

The light came on again, and was alight just long enough to reveal that Alkema and his team were completely surrounded by enormous men.

There was a metallic ping, and the light went out again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Aurora – The Airwaves

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Merry Biggins had her serious face on. “The clock has ticked down. Only two hours remain before the deadline the Supah al-Fareek Megaplex has set for the annihilation of MAARRS, and neither side shows any sign of backing down.

“While an army waits on the doorstep of the MAARRS Megaplex, there has been almost no detectable military activity on their part. Reaction from MAARRS has been reserved. A spokesman called the claims of Supah al-Fareek ‘specious.’ We looked up that word in our dictionary and it means ‘false.’”

Aurora – The MAARRS Megaplex

Auntie Maim finished her tea. “This would be a good time for us to go to the Command Bunker,” she told Lear.

“May I at least evacuate the last of my diplomatic team and the shuttle crew?” Lear asked.

Maim shook her head. “I’m afraid not, my dear. The departure of your ship would trigger an immediate attack. We wouldn’t want that, now, would we?”

“How did it come to this?” Lear sighed.

“It was bound to come to this,” Maim answered, her tone still polite but noticeably strained. “Your arrival only catalyzed it. Your botched rescue of Hellen Earth immediatized it, but sooner or later, no matter how many flowers you plant, or how many tastefully accented drapes

you hang, it always comes down to conflict. Let us go, shall we?"

Maim clicked a remote control pad at one of the walls, which slid open in halves to reveal a sort of small metal transport capsule. She led Lear inside and the capsule descended deep into the heart of the complex, then changed direction and proceeded horizontally for what felt like several kilometers. It descended at an angle for a few kilometers more, and finally stopped, opening into an immense and tastefully appointed bunker. Huge squares of fluorescent lighting illuminated a great space, most of which was taken up by a labyrinth of small square cells, demarcated by thin half-walls covered with beige felt. An army of men and women, in tasteful pastel uniforms, attended their stations.

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At the front of the room was a huge screen, on which was projected the two hemispheres of Aurora. Red lines and triangles marked the courses and position of an array of orbital satellites.

Maim took a large chair in the middle of her command center, and activated a number of systems from controls on its armrests. "If Supah al-Fareek thinks they can drive an old woman off from her lifelong dream of world domination, they have another thing coming."

"You don't have any troopers in place," Lear pointed out. "You're surrounded. How can you hope to counter-attack? Perhaps, you should consider suing for peace."

Maim looked shocked for a moment, then chuckled. "Oh, how *amusing*. If there is one thing I've learned in life, it's that you can always expect the unexpected. It's smart

to always have a back-up plan in case things don't work out the way you planned. And I think my back-up plan is something *really special*."

There was a large globe in the front of the room. Auntie Maim used this for a visual aid. "This planet, as you know, is surrounded by a powerful electromagnetic field that manifests itself in the spectacular global lightshow that gives Aurora its name. Imagine, for a second, if you could focus all that energy on one point on the planet's surface."

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Lear could intuit the result. "It would be highly destructive."

"*Massively* destructive. It would create what scientists call a *plasma vortex*, a storm of energy so intense, a nucleonic attack would look like a fragrant pile of leaves burning in the autumn, comparatively."

"How could you focus the energy on a single point?"

Maim smiled, as though glad Lear had asked. She turned to the young man at the foremost console, a thin, soft boyish man with sandy hair, a thin nose, and long deft fingers. "Billy, be a dear and activate the Primrose Sanction."

An image, part photograph, part schematic, of a large orbital satellite appeared on a side-screen. Maim explained. "The Primrose satellite, built by MAARRS, serving as an orbital communication node. While the satellite broadcasts home and gardening shows to a planetwide audience of millions, the solar energy collectors power a mega-pulse fusion reactor. When the

reactor is activated, it fires an intense, negatively-charged, dipole beam down to one point on the surface of the planet.”

A simulation demonstrated a result. For a brief second, all of the aurora energy encircling the planet would bear down on that one point. Page | 340

“There would be immediate and total devastation within 150 kilometers of the point of impact,” Maim explained. “However, it would also take several days for the planet’s electromagnetic field to fully recharge. In that event, the whole surface would be bombarded with cosmic rays and solar radiation.”

A realistic simulation on one of the screens showed the effect. A blast-wave obliterated Supah al-Fareek. The blast-wave dissipated, but in the aftermath, the intensity of solar radiation on the planet increased dramatically.

“There will be mega-level windstorms and electrical storms... all that energy dumped into the planet’s system has to go somewhere. We expect there will be crop failures, and... since the planet’s power grid is dependent on the aurorae, most of the Megaplexes will be blacked out. The disruption in entertainment, food, and social services should quickly lead to rioting, and social disorder. The resulting power vacuum will allow a well-organized operating unit to seize power on a global scale.”

Lear needed to sit down. Billy found her a well-appointed chair, recently re-upholstered in a tasteful design of gray and pink paisleys. “You can’t be serious.”

"None of this would be necessary if your people hadn't botched the rescue. You brought this on. I had hoped the primary plan would work. There is still time," she said. "I will be very disappointed if the Fareeks force my hand into unleashing Primrose. But I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to bring some order to this planet."

Aurora - The Underground City

Keeler woke up to water dripping on his head, "Honey, would you pull my head out of the bathtub?" he called, still in a haze of sleep.

"Um, it's only me, sir..." said David Alkema.

The commander opened his eyes slowly, and discovered he was not, as he had at first assumed, sleeping in the bathtub after a night of social drinking with the Lake of the Loons Skull and Bones club.

Instead, he appeared to be in a small barred cell, with two bunks, the top of which was not occupied by Lt. Alkema, who stood near the front of the cage. They appeared to be on the inside of a thick-walled building, whose corrugated metal roof curved over their heads. He could not be sure, but he had a sense they were still underground. He rose from his bunk and swung his feet over the side. He walked to where Alkema was standing. "Where are the others?"

Alkema shook his head. "I don't know. When I woke up here, it was me and you. I haven't been able to get any of them on COM Link."

Keeler scanned around. The front of the cell showed nothing a hallway, with closed rooms leading up to a more

open space, like a lobby. One of the large men was there, a guard. There was another at the end of the hallway.

“Are those the Glowing Abandoned Spaceyard Monster Men you saw?” Keeler asked.

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“We just saw the one, but, za, those are the guys,” Alkema sighed. “It seems so obvious now. For some odd reason, I had expected it to turn out to be the old man, Withers.”

As they watched, one of the big scary glowing men was approached by Hellen Earth. They held out palms toward one another, and clasped them. A blue glow emanated briefly from their clasped hands, and their eyes were locked together. “What are they doing?” Alkema whispered.

“Exchanging long protein strands,” said a familiar voice. “It’s how they share programming.”

Festus Creed looked down at them from the upper bunk, with tired eyes, almost buried in the lines of his face. “I did ewevything I could to avoid this.”

“What exactly *is* going on here?” Keeler asked. “Why did Maim kidnap the killer bimbo? Why are two cities going to annihilate each other? Why is my underwear riding up? I want answers... not necessarily in that order, though.”

“I put it to you bluntly,” said Creed. “MAARRS Needs Women.”

Alkema’s lower lip trembled. “Where is Pieta?” he asked.

"Your companions are perfectly safe," Creed assured them. "The Men from MAARRS understand that you are not a threat, but their pwogramming wequires them to sepawate pwisoners taken in combat."

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"Programming?" Keeler said, the haze beginning to lift. "So, those guys are androids?"

"Not quite, they are bio-engineered, genetically pwogrammed, organic machines."

"Bio-Genetic machines...," Keeler asked.

Creed continued patiently. "We developed a means of genetically pwogramming human simulacrum."

"You whatted a what of whatting what?"

"I think I know what he's talking about," Alkema said. He turned to Creed. "Those are actually human replicants, with enhanced bio-molecular structural constructs, programmed using DNA base pair sequencing."

"Vewy close," Creed said. "For our purposes, close enough."

Alkema turned to his commander. "Let me try and explain this in terms you can understand." Keeler looked at him with an equal mix of interest and doubt. "Never mind that, let me just try to reduce it to lowest terms and hope for the best."

"Sounds good to me," said Keeler.

Alkema sighed. "Okay, let's begin with cloning. Cloning biological organisms is what enables us to create meat from cell samples, and regrow body parts that are injured or diseased. We can also clone complete

individuals, but our morality prevents this. Our AI technology, at least major parts of it, uses materials that are almost biological in principle, including a form of artificial DNA, are you with me so far?"

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"Right," Keeler said, indicating that he sort of understood.

"Okay, the Men from MAARRS are like cloned machines. Their physiology is built of organic material, but its molecular structure is something nature never could have produced."

"Superhumanoids," Keeler suggested.

"Close enough to right," Festus Creed told them.

"So, why do they need women?" Keeler asked. Creed pulled himself up to a sitting position on the side of the bunk, and Alkema and Keeler reluctantly conceded that this was going to take a while. "Fourteen years ago," Creed began, proving the point. "Auntie Maim became the CEO-for-Life of the MAARRS Megaplex. She bought out the company on the strength of her personality and sheer force of will. Many people wondered why a woman who made a fortune on home decorating, arts and crafts, and gourmet cooking supplies wanted to buy a plex whose primary business was armaments and space. Maim had a vision. Within twenty years, it was her goal to replace the Synerplex with a united world government, end conflict, and more efficient use of our world's resources.

"To that end, she restructured the company around gaining control of key strategic economic assets, while simultaneously developing numerous weapons programs.

At the time, I had been a marketing scientist, studying how to influence the buying patterns of consumers. I had considerable expertise in replicating the functioning of human perception in computer-based simulations. As such, I was twansferred, and put to work on the Men from MAARRS project.

“Maim envisioned the Men from MAARRS as her foot soldiers... Humanoid biological constructs... bwded for combat... the ultimate enforcers of her will. She planned to make hundreds of thousands of them. My team was wesponsible for developing their cognitive skills.”

“Their brains,” Alkema interrupted.

“Exactly... specifically, I was to develop the genetic basis for their combat instincts. My team leader heard a wumor that Maim believed that the best fighters came from the hardscape. There was no hard evidence of this, but it is a widely held perception within the Synerplex. In any case, I was sent to the hardscape to study their neural patterns, on the theowy that weplicating these patterns in the instinctive behavior of the Men from MAARRS would enhance their combat effectiveness.

“I went to the hardscape, using my cover as a combat wecwuiter to evaluate various subjects, mostly young men and women, barely out of adolescence. A lot of them were unstable, the rest just longing for the excitement of the combat zones... they thought it was a game.” He shook his head. “They thought they’d achieve fame and wenown fighting for the entertainment of the Synerplex.”

“I was in the hardscape for two years, hated most ewevy minute of it. If it had not been for the monthly

shipment of psychoactive narcotics from HQ, I would have gone mad. During that time had isolated forty useful neuwal profiles... but it over time, it began to weigh on me that ewewy man and woman that passed thwough my recruiting office and went to the city was going to die. I nearly suffered a mental bweakdown." He was rubbing his eyes quite hard at this point, feeling some echo, perhaps, of the distress his assignment had given him.

"I did not want to go to one of the company's physicians, if that had happened... I'd be fired from the project, probably wetired to a job in Marketing. I couldn't bear that. So, I went to a counselor in the town I was located."

"Fair Havens?" Keeler asked.

"No, Thwee Taverns... I couldn't go back to where the Synerplex would find me. In any case, to my surprise, the counselor was one of their holy men, a minister. I had no use for weligion... still don't... but that didn't seem to bother him. We spoke for a long time. Over a period of some months, he finally pwevailed upon me that there was such a thing as wight and wong, that deep down I knew this, and this was the conflict that was causing my stress.

"And the cure was for me to act on this knowledge.

"Out of sight of MAARRS management, I undertook a side project. In addition to the brains of those hungwy for combat, I began to study those whose testing wevealed a stwong stweak of mowality. From their minds, I developed a counter-pwogram, one that would give my subjects a sense of wight and wong, and the desire to act

on it. I submitted this instead of the combat algorithm I had been paid to develop.

“When Maim weceived her first batch of soldiers... one thousand pwototype men, she was quite howwified to discover they would not engage in conquest for the sake of conquest. Naturally, the Men from MAARRS were now useless to Maim’s ambition. She would have had them destwoyed. But they were still smart, and still combat capable when they believed the cost was justified. They bwoke out of the city. Many were killed, but enough survived and disappeared, choosing the one place on the planet no one would look for them.”

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“The Old Abandoned Spaceyards,” Alkema exclaimed.

“Cowwect, meanwhile, I destwoyed all my research on the Men from MAARRS pwoject, and defected. With the help of Supah al-Fareek, I set up a false identity in the Hardscape, and started a new life. In exchange, I shared my non-combat welated human perception construct data with them, for use in their development of some kind of entertainment unit.”

Keeler bucked is head toward Hellen Earth, now exchanging long protein strand with another warrior. “So, what’s with her?”

“I was unaware of her existence until she showed up at my farm,” Creed said. “Appawently, after my defection, Cherry Forever, my assistant, chose to defect to Supah al-Fareek. She did not have all my research, but she had much of it. She used her knowledge to help Supah al-Fareek create their own genetic machine program, the Very Enhanced Neural Impulse Simulation pwoject.”

“VENIS,” said Alkema.

Hellen Earth curtailed her protein strand sharing activities and sallied forth to the cell.

“VENIS, correct. I was made in the enhanced image of the defector, Cherry Forever. Supah al-Fareek had no designs on Global Domination, but they recognized the utility of a replicant whose physical attributes would make her appealing to men. I was programmed to be an assassin. My target was Auntie Maim.”

“So, Supah al-Fareek staged the defection?” Alkema guessed.

Hellen answered. “That was their plan, but Maim somehow convinced your people to participate in my liberation. Your companion was there.”

Keeler looked at Alkema. “You?”

Alkema was wide-eyed. “I swear on the graves of St. Moon Unit, I have never seen this woman before in my life.”

“I believe your memory may have been erased,” Hellen told him. “Unfortunately, Maim had access to a deactivation sequence. My assassination attempt failed.”

Keeler pondered this. “How did you know to come here?”

Hellen looked to Creed, who began the answer. “Hidden in the pwogramming I developed was a sort of wecall code. Supah al-Fareek must have known my wheweabouts, and she accessed that information. Fwee of Supah al-Fareek, she wecognized a need for assistance, and came straight to me.”

“He told me of my brothers... the Men from MAARRS,” Hellen said. “I am told that as a prototype, I am somewhat feature-heavy. These combat and infiltration skills enabled me to penetrate the datacore of the MAARRS megaplex, where I retrieved the necessary data on the Men from MAARRS project. Maim tracked the Men from MAARRS to the old abandoned spaceport... some two hundred survivors of the original thousand men. She chose to let them live, and thinking if she captured me, she could reprogram the next generation with my killer instincts.”

“If you’re a prototype, does this mean there are others like you?” Alkema asked.

“At least forty-five,” Hellen said. “And at least thirty more in pre-activation stasis. A few are programmed with combat skills, but most are intended as concubines.”

“That’s a lot of killer bimbos,” said Keeler. “No offense.”

“Oh dear,” said Creed, checking the chronometer implanted into the back of his hand.

“What?” Keeler asked, already knowing he was not going to like what he was about to hear.

“It would seem that as we have spoken, the deadline for action has passed. Supah al-Faweek should have commenced their attack four minutes ago.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Aurora – MAARRS Bunker

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Goneril Lear held her breath as the chronometer reached 00:00:00. Live newsfeeds from the four primary news channels showed different angles of the MAARRS Megaplex, two from the hills above the city, one from a mid-city camera array, and one view from space. She expected at any moment to see the brilliant white flashes that would announce the obliteration of MAARRS.

The bunker was silent. All eyes were fixed on the screens. The muscles in Lear's neck were taut enough to support a suspension bridge

Primrose waited above Supah al-Fareek.

Lear waited, and watched for some time longer, until her skin began to itch with anxiety. How long would it take for orders to be given and confirmed? How much time to prepare, target and launch the missiles? Surely, enough time for this had passed already?

Ten minutes passed after the deadline before someone finally spoke; a chunky middle-aged man at one of the consoles. "I am detecting no activity in the Supah al-Fareek lines."

Auntie Maim stood from her comfortable chair and stared out at the Mega-Weapons arrayed just outside her city. Mercenaries stood next to them. They must have known this was the time, she could see them checking their chronometers.

Maim began laughing. "Hah, they caved. I knew they wouldn't go through with it."

"Perhaps, we should attempt to communicate," Lear suggested.

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"No, let them come to us," said Auntie Maim.
"Maintain Stand-by on the Primrose Sanction."

A middle-aged woman in the command center spoke up. "Auntie Maim, something curious is happening on the news and entertainment networks."

"That is of no consequence," Maim snapped.

Four forward monitors activated. NewsChannel23, which should have been displaying the head and other journalistic assets of Merry Biggins instead showed a picture of a scantily clad girl tripping over a power cord with the legend "Technical Difficulties." The other three featured variations on this theme.

"The entire planetary communication grid appears to have been shut down," the woman said.

Suddenly, the image of the MAARRS Megaplex from space vanished from its monitor, and the other screens showing the assembled Supah al Fareek strike force similarly vanished. Soon, they were replaced by imagery of a cartoon cat with a chainsaw chasing a cartoon mouse through a cheese factory.

Maim pondered this. "This must be some form of information warfare. Well, let's dish up a moderately sized portion of the real thing. Billy, enable the Primrose satellite."

"Sending arming signal to Primrose 1," Billy answered. He paused a second. "I am not getting a confirmation signal."

Maim scowled. "Surely, you must be mistaken."

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The young man broke into a sweat. One did not displease Auntie Maim in the middle of a battle. "Sending status confirmation signal."

Suddenly, the telemetry signals from Primrose 1 went directly to flatline.

"Primrose 1 has been destroyed," Billy reported.

"That's quite impossible," said Maim. "Switch to an alternate platform."

"Enabling Primrose 2," Billy said, tapping commands into the keyboard at his station. A moment later he reported again. "No telemetry signal from Primrose 2. Primrose 2 has also been destroyed."

"Primrose 3 has been destroyed," said a female technician in the cube behind Billy.

"Primrose 6 has been destroyed," said another technician.

"Primrose 4 has been destroyed," said Billy

Maim looked disturbed. Nearly half of her Primrose satellites had been eliminated. "Arm Primrose Eight."

"Arming sequence input," said Billy.

"Detonate Primrose 8."

"Detonating," Billy said, but as he did so, the icon for Primrose eight vanished.

Auntie Maim uttered a curse that the Lingotron could not translate.

Pegasus - PC-1

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The bridge was lit in the orange and blue hues of full battle stations. On the forward screen, one of the Primrose satellites exploded, and an Aves passed through the debris.

"Amy and Chloe report secondary targets have been destroyed," said Specialist McCormick.

Redfire nodded. "Have Warfighter teams one through six continue until all orbital weaponry is destroyed."

Shayne American called for his attention. "Incoming message from Netzwerk Megaplex."

Redfire waved her off. "Take it. I'm managing a war here."

As if in confirmation, McCormick reported. "Quentin has destroyed the orbital weapon platform designated K2."

"Acknowledge," said Redfire.

"Mr. Marvelous, we will restore the planetary communication net once hostilities have ended," American said into her COM Link.

Redfire leaned over Tactical Specialist (the other) McCormick's station. "Status of ground weaponry."

"It is as you predicted, TyroCommander. Nothing is moving. They're holding position and standing down."

Redfire nodded briskly. For the first time in many, many weeks, he felt he was back on his game. "Status of Aves *Maud* and *Kate*?"

"*Kate* is on the surface and is standing by to recover Prime Commander Keeler's party. *Maud* is maintaining an airborne pattern over the city."

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Redfire relaxed a bit. "Continue operations per my orders."

American turned to him. "Mr. Khan is signalling again from Supah al-Fareek," she said.

"Tell him there is no change in the status quo," Redfire said. "And if he values his life, he will keep it that way. Meanwhile, tell him to enjoy the fifty-six hour marathon of Trixie and Cheesehead, the classic cat-and-mouse team of Sapphirean Animatronica."

American shook her head. "Not that kind of message, TyroCommander. It's a distress call."

"Put him on," Redfire ordered.

A screen appeared, showing the severe, reddened features of the Supah al-Fareek's feared and storied Maximum CEO looking in a abject fear. He opened his mouth as though to speak, then the signal disappeared in a blitz of static.

"Lost signal," American said. "TyroCommander, I am reading power flux across the Supah al-Fareek Central Command Complex."

"Show me," Redfire ordered. A schematic of the SaFC3 appeared, with clever depictions of blue, red, and purple

power spikes bursting throughout the facility. "Their power grid has been sabotaged," he said. "Those aren't random spikes, they're concentrated in the communication and control areas. Somebody's taking out al-Fareek's capacity to speak and think... and it isn't us."

"More activity in Supah al-Fareek," American brought up more data, an optical feed from the surface, showing three large, heavy battlecraft lifting into the air. They wobbled on liftoff, as though the pilots were not completely comfortable with their operation, then shot across the desert at supersonic speed.

"Dispatch an Aves to shadow them. Take them out of my sky ... or, their sky, technically ... if they attack MAARRS," Redfire ordered.

Aurora - MAARRS Underground Bunker

"I have lost contact with all Primrose satellites," Billy said, his voice cracking with fear. "They may have all been destroyed."

Auntie Maim set down her cup of herbal tea. "Well, find me an antique pubic stimulator with handcrafted guilt edging and penetrate my lilac-scented cervix," she said, her face turning red, the only other outward evidence of anger.

"Perhaps, now is the time to sue for..." Lear began, but a harsh look shut her down.

"Is there an alternate battle plan?" Lear asked.

"Oh, dear," said Maim. "There is always another plan. Apparently, someone is interceding to thwart this conflict."

The only force I can think of with that amount of power is your ship."

"I could communicate with my ship, and determine that," Lear offered.

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Maim stared her down, then gave a slight nod to the woman who was pointing the gun at Lear's head. Lear touched the back of her chin. "Executive TyroCommander Goneril Lear hailing *Pegasus* command. Please respond, *Pegasus* command."

"*Pegasus* command, TyroCommander Redfire, go ahead."

"TyroCommander Redfire, what is *Pegasus's* tactical status?"

"*Pegasus* is at Battle Situation 1.1.1."

"*Pegasus*, can you describe current tactical operations."

There was a long intervening pause, then Redfire spoke again. "I'm sorry, TyroCommander Lear, but you know I cannot do that. It is contrary to mission regulations, and common sense, to discuss specific tactical operations over an open link, as you surely know."

Lear felt her lips going dry, not knowing if her effort would satisfy Maim or not. "I understand, TyroCommander... please relay any tactical information you can."

"We are disabling offensive weaponry and communication networks planet-wide."

"On whose authorization?"

“My own,” he said. “With both you and the Prime Commander incommunicado, I am taking operative command of this mission.”

Another pause. Then, Redfire asked. “What is your status, TyroCommander? Are you in need of assistance.”

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“Don’t answer!” Maim commanded. “End the transmission. End it, damn you.”

“Lear out,” Lear said. It had taken her a while --- probably because she spent so much time in the presence of politicians and other people of power --- but she had finally figured out that Maim was insane, and was getting some idea as to the degree. There was no chance for an alliance now. She had failed, but least no one would die. Redfire would see to that. And maybe, when it was all over, she should transfer herself off *Pegasus* and become Station Master at the Chapultepec StarLock.

Maim rose from her seat and sat down at a very stylish, lavender tinted computer terminal. “So many good options... my airborne bio-toxin that would wipe out the agricultural zones... my tectonic resonator to open a volcanic fault and vaporize the oceans ... the phallotron, not yet tested, but potentially devastating... oh, yes, and then there’s the ice age project ... cybernetic pathogens to wipe out the assets of the Synerplex... a moveable feast of apocalyptic options.”

With that Lear despaired. A thought rose in her mind like a thermal plume, that she would have to kill Auntie Maim in order to protect this planet.

Lear felt something tickling and painful surge through her communication implant. She winced.

At that moment, the overhead lighting in the facility failed. There was a brief darkness before the auxiliary lighting kicked on. When it did, there was a large man standing in the front of the room, the Poltergeist suit strapped on his back. In a quick moment he unsnapped it, let it fall to the floor, revealing himself fully.

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Two of Maim's bodyguards drew a bead on him with their blasters, but before they could fire, he had picked up a technician from behind his console and threw him at the bodyguards. He leaped over the console as fire opened on him, and explosive-tipped bullets ripped into his flesh, he punched several codes into the control panel.

Blast-shielded, steel reinforced doors slid into the floor. In the chamber behind them, a small army of Men from MAARRS. They swarmed into the bunker, firing weapons. Lear watched in horror, feeling her body grow heavy and hot and unresponsive to her impulses as she saw some of their weapons were Odyssey-issue pulse-weapons and hand cannons.

She felt a hand grab her from behind and jerk her back. Maim had not wasted a second, had picked up a blaster. She pulled Lear backwards and positioned the weapon at mid-hip. She picked off one of the Men from MAARRS, then pressed the gun into Lear's belly... aiming it at her unborn daughter.

"Now, you men stay right there, or I will kill my hostage," Maim said. "Billy, come here."

The thin young man rose from his console, brushed the dust from his hair, and stood by his boss. She handed him the gun.

"When unexpected guests drop by, it's always best to have a little something prepared in advance... just in case." Maim pulled up a sleeve on her blouse, revealing a hidden control band that encircled her forearm. She touched a red square on its surface.

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Pops and bangs erupted in the bunker. The small ones blew out bits of shrapnel at deadly speeds through the chamber, catching at least one of the Men in the eye. Louder explosions burst from mines in the floor, throwing the Men close enough to the floor mines into the air. The dust and the smoke in the room grew thick and opaque.

"Let's go now," said Auntie Maim. A hidden panel in the wall slid aside. Beyond it was a black metal vehicle, shaped like a bullet. She matched her handprint to an outline on the side. The side hatch slid open and Maim climbed inside.

"Are we taking her?" Billy asked.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Maim as the hatch closed tightly. Blue-white flame shot out of the vehicle's rear, and it shot down a tunnel.

"Where is she going?" Lear asked Billy.

"The tunnel opens into the ocean. Once the escape hatch blows, the entire bunker will be flooded," Billy explained.

"Can we get out?" Lear asked.

Before Billy could answer, there came the sound of a distant roar. Lear made a mental calculation. They were perhaps four kilometers from the exit point for the escape submarine. This meant they had only a few seconds. She wondered if she could hold her breath long enough to...

"Get in here!" Billy yelled, his voice reedy and effete. He reached out and pulled Lear back into the bunker, then slammed down a lever that closed the escape hatch.

"All you had to do was turn it off," Billy said. "I designed the self-destruct, but I'm not stupid. Let's get the phunk out of here," said Billy.

"To the lift!" Lear shouted.

"No," Billy told her. "The lift is booby-trapped. We have to take the stairs."

"Stairs? In a bunker."

"It's a Fire Code requirement," Billy explained.

"No!" one of the Men from MAARRS barked. "Come with us. It isn't safe here." He gestured toward the hole they had blown in the wall. "Bruce... you and Bruce help with the wounded."

"Bruce?" Billy asked.

"We like to be called Bruce," said the Man from MAARRS. He removed his mirrored shades, revealing electric blue eyes, numbers flashing across his retinæ. As he lowered his weapon, the bulbous muscles of his arm flexed and gave. "We're really, *really* sorry it had to come to this. We're sorry about the mess."

“O-o-o-oh,” Billy sighed. Lear thought for a moment he has going to swoon. The rest of the attack squad was clearing out, along with the survivors from the control room.

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Billy was the last to leave. “I’m going to blow the chamber,” he said. “The debris should act as a dam to keep the water from flooding the tunnel behind us.”

The space behind the bunker was a long tunnel, which joined a network of underground caves a few kilometers distant, and eventually back to the surface.

Lear, Billy, the Men from MAARRS tramped through the tunnels for several hours, mostly in silence. The Men from MAARRS were not much for talking. Lear worked over and over her head how things had gone badly, and how she might still salvage an alliance out of this debacle. The survivors of the MAARRS control room wondered if they were eligible for unemployment, and what would become of their pensions.

The path sloped upward, emerging from a mountain cave, fifteen kilometers outside the MAARRS megaplex. They were met by a small detachment of ship’s Warfighters, a pair of Aves, and *Pegasus’s* Prime Commander, who had set up a picnic lunch for them.

“Executive TyroCommander Lear,” he said, passing her an egg salad sandwich. “I believe you have a great deal of explaining to do.”

Lear held the sandwich as though not knowing whether to eat it or wear it as a hat, so shell-shocked was she from the events of the last few hours.

"We came this close," Keeler said, holding his thumb and fore-finger apart, but whatever they had come to such proximity to was lost in a rumble and roar from the western sky. Three more chunky gray battlecraft dipped over the mountains and positioned themselves just far enough away so that the heat and power from their massive hoverjets did not blast the entire picnic into hot chunks. They slowly settled to the ground.

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"Ah, the delegation from Supah al-Fareek," Keeler said. "Right on time, but then, I expect punctuality from people of this caliber."

"Peace talks," Lear said, almost hopefully.

"Not quite," Keeler answered.

Hatches on the sides opened with loud mechanical clanking, the lower hatches lowering to the ground to form ramps. One by one, lithe, sexy women appeared in the hatchway of each ship, and walked hesitantly into the light. They were a mix of blonds, redheads, and brunettes, a mix of body and facial types, but all had the raw animal sexuality of the original Hellen Earth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

By My Estimation, the Date is 1 December, 7370 A.S. Some days, I think humans are just a practical joke The Allbeing played on the Universe. Why else would The Allbeing have picked apes to evolve into the galaxy's dominant life form? If only The Allbeing had given us the opposable thumbs... We would have evolved cultures centered on napping, grooming, fine dining, and the prolonged torture of smaller, weaker creatures. Cats are genetically programmed for deviousness. We lead secret lives humans don't even have a clue about. And even though Aurora was a planet where every lie was wrapped in a deception, and every deception enclosed in mendacity. And yet, it wasn't cat-like at all.

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Pegasus – PC-1/Main Bridge

“How did you know about the Primrose satellites?” Alkema asked Redfire, when he had returned from Aurora, taken a few days off, and then returned to Bridge Duty.

“They didn’t make sense,” Redfire explained. “The atmosphere of this planet is so highly charged, most of the planetary communication nets simply bounce carrier-wave signals off the ionosphere. Penetrating the auroras requires a huge power-boost. Why use comsats? Also, they were about four times the size of a standard comsat. Also, I noted that after the Fareeks issued their ultimatum, the Primrose satellites began shifting position. I scanned the one over Supah al-Fareek, figured it was some kind of fusion pulse weapon, and destroyed it. Then, I took out the rest of them. Then, I took out the key nodes of the planetary communication network.”

“So the Fareks couldn’t order their forces to attack?”

Redfire shook his head. “Neg, I am sure they had back-ups, or, a dead man’s switch... a fail-safe that would let them carry out the attack if they lost communication with the base. Instead, I took out the civilian broadcast channels.”

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Alkema asked. “What made you think of that?”

Redfire crossed his arms and looked serious. “Once I stopped looking at it as a tactical problem, and considered it as a matter of strategy, it became clear to me. To disable a culture, you have to destroy its primary value --- the thing it prizes above all else. The Aurorans are obsessed primarily with images, violent imagery is their second favorite form of entertainment, after sexual imagery. I thought if I took away the images, deprived them of their entertainment, there would be no war.”

Alkema took a moment to process this. “You bet our lives on your perception of their societal values.”

Redfire almost smiled. “Good thing I guessed right then. I knew the Fareeks were counting on global coverage of their operation. They had an agreement from Netzwerk City that would have covered the cost of the operation, and they were counting on armaments sales resulting from the worldwide broadcasts showing the effectiveness of their weapons. But those things would only happen if they had images to broadcast... live. I disrupted that, and Supah al-Fareek delayed their attack.”

Alkema tapped his fingers against the tactical station. “I never would have thought of it like that. Every time I’m

tempted to think of myself as... a pretty intelligent guy, you or Commander Keeler show me how much I have to learn. If I was the ship's chief tactical officer... " he didn't finish the thought.

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But Redfire did, "MAARRS would probably be a radioactive crater, smoke would fill the skies over Supah al-Fareek, dead bodies every where...."

"Za, thanks... I didn't want to finish the thought, but you did it pretty effectively, thank you."

"Humility is a good start on the road to wisdom," Redfire told him. "Don't worry, by the time you become tactical chief, you'll have a lot more experience."

The war settled, rather anti-climactically, I thought. You know, a squad of Warfighter androids could have infiltrated General Cannibal's forces, detonated one of those nucleon weapons and taken out the whole siege force. Then, in the confusion that followed, I would have kidnapped Auntie Maim and Rupert Kahn, stripped them naked, buried them up to their necks in cat litter, and forced them into intensive therapy.

Admittedly, more would have died, but I would have cleaned up in style points.

They found Kahn, by the way, and by 'they' I mean the Supah al-Fareek Board of Directors, with a broken neck, back, and crotch. Turns out he had been trying out the Hellen Earth seduction model when the rebellion started.

No one knows what became of Auntie Maim.

Anyway, with peace at hand, the boss turned his attention back to archaeology, and spent the next several days in the Abandoned Spaceyards. His archeological team picked their way

through the old complex, like rats digging their way through an old garbage pile.

Aurora – The Abandoned Spaceyards

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“I suppose you’re wondering why I asked you here today,” Keeler said as Mr. Withers was escorted into the old command center of the thoroughly decontaminated spaceyards. It had become the center of operations for *Pegasus’s* archeological efforts on the planet. Keeler has taken over a former conference suite as his field office. By pulling together furnishings recovered from elsewhere in the complex, he had managed to recreate something of a period office setting, with beige couches and upholstered chairs, a frosted glass table and desk mounted on gray stone and black iron bases. Bright halogen lamps stood on the desk, side tables, and in the sconces. The walls hung with abstract art pieces, mostly multi-colored lines and geometrical patterns surrounded by large white spaces. The commander hated them, but they made the place true to its time and place.

“Opening up a part of our history too long buried,” the old man said. “Because you’re a historian, and a historian is someone who studies the past.”

Keeler poured himself a drink from the period bar. The liquor was fresh, but local. “There are two kinds of historians, the kind who want to find the truth about the past, and the ones who want to make the past what they wish it to be.”

“I suppose you consider yourself to be the former.”

“Let’s begin the tour,” Keeler responded. Exiting the conference area, he led Withers through the facility, flanked by David Alkema. “What we have learned is that these spaceyards were built, as we suspected, as part of a crash program to colonize Ecco and establish a defense fleet to protect Aurora against the expected Tarmigan Assault.”

“Their recklessness left the area badly contaminated,” said Withers. “Your people have done a remarkable job of cleaning it up. Although, the radiation probably damaged the records as well.”

“Actually, the radiological and chemical contamination preserved the records,” Keeler responded. “Without the contamination of this site, it probably would have been razed and built over. Nothing of that era would have been preserved.”

They led Withers into an elevator that deposited them on an upper floor office suite labeled “Marketing.” They passed through a pair of parabolic glass doors and into a gray and blue space with a few sparse examples of ancient furniture.

On the back of the wall was a beautifully-rendered map of Ecco 1, portraying the hemisphere with the large lake suitable for inhabitation. The locations of thirteen colony sites were marked with half-circles. Additional posters showed artist’s renderings of the finished cities. On a long table were several copies of a beautiful hardcover book whose pages were almost too brittle with age to be turned, a marketing premium package describing the wonders and beauty of Ecco colony.

“They put a lot of time and effort into promoting emigration to their new world,” Keeler said. “It was described as a near-paradise. Initially, we think, it might have been conceived as a kind of bunker to evacuate the Auroran elite, but that was probably just a cover story. As you told us, most of the people sent there were dissidents, malcontents, ... mostly Chryslers who never adjusted to the New Ascendancy, which was the slogan the third wave immigrants gave to their new socio-economic paradigm, the ancient precursor to the Synerplex.”

“Everyone who went to Ecco did so voluntarily, because they would be happier there,” Withers said. “Our historical understanding is quite emphatic on that point.”

“More or less,” Keeler said. “Many of the emigrants were criminals, given the choice of relocation to Ecco, or hard time on Aurora. Many more of them were Chryslers, choosing Ecco 1 over forced Exodus to the hardscape, offered the bargain of a world of their own in exchange for one which they felt had been taken from them.”

Keeler led his audience into an adjacent room, a scale model of Dawnstar City stood on vast table. “As I was saying, they went to extreme expense and effort to make the Ecco colony look as advanced as Aurora. Our researchers estimate that the expenditure involved in building the fleet, and thirteen pre-fabricated cities to Ecco would have consumed an amount of resource equal to gross planetary product at the time, which ushered in your planet’s greatest economic depression,” Keeler added. “For a century afterwards, most of your planet was reduced to grinding poverty.”

Withers nodded grimly. "The cost of pride... of hubris for a young colony like ours to think we could have a colony of our own."

Alkema cut in, "Actually, if you had followed a more conventional colonization model, relying on the new colony's resources instead of pre-fabbing everything here and shipping it out, the expense would have been considerable lower."

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Withers considered this, with a sour expression, "True, but perhaps our ancestors wanted to increase the prospects of the colony's survival."

Keeler's face brightened, "Survival is what it's all about. Survival is why humans colonized space to begin with, increasing the chances of our species survival geometrically with each new world we claimed. Survival was the objective, indeed, but not the survival of Ecco. A hardscrabble colony on Ecco would not have much helped Aurora's chance of survival against the Tarmigans, but an advanced colony that virtually replicated your level of civilization... that would have helped a lot."

Withers presented a confused, shabby little smile, "I'm not sure I understand you."

"Perhaps, not yet," Keeler said. "A visit to the factory floor will fill in the rest of the gaps. We found something rather extraordinary down there."

The Marketing Department was even more isolated from the Production Areas than from Engineering. The way they took was through a long, dark tunnel that eventually emptied into a vast production bay. In the bay

sat a large, dark metal ship, which looked exactly like one of the warships from the Battle of Chapultepec. It was not a large ship, not even 150 meters long, but *Pegasus's* engineers had examined it and found it space-worthy, minus some minor engine upgrades. An umbilicus connected it with a portable fusion generator from *Pegasus*.

"This was the last ship," Alkema told him. "*S.S. Typhoon*, a warship. It was never launched, but the drive engines and systems are intact."

"After so many centuries," Withers said. "What a remarkable find."

"Fortunate that the radiation levels kept any curious historians... or salvagers... at bay." Keeler remained grim. "Would you like to see what's inside?"

He led them down the production bay. There was an open hatch on the side of the ship. On the inside, lights were blazing. The interior was tight. The ceilings were low. The passageways were barely wide enough for a man to squeeze through. When they reached the bridge, they found a space somewhat smaller than the command module of an *Aves*, with tightly spaced seating for five crewmen.

The seats were of a rudimentary design, pads positioned on metal racks. Alkema slid into the station at right rear. "This is where the Navigator would have sat," he said, powering up the system. It was a very old array, with chunky buttons and switches marked with the sigils of an unfamiliar alphabet. Alkema had spent several days teaching himself the language. "These displays are a little faded, but you should be able to follow what I am doing

here,” he said. “I am punching in the coordinates for the Chapultepec StarLock. We’ve linked the *Typhoon*’s systems to a simulator on board *Pegasus*. *Typhoon* thinks it’s moving through space. Now, it thinks it is arriving at Chapultepec, a journey that normally would have taken about 52 years in normal space, but only a few weeks with a hyperspace detour.”

“Stop Boring Everyone[☒],” Keeler said.

Alkema nodded, “Right, now, imagine the battle is unfolding. The crew is watching their fleet get wiped out. The commander orders them to fall back to Aurora, per his orders. The navigator lays in a course back to Aurora.” He entered a large number of coordinates into the system. A long rectangle of numbers appeared in the screen. “The ship, and the crew, think they are traveling back to Aurora. But, this navigation system is defective. Let’s see where they would really ended up?”

Behind the rectangle of letters and numbers, a passingly familiar orange planet appeared. “They tried to reach Aurora, but they would end up at Ecco.”

“A navigation glitch?” Withers asked.

Keeler snorted. “A random navigation glitch that takes the ship to a colony where Aurora sent its dissidents, a colony built to look like an established civilization. Yes, it could be a glitch...” Keeler paused. “And gongos might take flight from my anus.”

[☒] A Sapphorean idiom meaning, “Cut to the chase.”

“These ships were designed for one-way missions,” Alkema said. “Once they left Aurora, they could only return to Ecco.”

Keeler set the stage, “When the Tarmigans began attacking human colonies in the Orion Quadrant, Aurora and the other colonies in this sector got a warning. You knew they were coming, and had time to prepare.

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“You knew your tactical situation was hopeless. But then, someone had a brilliant idea. You would build a colony on a nearby planet, make everyone, even your allies, believe that this small colony was actually Aurora. You hurriedly built a fleet of ships, prefabricated cities at devastating expense, to be sure, but to save your asses, no price was too high.

“So, the fleet flies out to meet the invaders, in concert with your allies from Orenthia and Dominia. Your mission was to hold the StarLock Chapultepec... make a stand, not let the Tarmigans pass. But your fleet was instructed, if defeat seemed imminent, pull back and make a last stand to defend the home planet. And your warrior-cosmonauts, to their credit, tried to do just that.

“But instead, their ships fell back to Ecco. The Tarmigans followed, and presuming the civilization they saw there to be Aurora, they turned every human there into salt.”

Keeler finished, in a voice of highly intelligent outrage. “Ecco wasn’t a colony, it was an altar on which you sacrificed 400,000 people to the god of your own survival.”

Withers was unimpressed. "Very interesting speculation. I'm getting the distinct impression that you are casting the actions of our ancestors as a stain against the current generation of Aurorans."

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Keeler met him with a steely glare. "All I can do is force you to confront the truth of your history, and heritage. The Synerplex as it exists today is a direct descendant of the companies and government committees that originated the Ecco project."

"Those bastards," Alkema said. "They set up a whole fake civilization just to save their sorry buttocks."

"Correction, they built two fake civilizations," Keeler said. "The only difference is, they're still living in one of them."

Withers cast his gaze about the spaceship. "In any case, I suppose I should thank you for providing us with this priceless historical artifact."

"It doesn't belong to you," Keeler told him.

"Excuse me?"

"This ship was built under contract to the Ecco Colony Consortium Organization. It belongs to Ecco Colony, not Aurora."

"But everyone on Ecco is dead," Withers pointed.

"A mere technicality," Keeler said. "Alternately, there are a variety of other legal theories to support a claim of ownership to this vessel ... abandonment, right of salvage... and if all that fails, the principle that we have a ship that can toast any spot on this planet and you have

absolutely no remaining defenses against us ... In any case, the Synerplex has no claim to this ship."

Withers finally got the picture. "So, you are confiscating this ship?"

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"Pretty much," Keeler told him. "But don't worry, your people never much cared for history anyway."

Despite his contempt, the Prime Commander was still obligated to offer Aurora the opportunity to join the Alliance. He found the prospect distasteful, but on balance, the Aurorans did have useful military technology, and they were a surviving colony with a technologically proficient culture. More importantly, they were part of the human family, and humans feel obligated to their families, even to those weird cousins you'd prefer to keep locked in the cellar.

Aurora – Netzwerk City Aeropagus Hotel

Prime Commander Keeler, Tactical Lieutenant Alkema, two diplomatic specialists and a pair of Warfighters (just to be on the safe side) met with the leaders of the Synerplex in the penthouse conference center, a space large enough to hold a quoits tournament. The central table was white, underlit, and so long that intercoms were necessary for those at the head of the table to hear those at the bottom. It was surrounded by square, white leather chairs. It was a night-time meeting, as the Aurelians preferred. The lights of the city glittered all around them, and the sky blazed, as always.

Prime Commander Keeler wrapped up his half-hearted speech. "You have had several days to contemplate the advantages of an alliance with the other human worlds of the Perseus Quadrant. Together, we can forge a great civilization of trade, culture, mutual defense and other good things." He regained his seat, privately doubtful an alliance with Aurora would benefit anyone at all.

Mr. Marvelous stood up. "We've reviewed your proposal, and it's got some really, really great stuff in it. The technology exchange alone is worth a trillion synercreds, easy."

Marvelous walked around the back of the table. "And, hey, it's not like you're asking a whole lot from us. You want us to help you fight the Aurelians, and you'll offer us generous consulting and licensing fees. From our perspective, no downside risk."

He paused, and struck a pose in front of the windows, the lights of the city like a galaxy behind him. "On the other hand..." He paused, turned to one of the scantily clad Calendar Girls. "Miss June, why don't you fetch me a martini, stirred not shaken, with an olive, none of that fruity scheisse."

"Right away, Mr. Marvelous," she chirped.

"Anyway, me and the rest of the Synerplex have been talking, and... we decided, when the time comes, we'll just throw ourselves in with the Aurelians."

The diplomatic specialists looked stunned, but Keeler had kind of figured that Aurora shared more than the first three letters of its name with Aurelia.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider," Diplomatic Specialist Citi asked.

"Well, look, we also talked about, you know, signing a treaty with you long enough to get your technology, then sell you guys out to the Aurelians, but we decided that would be..."

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"Traitorous?" Keeler offered.

"Shabby ... uncool... tacky..., and that's just not us."

Keeler nodded. Maybe the discovery of the previous treason at Ecco Colony had struck a chord with these people, or maybe Marvelous was being straight with them.

Citi wasn't giving up though. "But... you must realize that when the Aurelians come, they will destroy your entire civilization."

"Look, pal, not that we don't like you. But we've looked at what Aurelians got and what you got, and we don't think there's a chance in Hell you guy can beat them. And when they do win, we get long-life and loads of sex. Frankly, we can't even figure out why you're fighting them."

"But what about your planet," Citi warned them desperately.

"Not my planet," Marvelous shrugged and took his martini. "Best guess, they need another five hundred years to get here, minimum. I'll be long dead by then."

Upon his return, the commander told me they had rejected an alliance. "No big loss," he assured me, then he said

something about there being more to Aurora than the Synerplex, and in time we would have two strong allies instead of one duplicitous one, but I kind of was distracted because I heard this noise in the ventilation system, or at least I thought I heard it, I couldn't really be sure, but for the whole rest of the time he was yammering, I was staring at the ceiling vent trying to hear it, because, who knows, might have been food.

Even though nobody died this time, there were some casualties.

Pegasus – Hospital Four

Flight Lieutenant Toto lay on one healing bed, Max Jordan on an adjacent one. Their groins were enclosed by a restrictive healing device. A display on the tap portrayed the restorative work nanobots were performing on their reproductive systems, and made male members of the crew involuntarily clench their legs together.

“Flight Lieutenant Toto... and Max Jordan both apparently picked up the virus through sexual intercourse with several native Aurorans,” Dr. Skinner intoned gravely, explaining the situation to Commander Keeler.

Keeler nodded, “A touch of the old love bug, brings me back... to that era several thousand years ago when humans were susceptible to such things.”

"It's very lucky for us that this is only the first alien virus our plucky immune systems have been unable to handle," Skinner said. "I have been able to treat your aviator, the strapping teenage boy, and a few other crewmen using standard retro-viral campaigns. With some genetic manipulation, I may even be able to restore the functionality of their reproductive systems."

"Za, I was going to ask about that. Are the graphics on those healing units really necessary?" He gestured toward Toto's box, where several thousand tiny robots were poking needle-like appendages into the cells of the young aviator's genitalia, while others scraped bits of virus off their other tissues, and still more chased random viruses and shot them to pieces.

"I like to monitor the progress of the reconstruction."

"You can get the same result with digital data displays, and they're not expensive," Keeler shuddered off the thought of little metal robots swimming around in his nether regions, and asked a command-type question. "Are the rest of the crew at risk?"

Skinner shook his head. "I don't believe so. Sexual contact of the genital-to-genital variety appears to be the only transmission vector available to this nasty little bugger."

Obligingly, a display behind the doctor showed the virus, clinging to the side of a sperm, riding through the vas deferens. "Go little guys, go!" Keeler exclaimed.

"I researched the origins of the virus. Apparently, it was originally developed as a form of sterilization.

Aurorans lack our capacity for reproduction at will, and they enjoy recreational sex extremely much. At some point, the virus mutated and became transmittable.

“It’s a demographic time-bomb,” Skinner said with firm quietude. “Infection rates in the Megaplexes are probably in the 98% range. The birth rate over the last two generations has fallen to the point where the possibility of the next two generations is slim to none. Within one hundred years, I am forecasting the complete depopulation of Aurora’s urban areas.”

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“What about the Chryslers?” Keeler asked.

“Their birthrates are holding up for now, and with the vaccines we are developing, we should be able to preserve their numbers.”

“Which brings us to the Men from MAARRS and the Women from VENIS?” Keeler asked.

“Ah, the you’re inquiring about your little challenge,” Skinner said. “The Men from MAARRS and the Women from VENIS were, as you suspected, bred to be mules, utterly sterile, much like urine, which is valuable information should you ever be stranded in a desert.”

“Za, good to know, in any case... can you fix them.”

Skinner plopped himself down, with grace and style, into the large stuffed chair behind his workstation.

“According to the simulations, our genetic engineering capability, assisted by some interesting tricks we learned at EdenWorld, we should make them a viable new species through reconstruction, or should I say, primary

construction, of fully functioning reproductive systems.” Skinner paused, “If that is indeed what you want.”

On this mission, I worked with TyroCommander Lear’s whelp, the kid who went into an alternate universe and spent two years with Flight Captain Driver. (See Entry for 23 Pentember, 7369 AS). All I can say is, now he has Captain Driver’s social skills instead of his mother’s. Can you say, “marginal improvement?”

Pegasus – Fast Eddie’s Slam-n-Jam

Matthew Driver sat at a table with a salad in front of him, the closest thing to healthy on the FEISS&J menu, a concoction of leafy lettuce, vegetables, eggs, meat, and something white and gloppy smeared over it. He dug into it with his spork, and chased the first mouthful with a cool drink from a glass of sparkling water.

“Matthew, may I join you?”

He looked up. It was Eliza Jane Change. He slid to the right, making a space for her in the booth, although she was more inclined to sit across from him, this making conversation easier, and that is what she did.

“How is your sister?” she asked.

“Great,” he answered. “Those twins are amazing.” He paused a bit, residual knowledge of his attempted relationship with Eliza Change made him realize that this conversation was not about him. “What’s new with you?”

“I had sex with TyroCommander Redfire.”

This took him aback. Two years on the Chronos StarLock had broken him of his emotional investment in

her, not too mention his chastity. But he managed not to say, "Guess who I had sex with."

Instead, he opted for the more open-ended, "How interesting."

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She sighed and gestured for Eddie to bring her a drink. Eddie was busy with a group of fundamentalists, the technicians who serviced the wormhole generators-- guys who work with fundamental forces of the universe knew how to party, and Eddie was not leaving them. Puck approached with a tall glass of pink and frosty. She took it but did not drink. "I know you think that I was wrong to do that..."

He nodded. "Admittedly, I do, but at this point, I've accepted a certain amount of futility in dealing with you."

"You've mellowed," she told him.

"I've gained some perspective," he said.

"Do you still claim you met The Allbeing?"

Driver shook his head. "I met *an* All-Being Master of Time, Space, and Dimensions, not *The* Allbeing."

"Did she give you any advice that would help me?"

"I asked her about my relationship problems."

"You mean... me?"

"Partly, anyway, the All-Being told me that relations were only fated when we made them fated to be. Then, she asked me if I wanted a drink, and I asked her for a limon tonic. Suddenly, a limon tonic appeared at my side. I asked her if she created it, and she said she wasn't magic, that The Allbeing wasn't magic. She couldn't materialize things

out of thin air, but she could set events in motion that, over the course of billions of years, would result in the limon tonic being next to me when I asked for it. And she told us that's how The Allbeing works. No magic tricks."

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"And how does that relate to relationships?" Lear asked.

"It's basically the same thing. The Allbeing knows who's supposed to be with whom, and He arranges for them to be in the same place at the same time. That's why every working relationship is like a miracle. The All-Being also said that even though The Allbeing brought people together, it was up to us to make things work. The All-Being said a lot of things in the universe are that way."

Eliza scowled. "The All-Being this, the All-Being that. If love the slagging All-Being so much, why don't you marry her."

Matthew's face froze for a second, and then he began to laugh. And then they both laughed, and it felt much better. "So, what shall I do?"

Driver shrugged, "Redfire's a free man, legally anyway."

"That is true, but I don't think is heart is free."

Trajan Lear entered the Slam-n-Jam, "Thought I'd find you here." He took a seat at the table without being invited.

"Eliza, I trust you know Trajan."

Eliza spoke to him cordially, "I reviewed your mission report from Aurora. It was thorough and well organized, and your performance as mission aviator was exemplary."

"Praise from Caesar, thank you," he put an arm around Matthew's shoulder, "I was trained by the best you know. A couple of years of drills in an alternative universe can prepare you for pretty much anything... um, except for dealing with crowded city skylines, bi-axial rotation, highly energetic aggressive transsexuals."

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"I read that part," Matthew said. "Unfortunate... what happened to Max Jordan, I mean."

"Aye, unfortunate in the extreme," Trajan sounded like he genuinely felt sorry for Max, but it was hard to be sure. "You ready to go?"

"Aye," Matthew answered, standing. "Eliza, as a friend, I'd just say you can do better, and, ... why don't we go back to having breakfast again. Tomorrow, the Sector 21 North Café on the Amenities Nexus."

"Agreed, I will see you then."

Matthew spared her a glance as she left. He saw something odd. Eliza had spent most of her lifetime trying to be alone, but he had never seen her look lonely before.

Creed had approached the boss with the suggestion. The bio-android men and women knew they had no place in Auroran society, in either Auroran society, and wanted no part of it in any case. But they knew, seven light years away, was an ideal world for the forty females and 220 males.

Interesting marital arrangements they will have to work out. My species could give them some pointers. I suggested to Doctor Skinner that he let them breed in litters of three-to-five, but he did not like that idea. Anyway, Skinner was intrigued by the notion of a society where all members were genetically indistinguishable. Every man and boy, every woman and girl a precise replica of every other.

And all named Hellen and Carl, oy...

Pegasus – Main Bridge/PC-1

“*Typhoon* is hailing us,” said Specialist Claudius McCormick. He opened a display in the forepart of the bridge, showing Festus Creed, on the bridge of *Typhoon*.

Keeler stood and addressed him, captain to captain. “We show all systems fully operational. Are you ready for transit?”

Creed got a final check from Billy and his daughters, then nodded. “The Hellens and Carls are secured below in the hibernation chambers. “

Keeler nodded, “Godspeed, Mr. Creed.”

Typhoon fired her thrusters, and began her long journey toward Ecco 1. The Men from MAARRS and the Women from VENIS would restore the devastated colony, repopulating it with supermen and superwomen. A dangerous experiment, some would say.

Pegasus flexed her propulsion fields and accelerated toward the point of transition. In a matter of a few days and some years, she would return to Chapultepec.

Streaming through hyperspace, the Prime Commander took care of some unpleasant business, that, for once at least, did not include any funerals.

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Pegasus – The Command Suite

Goneril Lear entered the Prime Commander's Command Suite, the officious chamber with the huge observation windows that overlooked the rear of the ship. This was more or less his office, where he conducted official ship's business. When she entered, Keeler was sitting next to Chief Inspector Churchill, the captain of the Ship's Watch. "Sit down Tyro-Commander Lear," he said, once again using the voice of highly intelligent outrage. "I have instructed Chief Inspector Churchill to investigate the pattern of events on Aurora, to determine if the crew... or any member of our crew... contributed to the near holocaust on that planet."

"I have submitted my report already, Commander," Lear said. "But, if there is anyway I can assist Chief Inspector Churchill with his investigation..."

Keeler slammed a datapadd onto his desk, cutting her off and leaving a tiny dent in its burlled walnut surface. "Something happened on that planet that almost caused a war. I don't have a complete picture yet, but what I do have is quite disturbing."

"Commander, I..."

"You'll get your chance to speak," Keeler assured her. "First of all, you met with a representative of MAARRS, and immediately afterward, scheduled a trip to Supah al-Fareek."

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Lear was cool. "As I said in my report, both of whom have weapons technology and expertise that could aid us in the War Against Aurelia."

"Quiet you," Keeler barked. "After that, you left to returned to MAARRS, with a stop in-between, perhaps to ward off suspicion. After you left, the Aves *Prudence* was diverted to Supah al-Fareek on your orders. While *Prudence* was in Supah al-Fareek, its transponder was deactivated for several hours that corresponded with a massive security breakdown at the Supah al-Fareek Central Command.

"During this breakdown, the prototype weapon known as Hellen Earth escaped from her holding cell, assisted by three men, two of whom may have been Flight Lieutenant Trajan Lear and Tactical Lieutenant Alkema. Both of whom deny involvement. In any case, the men were wearing some kind of camouflage suit that disguised their bio-metrics. No one in the *Prudence* crew has any memory of this. Even the truth machines have not extracted any memories from them. The same is true of the landing party that accompanied you on the Aves *James*. So, if they were involved in some way, their memories have been erased. In any case, I am willing to assume they were only acting on orders."

Keeler stared her down hard. "What I intend to find out, with the assistance of Chief Inspector Churchill, is

determine who issued those orders, under what pretext, and whether this person was setting out to undermine my mission."

There was a pause during which Keeler continued to glare at her.

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"May I speak now?" Lear asked.

"Neg," Keeler answered. "I already know what you're going to say. I read your mission report. You have a neat little explanation for everything. Your discussions with MAARRS and Supah al-Fareek were purely diplomatic in nature. You offered the services of your ship to transport a dignitary to MAARRS, and had no idea who this person was and you still don't. You point out that the Fareeks claim this person was actually a prototype weapons system stolen by MAARRS. You point out that MAARRS claims the defection was staged to allow this person to attack the MAARRS central data nexus and assassinate Auntie Maim, the Chairwoman for Life. None of this can be verified since the data repositories of both companies have been thoroughly destroyed. Did I miss anything?"

"Only that I would also point out that..."

"Quiet you!" Keeler closed his eyes and shook his head, as though trying to clear the Etch-a-Sketch of his mind before turning to the next business. "I can not have my executive officer, or any member of my crew making unauthorized missions behind my back, or in front of my front, or off to the side of my ..."

"Commander," Lear interrupted.

Keeler cut her off. "I have tasked Mr. Churchill to thoroughly investigate this entire incident. Until then, I suggest you take a family leave, so that I can spare you the indignity of relieving you from duty."

Aurora – Somewhere in Corto Maltese Province

Elba Renee Carrington was working in her terraced garden, planting a row of Alamo trees, a species whose elegant trunks were once said to have been hand-carved by the gods themselves. They sported diamond-shaped leaves that went from gold-green in summer to red-violet in autumn, but did not shed. And their nuts added just the correct note of nuttiness to breads and pastries.

From the northwestern sky came a sustained roar. She looked up, holding her sunhat to the back of her head as she did so. A hovercraft was landing, gunmetal blue trimmed in yellow and orange, four propulsion pods laying waste to the perennials on the side of the koi pond.

It was a Netzwerk City Executive Transport, not a security ship. Nevertheless, she removed a charteuse plasma rifle from its cozy her sewing kit, a very powerful mini-flamethrower, capable of producing a ten-meter wall of flame and sustaining it long enough to flash fry anyone within it. She tucked it into the folds of her dress.

A hatch swung open, and The Glorious Burbank Experience emerged, wearing a tailored blue suit, carrying an elegant handbag. She walked toward Elba. Elba walked toward her. They met at the white gazebo.

"You're looking very well, Auntie Maim," said Burbank.

Carrington smiled. "Why, you found me out, you naughty little girl."

"Please don't kill me," said Burbank, her smile not fading one candlepower. "First of all, it would be rude, and second, it would negate the offer of asylum Mr. Marvelous has offered me to extend to you."

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"Asylum," Maim said.

"And immunity," Burbank said. "Supah al-Fareek, of course, are still angry for theft of proprietary data, and the rest of the synerplex is angry about the whole ... you know, trying to take over the world thing?"

"Oh, that..." Maim chuckled. "I would have succeeded, too, were it not for those meddling kids."

"That's the indomitable spirit Mr. Marvelous admired," Burbank enthused. "Bloody but unbowed." She removed a datacard from her pocket. "We wondered if we could interest you in a chat show."

"A chat show?"

"Nothing too heavy... three days a week, you can talk about cooking, gardening, world domination... things that interest you."

Maim considered this. She knew Mr. Marvelous from back in the day when he was just a punk kid with an attitude, a haircut he couldn't afford, and a tongue like a licorice whip. The chat show was just a front for something else... something a lot more interesting.

Pegasus – Docked at Chapultepec StarLock

At Chapultepec, eleven years had passed in our absence. The twenty-two we had left behind had pretty much restored the station to full functionality and produced nine of those annoying smaller humans.

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They had managed to reactivate six additional StarLocks, named Charmed, Christmas, Chadoury, Chinook, Chagrin, and Chanticleer. The last provided a shortcut to the Orion Quadrant, where Earth might be.

On the home-worlds, we learned that the New Commonwealth consists of eleven colonies, led by Republic. But Sapphire had formed a loose alliance of its own with six other colonies, called the Free Worlds. They were building two huge complexes on Loki, under atmospheric pressure domes. One would be the Commonwealth Capitol, the other would be a meeting place for the Free Worlds, each of which would establish an embassy there.

About the only thing the New Commonwealth and the Free Worlds agreed on was the need to fight the Aurelians.

Our choice was uncertain. We could wait at Chapultepec, or, we could leap into a better part of the galaxy, and resume

searching for colonies. Clues assembled by the other pathfinders had identified an additional three hundred colony sites to add to the list from Testament.

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Keeler and Alkema were in the Command Suite. Their jackets hung on the backs of the commander's conference chairs. They bent over a table, on which were arrayed a bunch of tiny androids, half white with green shorts, half white with blue shorts. They stood on opposite sides of the table, manipulating handles that caused the tiny androids to kick a high speed levitating sphere with the object of shooting through it through goals on the opposite ends. A gray and white cat sat nearby, pretending to nap, occasionally opening his green eyes languorously.

Keeler flailed at his handles, sending his little guys running and kicking. "I built my entire academic career on the idea that there were no Tarmigans. At the time it was almost heresy, but the kind of heresy that was fashionably academic. I got a lot of mileage out of denying the Tarmigans. I had a good run. I almost believed it myself, and now, I've been revealed for the sham that I am."

Since telling him he was not a sham would have been too transparent, Alkema merely asked. "What now?"

Keeler sprung the ball straight through Alkema's. All the little blue-shorted androids raised their arms and gave tiny shouts. "Za! Za! Za! I am the All-Being Master of Shoosball!"

Keeler sighed, "Now, I guess I have to figure out how to fight the bastards. Destroy my universe, will they? Not on my watch!"

“Uh, they’re gone, sir.”

“Can you be so sure?” The Prime Commander stood up and cracked his back as the shoosball primed itself for the next match.

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“Someday, Alchemist, we’re going to find a planet the seems to be a paradise, and then we’re going to look underneath the surface and find out that everything is exactly what it seems to be. Someday....”

They were interrupted by an urgent call from PC-1. “Prime Commander, we are receiving an urgent message from Odyssey Combined Command.”

“Damn,” Keeler barked. “Pause game. I’m on my way.”

They grabbed their jackets and proceeded to the Main Bridge, where TyroCommander Redfire had been presiding.

A Republicker woman in an odd gray and white uniform appeared on the screen. “This is Continentia Kellogg from Odyssey Combined Command on Loki. Fourteen minutes ago, our outer orbital antenna array received an emergency TPT transmission from Pathfinder Six, *Lexington Keeler*. Re-transmitting signal now.”

The face of a stern, balding man, somewhat older than Prime Commander Keeler, but harder and tougher, stood on a bridge like that of *Pegasus*, but darker, smokier, and more damaged. “This is Acting Commander Josephus Lockheed, commanding the Odyssey Pathfinder Ship *Lexington Keeler*...”

Alkema had already run the *Lexington Keeler's* crew manifest. "Lockheed, Josephus, Tactical TyroCommander." *If the second officer was in command, where were the commander and the first officer?* He did not want to contemplate the answer.

Lockheed continued "... I am transmitting the complete log of our mission, which will apparently end here. We are under massive attack by ..." his speech was punctuated by an explosion that rocked the bridge and threw everyone off their station. The Acting Commander pulled himself up by a self-deploying "Oh-shit" handle. "Supersonic, transmit the tactical data on the alien ship!" he commanded.

The datastream changed to a tactical schematic of a huge spherical ship, large enough to hold a million pathfinders. It was not identical to the Aurelian sphere they had previously encountered, but its kinship was obvious, there could be no other.

As the schematic was built gradually, there was a confusion of voices off.

"... Detonation in eleven second..."

"Secure stations...."

"Primary personnel to shelter areas."

Everyone on *Pegasus's* Bridge stood as the transmission abruptly cut off. The Director of the Odyssey Combined Command re-appeared. "*Lexington Keeler* had not made its scheduled rendezvous with the Supply Point. Therefore, they had no knowledge of the Aurelians. We can only assume that they did not survive the encounter."

Keeler took this in quietly, then answered almost as quietly, "I don't think we need to assume that."

"Prime Commander..."

"That was a TPT transmission, correct? Virtually simultaneous. At most, a few hours old," Keeler continued. "Do we know the point of origin of that signal?"

"*Lex Keeler* was last reported in the system 12 255 Crux..." answered Odyssey Combined Command. "It's an uncharted system... not in the Testament Database."

"How far away is that?" Keeler asked.

"663 light years," the efficient ponytail bobbed.

"Within the range of the StarLock," Alkema said.

"I knew that," Keeler said.

"Prime Commander," said the Odyssey Project Director, "I can't advise *Pegasus* expose itself to a combat situation. The Combined Command will review the situation and advise you."

"You do that," said the Commander. "Lt. Navigator Change, contact Chapultepec Control and lay in a course. We're going to rescue *Lex Keeler*."