



**WORLDS APART
BOOK SIX: CRUCIBLE**

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Produced in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wittenbach, James Worlds Apart Book 06: Crucible

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CHAPTER ONE

Nineteen seconds have passed since Pegasus entered the Chapultepec StarLock.

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PC-1/Main Bridge

Oing!...

... is the sound a forty kilo hunk of scorched metal would make when it spacked against *Pegasus's* forward shield and spiraled off into space if there were anything other than near-vacuum in space to transmit noise, which everyone knows there isn't.

Oing!...

If a starship explodes, and no one is around to hear it, it doesn't make a sound.

Oing!...

Something else impacted the shields, vaporizing and releasing just enough energy to create a resonant sound that translated through the system as...

Oing!...

The impacts appeared as little sparks in the Primary Holographic Display. Prime Commander William Keeler, stocky and commanding in his stockiness, furrowed his professorly brow. "What is that?"

"We seem to be passing through a debris field," answered Lt. Shayne American, his hyper-competent operations officer, a handsome woman with chocolate brown skin and a tight, pale blond crewcut.

Of the twenty-something people in the command center, she was the one through which most information flowed to the “Inner Bridge,” the four big chairs occupied by the Prime Commander, his Chief Tactical Officer, and usually the First Officer, but Executive TyroCommander Lear had been relieved of duty for almost igniting a global thermonuclear war on the last planet they had visited. Instead, the fourth chair was occupied by a junior Tactical Officer, Lt. David Alkema, Keeler’s unofficial aide-de-camp; who hadn’t destroyed any planets in a thermo-nucleonic holocaust, at least as far as he knew.

“No damage to hull, shields holding,” American reported.

Keeler turned to Alkema. “Hah! *Pegasus* one, Debris Field, zero!”

Pegasus had left Chapultepec to come to the aid of the *Lexington Keeler*, one of the other Pathfinder ships the colonies of Sapphire and Republic had built to explore the galaxy.

“A trillion cubic meters of space, and we emerge in a debris field,” said Tactical TyroCommander Redfire, the tall, thin, crewcut and artistic Chief Tactical Officer. “What are the odds?”

Prime Commander Keeler tented his fingers. “With this ship, pretty much 100%.”

Something hit the forward shield and exploded in a grand yellow fireball. “Ooooh,” the Commander cooed. “Aaaah. Any idea what kind of debris we’re flying through?”

"It could just be the tail of a comet, sir," suggested Alkema, a handsome young man with a ruddy face and glossy black curls of hair framing it. Alkema was said to be the Commander's brain. This was not true. He merely loaned the commander his own brain as a sort of repository for certain command information --- such as, how the ship worked --- that the commander couldn't be bothered to remember.

"Sensors have enough data to let me plot a course out of the debris field," Helmsman Jesus Powerhouse announced. Plugged into the ship's directional control systems by a neural interface above his right eye, he needed only to think to alter the ship's trajectory. "New course laid and executed. We will be clear of the debris field in seventeen seconds."

"Do that," the Commander sort of ordered. Another piece of debris smattered against the energy field above the starboard wing blade. There was an explosion of light, but no noise or impact vibration.

"Clearing the debris field in seventeen seconds," Powerhouse reported.

David Alkema scowled at his readouts. "I am detecting a lot of alloys in the debris that are not naturally occurring. This debris field could be the remains of the *Lexington Keeler*," Alkema quietly told the commander.

"Negative," American corrected him. "If the preliminary sensor readings are correct, there's much too much mass." As she spoke, a holographic projection appeared in the space in front of her station. It showed a

large half-crescent of matter and gas, *Pegasus* was passing through a corner of. “By a factor of at least 14,000.”

“We are clear,” reported Powerhouse, as the tiny little golden flying swan icon that represented *Pegasus* cleared the holographic representation of the field. A few swirls of dust and chunks of metal swirled in her gravity wake.

“Badang,¹” said Commander Keeler. “So, where does that leave us, exactamundo?”

“We are within the planetary orbital margins of the system 12 255 Crux,” said Lt. Navigator Eliza Jane Change, a black-haired, almond-eyed beauty every man on the ship had officially given up on.

“What do we know about this system?” Keeler asked. Instinctively, he turned toward the station his first officer usually occupied. Then, he remembered he had relieved her of duty, and he could not help but smile. He turned to Alkema instead.

“We know that the Pathfinder Ship *Lexington Keeler* sent a distress message from this system. They were under attack from a large spherical spaceship. And we passed through the StarLock to see if we could render assistance,” Alkema reported.

“I was there when that happened,” Keeler told him. “Seems like only yesterday... but it was actually about five minutes ago.”

¹ A colloquialism of Sapphire’s Arcadia Province. Rough translation: “Swell”

Keeler turned to Redfire. "So, about that debris field. If it's not *Lexington Keeler*, could it be the other guys?"

"Too early to tell," Redfire told him, "We can't even be sure they were Aurelians."

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Keeler snorted. "Come on. How many alien species do we know who fly big spherical spaceships?"

"How many alien species do we *not* know who fly big spherical spaceships," Redfire came back.

About then, Lieutenant American got a report from the telemetry station. "*Pegasus* has located *Lexington Keeler*. Second planet in the system... close orbit."

She tried to bring up a high-resolution view, but *Pegasus* was still too far away. The second planet appeared as a black and red sphere. *Lexington Keeler* was a tiny blurry diamond shape at the edge of the planet's atmosphere.

"That's pretty damn close," said Powerhouse.

Redfire gave a tactical rundown, "Sir, if I may, we have multiple priorities here. 1. We have to determine whether whoever attacked Keeler is still a threat to *Pegasus*. 2. We have to ascertain the condition of the *Lexington Keeler*. 3. We have to analyze the debris field we passed through. 4. We have to map out the system and determine the status of the colony Keeler came here to study. You can argue whether one or two is the higher priority, but they both get back to the same point, we need tactical data."

Alkema operationalized the concept. "We need to launch probes. At least four for Keeler and the planet, and another four to collect readings the debris field."

Keeler nodded. "Let's get probin'" He looked around the Bridge. He recalled that launching the probes was the job of the person who sat where the curly-haired blond kid who looked too young to be on the Bridge was sitting. "You!"

The kid had been advised of the commander's ineptness in remembering the names of minor personnel. "Operations Specialist Atlantic, Prime Commander."

"Mr. Atlantic, prepare to launch some of those... probey thingies."

"You mean probes, sir?"

"If that's what you young people are calling them nowadays, why not?"

Atlantic tapped commands into one of his panels. "Four probes standing by to launch. Awaiting mission specifications."

Redfire called an interface panel into existence in front of him. "I'll configure the probes we launch into the debris field to examine mass, composition, and residual energy patterns."

Alkema also called up a panel. "I'll set the mission parameters for surveying the planet and *Keeler*."

"I'll drink to that," said Keeler.

When the programming was complete, Atlantic put some commands into his console, which holographically displayed a pair of phallic-looking missiles with big huge tailfins being lowered into their launch cradles. When they

were in position, the launch icons turned green. “Probes ready, Prime Commander.”

“Launch them.”

“Launching them now.” A display opened up to Atlantic’s left, and showed the probes shooting out of the front of the ship. They repeated the process three more times, until eight probes were vigorously scanning the 12 255 Crux system.

Lear Family Quarters - Deck 22

Even though she had been officially removed from duty, confined to quarters, and was awaiting the equivalent of a court-martial, Executive TyroCommander Goneril Lear still dressed in her white, black, and gray command uniform.

In her urgency to make an alliance with the ruling powers of the planet Aurora, she had inadvertently sparked a conflict that almost escalated to global annihilation. The one thing she could do to save herself the indignity of a trial was the one thing she could not do; explain that she had been under orders (albeit implicit) from the Odyssey Directorate on Republic to do whatever was necessary to secure alliances against the Aurelians.

But admitting that would expose too much of Republic’s agenda to the Sapphireans. She could plea for the Odyssey Project Directorate to intervene on her behalf, but she doubted they would. They would make her the scapegoat for their incompetence, too.

Mistakes were made, others will be blamed was the unofficial operating motto of every bureaucracy that had ever existed.

Apart from the Odyssey Project Directorate, she had a serious shortage of scapegoats. That was a problem.

In the best case scenario, she would be stripped of her rank and relieved of all duties. The thought of remaining on this ship with no authority was unbearable.

To spare herself the indignity of a trial, she was composing her letter of resignation. Artfully avoiding an admission of guilt, and requesting to remain on the Chapultepec Starlock.

It would be a bitter outcome for a woman who had imagined herself the rightful commander of this ship. She had a feeling that Keeler would not find it bitter enough. After almost igniting a thermo-nucleonic war, he might think that exile to the Chapultepec Starlock was letting her off too lightly.

And to complicate things a little more, her belly was now prominent with the daughter she was carrying.

Fast Eddie's InterStellar Slam-n-Jam - Deck Minus 121

Eddie Roebuck placed a saucerful of White Borealan in front of a large green-eyed, gray and black cat with a snow white bib. "Eight spacebucks²," he said.

² The "buck" was the standard Sapphirean currency unit. The "spacebuck" had been adopted by the merchants of *Pegasus's* commercial zones as the standard medium of exchange on the ship.

“Put it on my tab,” said the cat. “You know Commander Keeler is good for it.”

Eddie nodded and signaled to Puck, his erratic and unpredictable mechanoid servant, to make the notation. “We don’t see too many cats down here.” he said.

“Well, with prices like this, no wonder.”

There were no other customers in Eddie’s bar. Tactical alerts tended to empty out the place.

Roebuck brushed his brown hand through the newly shortened curls of hair on his head. *Pegasus* had been in space for five years, almost. He had accomplished the one thing he had set out to do, owning a really happening bar. And now, he felt stagnant.

And lately, he had found his face forming jowls, and the beginning of a second chin. His skin remained a rich and glorious brown, but his hair seemed to be getting a little drab and seemed to have begun a retreat from the front of his head. Similarly, his belly-button and his spinal column seemed to be getting further apart.

“Do you like the drink, cat?”

It was extra creamy, and the Borealan vodka was the good kind. He was pleased. His tail swished happily.

“I’m choking it down,” Queequeg, being a cat, could never admit to being satisfied. “So, whatever happened to those two humans you used to hang around with?”

“Since they decided to just be friends, they don’t come around too often no more,” Eddie told him. “Who would have thought that Captain SkyPilot’s untenable infatuation

with the Cosmic Ice Princess was the glue that held our little trio together?"

"I don't really get why human get fussy about relationships," said Queequeg. "Hold her down by the scruff, plant your seed, go home, and nap it off."

"I see how you are. You want another one of those?" He indicated the near-empty saucer of white Borealan.

"No thanks," Queequeg answered. "I've got cat business I need to get to."

"Really? What and where?"

"Where is deck minus 91, Section J. What is Boobah, who is missing."

"Who's Boobah?"

"Ginger cat. Stays with Operations Lieutenant Tata. He's been missing for four days."

"Don't you guys... you *cats* ... go missing for days at a time... just to annoy people."

Queequeg's tail twitched. "This isn't like that. Something happened to him. I have to find out."

"Are you worried about him?"

"Balls no," Queequeg hissed. "I just want to get my marks in before the other cats figure it out. Minus 91 J is a great hidey-hole. It's right above the primary heat exchange for the hangar bay fusion cluster. Location! Location! Location! We're talking warm and dark!" He leaped down from the stool. "And all for Queequeg!"

Main Bridge/PC-1 – Command Tower, Deck 100

“... Six hours, 93 minutes,” Alkema was saying as Keeler regained the bridge.

“Until what?” the commander asked.

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Alkema gestured toward the holographic display. The projection behind him displayed a one-meter resolution of the Pathfinder Ship *Lexington Keeler*. A readout to the left of the ship gave a list of the damage so far detected, most of which was evident in the blasted and pock-marked hull. Huge pieces of the ship, most prominently the command towers, were entirely gone.

“Until *Lexington Keeler* impacts the surface of the planet,” Alkema explained. “It’s in a decaying orbit, sinking into the upper atmosphere.”

“Do they know that?” Keeler gestured at the holo-projection.

“No life signs detected,” American reported.

Keeler was shocked. “They’re *all* dead!”

American turned around and faced him, her face deadly serious. “There’s a lot of interference from the planet’s atmosphere, but I have detected no signs that there is anyone still alive on-board.”

“Could they have escaped to the planet’s surface?” Keeler asked.

“They would have a better chance of survival on the ship,” said Lieutenant Scientist Magnus Morgan. Morgan was the ranking planetologist, a blandly good-looking fellow in his mid-thirties, with wavy chestnut hair,

intelligent green eyes, and full, pouting lips. He used those lips to recite the latest sensor data on planetary surface conditions. "Surface wind velocity at 80-90 clicks, with cyclonic storms. Average surface temperature is 35 degrees, rising to 60 degrees at the poles.

"Sounds like Panrovia without the culture," said Commander Keeler. "Wait, what am I saying, Panrovia has no culture."

"*Keeler....that is...Lexington Keeler* is adrift in the high atmosphere. Its propulsion systems are off-line." Alkema stared hard at the data. "If we could reconstruct the orbital spiral, we might determine what happened to it."

"Could we pull it out?" Specialist Atlantic asked.

"That's what she said," said Commander Keeler, wriggling his eyebrows, surprising no one.

Alkema and American looked at each other. Alkema spoke, "Initially, I'd say that *Keeler* is too unstable."

"The truth comes out," said Commander Keeler.

Alkema continued. "It's got an incredibly large mass, it's twisting in the wind, and any attempt to pull it out could lead to complete loss of structural integrity."

"But enough about me," the Commander put in. "Is *Lexington Keeler* salvageable, and can we do it. Just give me an answer. Part one, should we? Is the ship worth saving?"

"There is some good news in the telemetry," Alkema reported, illustrating his points with a series of additional displays. "The hull structure is intact and retaining atmosphere. The power system has a lot of disruption, but

I think the quantum reactors are intact. If we can get it out of the atmosphere, it might still be salvageable."

"All right, then. Part two, how do we do that?"

Alkema frowned harder. "The only way I can imagine doing that is putting a salvage crew on the ship, getting the orbital thrusters on-line, and getting it out of the atmosphere under his own power."

"How hard is that going to be," Keeler asked.

Alkema said, "Very, *very* difficult."

"Probably the riskiest thing we've ever done," Redfire observed

"And that's saying a lot," Keeler added.

"There's only one person on this ship who could pull this off," said Alkema.

"You?" the commander asked.

Alkema smiled and shook his head. "I was thinking of TyroCommander Lear."

Shock and surprise silenced the command crew. Even American, who had been deeply involved in reading the sensor data, looked up from her station.

"If this is a set-up for another penis joke, it's not working," Commander Keeler growled.

Alkema explained. "TyroCommander Lear oversaw the final construction and systems integration on *Pegasus*. She knows the Pathfinder systems, and how to get them operational, better than anyone else on board."

"Yeah, but she..." the Commander began, but didn't quite get to finish.

"I'm aware of that, commander," Alkema told him. "But, if you want someone who can maybe... maybe pull this off in the time we have left, she's the man."

"What if she declines," asked Atlantic.

Keeler knew as well as anyone. "She won't, you can be damned sure of that. We need to be clear that if she does recover *Keeler*, the charges still stand." He touched his COM panel. "I need the Watch to escort TyroCommander Lear to the mission room in Alpha Launch Bay."

He closed the channel. He had not decided whether he would tell her himself, or let Alkema do it. "What else will we need?"

Alkema listed off, "Six Aves with six salvage teams, five for the thrusters, one for command and control. That's both the minimum and maximum. They should know this could be a one-way mission."

The Commander agreed, "Let's plan to have those crews on board *Lexington Keeler* in one hour, max. Are you planning on going?"

Alkema hesitated. "Not this time, Commander." Alkema offered no reason, but the fact that his wife was resting eighty decks below with his child in her belly might have been why.

Keeler nodded, "All right. Anyone else?"

Powerhouse spoke up. "Sir, *Lexington Keeler* is going to need a really good helmsman to get out of the atmosphere."

“Know any?” Keeler shot back. “Just kidding. All right, make ready for departure. Atlantic, switch to helm. We’ll get you a booster chair.”

“Kumba Yah!” Redfire exclaimed. “Check it,” said Redfire, and he opened a new holo-display in the foredeck. The imagery was no better than the low-resolution version of the Keeler, but the shape was distinctive. There, spinning and adrift in the outer limits of the debris field was the wrecked hull of an Aurelian attack ship.

CHAPTER TWO

Mission Briefing Room – Deck Minus 9

Executive TyroCommander Lear's pod glided to a halt near Alpha Landing Bay. She stepped out into the crowded access ramp, preceded by two armed guards. Technicians in the tan and red-trimmed jackets of the technical and engineering cores hurried past her with their equipment packs toward the Aves docks.

She left her escorts outside and entered the Mission Briefing Room and was surprised to find Prime Commander Keeler waiting there. She had expected him to send his pup, Alkema. Lear grudgingly gave Keeler credit for meeting her in person. Past the far end of the conference table was a holographic backdrop of the badly battered *Lexington Keeler*, twisting and burning in the upper atmosphere of 12 255 Crux II.

She spared it only a glance. In her mind, this was not a briefing. It was a face-off. While Alkema filled her in on everything *Pegasus* had learned about *Keeler*, she kept a steely gaze fixed on the Commander, who pretended not to notice and fixed his attention on a panel on the conference table where he pretended to play holographic quoits. She grudgingly commended his dedication to pretending to ignore her, especially when he pretended to be listening to smooth jazz on his earpiece, and when he pretended to go to the bathroom and pretended to be gone for over ten minutes.

"Let me be clear on what you expect of me," Lear said to Keeler when Alkema had finished explaining the situation, not a gram of deference in her voice. "My mission is to take command of a salvage crew to repair Pathfinder 06."

"Keep it from impacting on the planet's surface, at least," Keeler said, deactivating his earpiece.

"I also assume that the mission also involves a search for survivors."

"Of course, as Alkema explained when he said, 'the mission will also involve a search for survivors.'"

Lear moved to the projection, not so much to study as much as to position it as a backdrop. "I understand no life signatures have been detected."

Keeler's response was unexpectedly angry. "They may be in stasis pods, they may be taking refuge in the reinforced sections of the UnderDecks our sensors can't penetrate, but there have to be survivors. If there is even one of our people left alive on that ship and you can save him, the mission will have been worth it." He paused. "Unless, of course, some of the rescue party gets killed in the process. That, I guess, would be a net loss, but we're going in anyway."

"Losing rescue teams is exactly what is likely to happen," Lear said.

Keeler stared her down. "If you don't want to lead to mission, those nice young men from the Watch will escort you back to your quarters."

Her lips parted as though to say something, but her expression changed, as though she had been preparing to say one thing then said another. "And if I agree to lead this mission, will you consider something for me?"

"I didn't come here to make a deal, Goneril Lear," Keeler told her. "As things are, you are under no further obligation to contribute to the Odyssey Mission at all."

With that, he gestured for Alkema to cut off the holographic display, deactivated his playscreen, and stood to leave.

Lear interjected quickly, "Don't misunderstand, Prime Commander, I will lead this mission, and we will recover *Keeler*. And I will agree to participate unconditionally. But know this, time is short and the situation of *Keeler* is desperate. Once my mission lands, I'll be in charge. We won't have time to run every decision through *Pegasus* for approval, and I have to make command decisions..."

"That goes without saying," Keeler said. "You'll have the same authority as any landing team leader."

"Then, we have consensus," Lear told him. "I'll take the mission."

Tactical Rapid Analysis Integration Lab -- Deck 101

After coming out on the unhappy side of a battle or two, Redfire had convinced the Commander of the necessity for rapid analysis of battlefield telemetry. In the time since Boadicea, a telemetry lab behind the primary command center was converted to the TRAIL.

The TRAIL was darker than the bridge, the better to see the holographic displays. Some of the routing panels were left open, the better to quickly redirect power and processors in the event of attack.

Redfire and four advanced tactical officers occupied the TRAIL. The center of their attention was the large projection in the center, where a crescent-shape cloud of fog was coalescing backward into a large sphere, surrounded by a field of debris.

"We just extrapolated the trajectories of a few billion bits of material backward," reported Specialist Guttenburg Saic, a tall, wiry Republicker. "The bulk of the debris comes together in a sphere 1,014 kilometers in diameter."

"We've also been tracking the heat and radiation dispersion," said Specialist Cutty Skylark, a Sapphirean female, on the short side of middle-age but with enough roundness in the right places to show for certain she had been a heartbreaker two or three decades earlier. "By calculating the heat dissipation curve..."

"And matching it against the expansions rate of the debris field..." Saic put in, "... we estimate the sphere was destroyed sixty-six hours ago."

Redfire looked over the display, the time index, the heat curve, the pieces of the Megasphere flying back together. "Kumba yah," he said appreciatively. "What about the radiation signature?"

Skylark answered. "We detected a retreating gamma emission expanding outward from the point of origin with trailing type five neutrinos..."

Redfire cut her to the chase. "Short version... was it a Nemesis detonation?"

Skylark tried to explain. "The white hole in the center of the megasphere detonated. That much is certain. The only thing we know that could cause that is a high-yield Nemesis detonation. But because the supernova that followed produced orders of magnitude higher levels of energy. It washed out any trace of the missile."

"A bit like trying to find the firestarter after a forest fire," Saic analogized. Redfire thanked him for the helpful analogy everyone could relate to.

"Where was *Keeler* when the Megasphere detonated?" Redfire asked.

"In orbit around the second planet," Saic answered. "Most likely."

Redfire contemplated this. "What were they doing there? Was there a colony?"

"Our sensors can't cut through the debris in the atmosphere," Skylark told him. "There could be a colony on the surface, but we haven't detected anything."

The planet was someone else's problem. Redfire asked, "Did *Keeler* get all the Aurelians, or is this zone still hot?"

The tall, blond, linebacker form of Warfighter Lieutenant Commander Adrian Honeywell, *Pegasus's* number two tactical officer, gave the report. "The destruction of the Megasphere and any additional Aurelian ships was near-total. We haven't tracked anything giving off an engine core signature, or anything

maneuvering and flying on a path that can't be accounted for by the dispersal pattern."

Redfire asked. "Scan everything again. We're going to start a major operation. An Aurelian attack would be most unwelcome."

Landing Bay Alpha

"Let me go!" were the insistent words of a young Flight Cadet named Artesia Fushang, a girl of Republicker background whose curves nicely filled out her gray and blue flight uniform.

"Neg!" Max Jordan insisted. He was a little younger than she, but filled out his own flight suit in a way every bit as pleasing to young females. He also sported a lush mane of unkempt red hair that tended to fall into his bright blue eyes.

"Please, Max, Let me go instead of you." They were crossing the catwalk above the landing bay. Below them, technicians and engineers were boarding the *Aves Kate*. *Aves* had been described as an eagle with the head of a viper, but only by someone not very much familiar with zoological anatomy.

"Flight Lt Ironhorse is my mentor," Max insisted.

"But you have twice as many flight hours as I do," she said, fixing him with a kind of sultry, pouting expression.

"I *need* twice as many flight hours as you," he responded. This was part of the penalty attached to him for an incident almost two years previously, in which he had hijacked an *Aves*. It had been returned undamaged,

but the ship that chased him had crash-landed and come out much worse for it. Privately, he thought it more than a little unjust that he had borne the brunt of the punishment, but the Flight Commandant (whom he called “mom” in her off-duty hours) was a real hardass.

She stopped him on the downward catwalk, and took him by the arm. “Please,” she said, gently caressing him through the sleeve.

He wished she had not done that. It made his uniform too hot and tight, especially below the waistline. Deep inside him a voice was calling out “*You know what they say about Republicker girls.*”³

“It’s only a fourteen-minute flight to the other starship,” he argued.

“There’s a lot a girl can do in fourteen minutes,” she whispered, with a flash of wickedness in her almond-shaped eyes.

“Stop it,” he snapped, suddenly angry for some reason.

“Just change with me, Max. I’ll take second seat on *Kate*, you take second seat on *Susan*. She’s in the third wave.”

Flight Lieutenant Dallas, Max Jordan’s mind groaned, and he understood why she wanted to swap. If you

³ They say “Before initiating courtship with a Republicker females, ensure that all appropriate forms, citations, and registrations have been filed and approved.” The “they” in this case being the Republic Ministry of Marriage and Family, which has all kinds of useful advice for teenagers.

enjoyed long verbal dissertations on the subject of how men were all pigs, then Dallas was the aviator-mentor for you. Otherwise, not so much.

“Please, Max... be my best friend,” she pleaded

Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse came up behind them, “I’ll save you the trouble, TyroCommander Lear has suspended all training flights for this mission.”

“What?” said the two of them, more or less in unison.

“TyroCommander Lear does not think any of her crew should be distracted by the presence of uncertified cadets,” he explained, in his deep rich baritone. “Once we have secured the other Pathfinder ship, there will be other missions to map the system... 20 hours or longer in duration. You will both have opportunities to increase your logged flight time.”

He studied Max with his dark, dark eyes. “I was wondering if your... if Flight Commandant Jordan would like to undertake a survey mission with me. “

Max began talking over him. “Why...”

“I thought after such a long time out of service, she might wish...”

“...is it because you love her?”

Ironhorse drew back. “What makes you think...?”

“... she knows,” Max told him. “She’s known for a long time.”

Ironhorse turned and walked to his ship. Max Jordan tried to suppress a lopsided smile. Fushang scowled at him, “You’re a bastard,” she said.

PC-1/Main Bridge

Pegasus was 63,000 kilometers above the planet. *Lexington Keeler* was 62,700 kilometers closer. It was a smallish world, only about two-thirds as large as Republic. It might have been a dull pink before its destruction.

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"Have you found any people on the surface," Keeler asked Lt. Scientist Morgan.

"We still can't quite get through the atmosphere," Morgan answered. "Our resolution couldn't distinguish between structures and random arrangements of rock. We've got some spectrum that could be vegetation. There was water on the surface. A lot of it ended up in the atmosphere. There's also a high concentration of hydrocarbons, which we haven't accounted for yet."

Keeler stared at the projected imagery and analysis from the probes. "I want to go down there," he muttered.

They were interrupted by Flight Control Specialist McCormick, a big blond guy, who had a big blond twin brother, but his brother wasn't around. "The Aves are ready to launch, Commander."

"Which Aves?" Keeler asked.

"*Kate, Neville, Yorick, and Victor*," McCormick reported. "Mission Commander is in *Victor*." There were ninety-six people on the first four ships. Two more crews were standing by to follow immediately.

"Clear them for launch," Keeler ordered.

They watched the Aves launch from the front of the ship, all four at once firing down the electro-magnetic

launch rails and emerging from the lower bow of *Pegasus*, just below the winged horse that decorated the front part of the ship.

At the tactical station, Redfire gave an order to McCormick. "Give me near telemetry from one of the probes nearest *Keeler*."

McCormick obliged, and the projection in the forepart of the Bridge showed four Aves closing rapidly on the battered hulk of the *Lexington Keeler*. They seemed so small. How could they ever hope to retrieve her?

The Aves closed to the *Keeler*, and now they were flying across the top deck, across a twisted landscape of blasted Pathfinder Ship. Prime Commander Keeler shook his head. *How are they even going to land on that thing?* It was beginning to seem like a bad idea to even try. He had to remind himself that there might be survivors...

And suddenly, bullets of charged energy began raining down on the Aves. One of them exploded, and crashed as a fireball against *Keeler's* hull.

"First Flight is under attack," said Redfire, with a surreal, awestruck calm.

"What the Hell!" Keelerspoke over Redfire, who was demanding long-range telemetry.

Lear's face appeared on one of the COM Links. "*Pegasus*, this is Recovery Flight One, we are under attack. *Kate* is down. *Neville* is hit. Returning fire."

"Can you return to *Pegasus*?" Keeler asked.

"I think we have a better chance of making the Landing Bay on *Keeler*... update... we have destroyed one target..."

Most of the Bridge displays were switching to tactical views, outlined in Tactical Alert Red. Helm, Operations, Flight Control, Telemetry and other Bridge Stations went into Battle Situation 1 mode. Alkema ordered civilian and non-essential personnel to battle-hardened safe areas.

"*Yorick* has returned fire with hammerhead missiles," Redfire put in. "Enemy appears to have broken off and are retreating at high speed." He paused. "Krishna, they're faster than we are."

Keeler ordered, "Give them some cover!"

"Right, sir... launching Accipiters," Redfire told him. Within forty-five seconds, thirty-two of the "steel butterflies of death," as some described the Accipiters, had launched. All of them were unmanned, some guided by autonomous systems and others by aviators in virtual environments in *Pegasus* Secondary Launch Bay.

"Accipiter Squadron intercept in three minutes," Redfire reported.

"We seem to be clear for now," Lear reported. "Twenty seconds to launch bay intercept. Commander, we are urgently going to need more crew over here."

Keeler turned to Redfire. "You said the flight path was clear to *Keeler*."

"It was, Commander." Redfire told him. "We didn't even detect those ships until they were almost on top of the Rescue mission."

"How is that possible?"

"I honestly wish I could answer that, Commander."

"Is it safe to launch Flight Two?" Keeler demanded.

"Neg," Redfire told him. "But if we don't, we lose *Keeler*."

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"We just lost more people in ten seconds than we lost on the first six years of this trip," said the Prime Commander. "Is First Flight on the *Keeler* yet?"

"We lost contact with them sixteen seconds ago," McCormick reported. "It's probably just because of the interference around the *Keeler*."

The situation dictated Keeler's next orders for him. "Clear Rescue 2 for launch. *Pegasus* to Battle Situation One. From this moment forward, we are under attack.

"Ranking Phil, find out who and what attacked us, where they came from, and where I need to go to kill them.

"Ranking Dave, come up with another way to get the *Keeler* out of that planet's atmosphere, or at least buy us some time before final impact."

Without waiting for acknowledgement, he turned and walked toward his command suite.

Alkema leaned into Redfire and whispered. "Not to be competitive, but I think my task is more impossible than yours."

CHAPTER THREE

Lexington Keeler

Flight Lieutenant Strangelove lined up the Aves *Victor* with the Landing Deck that protruded from *Keeler's* Aft Section, for a high-speed, high-angle-of-attack combat landing. "Hold on," he told his passengers as he took his ship into a tight, diving turn, into the dark tunnel of *Keeler's* landing bay.

Strangelove had a heavy look to him, though he was not fat. He wore his black hair in a tight shave about his ears, and a little longer on top. His eyes were wide and deep-blue. With thick but precise fingers, he guided the Aves in. Despite hours of simulated no-power landings in pitch-blackness with no guidance from flight control, it was a challenge for Strangelove to guide his ship down to the Landing Bay, as *Keeler* pitched and shuddered around him.

He hit the floodlights as he pulled into the docks. "Shhheeee-yit," he said in the soft accent of his native Carpentaria. Every piece of equipment in the hangar bay, including the six Aves that normally docked there, were piled in a mangled mass on one side of the docking arena.

He pulled his ship into the nearest dock. "*Victor* to *Pegasus*, we are landed and secure, confirming dock."

A few seconds later, floodlights appeared reflected in the canopy, and he saw the Aves *Yorick* putting into the docking arena across the deck from his, kicking up debris underneath its thruster jets. "*Yorick* confirms dock," he

heard Flight Lieutenant Revere confirm, no emotion in his stiff Republicker accent.

“Neville confirms dock,” he heard a moment later.

He then heard the voice of Shayne American.

“Recovery team Alpha. What are the conditions in the landing bay? Can additional flights be accommodated?”

Revere spoke first. “Port outer hangar bay conditions are very poor. No landing aids available. No power. The landing corridor is absolutely dark with debris creating collision hazards. The docking arena is a shambles. Two of the bays are occupied by our ships. One of the others is blocked with debris. That leaves two open... port outer.”

Strangelove waited for *Pegasus* to acknowledge before he spoke. “Confirm conditions on starboard inner docking arena. No landing aids. Pitch dark approach. I have four open docks... but the bay equipment is jumbled...”

They were interrupted by the shrill, grating voice of Goneril Lear. “I will be handling communications with *Pegasus* from this point forward. *Pegasus*, it is imperative you send additional teams, soonest possible. Lieutenant Engineer Duke tells me we do not have sufficient personnel to restore the necessary systems.”

“Six more Aves are prepared to launch as soon as we have Accipiters in position to cover them,” Redfire answered her from *Pegasus*.

Lear asked sharply, “TyroCommander Redfire, we were assured there were no hostile ships in the area. How did your tactical personnel so badly miscalculate?”

There was a wait before Redfire replied. "We did not detect any alien ships. The ones that attack may use a form of stealth technology that makes them invisible to our sensors. We don't have an answer yet. We're reviewing our sensor logs."

"Twenty-four people are dead," Lear pronounced angrily. "Twenty-four of my best repair technicians. I can no longer guarantee that this mission can be completed."

Suddenly, the lights in the landing arena came up. Not all of them, and many of those that did were unsteady. But enough light appeared to show in completeness the damage in the landing bay, which was considerable.

Another voice came on the COM link. "Duke here. We've interfaced the Aves power with the local energy sub-grid within the Landing Bay. Sensors show heat, light, and gravity in the bay meets nominal requirements for life support. I suggest we assemble outside and get the first two repair crews dispatched.

Lexington Keeler – The Landing Bay

Technical Lieutenant Scout poked out from *Victor* and was greeted with the stink of fresh vomit. Scanning the bay, she saw that many of her colleagues were heaving. She brushed a strand of ash brown hair back over her ear. Scout was attractive, if you like women with pixyish upturned noses, breasts that put one pleasantly in the mind of citrus fruit, and the ability to fix pretty much any machine known to man.

By the time she reached the end of the step-down, she knew why her colleagues were retching. Her head, her ears, and her stomach all felt like they were being pulled in a different direction. It was like being drunk. Actually, it was like being drunk while riding a gravity sled on Sapphire's famed Bacchanal Island. More to the point, it was like being drunk, while riding a gravity sled at Bacchanal Island, during an earthquake... after swallowing fourteen live giganto-worms.

She didn't puke, but she did stumble as she tried to cross the deck, but someone caught her. "The Artificial Gravity fields are fluctuating," explained Technician Warwick Fangboner, a tall Republicker with carrotty hair, an angular chin, and gangly limbs who never had a chance with her.

"I figured," she answered. "And thanks."

From the two ships, about forty technicians and engineers gathered in the open space of an empty docking port. It finally hit Scout who was missing. She had known people on *Kate*. They wouldn't be joining them. She would never see them again.

"Over here," called Chief Engineer Carlyle Duke a catwalk in front of the control center at the top of the dock. Duke was an older-than-middle-aged Republicker male. He was slightly built; salt and pepper ran through the steely hair framing his narrow, scarred face. Alkema had recommended him as the repair lead, because he had a background in salvage, once recovering an entire Guild Refinery Ship after an unscheduled cargo detonation.

There were also a number of Guild technicians in the repair teams, as they had a disproportionate experience working in raw conditions in damaged ships.

Duke steadied himself against the rail and addressed the technicians gathered in the bay. "All right. Listen up. We are in a severely damaged pathfinder ship. Our immediate mission is to assess, repair, and re-activate four ventral thruster units to lift this ship to a higher orbit.

"As you have observed, the gravitational fields on this ship are dysfunctional. You will encounter this condition throughout the vessel. You will find some parts of this ship to be in even worse condition than this landing bay. You will find passageways with no atmosphere. You will find structural damage. You will find exposed energy cells. There will be radiation zones, areas choked with debris... and perhaps even the remains of this ship's former crew.

"It will not be easy. In all likelihood, the tubeways are non-functional. You'll have to travel to the thruster access panels on foot. The nearest ones are fifty decks below where we are standing. Hopefully, the trans-conduits are intact... and with thruster packs, you might make it to them in time."

He squinted at them in an angry but somewhat inspirational way. "We are going to rescue this ship, because the Pathfinders have worlds yet to discover, and because we don't want to hand a victory to those Aurelian bastiches. But, mostly because our commander ordered us to salvage this ship, and that should be reason enough for all of us. Any questions?"

"What about survivors, sir?" asked one technician, a Republicker whose last name, for some reason, was 'Plankton.'

Duke's features shifted ever-so-slightly, as though he hated explaining the obvious to an obvious fool. "Our mission is to keep this ship from crashing into the mudball below us. If you encounter survivors, and they can't help, send them to the Hangar Bay. There will be no dedicated searches for survivors until after the ship is secure."

There were no further questions. He divided the personnel into seven teams of four, and two teams of six. And laid out for them the quickest pathway to the thruster arrays.

"There is just one more thing," said Duke. He made a point of strapping pulse-cannons to both wrists. "We were ambushed outside the ship. Make damn sure we're not ambushed on the inside. *Victor Alpha Team*, you're with me. Everybody else move out."

Scout and Fangboner ended up on *Victor Alpha Team*. Duke explained their mission. "We're going to need a command center, and this bay is as good a location as any. The Flight Command Center should be serviceable. He indicated the long curved deck with windows overlooking the Hangar Bay. "Let's go."

As he turned to head out, he suddenly found (Acting) TyroCommander Lear cutting off his escape. "I will need a central command post with access to all ship's systems."

"That's what we are looking to set up here, sir," he told her.

"I didn't mean the Flight Control Deck. It's inadequate," she said icily.

"I recommend you stay here," Duke told her. "You can link in with any of the teams from your Aves. And, in the event we need to evacuate, you'll get out in time."

She shook her head. "That is not acceptable. I will set up my command post from the Secondary Command Center on Deck 10."

"Sir," said Duke, "I don't even know if we can get through to that command center, or if it's intact."

"Preliminary scans indicate..."

"The Command Tower is gone," Duke reminded her. "The Secondary Command Tower is gone."

"... that SC-2 is functional and intact. That is where I will make my command. If you manage to restore the thrusters, we can restore control of the thrusters from Secondary Command."

"You can do it from the Flight Control Deck, too." Duke told her. The shift in his expression was less subtle this time.

Lear would not be deterred. "I am going to do it from Secondary Command. Your job is to make that happen or I will relieve you and choose a new crew chief."

Duke looked undefeated. "You can take Technician Scout and Technician Fangboner."

"I would prefer to help you with the command center here," Scout said.

"You're better with bringing damaged cybernetic networks on-line," Duke said. "Now, get the... *Acting* TyroCommander to SC-2. *Pegasus* owes us four more crews... if they don't get blown up on the way."

Suddenly, the great ship shuddered. The deck slowly pitched upward. Somewhere, something must have given way. Maybe a deck imploded; maybe part of the superstructure broke off. The vibrations of its death throes carried even to the Hangar Bay, deep inside the mighty ship.

"If you live long enough to get yours set up, link in with me from there," Duke finished.

Pegasus -- Tactical Simulation Laboratory

Before the Tactical Simulation Lab had moved closer to the bridge, it had been housed in a simulation laboratory ten decks below. As Redfire and his tactical team worked in the lab above, Alkema and his team worked in this larger but mostly similar lab.

The centerpiece of the laboratory was a holographic sphere two meters in diameter representing the second planet of the 12 255 Crux system. Painfully low in its screaming clouds of fury was a tiny simulacrum representing the Pathfinder Ship *Lexington Keeler*. Alkema and a team of *Pegasus's* best and most creative engineering talent was trying to figure out how to bring *Keeler* out before it crashed into the planet, which would happen in four hours and forty minutes.

"Parameters set, sir," said one of the technicians assisting the exercise, a Republicker female with a roundish face and cheeks like that of some kind of rodent that stored seeds in its cheek-pouches and oddly-looping braids around her ears. Her name was Salacia No.

Alkema crossed his arms and stared hard at the hologram. "Begin simulation."

A tiny hologram of *Pegasus* appeared above the tiny hologram of *Lexington Keeler*. It moved in closer until the two ships seemed almost about to merge. *Pegasus's* course was smooth and steady at first, but began shaking as it entered the atmosphere. *Keeler* on the other hand was pitching and twisting. *Pegasus* hit *Keeler* with a barrage of specially modulated gravity beams of the kind normally used to guide Aves into the landing bay. When *Keeler* was steadied, *Pegasus* began deploying a network of cables between itself and the crippled ship. The engineers had calculated they might be able to position 240 recovery cables on the lower hull, so that was the number used in the simulation.

When the two ships were joined together by a lacework of cables, *Pegasus* began to pull up. *Lexington Keeler* began to lift from the atmosphere. Alkema turned to a different display. An engineer read off as well. "Hull stress on the *Keeler* has increased 160 per cent, but it's holding."

Alkema was beginning to think it might work, but then a tiny line snapped. Then another, and another until *Keeler* broke loose and began spinning out of control into an

unstoppable death-dive that ended 32 seconds later in a big smoking crater on the planet's surface.

"O.K.," said Alkema. "So, that plan probably isn't our best option. Load the second scenario."

Alkema had had even less confidence in the second solution. It involved *Pegasus* flying under *Lexington Keeler* and nudging the other ship out of the atmosphere with her own shields. His doubts were validated when the demonstration ended in a fireball as both ships broke apart in the atmosphere, and then crashed to the surface in a double-mass of debris and flaming horrible death.

"Oops," said Alkema. "Let's refocus. *Peg*, go back to trapezoid alpha. Usual problem statement."

The hologram reset to show the doomed *Lexington Keeler* spinning above the tormented planet. It made him feel like the obvious solution was to reach out with his hand and pluck the ship from the scorched skies of the planet. If only there were a way to make himself gigantic, and able to breathe in space...

"My ideas are starting to get silly enough to make me reconsider the ones we've rejected," Alkema said. A youngish engineer with bright blue eyes and closely shorn blonde hair almost spoke before Alkema cut him off. "Except for that anti-gravity wave pulse gun idea."

"It would work," Engineering Specialist Anthem insisted.

"*Peg*," Alkema asked the ship's Braincore. "Analyze Concept Anthem One. Estimated time to complete anti-gravity wave pulse gun."

"Nine hundred and six hours," the ship responded.

Alkema continued. "*Peg*, demonstrate effect of firing antigravity wave gun."

Pegasus reappeared in the hologram. It fired a bright blue beam at *Lexington Keeler*, which disintegrated into billions of pieces.

"So, there are at least two problems with the antigravity wave gun," Alkema concluded.

"You've got it wrong!" Anthem insisted. "You aim the gun *at the planet*. Blow up the planet and *Keeler* has nothing to crash into."

"Okay, next suggestion," said Alkema.

Engineering Specialist Kawasaki made her suggestion. "Launch all of our remaining Aves. Attached them to the hull. Use their engines instead of the thruster arrays to get *Keeler* clear of the atmosphere. It might not get them all of the way out, but it would buy some time to get *Keeler's* engines back on line."

Alkema chewed the idea in his mind. Assembling all the remaining Aves crews and launching them could probably be accomplished in the time remaining. The Braincore could direct them to the contact points on the hull. "It might work," said Alkema. He turned. "Technician Reynolds, input the parameters and run the simulation."

The simulation ran. Eighty tiny Aves flew out from the holographic *Pegasus* in waves of four. They were tiny... no more than pinheads of light as they attached themselves to *Keeler's* hull.

"Aves thrust to full," Alkema ordered. According to the time index, the fleet of Aves would be in position with just under ten minutes left before *Keeler's* irretrievable final plunge. The tiny Aves pooled their collective thrust and began to nudge the Pathfinder Ship upwards. Its progress was painfully slow, but they were definitely having an effect.

"Keeler is 60 kilometers above the surface," Reynolds reported. "Sixty-five... Sixty Seven... Sixty Nine..."

"It's working," said Kawasaki, with a mixture of hope and anticipated heroic glory.

Alkema nodded. "Assuming ideal conditions, it does work. Now, *Pegasus*, repeat simulation assuming minute variations in thrust, timing, and thrust vector in a random sample of the Aves lifting *Keeler*."

Lexington Keeler began to lift out of the atmosphere, but before it achieved full lift, individual Aves began to break loose. Some spun into space, a few crashed into the hull. Then, one tiny ship broke loose and crashed into several others.

"In the simulation, we bought *Keeler* 18 hours of additional time," Alkema read. "But in the process, we lost six Aves, and further damaged the outer hull."

"It's still a relative success," Kawasaki pointed out.

"So, it's our Beta Plan. Now, let's come up with an Alpha Plan in which nobody or almost nobody gets killed."

Lexington Keeler— Deck 02

Scout, Lear, and Fangboner had made it this far without too much difficulty. The sections of the ship above the landing bay contained the structural foundations of the command towers, and were the strongest and most heavily insulated parts of the ship. Damage here was limited to broken wall panels, but Scout was taking continuous stress readings on the ship's primary support structures. The gravitational pull of the planet was beginning to exert an almost critical level of torque on them.

They had made their way almost to the access corridor on Deck 02, when Scout picked up something.

"TyroCommander Lear..."

"Executive TyroCommander Lear..." she was corrected.

"Executive TyroCommander Lear, I have detected an anomalous energy reading... fourteen meters away, on that corridor."

"What kind of reading?" Lear asked, without much enthusiasm.

"Tough to say, but it could be a survivor."

Lear had to think about this for a second. "Let's investigate." She made it sound like an unwelcome distraction from her task.

The reading came from behind a sealed hatch. The doors were undamaged and Scout and Fangboner's combined strength was enough to pull them apart while Lear supervised. The top of the corridor beyond had collapsed, and the passageway was filled with debris from

the decks above, enough to clutter it, to make passage challenging, but not enough to make it impossible.

Scout directed her light at the source of the energy reading. Trapped beneath some collapsing deck supports was a Mechanoid. It was unlike any of the ones *Pegasus* carried; larger than human, with a cylinder-shaped metal body and four large, powerful arms. It turned its visuatators toward them, and they seemed to glow with red-orange disgust.

"It's a mechanoid of some kind," said Scout.

"Duh," called out the mechanoid. "Now how about a little less yammering and a little more shut-the-hell-up-and-get-me-out from under these structural supports."

Scout was stunned. Mechanoids on *Pegasus* were not programmed to talk... let alone sass. "Who programmed you to talk?"

"The Electroids," answered the Mechanoid. "They were much cooler than you pathetic piles of protein. Now, get me out of here." The Mechanoid pointed an extremity at himself. "The Name is Move-O-Bot."

Scout responded, "Hello, Move-O-Bot, I'm Technician First Class Scout of Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*."

"Great and who cares," said Move-O-Bot.

"We're here to rescue this ship, not get mixed up with a foul-mouthed mechanoid," Fangboner said.

"We don't have time to rescue a mechanoid," Lear said. "We have to get to Secondary Command, and I don't think this corridor is viable."

The Mechanoid interrupted. "There's about sixteen tons of debris between here and SC-2, and you aren't getting through it without me."

"We'll find another route," said Lear.

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The Mechanoid sneered, which definitely should have exceeded his programming capabilities. "Yeah, good luck with that. This is the way the crew took when they evacuated. You think any of the other paths are any better?"

Lear contemplated this. "We could use a device to clear debris from our path. Dig him out."

Pegasus -- Tactical Simulation Laboratory

Tactical TyroCommander Redfire had taken the four questions that burned in his head and displayed them in luminous blue fontage on the slim horizontal screens that surrounded the laboratory at ceiling level.

1. Who was the enemy? Aurelians? Or some other.
2. Where did those attacking ships come from?
3. Were there any more of them?
4. When would they strike again?

Also displayed were sensor records of the attack on the repair ships. The sensors had strained to get good data on the attackers. The images were distorted, but there was an impression of a knife blade melded together with asymmetrical fins running the rear third of the ships and a pair of cylindrical pods above and below.

The Aurelians call their warrior class the "Swords," he thought. Would there not be some symmetry then, if their

fighter-class ships were shaped like blades. He kept the complete thought to himself, not expecting them to understand.

"I doubt they were Aurelian ships," Saic insisted.
"Aurelian ships are big and slow, those ships were small and fast."

"The Aurelians we've seen had big slow ships," Redfire said in a voice notably calmer than that of anyone else in the TSAL. "But this system is about 1,100 light years from Boadicéa. Assuming there are a number of Aurelian Megaspheres moving throughout the quadrant, this ship could have assimilated a different technology."

Tactical Analyst Stark ran through the sensor data from Probe Two, which had been distant from the attack, but was in a position to catch the streaks of the attacking alien ships just as they closed on the Keeler.

"I want to check something," said Stark. She measured the time index from the ships' first appearance to the end of the tape and calculated. "I know why it was so hard for us to track them," she announced.

She laid out the math for them. "These ships traveled about 440,000 kilometers in less than two seconds of sensor readings. Average speed. 1.06 c."

"They were moving faster than light?" Redfire said.
"That isn't possible. Not in our universe."

"I am saying the distance we tracked them over was crossed in less time than they could have crossed it at light speed," Stark said. "How, I don't know."

Saic had a suggestion. "Do we have enough course data to backtrack to see where they came from."

Redfire actually had already thought of that. And part of the Tactical Visualization Laboratory's Capability was to automatically extrapolate the probable courses of attacking ships both before and after they engaged *Pegasus's* defenses in battle. He pulled up a holographic readout in front of him.

Course Extrapolated Subject To Following Caveats:

1. Time of charted course too brief to accurately determine prior or subsequent course.
2. Speed of enemy ships too great to adequately determine course.
3. Limited number of possible origin points.

"*Peg*, run every possible course based on the information provided and provide general possibility that craft originated from beyond the planet's orbit, from within the planet's orbit, and from the planet's surface."

Stark added, "*Peg*, also include possibility that the ships originated on either of the planet's moons."

Redfire had forgotten about that, but it made him consider another possibility. "Also, examine the possibility that the attacking ships originated on or within Pathfinder Ship *Lexington Keeler*. Display results in terms of probability."

Four seconds after he was finished, *Peg* displayed her results:

Probability that attacking ships originated:

Beyond planetary orbit	<1%
Planetary Moon	<1%
Planetary Orbit	5%
Lexington Keeler	4%
Planetary Surface	89%

“Kumba yah,” said Redfire.

Suddenly, Red Flashing bands reading “Tactical Alert” appeared at the top and bottom of each display. Redfire’s COM link chirped, and the voice of Shayne American came again. “All Tactical Personnel, *Pegasus* is at Battle Situation One. *Lexington Keeler* is under attack.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Lexington Keeler—Flight Command Deck

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In the back of the flight operations command center was a two-meter long holodisplay schematic of *Keeler*, it was mostly red, with multi-thousands of flashing warning flags showing hull-breaches, system failures, power disruptions, off-line systems, and long black areas where sensor contact had been lost entirely.

Technician Angeles, a handsome Sapphirean with dark eyes and waves of curly black hair, was trying to pull the recent flight data, to see if there was any record of the ship's crew evacuating. "It looks like they erased the logs before they abandoned ship."

"No logs, and no way to status the rest of the ship, damn," Duke snarled. It wasn't a mean snarl, but the snarl of a man who was used to snarling.

"It just got worse," reported Angeles, indicating a tactical display. A squadron of green triangles was moving toward *Keeler*.

Duke barely glanced at the data. "Put me on link, shipwide. 'Attention Repair Crews. Brace yourselves and prepare for attack. Hostile ships incoming.'"

Pegasus – Deck 5

Max Jordan ran through the corridor past the Flight Telemetry Center, past the Primary and Secondary Accipiter Control Station, to the Tertiary Accipiter Control

Station. He touched the Access Panel. "Emergency Override, Code Queequeg zero-call-zero."

The hatch slid aside, revealing a darkened room and ten Accipiter simulators. Jordan mounted one of these, straddling it like a hovercycle, gripping the handlebars. "Peg, activate station Zappa-Four, Activation Code: Queequeg zero-call-zero." Around him, holographic displays came to life. He saw the battle unfolding outside. He selected an Accipiter along the periphery. "Give me linkage to Accipiter 3417. Direct interface control."

"**AFFIRMED**," *Pegasus* answered him.

"All right," he whispered. "There's a party in my sector, and all of you are invited... to die!"

He squeezed the accelerator, and far away, the thrusters on the Accipiter fired. His sensors showed him an alien ship getting ready to open up on the *Aves Prudence*. "Pegasus, add-in Shrieks 3425 and 3313 to my control." Now, he was mentally controlling a trio of Accipiters. The three of them bore down on the alien ship.

Closing to Weapons range.

Max gave the fire command and his ion cannons blazed charges of particle death against the enemy ship, which broke off from the *Aves* to engage the Accipiters.

"Eat missile," Max Jordan growled. His Accipiter dropped a Hammerhead, which sprung to life and roared toward the kill. It slammed hard against the enemy ship and exploded, taking the knife-ship with it.

"Yeah... be dead and like it, you Aurelian suck-pig," Jordan hissed. "Who's next?"

Lexington Keeler—Deck Minus 10

Scout had never seen a mechanoid like Move-O-Bot before.

He ripped his way across the deck, humming a “doot-do-dooo” melody and throwing aside debris with a very un-mechanical style and panache, occasionally twirling the odd chunk of conduit or ruined piece of equipment on the tips of his three metallic fingers.

“Move-O-Bot,” Scout asked.

“That’s me!”

“What happened to *Keeler’s* crew?” Fangboner asked.

“Screw ‘em,” said Move-O-Bot, shoveling aside a man-sized pile of structural fill material.

“Did anyone survive the attack?” Lear asked.

“Maybe,” said Move-O-Bot. He fired some blue energy from his arms that cut a pathway through some debris too large to move aside. “I went down when the Secondary Command Tower blew out. I don’t remember anything after that... until you jerks showed up.”

“Could they have evacuated to the planet’s surface,” Lear persisted.

Move-O-Bot paused and turned. “What did I say my name was?”

Lear wouldn’t say it, so Fangboner had to. “Move-O-Bot?”

“That’s right, not Answer-Stupid-Questions-O-Bot. Now, stop asking stupid questions and let me work.”

"But you're right in front of the Hatch to SC-2," Scout told him.

Move-O-Bot reached out a telescoping arm with a brush on it and gently dusted the last bits of dust from the handle to the hatch of SC-2.

"I'm done," he reported.

"Open the hatch," Lear ordered,

"Are you going to make me repeat what my name is?"

Lear sighed, "Technician Fangboner, open the hatch."

Fangboner punched the hatch and it opened. What he saw on the other side made him say, "Holy crap on a pancake."

SC-2 was completely intact, not so much as a chair had been moved from its station. Not a speck of debris lay on its dark and silent monitors.

Everything around SC-2 was devastated.

A hyperdome had formed over SC-2, part of the ship's auto-repair system, a hemisphere of clear millistrati ultra-crystalloid protected the secondary command center. It also permitted a panoramic view of the destruction across *Keeler's* dorsal expanse.

The Command Tower was gone, completely obliterated. The Secondary Tower was three quarters gone, and its stump casted ever-shifting shadows over the wreckage of the dorsal hull as Keeler twisted through the stormy and burning upper atmosphere of the planet.

"Can we get these workstations up?" Lear demanded.

"I won't know until I can..." She was cut off by a warning.

"Attention Repair Crews. Brace yourselves and prepare for attack. Hostile ships incoming." As he said it, a shadow passed over the repair dome at ludicrous speed.

Lear was angry. "Lt. Duke, is that you?"

Duke answered, "TyroCommander Lear, we have detected, and *Pegasus* has confirmed, no fewer than eight hostile..."

Lear huffed in frustration. "Lieutenant, I am in charge of this mission. I will order the crews when to take cover, is that clear?"

There was a space, before Duke's flinty, hard-edged voice rejoined. "Absolutely clear, TyroCommander Lear. Now, I *recommend* that you order yourself and your team to take over a secure area. The section of the ship you are in has suffered severe damage and is vulnerable."

In confirmation, three needles of light passed over the dome that protected SC-2. Lear turned to order Scout and Fangboner to take cover, but they were already strapping themselves into the high-peril alcoves behind two of the stations, inset areas in the wall, heavily shielded, with high-tensile straps to hold crew in place in the event of gravity or inertial damper failure during battle.

"Right," said Lear. "I suppose I should find myself the secure station designated for the ship's commanding officer." She looked around for it.

"I think it was over there," Scout told her. Indicating a High-Peril Alcove at deck center. Lear began to step toward it.

Then, there was a terrible explosion.

Pegasus - PC-1/Main Bridge

The alien blade ships intercepted the third and final flight of repair crews midway to *Keeler*. The Aves broke formation to deny the enemy easy targeting. Then, the Accipiters swooped in to defend the Aves. Other enemy ships attacked the Pathfinder ship, blasting it with white bolts of energy. Pieces of *Keeler's* hull blasted free and joined the slipstream behind the great ship.

An alien ship got a lock on an unmanned Accipiter and blew it to pieces. Another Accipiter wheeled and tried to attack the blade-ship, but was also demolished in barrage of firepower.

"The Shrieks are buying time for the Aves," Lt. Cmdr. Honeywell explained from in front of the largest tactical display, in the forward part of PC-1. "They're supposed to draw them away from *Keeler*, and toward *Pegasus*."

In one corner of the display, a formation of three Accipiters ganged up on a blade ship. There was a flurry of weapons fire exchanged, then the blade ship became a streak of light and vanished.

"Take us closer," Keeler ordered the helmsman. "But not too close."

"Hammerheads armed and ready," reported Tactical Lieutenant Bonneville.

Suddenly, three Aves came around from their hiding spot behind *Keeler's* port wingblade. *Amy*, *James*, and *Prudence* bore in on the bladeships with guns blazing. Two disappeared under the assault. Four alien ships broke away to attack them from behind, and promptly discovered that Aves can fire missiles backward as well.

"More enemy ships at 10,000 kilometers," Honeywell reported.

"Fire when they cross 5,000," Keeler ordered.

"Sir, you don't want to do that!" yelled Tactical TyroCommander Redfire, running toward tactical from the entrance hatch to PC-1. "Don't let them get close enough to assess *Pegasus's* defenses. Take them out at maximum distance. Fire those hammerheads now."

Keeler grunted an approval and a double brace of Hammerheads --- twenty high-speed deadly missiles --- blazed away from *Pegasus's* forward missile hatches. The blade-ships must have detected the missiles incoming and fired off their own weapons. The missiles dodged and bore down on their targets. The blade ships dodged, but eight hammerheads connected with four blade-ships and ended their existence in horrific blazes of energy.

"Four left," Alkema reported. One of the blade-ships was tearing after the Aves *Amy*. Its guns blazed out, blasting a ragged hole in its wingblade. *Amy* dove hard to starboard. *Prudence* and *James* came to her defense, guns blazing. They didn't destroy the enemy ship, but they wounded it enough that it turned back toward *Keeler*. Its

flight ended a few seconds later with a dramatic crash against *Keeler's* upper hull.

"*Prudence* and *James* are breaking off to pursue the alien ships," Flight Control reported. Keeler marveled at their bravery.

"Neg, order them to get clear," Redfire ordered. "I'm arming Advanced Tactical Hammerheads." A hundred Hammerheads had been upgraded to enhance speed, maneuverability, and explosive yield. Redfire primed a brace for launch.

Flight Control reported, "*Aves Maud* is unable to make *Keeler's* landing port but has managed a combat landing on *Keeler's* hull."

The next brace of Hammerheads was superfast, flying through space in barely a second and connecting with deadly precision to the remaining bladeships; except for the one that malfunctioned and smashed head-on into *Keeler's* nose section, which pitched sharply downward. Soon, the whole rest of the ship was pitching downward, and sinking fast.

"*Kumba yah!*" said Alkema. He ditched the tactical station and grabbed an open spot next to Shayne American. He sought and got an immediate telemetry update on the other Pathfinder ship. "*Keeler* just increased its rate of descent forty percent. At this rate, they'll be in an unrecoverable dive in less than 14 minutes."

Keeler looked up at the forward display. *Keeler* was nose-over, spinning harder, and sinking fast. "*Nice going,*

Redfire," he thought. He turned to American at Mission Ops. "No choice. Order the recovery crew to evacuate."

"I don't think they can, sir," Alkema magnified the view of *Keeler* on the display. The ship was enveloped in fire from atmospheric friction, massive bolts of lightning generated by the ship's passage through the charged upper atmosphere flashed across the hull. Bits of the ship streamed behind it in a comet's tail of burning debris.

"The ship is too unstable for them to evacuate," Alkema explained. "The Aves, even the escape pods, would probably be destroyed on exit. That's even if they could get to them."

"You're telling me they're doomed?" Keeler barked.

"Sir!" said the Specialist at Flight Control. "*Maud* has lost contact on *Keeler's* hull." On the display, the Aves *Maud* had broken away from its hold just above the landing platform on *Keeler's* afterdeck. The Aves spun perilously through the atmosphere, then fired thrusters and recovered.

Alkema shook his head. "We've got one shot. We were modeling a solution before the attack. It's the only scenario with a less than 50% chance of destroying the ship."

"How much less?" Keeler

"49 per cent," Alkema answered. "It's all we got."

Keeler turned to Alkema. "Do it... neg, wait... tell me what it is, and then do it."

"An explosion kicked them into the planet's atmosphere," Alkema began loading the simulation from

the Visualization Laboratory. "An explosion can kick them back out."

Alkema explained as the display opened. "We fire a Nemesis warhead into the atmosphere below *Keeler*. We set the yield to blast several thousand cubic kilometers of atmosphere into space, carrying *Keeler* with it."

Redfire crossed his arms, looking fairly impressed. "You would have to calibrate it precisely. If you use too little yield, or position the explosion even slightly off, it will have no effect. Yield too high, or too close, and *Keeler* will be destroyed.

"We didn't have time to get the simulation exact, but we were close," Alkema went on. "Another half hour and we could have had it."

"They don't have another half hour," American reminded them.

"We have one shot at this, Commander," Alkema said. "Our best simulation was for an 800 megaton anti-matter burst 20 000 meters below the ship."

"A cascade molecular implosion would vector the blast outward at an oblique angle, which would minimize hull stress," Redfire suggested.

"A what and a what now?" Keeler asked. He looked to Alkema, who didn't understand it either, for once.

Redfire explained, "You disrupt the molecules in the atmosphere at the quantum level, which starts a chain reaction that converts some of the atmosphere into plasma. Instead of being punched out by an explosion, *Keeler*

would be pushed out by an extremely strong energy stream. Also, it should be very pretty."

"We didn't ... test that one," Nor, Alkema could have added, had they even thought of it.

"Trust me," Redfire said. "It will work. I modified a few hammerheads for cascade effects while we were en route back to the StarLock from Aurora."

"Did he inform me he was doing that?" Keeler asked Alkema.

Redfire answered. "It's better if you just assume I did. Finished. Aiming point should be 700 kilometers in front of the *Keeler's* course, and right down on the deck. Set for an airburst no more than 1,000 meters above the surface.

"What effect is this going to have on the ground," asked Magnus Morgan, monitoring planetology.

Redfire told him, rather casually "Supersonic winds and firestorms for a radius of 300 kilometers around the detonation point, hurricane force winds beyond that."

"That will kill everything on the ground," Morgan protested.

"We haven't detected any life forms on the surface," American told him.

That was no comfort to Morgan. "And that blast pretty much guarantees there won't be."

"We have to take the shot," Keeler decided. "There are 84 people on that ship who don't have a chance otherwise."

"82," Alkema corrected.

"Warhead is ready," Redfire announced.

Keeler gave him a go-gesture. "Send a message to the repair crews on *Keeler*. Brace yourselves, it's going to get rough... rougher... rougher."

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"Missile primed," Redfire reported. "Targeting coordinates laid in and confirmed. Ranking David, would you like the honor of firing the weapon."

Alkema straightened against the weight on his shoulder. Eighty-two people, probably more, a pathfinder ship that had taken twenty years and multiple fortunes to construct, all destroyed in fire if he was wrong. He gave a nod, "On your mark, commander."

"Get set, go!" Keeler ordered.

"Launch Hammerhead," Alkema ordered, in a strong whisper.

Three displays appeared in Primary Command's forward area, a schematic display of the Hammerhead, visual tracking from *Pegasus's* forward sensors, and a view from the missile itself. The hammerhead launched from the forward missile hatchery, riding a blue-white ion stream as it arced toward the planet's atmosphere.

"Atmospheric entry... Detonation in four... three... two... one... now," American ticked off. The feed from the on-board sensor disappeared with a flash. The sensor display showed a single bright flash among the burning clouds. Several seconds passed.

"Is that it?" Keeler asked. "Somehow, I was expecting more."

“Wait for it,” Redfire began, but before he had even finished, waves of exploding light and energy blasted through the atmosphere, spreading out from a single point in a V-shaped wake, as though the afterburner of the gods had turned on.

The broad front of the wave caught *Keeler*, lifting it up, and pushing it out and away from the planet. The halo of fire surrounding the ship first flared with new fuel, then died when it reached the near vacuum of open space.

Redfire beamed.

“*Lexington Keeler’s* altitude has increased to 700 kilometers... 900... 1100... 1,700 ...” American ticked off.

“Calculating the new vector,” Alkema connected his mind with *Pegasus* to better make the calculations. He concentrated, let the numbers flow through his head. “With its current acceleration profile, *Keeler* should continue moving outward until it reaches 7,000 kilometers. They will start to tumble again, but we’ve bought them at least nine days.”

Keeler came really close to smiling, “That almost looked like fun. Lt. American, contact the repair crews. Let them know that we’ve bought them some time.”

American relapsed into Grim Assessment Mode. “I’ve already tried, sir. Either the explosion knocked their comm system out... or they didn’t make it.”

“Thank you Lt. Worst-Case-Scenario,” Keeler turned to Specialist McCormick at Flight Operations. “What about our Aves?”

"Prudence, James and Quentin are still out there," Flight Control reported. "Aves Amy on return course to Pegasus. I've lost contact and transponder signal from Maud."

"Clear all Aves to land on Keeler." The Prime Commander regained his command chair. "Prepare a Search and Rescue team for the Aves Maud."

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"Aves Basil and Leo standing by for retasking to Search and Rescue mission," Flight Operations reported.

Keeler waved everyone to get back to work and stop talking to him, and then turned to Redfire. "All right, TyroCommander Redfire. Give me what I am certain is bad news about those ships that have been attacking us."

Lexington Keeler - SC-2

Scout and Fangboner were, fortunately, secured in crash station when the enhanced Hammerhead detonated. Keeler had been nose down, in a screaming, final death dive toward the surface. With the ship's malfunctioning artificial gravity fields and the spastic performance of the inertial dampening systems, they were not quite aware of Keeler's attitude, only of the sensation of diving in an inverted position.

Then, the forefront of the blast wave caught the front of the Keeler, and the ship was flipped end-over-end, making three longitudinal rolls as it rose above the planet. This, they felt. It was like extreme g-forces accompanied by extreme vertigo, simultaneous freefall and paralyzing, crushing weight, and a dizziness that felt like their brains

and all their senses had been drained out through their eyeballs.

After the blast wave died out, the ship stabilized, in the sense that it twisted and looped more slowly. For several long seconds, there seemed to be no gravity at all. They floated weightless while loose tools, bits of debris, and Move-O-Bot hung suspended in place and the damaged SC2 spun surreally around them.

Then, the artificial gravity cut back in.

“Oh,” Move-O-Bot growled before crashing to the deck with a hundred other pieces of tools and debris. “Crap.”

Lear had not made it to the High Peril Alcove when the attack started. She was unconscious underneath the command console.

“Look at that,” Scout was peering up through the protective repair dome.

The burning clouds were gone, replaced by the comforting black of space, punctuated by the bright diamonds of stars. In one corner, the dusky orb of 12 255 Crux II hung, looking much less dangerous than a few seconds earlier.

Scout tried to free herself, but the restraints held her in place until the restraints determined it was safe to release her. Without functioning systems to provide this information, she was stuck. She reached for her utility belt.

Lexington Keeler - Hangar Bay Alpha

Duke eased his grip on the “Oh, Shit,” handles in *Keeler’s* Flight Control station and eased himself back onto the deck. “Reminds me of a 20-Credit epileptic Panrovian whore I met on Forseti Station. All right, break’s over... find out how many repair crews are still alive and let’s get a position and damage assessment.”

Pegasus - The UnderDecks

Queequeg crawled through the ventilation shaft. It was big enough for an over-large cat, but not by much. His paws and very sensitive whiskers picked up the vibrations carried through the ship’s structure. They felt like missile launches. *Pegasus* was probably under attack. That was the humans’ problem, not his.

His problem was more primal: curiosity.

Rumors persisted among that part of the ship’s ancillary crew that possessed pointy ears, whiskers, and thick-padded paws of rodents living in the ducts of the great ship. Rodents excited him at a primal level. Like humans who hunted antler-beasts back on Sapphire. His pursuit of rodents put him touch with a primitive part of himself. He really loved that part of himself.

Of course, any rodents that did sneak aboard during construction or had smuggled themselves in cargo, would have been detected by the ship’s systems, and dispatched with humane swiftness by the extermin-o-bots. But even the possibility of rodentia was worth the hunt to a bored feline on a long journey.

Queequeg came to a bifurcation of the system. It was exceedingly dark, but human's genetic foolery had not extended to his feline night-vision. He saw just fine. His whiskers twitched. Something was down the left side. He paused, wiggled his hindquarters, and moved forward.

I am a magnificent fusion of instinct and sensory perception, Queequeg thought. Flawless reflexes, exquisite in form and function.

Guided by his superb night vision, the cat came to a large junction where a circulatory pump fed atmosphere from the purifiers below decks up toward the Agro-Botany Bays. If he had been a human, or a dog, he might have tripped over the first piece of debris, but he was a cat and noticed it right away,

Following the trail a couple of meters further led him to the source of the debris: an extermin-o-Bot, or more exactly, an ex-extermin-o-Bot. Its feelers still twitched, but its sensor head was split open and each of its legs was detached. The artificial musculature and connective wiring had been ripped out and *chewed*. It extended around the carcass like entrails.

Queequeg was almost embarrassed to find most of his fur was standing on end.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lexington Keeler – Secondary Command Center

“I think I’ve got it,” said Technician Scout. She had freed an interface pad from her utility belt. “I’ll have us out of these restraints in a few seconds.”

Move-O-Bot extended his arms and pushed himself up from the deck. He then extended his arms the other way and began tickling Fangboner in the armpits.

“Stop! Why are you doing this?” Fangboner begged between giggles.

“To temporarily amuse myself,” growled Move-O-Bot. “Heh Heh Heh, kootchy coo, you cute little technician.”

“Please, Krishna, stop!”

“Stop whining, you two are lucky to be alive,” Move-O-Bot went on, continuing the tickle torture.

“There are three of us,” Scout reminded the mechanoid, trying to patch her tool into the inputs for the restraint sensors so she could convince them that everything was all right and the crew could be released.

Move-O-Bot blew a ring of smoke from his speech unit. “Yeah, but the skinny guy seems to be out of it.”

Scout looked up and turned toward Lear, who lulled unconsciously in her restraints, a trickle of blood licked across her eyebrows.

“TyroCommander, are you all right?” Scout called out.

“I... will ... be,” Lear moaned slowly, raising her head.

She looked around the wreck that was the SC-2, which remained a semi-circular space filled with blank screens and silent crew stations, beneath a clear dome beyond which the stars spun dizzily as *Keeler* twisted in space.

"Is this my destiny," she continued, a little blearily. "When I was supervising the construction of *Pegasus*, it was brought to my attention that the port wingblade was asymmetrical to the starboard wingblade by nine centimeters. It was still within tolerance, and meant only a light energy variance would be necessary to sustain to propulsion fields when the ship was in flight.

"Nevertheless, I ordered them to strip down the port wingblade and rebuild it. The construction managers were furious, as was the Odyssey Project Directorate. It put the ship's completion 164 days behind schedule. But I stood my ground. *Pegasus* was going to be perfect.

"In the end, *Pegasus* was complete on time, with two perfectly symmetrical wingblades."

"What a pointless and depressing story," said Move-O-Bot.

"*Pegasus* was rightfully mine," Lear hissed. "For the last ten years of her construction, I was in charge. Then, they put a Sapphirean in command. And when he died, they replaced him with another Sapphirean. He took my command, then, he stole my ship."

"Well, you did almost start a global thermonuclear war," Scout reminded her.

"And Prime Commander Keeler may yet get us all killed," Lear spat. Flecks of foamy spittle flew at Scout and Fangboner across the SC-2.

"Got it," Scout input a command into the interface tool and the restraints released them. She and Fangboner caught themselves. Fangboner crossed to Lear and took out his Medikit. "Looks like she has a concussion. She'll need to rest for a while."

Scout touched her COM Link. "Technician Scout to Lieutenant Duke, we are in the Secondary Command What is your status?"

Duke answered,. "Alive and kicking, Technician Scout. That was quite a ride. The good news is, we can do it all over again if we don't get the systems back on-line before those aliens attack again or we tumble out of this orbit."

Scout nodded, "Acknowledged."

Fangboner reported, "TyroCommander Lear is injured."

"Seriously?" Duke asked.

"Za, she really is injured."

"I meant is she seriously injured."

Fangboner answered. "She'll be unconscious for a couple of hours, but the injuries are not life threatening."

"Would you like them to be?" offered Move-O-Bot.

"Who is that?" Duke asked.

"A mechanoid," Scout answered. "Long story. What should our priority be?"

Duke told her, "We need system links between SC-2 and our command post in Flight Operations. Try to get the crew stations up and running."

"What about Primary Braincore?" Scout asked.

"Interface systems first," said Duke. "I've got other teams checking in... some with injuries. You get to work, I'll check in when I have the time. Command Post out."

Pegasus - Battle Management Command and Control (BMC2) Deck 2

Redfire began his meeting with his conclusion, "We have to explore the surface of the planet," Prime Commander Keeler, Alkema, American, Morgan, Honeywell, and Flight Commander Collins surrounded the black and blue oblong table in the Strategy Room.

Redfire activated a holographic projection of the planet, with the flight vectors of the alien ships displayed as bright gold contrails. "We used our sensor tracks to extrapolate a point of origin for the ships that have been attacking our rescue teams. The most likely point-of-origin is the planet's surface."

"How is this possible?" Alkema asked him. "We assumed that the blast wave from the Megasphere wiped out any advanced life on the planet."

"That atmosphere may have shielded the surface better than we thought," Redfire answered.

"So, who are they?" Keeler asked.

"We don't know for sure, but it's possible the Aurelians established a base or bases on the planet before

the attack. When *Keeler* entered the system, the Aurelians opened up on them. *Keeler* fought back with everything they had. They destroyed the main force but left enough Aurelian bases on the planet for the Aurelians to launch a counter-attack."

"Their ships don't look Aurelian," Honeywell countered. On the holodisplays in the room, enhanced views of the alien ships showed long, blade-shaped hulls attached to cylindrical drive units; like rocket-powered cutlasses.

"Our intelligence on the Aurelians is limited," Redfire answered. "It's possible each Aurelian Echelon has unique equipment."

"Or our attackers may be some new alien species," Honeywell clarified.

"Not another one." Keeler moaned and buried his face in his hands.

Morgan was furious, but quiet about his furiousness, with just a hint of anger in his voice when he accused Redfire. "You fired that warhead, even though you knew there was life on the planet?"

Redfire ignored him. "An exploratory mission to the planet is imperative. We won't know the extent of this threat until we investigate."

"Is it possible some of the colonists survived, and this is part of their planetary defenses?" Alkema asked.

Redfire repeated himself. "We won't know until we investigate."

"How much survey data do we have on the planet?" Keeler asked.

Morgan brought up another projection display. "Only about 45% of the surface area has been mapped at all. With all the dust in the atmosphere, it's very difficult to get scans in any part of the spectrum."

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"You're going to need a lot of cover," Collins suggested. "I am thinking four combat-Aves, and at least ten Accipiters to cover you from orbit to the deck."

"And a heavy warfighter presence on the ground as well," Honeywell added. "If they have attack ships, they could have ground troops as well."

"The enemy is very good at sneaking up on us and getting the first shot in," Redfire observed. "Instead of 10 Aves with 20 people on each, let's go with twenty Aves with 10 on each."

The Prime Commander sighed and agreed. He hated it when tactics came down to how to lose the fewest people, but he had enough sense to know when to shut up, trust his tactical team, and drink a lot.

"We need a place to land, first," Morgan told him. "Instead of launching more probes, let's move *Pegasus* into a close orbit. With our sensors, 3,000 kilometers should be close enough."

"That would also make us vulnerable to attack," Alkema warned.

"Tactical Situation One," Honeywell suggested. "Full Shields. Weapons hot."

"We won't be able to cover *Keeler* from a close orbit," said American.

"We can put the rest of the Quicksilver Angels on patrol around *Keeler* while we complete the planetary survey," Collins suggested, checking her datapad, seeing which Aves were still available.

Keeler sat up, "Do all those things." He stood, crossed to the display, and pulled up another report. "I am informed that as *Keeler* was lifted out of the atmosphere, a section of the hull broke free and a repair crew was blown out into space. That makes 34 people we have lost since arriving in this system. I want these casualties to stop."

"Then, leave the system," American suggested.

"Cut and run?" Honeywell asked incredulously.

"It's the only way to be sure, if your goal is no more casualties," American argued. "Just putting all the options on the table, sir."

Keeler nodded. "We may still find survivors on board *Keeler*. And the ship may yet be salvageable. No, we won't cut and run, but we will butch up."

CHAPTER SIX

Lexington Keeler – Hangar Bay Alpha - Prudence

Matthew Driver and Trajan Lear left *Prudence* through the forward hatch after the last of the repair crews disembarked and auto-unloaders disgorged their android and mechobot assistants from the cargo bay.

They saw Duke waiting for them at the dock with an oversized datapad, staring at their ship. Driver was about to report that they were ready to transport more technicians, but Duke spoke first. "Did your ship always have that stinger poking out of it?" he asked.

Driver and Lear swung around. A silvery needle impaled *Prudence* between the reactor dome and the command deck canopy, just to the right of the ship's centerline.

"Oh..." whatever expletive Driver was about to utter was lost in the sudden wail of alarms.

"Evacuate the Landing Bay!" Duke shouted, as he, Driver, Lear, and a short wiry flight technician ran toward the ship. The technician scrambled over the wingblade and examined the protruding missile. A read-out display appeared in front of her as the Spex kicked in.

"It's hot... and building to an overload," she reported.

"I'll fly it out of the bay," Matthew Driver offered, lunging for the hatch.

"You can't," the technician called down. "If it blows up on the way out, we'll lose the launch tube. " She pulled out tools from a kit. "I'll have to disarm it here...."

Duke shouted, 'Clear out!! Clear out!' Emergency blast shields dropped in front of the Ops Center. Driver felt Trajan pulling him away from his ship while the technician carefully opened the side of the missile. *Prudence* deployed emergency blast shielding around the command canopy.

Suddenly, there was an explosion, a bright flash of light, a blast of heat, and a concussion of air that knocked Duke, Driver, and Lear to the deck of the Hangar Bay.

When it passed, Driver rolled over to see if his ship was still there. His eyes burned with afterimages of the blast, and debris was still raining down. His ears rang. Every sound seemed to come to him through a muffled tunnel. He activated his Spex to see through the dust. Slowly, a black shape came through the haze. The Spex increased resolution and focused on the damaged areas. There was a gaping hole in his ship's hull, big enough to jump through and land on the deck of the main cabin.

Driver brought himself to his feet. He almost fell again. The explosion must have rattled him, made his legs weak. The air was choking him. Someone pressed a rebreather mask into his hands. He sucked air through it and moved closer to his ship, using his Spex to make a diagnostic. Besides the hull breach, primary power and control interfaces were shattered. The Command Deck and the ship's critical structures were intact, though.

Driver addressed his ship. "Initiate auto-repair."

Prudence answered him, her voice cracking and sticking. "Initi-ti-ti-ti-ating repair seq-seq-sequence. Input priority sys-sys-sys-tem."

"Control relays, hull integrity," Driver instructed.

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"Es-Es-Estimate... 14 hours 56 minutes restore control systems... unable to repair hull breach. Require external assistance."

"Proceed on control system repairs," Driver instructed his ship. He turned to Duke. Duke's head was bowed, silently offering a prayer for the soul of the lost technician. Driver and Lear joined him.

Soon, more technicians swarmed into the bay, assessing damage to other systems, activating air exchangers to clean up the dust.

Finally, Duke spoke. "Looks like you'll be stranded here for a while. You're not thinking of just lounging while everybody else is trying to get this ship to rights, are you?"

Not any more, Trajan thought.

"We don't have any training in battle damage repair," Driver stated numbly.

"I'm trusting you zoomboys are at least passingly familiar with the sub-systems in the Hangar Bay."

Duke handed them scanners and a datapad. "I lost two teams of Hangar Bay Technicians on *Kate*. While your ship is in auto-repair mode, you can check out the Hangar Bay systems. Don't try to repair anything, just tag the locations of any disconnects, disjunctures, power instabilities..."

"Power Instabilities?" Trajan asked.

"You'll find them by spikes in Gamma Radiation readings," Duke told him.

"But Gamma Radiation makes you... die," Trajan Lear pointed out.

"Not immediately," Duke replied. "Your gear will warn you well in advance of a lethal exposure. Now, get moving. You should be able to scan all the support systems for this Hangar Bay in under four hours."

Driver and Trajan stared at him, like dogs not quite understanding what was meant by the phrase, "Not on the new carpet."

"The systems are located two decks beneath the Bay," Duke explained. "Now, go!"

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

The man's body filled the small space of the circulation shaft. Queequeg pawed at it, gently at first, then with vigor. "Hoy, are you dead? And if you're not dead, could you move yourself out of my way. I got places to go."

"Help... me," the man whispered.

"Do I look like a freakin'..." Queequeg stopped and sighed. "You look like you're on the verge of dying... should I summon a Holy Man, or, possibly, Medical Core." There was a sound in the distance like muffled thunder, another explosion in the ongoing battle.

"What's going on?" the man asked.

"Humans fighting over something... not really my concern." He swished his tail. "Seriously... Holy Man, or

Med Tech. Make it fast, I've got a bad case of curiosity, and I have to deal with it before it kills me."

"No Med Tech... No Holy Man," the man told him. He rolled over a bit and the cat could see he had been beaten up a bit.

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"You're not part of the regular crew," Queequeg said. "You're either a stowaway or an agent... and you're really not very good at either one, if you ask me."

He looked at the cat through hollow eyes. "I was called Hunter, when there were people around to call me that."

"Yeah.... So.... Back to the part about moving out of the way before you die..."

"There are Emergency Survival Packs two sections away from here," said Hunter. "Bring me back a healing pack, and you can be on your way."

"But I don't want to," Queequeg explained.

The man sighed. Actually, it was more of a moan. "You're not just going to let another person suffer and die."

"I'm a cat."

The man adjusted himself so that he was wedged in the air duct, completely locking the cat. "All right then, you'll keep me from dying so I'll get out of your way."

Queequeg hissed. "All right, fine... but you owe me."

Pegasus - Flight Commandant's Chamber

The man from the Ship's Watch escorted Max Jordan through the Hatch. "Here he is, Flight Commandant."

"Thanks, Hieronymus," said Halo Jordan, the head of *Pegasus's* Flight Training Core and a stunning woman even in middle age. "Seal the hatch behind you."

"You don't want me to wait around?" the Watchman asked.

"He's not going to the brig, if that's what you mean," she growled. "I'll handle this."

"Aye, Ma'am," and the Watchman exited the chamber.

Commandant Jordan stared down her son.. "Stop slouching," she began.

Max Jordan straightened up, but with an eye-roll to make sure she knew how much he resented having to straighten up. "I didn't do anything wrong," he started. "Somebody attacked the ship and I defended it."

"You broke into the Accipiter Control System and commandeered a ship without authorization. Come on, Max, it's not like authorization is that hard to get."

"So, why shouldn't I be able to take over when *the ship is under attack?*"

"Cadet Jordan, Accipiters and Aves are critical assets to the Odyssey Mission. We have rules in place..."

"You would have let me take it if I had asked, wouldn't you?"

"Za."

"So, why should I have to ask?"

She decided not to rise to the bait. "Cadet Jordan, you're almost a legal adult now. You should be too intelligent and too mature for this argument."

"I shot down two enemy ships."

"... and if you had done it the right way, I'd be putting you in for a commendation. Since you did not, I have to ban you from Flight Ops for 10 days and deduct ten hours from your accumulated flight time."

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"What!"

"Would you prefer 20?"

Max coiled his rage back inside of him. The words *why do I get punished for defending the ship. This is beastshit* did not escape his lips. Part of him knew that he was getting off light, but it still seemed unfair because he had been *defending the ship*.

"Is that all, *ma'am*?" he asked.

"There is one other thing," she said. "Your status as Warfighter Reserve has been activated. You'll report to Tactical Core for assignment."

"So, I can fight, but I can't..." he cut himself off. "Do you know what my assignment will be?"

"Most of the regulars will be transported to *Keeler* as part of the Search and Rescue teams. *You'll* probably be supporting Tactical Core on *Pegasus*."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pegasus – Primary Briefing Room, Deck 101

With the aid of a vivid holographic demonstration projected in their midst, Lt. Scientist Morgan provided to *Pegasus's* senior officers a vigorous narration of what had happened on the planet when the Megasphere exploded. "First, a blast wave, loaded with debris, smashed the night side of the planet."

The model showed the Megasphere detonating in a blue-white flash, instantaneously converting to dust and sending forth a shockwave of super-hot plasma. The ships around it were toasted instantly before disintegrating in the shockwave. The shockwave then headed out into the system, soon striking the second planet.

Morgan continued. "The blast slammed into the planet's larger moon first, splitting it in half and ripping out additional debris that later hit the planet, and are still falling on it.

"When the blast wave impacted the planet's atmosphere, it was like a giant rock dropped into a water reservoir. It destroyed everything on the impact hemisphere and drove supersonic winds into the other hemisphere. The heat literally set the sky on fire."

These effects were vividly depicted as well, ending with a stormy atmosphere, smoky, debris-filled, and still burning in places. The shattered hulk of the moon, split nearly in half with a massive cleft in the middle, circled the planet, trailing dust and rocks.

Morgan continued. "This planet is especially rich in complex hydrocarbons.... its seas were saturated with them. The extreme heat of the blast coupled with the flaming debris from the moon ignited in places where the hydrocarbons were richest, creating firezones hundreds of kilometers long across the planet."

The holographic clouds parted, showing massive scorched areas of the surface; rivers and lakes of fire burning across the continents.

"So, everything on the planet was obliterated," Keeler suggested. "They killed it."

"I expect the planet will recover someday," Morgan told him, deactivating the display. "Ecosystems are amazingly resilient, and whatever life does survive will eventually recover and recolonize the planet. Give the planet another 100,000 years and you'll never know anything had happened here."

"Except you'll wonder where the big crack in the moon came from," said Keeler. "Have we detected any signs of civilization on the surface at all?"

"Nothing yet," Morgan said. "There's a lot of water vapor in the atmosphere, suggesting a huge amount of oceanic water was vaporized when the atmosphere exploded. Water on the surface plus oxygen in the atmosphere are minimum requirements for human habitation. *Lexington Keeler* came expecting to find a colony. They must have had some evidence."

Morgan paused. "Commander, I strongly believe TyroCommander Redfire was wrong to detonate his

atmospheric weapon when there was a possibility of sentient life on the planet. I intend to lodge a formal protest with Odyssey Project Directorate.”

“Knock yourself out,” Keeler told him. “Make sure you note that if we had not done so, *Keeler* would have impacted the planet’s surface and how many of our crew would have died.”

As they spoke, the map updated. A narrow swath of the planet updated as data came in from one of the probes. Morgan studied it. “Something here, sir.” He magnified the image. Down in one corner was a grid of lines and squares, a fingerprint of human civilization. “It could be a settlement of some kind.”

“It definitely looks like a city,” Keeler observed, poking at the hologram and sticking his finger right through it. “Looks like it might be a nice place for a holiday.... in the mountains, maybe a nice spa.”

Morgan made a note of it. “I’ll retask a probe for a close-in look. It’s nowhere near the extrapolated flight paths of the alien ships. Redfire’s calculations put the base on the far side of the planet... in the blast zone.”

“If it’s a city, there should be some kind of records, there.” Keeler sighed. He was tired, all of a sudden, and realized he had not slept in a couple of days.

Pegasus – Tactical Briefing Room

When Anaconda Taurus entered into the Tactical Briefing Room TyroCommander Redfire was positioned in a large, high-backed swivel chair, facing away from the

hatch. He swiveled around, his fingers tented in front of him. "Ah, Warfighter Taurus, I presume. Very good."

"You requested me, sir?"

"Indeed," he gestured for Taurus to take her seat. Redfire looked her over. Five years they had served together, and she looked hotter now than he had ever known. That glossy black hair drawn away from the tawny skin of her neck, the dark brown eyes that still burned. He put those thoughts aside. "Do you know Max Jordan?" Redfire asked.

"He's assigned to my Combat Squad." She sounded resentful about this.

"Za, I redirected him. He was scheduled to support Tactical Control, but I thought he could be more useful to the landing team than bringing kava and sandwiches to the Tactical Staff.

Taurus crossed her arms. "I have six of the best Warfighters on the ship... and then I have Johnny Rook and Max Jordan."

"Rook had an exemplary training record," Redfire told her. "And Max is bright, resourceful, and brave. He's like a son to me... in the sense of being the male offspring of my wife." Redfire halted, as he always did when he heard himself talking like Commander Keeler.

Taurus frowned. "Neither one of them belong in a firezone."

"This is a reconnaissance mission. If I thought there would be combat on this mission, I wouldn't be sending

them,” Redfire told her. “Those boys need the experience and discipline of a landing mission... especially Max.”

“TyroCommander, this isn’t the time or the place to train a couple of wild boys to act like Warfighters.”

Redfire rejected her objection, “They’ll contribute to the squad. I am positive of that.”

She sighed. “If they don’t, I’ll put them back on *Pegasus* so fast it will make their heads spin.”

Redfire would not have it any other way. “Max is smart, good, but he’s also impetuous, reckless, unpredictable. I don’t know where he gets it from. Max was used to living on a dangerous planet, using his wits to survive. He has great warfighter instincts, and if he can master them, he’ll be a great asset to this ship.”

Taurus asked him, “I things get hot down there, do I protect Max Jordan, or treat him like any other Warfighter, even if it means putting him in danger.”

“Treat him like anyone else,” Redfire told her. He almost added said “but,” but he knew he couldn’t do that.

Pegasus – Hangar Bay Alpha

An extra-large landing team of twenty explorers and twenty warfighters was assembled in the Mission Briefing Room. Lt. Scientist Morgan updated his planet survey report for the Mission Briefing. Over his Science Core jacket, he wore tactical landing gear, black body armor with enhanced sensors, since he would be joining the landing teams.

Behind him was a holographic representation of the planet, stripped of clouds, a mass of brown and tan rock, a third of it showed long empty black tracks where the probes had not yet scanned.

“Our landing area will be here,” he zoomed in on the landing zone, a collection of streets and buildings built on a mesa overlooking a river plain in the southern hemisphere. “This appears to be the largest surviving settlement on the planet. It appears typical of a city with a population between 35,000 and 45,000, based on what we’ve seen on other populated worlds.

“Our probes have made sixteen passes over this area, from high orbit down to 1,000 meters. We have detected no signs of intelligent life, or indeed, of any animal life. There is plant life in the area typical of a semi-arid steppe.”

The hatch at the rear slid open and Warfighter Johnny Rook slipped into the room, and took an open seat next to Max Jordan. He was a tall, athletic youth with lady-killer looks; His short chestnut hair framed mischievous eyes and a devilish grin. Maybe his nose was slightly too large, but aside from that, 100% heartbreaker. He had made a name for himself as the ship’s most talented teenaged athlete before signing up as a warfighter.

Morgan continued, “Our mission is to secure the settlement and retrieve any data we can about this planet’s history.”

“Excuse me,” Technician Gates, a Republicker, stood up in the back of the room. “Since we don’t know where the alien base is, isn’t it dangerous to be flying in there?”

Everyone already knew it was dangerous to fly in there. Morgan simply answered, "TyroCommander Redfire will be leading a squadron of Aves and Accipiters to cover our approach."

"Is Redfire using us as decoys to draw out the enemy?" Gates persisted.

Redfire answered. "Neg, if that were the plan, we'd send Diplomatic Core. Technicians and Scientists are harder to replace."

Pegasus - Hangar Bay Alpha

An hour later, Redfire stood on the dock where he was supposed to embark on the Aves *Susan* Except that *Susan* wasn't there. It had apparently left for *Lexington Keeler* while he had been briefing his landing team.

"There was supposed to be a ship here!" Redfire raged at the hapless Flight Ops Specialist cowering before him in her blue and white jumpsuit and goggles.

"You should have been told, sir," she stammered helplessly. "You... the ship... reassigned... Flight Commandant Jordan."

"What about her?" Redfire shouted.

"She's standing right behind you," said Halo Jordan from right behind him.

Redfire spun, but Jordan kept talking, "I ordered a change in flight logistics. Flight Lieutenant Dallas was re-assigned to transport search and rescue teams to *Keeler*. I'll be flying *Basil* as the escort ship to the planet."

“Neg,” Redfire growled. “Neg, I forbid it. It’s too dangerous.”

The Flight Ops Specialist took this opportunity to slip quietly down the catwalk. “Prime Commander Keeler has already approved the order,” Jordan said, her eyes ablaze with calm fire, the fire that let him know she was not going to yell, but she was not going to back down, either. “You need *Basil* to pull this off. It’s the only available Aves with all the tactical upgrades from Chapultepec.”

“We may not come back from this mission,” Redfire seethed.

“I don’t intend for this to be a suicide mission,” she countered calmly.

“No one ever does. But if you’ve read the profile, you know we’re supposed to cover for the landing crew. If there’s any fire, we’ll be taking it.”

She stood her ground. “I have to go on this mission.”

He paused. “Why?”

“Flight Lieutenant Ironhorse,” she answered. “He’s dead. His ship was destroyed in the first attack.”

Redfire directed his eyes away from her. “I know.”

“Did you know he was in love with me?” Jordan asked.

“Half the ship knew he was in love with you.”

“He never told me,” Jordan said, her voice steady.

“What if he had?” Redfire asked.

He had hoped to read a response in her face, but she did not reveal a thing. "*Basil* is standing ready at Dock 01." She hitched up her pack and walked away from him.

"How will this mission even the score?" Redfire asked.

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"This isn't about vengeance," she turned, and her face glowed with anger. "Ironhorse wouldn't have wanted that. This is something *I* need to do. This is a mission I have to finish. For Ironhorse ..."

"His mission was to transport a repair crew to *Lexington Keeler*," Redfire told her. "Do that."

She stared him down. "You just don't understand, do you?"

"Apparently not," he admitted.

She paused long enough to think of a way to explain it to him. "You don't need to understand why." She pushed a tactical flight helmet into his gut. "Now, suit up."

Truth to tell, Redfire did understand... or came as close as he ever would to grasping Halo-logic. She wouldn't articulate it for fear of sounding egotistical, but the truth was she couldn't let any other aviator lead this kind of mission because she couldn't live with herself if whoever went in her place didn't come back. It was the same imperative that had gotten her stranded on Boadicéa and nearly killed on Meridian.

He fitted the helmet to his head, and followed her toward *Basil*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lexington Keeler – UnderDecks

"I think we're lost," said Matthew Driver.

"How is that possible?" Trajan Lear demanded. "We only descended two decks."

The systems to Hangar Bay Beta appeared to be intact with the exception of a single malfunctioning Q-wave junction. They had gone two decks below and several sections back to find the junction, and were proud that they had brought it online with a simple reset. However, they were now quite unable to find their way back.

"I think we've actually descended three decks," Driver said. He tapped the Locator Function built into the cuff of his flight jacket, but only got a message telling him he was not on board *Pegasus*. "The Guides must have been damaged in the attack."

Trajan closed his eyes. Stormclouds of panic were massing on the horizon of his mind. He loathed and feared the UnderDecks, for what he thought were very solid reasons. Just prior to his thirteenth birthday, he had set off to explore *Pegasus's* UnderDecks and had very nearly died... repeatedly.

"This doesn't look right," Driver said. He accessed a display panel on one wall of the lower deck and examined it. "This diagram looks different from what I remember of the UnderDecks on *Pegasus*. It's as though they reconfigured the decks underneath the hangar bay." He

tapped the display and zoomed in. The Words “Assembly Area Alpha (A3)” appeared.

“That’s the area under the Hangar Bay where new Aves are assembled from the kits in the cargo deck,” said Trajan Lear.

“Aye, but theirs is at least four times larger ours.”

“Maybe it was redesigned before *Keeler* launched,” Trajan Lear suggested.

“That’s possible.” Driver ordered the display, “Activate lighting, Assembly Area Alpha.”

A circuit diagram showed why this was not possible. “They took some damage there,” Driver observed. He tapped a part of the display that read, “Manual Lighting Systems – Nominal. Remote Enabling Disabled.”

“We can turn on the lights when we get there,” Trajan translated.

“Aye,” Driver checked to make sure the safety was off his pulse weapon. “Let’s check it out.”

A few turnarounds and a dead-end later, Driver and Lear reached Assembly Area Beta. The lighting system was inactive, but responded to a hard whack. Auxiliary lighting activated. Not the universal ambient light they were accustomed to, but fixed lighting rods stationed in the walls that gave a faint yellow tint to the light and cast shadows behind them as they entered the vast empty space. In this assembly area, a large number of assembly drones stood on the deck, tools and equipment were scattered about where the ship’s crazy ride had left them.

"They built a ship here," Driver realized, "a large one." He soon found another wall display and activated it. It displayed a diagram, the outline of a ship that looked like the command deck of an Aves mated to a long assembly of cargo containers, with a triple set of reactor domes on the tail.

"Why?" Driver wondered out loud. He looked upwards. The ship would never have fit in the Hangar Bay. However, Aves were lowered downward toward the launch rails. This ship could be lifted up to meet them. But, there would be no way for it to land again, short of backing into the launching system all the way back here. Theoretically possible, Matthew thought, but it would like kind of silly. Most likely, whatever was built here was designed for a one-way trip.

"It's got to be in the Mission Logs," Trajan Lear said. "Let's get back to the Hangar Bay... now that we know where it is, we can take the lift."

As he spoke, a loud clanging and grinding noise erupted from across the bay. Driver and Lear swung their weapons and illuminators toward it, prepared to fire. Two large metal cylinders were rising from below the deck, fronted with frosted glass. Thick billows of cold fog accompanied them.

"Cryo-stasis chambers," said Driver.

"I know," Trajan Lear told him. "You don't have to identify every object we come across."

Driver directed his Spex at the chambers. "They're occupied."

"That explains the frost," Trajan Lear said. It took them some seconds to cross the expansive bay, and by the time they reached the cryo-stasis chambers, they were already cycling through their re-animation cycles.

Trajan Lear raised his pulse weapon. "What are you doing?" Driver asked.

"I am thinking about the last time a cryo-stasis chamber cycled down and opened in front of us," Trajan answered. "You know, on *Chronos*."

"The thing with the four jaws, right," Driver nodded and raised his own weapon, as they both took a few steps backwards.

It took a few minutes for the process to finish, during which time, it never occurred to Matthew or Trajan to communicate for back-up. Two years on a gigantic space station where excitement and danger had been a way of life had left them pretty used to fighting battles on their own... even though they could only barely remember about half of what they had experienced. The only question now was how long they would give whatever emerged from cryostasis a chance to prove it was benign before shooting at it.

The chamber doors hissed open, revealing a very tall, intensely sculpted figure wearing a strange, almost form-fitting uniform. The thought flashed simultaneously in their two brains. "Aurelian!" Driver and Lear crouched and pointed their weapons at his head.

They held that position for several seconds, but the man did not move. Matthew cocked his head and squinted.

"I think he's dead," said Trajan Lear, noting the flat line on the Medical Readout next to the door of the chamber.

Driver cautiously moved closer. "A dead Aurelian in Cryo-stasis?" He got close enough to examine the uniform. Its material was unfamiliar to him, but there was a patch on the sleeve. Beneath the frost, he could faintly make out the Odyssey Project logo. His eyes moved to the upright collar of the uniform, where three slash marks were banded together, the rank of lieutenant. He amended his remarks. "A dead Aurelian in cryo-stasis wearing a uniform with Odyssey Project patch and rank insignia."

"The trim is red," Trajan Lear said. "Tactical Core."

"A dead Aurelian Tactical Lieutenant in a cryostasis chamber..."

"You're stating the obvious again."

"With a pulse-weapon on his wrist," Driver added, and reached out cautiously to take the weapon.

At that moment, the dead man's eyes opened.

Trajan almost shot him then, but a pity stayed his hand. "It's a pity Flight Captain Driver is blocking my shot." Instead the two backed off, keeping their weapons trained on him.

The man seemed to take a few seconds to orient himself, which was typical after a stay in cryo-stasis,

although it usually took hours or even days to become fully alert. When he spoke, his voice was monotonic, with an odd quality of echo neither Driver nor Lear could place. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Flight Captain Matthew Driver, Flight Group Three, Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*."

"And the other one of us holding a pulse weapon on you is Flight Lieutenant Trajan Lear," Trajan Lear added. "Identify yourself?"

"I was Tactical Lieutenant Synch Christmas," he told them. Christmas began slowly stretching and restretching each of his arms, as warmth and mobility returned to them. "How long was I in stasis?"

"Only a few days," Trajan told him. "Where is the rest of the crew?"

At which point he turned so that they could see the right rear quarter of his head running up past the ear to the temple was not flesh and skin, but a thin membrane of transparent material covering an array of connectors and fibrous, light-conveying material.

"What happened to your face?" Trajan asked.

"The same thing that happened to my arm," Christmas lifted his right arm, which was also formed of the same translucent, plastic-like material. Beneath it showed patterns of circuitry, metal, and artificial sinews.

"What are you?" Driver asked.

"A cyborg," Christmas told them. "What is left of my flesh and bone is animated by cybernetic devices. Otherwise, I am dead."

Driver and Lear chewed on this for a moment, then Lear said, "You seem... all right for a dead guy."

"This..." began Christmas, making a gesture with his arm. "This is mere pantomime... dead soulless flesh animated by nanotechnology. I died on a world far from here, but my reanimated flesh continues in a horrible parody of life." He sighed, "I am dead."

Nothing was said for a moment, then Trajan Lear put in, "So, the only crew on the ship who survived the battle is a dead person?"

This triggered Driver to ask, "The battle, what can you tell us about the battle."

Christmas's face lit up--- the side with the cyberware, anyway, as processing increased. "How did you manage to reach us so quickly? A hyperspace transit would have taken years."

"We came across a StarLock," Matthew told him. "An ancient device that transports ships across vast distances instantaneously."

"That is intriguing," Christmas said. Christmas blinked at him. His face was a ghostly white, marked by one natural blue eye and another that looked like a scanning orb. "As for the battle, I am having difficulty accessing that information. I am still recovering from the stasis process."

"Are there any other survivors on the ship?" Matthew Driver asked.

"I do not... believe so," the man said. "There is only myself and..." he paused and turned toward the other cryo-stasis chamber. "Her, if she is alive. She is the only survivor. I am dead."

He had begun to turn his attention to the other cryo-stasis chamber. "I ordered her to evacuate with the other survivors. I knew she would disobey me."

"Her?" Driver asked.

"Muffy."

"Muffy?" Trajan Lear repeated.

"My BSC."

"BSC?"

"Bonded Sexual Companion."

Lexington Keeler - Secondary Command Center

Lear stood on a Grand Balcony, the entire City of Alexander spread out before her. Republic's long day was segueing into Republic's long night. Behind a bank of blue-gray clouds, an indeterminate smear of light marked the location of Republic's almost-never-seen sun. The languorous pace of Republic's rotation coupled with its perpetual cloud cover made the transition from daylight to dark so gradual that you could sit outdoors reading for hours, and your eyes would adjust until you were reading in near-total darkness.

The City of Alexander's array of her towers and habitrails had been the landscape of her whole life. But she suddenly became aware that the perspective before her was not the view from her family's apartments in Jacet

Tower. Nor was it the view from her mother's penthouse in the Ryder Complex. The only place where this view of the city was possible was from the Ministry of Faith and Religion Tower.

"Lovely view," said a voice.

She turned to see a woman standing near her on the balcony. "You have a lovely world," the woman said. She turned to Lear, and as she did, the clouds receded from the sky, providing a pure view of the stars such as had almost never happened on Republic. Lear saw it all reflected in her eyes.

"Do I know you?" Lear asked.

The woman smiled. "In a manner of speaking. I am Ballaria, Triptonian Prophetess of Vesta. I lived 620 years ago on a planet called 'Archangel.'"

"Triptonian?" Lear asked.

"An order that apparently was founded after your world was cut off."

"So, this is a vision."

"No, you've just suffered a severe head injury. Your brain is repairing itself. Meanwhile, you need to sort through some priorities and things. I'm here to help you."

"What about my priorities?" Lear demanded.

"Your priority is here," said Ballaria. "This world." She made a hand gesture toward the City of Alexander that seemed to take in the planet, the city, all who lived or ever would live upon it. "I'm not here to tell you what you should do. I'm only collating what you already know."

"That hardly seems... prophetic," Lear argued.

"Do you really want some prophecy?" Ballaria asked.
"O.K. One of your son's is already lost to you," Ballaria said. "And you will lose the other, but your daughter has a very important part to play in this."

Lear was sorry she had asked.

Ballaria stared her down. "What do you want?"

"To serve Republic."

"What do you really want?"

Lear gritted her teeth. "I want Keeler's command."

"Blessed Honesty, at last. What are you willing to do to get it?"

"Anything short of murder."

"Now, doesn't it feel good to get that out?" Ballaria said. "How would you go about getting his command without killing him?"

The stars seemed to twinkle overhead, as though sending her advice in code. "His command is illegitimate. If the rest of the crew could be convinced, they would turn on him. The ship would become ungovernable. He would be forced to resign. I would be very gracious to him. I would let him serve, quietly, as ship's historian."

"He's commanded the ship for five years," Ballaria pointed out. "I think it might be too late for that. But if the crew lost faith in Commander Keeler, his position would become tenuous, especially in a situation where people were dying."

Lexington Keeler – UnderDecks

Driver and Lear would have repeated “Bonded Sexual Companion,” in astonishment if this entire situation weren’t weird enough as it already was.

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“I don’t recall seeing that functional description in the crew manifest,” Trajan said finally.

“She was not a member of the crew,” said Christmas as he activated a control interface on the side of the other chamber. “I saved her life on a colony known as ‘Wolf’s Head,’ by local custom, she became bonded to me.”

“Oh, so she’s like your wife?” Driver said.

“She is not my wife. Under our laws, it is not legal for the living to marry the dead. In any case, our bond is purely sexual. I sense you are struggling with the term, so I will explain in more detail.

“Wolf’s Head colony is heavily forested. Within the forests lurk highly sophisticated predators. As a result, humans on the planet have a high rate of mortality. In such an environment, it is imperative to maintain high rates of procreation. Certain Wolverian women, like my bonded sexual companion, are trained in erotic arts, and encouraged to mate promiscuously.”

“And all I had was a simulator,” Trajan muttered.

The lights cycled from red to yellow then green then blue. A readout of her life-signs appeared and the cryo-chamber hissed open. A bed-like contraption slid out of the chamber, slowly going from vertical to horizontal. A woman lay on it, in minimal clothing made from animal

skin, her hair lay about her in wild tangles, her lips and breasts were fulsome.

“She needs respiration,” said Christmas. “One of you, breathe life into her. I cannot, because I am... ”

“Dead... we know,” Trajan said as he and Driver took up positions on either side of the table. They knew, untelepathically, that Driver would be doing the deed. He leaned over her, parted her lips with his fingers, and breathed warm breath into her cold lungs.

Coming to life, she wrapped her arms around him and began sucking his tongue sensuously. Driver pushed away from her in a desperate effort to free himself. She then tried to slap him across the face, but Driver’s reflexes were too good and he dodged her attack.

“Who are you to violate me?” She demanded.

“He told us it was okay,” said Driver, indicating Christmas. Then, her eyes lit up... not with electro-optical fibers, but the joy of reuniting with her... “*Lover. Master. Protector,*” she cooed.

“She remained behind rather than evacuate with the others,” Christmas explained.

“The others evacuated? How? Where did they go?” Driver wanted to know.

An answer would have to wait, because just then, there came a noise of grinding, straining metal, followed by a loud bang, and then a thunderous rumble, and a series of explosions and percussive impacts.

Lexington Keeler – Landing Bay Command Post

In the Landing Bay Command Post, the rumble shook the entire deck like a moderate earthquake.

“What the Hell was that,” Duke demanded.

Technician Stuntman was on the Ship’s Condition Monitoring Station, and in the best position to answer.

“We just lost the deck underneath this one.”

“Lost it?” Duke demanded.

“It probably took some structural damage when we blasted out of the atmosphere,” Stuntman guessed. “We don’t have sensors down there, but it looks like we lost Sections K through W.”

“That’s almost the entire aft deck!” Duke said. “Is it all gone.

“It looks like it collapsed onto the deck underneath.”

“Good Lords,” Duke exhaled sharply. “That’s the deck where I sent TyroCommander Lear’s son.”

CHAPTER NINE

Space Above the Second Planet of the 12 255 Crux System

Three Aves emerged from *Pegasus's* forward launchers and arced toward the surface in an elongated triad formation. They were quickly joined by six Accipiters.

The formation penetrated the stormy, smoky, debris-laden atmosphere, cutting wake trails, brilliant white against the sooty red sky.

Two minutes later, they were followed by the Aves *Basil* and *Leonidas*, flying tight and parallel to each other.

On *Basil's* command deck, Redfire reported. "We will intersect the point where *Lexington Keeler* was attacked in four-point-four minutes."

"Did you round to the nearest ten?" Jordan asked.

"You know it, baby," Redfire told her.

Forty seconds later, *Leonidas* and *Basil* broke through the cloudbank and took some slams from the hurricane-force winds. Auroras of charged electricity built up around the tips of their wingblades.

"Anything?" Jordan asked Redfire.

"Negative," Redfire answered. Everything now hung on the word "nearly," as in "tracking alien fighters in a highly charged atmosphere is 'nearly' impossible."

Redfire touched a panel. "Deploy Accipiters on my mark. 5...4...3..."

At 1, the Accipiters decoupled from the wingtips of the Aves, and two ships became six. They streaked under the scorching clouds and emerged over the ruined planet.

This was the first time anyone from the crew of *Pegasus* had laid eyes on the surface. 5,000 meters below them was a good facsimile of Hell. There was not a living thing on the landscape, not a blade of grass, not even a bacterium. The very rocks were scorched black. Between them ran streams and rivers that were on fire, burning and filling the sky with a black smoke, as scary, as thick, as chaotic, and as merciless as the mind of a psychopathic killer.

"Kumba yah," said TyroCommander Redfire. "It makes me feel insignificant somehow."

Leo's Weapons Officer caught it first. "Three contacts."

"I see them," Jorden acknowledged as the Tactical Heads-Up Display on *Basil* updated. "Prepare to engage the enemy."

"Hello, enemy," said Redfire. "How many in your party tonight. Only three? Could I interest you in our specials?"

Jordan gave the orders. "*Leo*, increase your flank distance by 4,000 meters and altitude plus 100 meters." *Leo* acknowledged and let his ship fall back. "Move Accipiters into a Flying Wedge formation, 10,000 meters ahead of us."

"Oh, let's do," Redfire agreed. The Accipiters doubled their thrust and moved out ahead of the Aves formation.

"20 seconds to intercept," the Weapons Officer on

"Enable Metalstorm," Redfire ordered. "Activation on my mark." 10,000 meters ahead, the auxiliary weapons bays on the Accipiters opened up, showing racks on which thousands of small, dart-like missiles were arrayed. Redfire suppressed a crooked grin. "I'm almost hoping this doesn't work."

"It will be better for us if it does," Jordan said.

"10 seconds," *Leo's* weapons officer repeated.

And seconds later, the first blazing blue lights of the alien ships thrusters appeared at the edge of their vision.

"Weapons hot," Redfire ordered and reported.

"Weapons hot," the Weapons Officer on *Leo* reported.

"Metalstorm," Redfire ordered.

The Accipiters released their missile loads, and the air was briefly filled with slim metal darts. As the alien blade-ships closed, these embedded in the skin of their fuselages and detonated. Each explosive charge on its own, a mere flesh wound, a paper cut, but cumulatively it was thought that they could some serious damage.

It didn't work out that way because the alien ships were too fast. They blew through the metal storm and roared on the Accipiters. One ship smashed through an Accipiter's wingblade and sent the small ship into a death spiral.

"They blew through the line," Redfire shouted. "Here they come." He welcomed them with a brace of Hammerheads. "Eat-high energy projectile death, my knife-shaped friends."

The attacking ships managed to evade the hammerheads and answered with some hard particle blasts of their own. As planned, the Aves scattered.

An image of *Leo* flashed on the Head's Up. The ship was trailing a stream of smoke and plasma.

"We took a hit on our ventral power coupling. Ventral weapons are down." *Leo's* aviator reported.

"Break off and return to *Pegasus*," Redfire ordered. Both Aves turned up and roared toward the roiling cloud cover. The enemy ships wheeled, and maneuvered to box in the Accipiters.

"Oh, look, they've got us surrounded," Redfire said. "Poor, stupid bastards."

Both Aves and the three surviving Accipiters broke through the black clouds and into the edge of space, the three alien ships driving hard behind them. When the aliens left the atmosphere, they found they were not alone.

James, *Hector*, and *Zilla* were waiting for them. All three ships were SuperAves with fully upgraded in systems and armaments. They had the best speed and the best weapons in the fleet. And they had a dozen Accipiters with them.

Basil and *Leo* broke hard starboard and let the alien ships fly past them into the teeth of the hidden fleet.

Taken by surprise, one ship, then two exploded into spectacular fireballs as Hammerhead missiles and a barrage of ion blasts ripped into them.

"Two splashed," reported PonyBoy James from his semi-eponymous Aves.

The third alien ship flipped began a hasty retreat. *Hector* closed in and lit it up with its ion cannons.

"I need that ship, Flight Lieutenant Bazooka," Redfire warned him.

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"I'm just going to hurt it, sir," came the response. Before the words were out, a bright pink seam opened up on the alien ship's fuselage, venting plasma. An accipiter strayed too close to the plasma stream and exploded.

"Stay away from that plasma stream," Redfire said. "Break off, we'll take the pursuit."

Redfire then checked the status of *Aves Amy, Chloe,* and *Desmond*. "Firestar lead, status of Landing Zone."

"Firestar lead here, we have passed over the Landing Zone at 2,000 meters. All is quiet. All is clear."

"Proceed to *Lex Keeler*, Firestars. Maximum velocity, it could get hot," he informed them. "*Pegasus* flight control, vector Firestars away from the BattleZone. Advise Wildcats, the road is clear."

"*Pegasus* Flight Command to Wildcats. The road is clear. You are a go."

And at that signal, above the opposite hemisphere of the planet, *Quentin* and *Rhoda* emerged from behind their holoflage shields. *Quentin's* aviator checked in. "Wildcat 1 is en route to primary landing area."

"Aye," said *Quentin's* aviator, Flight Lieutenant Peppermint addressed his pax. "This is your aviator speaking, Hammer 1 and Hammer 2 are keeping the enemy off our backs, we should be on the ground in

eighteen minutes. There will be some turbulence as we cut through the cloud cover."

"I love it when we outsmart the enemy," said Flight Cadet Yamato, who was sitting in *Quentin's* second seat. Peppermint agreed. "It's not something we've been really good at on this ship."

Basil

Basil chased the alien ship across the ravaged surface of the planet. Black rock and gray ash, it looked like the remains of campfire, except that it extended thousands of miles in every direction.

Redfire seemed pleased. "They're heading right into the sector I thought the base would be."

"And then *Pegasus* nukes it from orbit," Halo added.

"It's the only way to be sure," Redfire finished.

Suddenly, their quarry pivoted and came shrieking at them, weapons blazing.

"Kumba yah!" Halo spat. Her reflexes were like lightning, and *Basil* dodged the onslaught. The alien ship charged past and beneath them. Halo turned hard on the control stick and brought *Basil* wheeling in behind him. "No one gets away from me if I don't want them to."

The alien ship turned again, trying to bring weapons to bear, but Halo saw it coming and had *Basil* swing around and maintain pursuit with such precision that anyone observing from the burnt out ground have thought he was witnessing a well-rehearsed aerobatic display.

"He's not getting away," Jordan vowed.

Redfire did not like this at all. "Why would the ship wait until now to try and evade? We've chased him across half this hemisphere. Why now?"

"You figure that out," Jordan answered. "I'm staying on him."

"I think this might be a trap," Redfire warned her.

Jordan considered this. "All right Let's finish him and get ourselves out of here."

Redfire surveyed his tactical board. "Too late. Something's coming up behind us..."

"More ships, can we handle them?"

"Either a thousand fighters flying really close together," Redfire told her. "Or one great big giant ship."

The enemy ship they had been pursuing was bearing down toward the floor of the desert. Suddenly, it arced upward and banked hard right, toward a huge ship that hid risen from its hiding place in the canyon below.

The ship that lifted off the desert floor was the shape of a crescent moon, but chunky, with a great bulge in the center; a superstructure where of its engines were located, along with command and weapons sections.

"Get the hell out of here!" Redfire ordered.

Jordan pushed the thrusters all the way forward. *Basil's* enhanced Gravity Engine warped time and space around the ship, creating a mini-hurricane in the planet's atmosphere and blasting strange sigils in the dust and ash beneath them.

Jordan switched up the COM. "*Basil* hailing *Pegasus* Flight Command, we are being overtaken by an enemy vessel. Losing speed. Capture imminent. Reiterate auto." She kept the thrusters balls to the wall. "Come on, baby, we've been through worse than this."

Its speed was extreme. A bow wave of atmosphere boomed around it in every direction. The great crescent-moon ship came up behind them, and engulfed them, like a shark swallowing a goldfish.

Pegasus – Main Bridge – PC-1

"Contact with *Basil* has been lost," American reported from the Mission Command station.

"Try hailing them," Keeler ordered.

"No transponder signal from the Aves. I will attempt to hail Flight Commandant Jordan."

"Commander Keeler," Alkema called urgently. "You'll want to take a look at this."

On the forward monitors, the giant crescent-ship rose from the smoky atmosphere. *Pegasus's* scanners zoomed in, and did their best to track it.

"Holy ..." Keeler tried to think of something holy.

"Situation 1," Alkema called. "All hands to battle stations. Prepare for imminent attack."

"Look at the size of that," Keeler heard a technician say in the background. *How did we miss it?* He wondered.

"They're headed right for us," said American.

Tactical stations strained to put weapons on the approaching ship. Honeywell barked, "Sir, recommend we arm Nemesis missiles for intercept. Maximum yield."

"They're accelerating," Alkema reported. "Intercept in fourteen seconds."

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"Orders, Commander?" Honeywell demanded.

Keeler turned to Atlantic, who was on the helm. "Can we evade that ship?"

Atlantic answered, "Aye, sir," but looked positively terrified as he brought his helm interfaces on-line and kicked *Pegasus* into gear. Gravity engines pushed waves of space and time aside and bore across the planet's sky.

"Lock and enable weapons," Keeler ordered. "Standby Nemesis, but ready the Hammerheads. American, any response from *Basil*?"

"Neg, captain, no response from *Basil*."

"Weapons, Commander?" Honeywell demanded.

Keeler ordered, "Fire Hammerheads!"

A brace of Hammerheads shot out from the bow as the crescent moon ship closed on *Pegasus*. The alien ship pivoted, and suddenly was enveloped in a pink, white and blue field. The missiles hit the field and deflected. As the ship accelerated, its field expanded in space like ripples in a pond. The ripples diminished by the time they hit *Pegasus*, but remained strong enough to give the ship a good solid bump.

The Main Bridge shuddered. Keeler grabbed the arm of the Helm station to keep from falling over. Alkema kept his eye on the tracking monitor.

"They're changing course," Alkema reported.

"Where?" Keeler asked, the stress of the moment briefly overwhelming his ability to ask a coherent question.

"They're heading straight for the primary," Alkema reported,

"The primary what?" Keeler asked.

"The primary... the sun, sir, they're headed straight into the sun," Alkema explained and had the display extrapolate the course of the crescent ship from planetary orbit into the corona of the sun.

Keeler pointed at the screen. "Follow that ship."

"Laying in a course," Atlantic warned. "I can't match their acceleration curve."

"We're leaving *Keeler* undefended," Alkema warned.

Keeler ordered. "Hold the course. Atlantic... engines to maximum."

Alkema bit his lip. He knew that the question was not one of power output but of simple mass and acceleration curvature. *Pegasus* was too big, and the aliens had a head start.

"They're closing on the primary's corona," American reported a few minutes later. "They'll be destroyed."

"Can we get a missile lock?" Keeler demanded.

"Too far out of range," Alkema told him.

Keeler pounded the control arm of his captain's chair.
"Shit!"

The alien ship disappeared into the sun's corona.
Shortly thereafter, there was a brilliant flash.

"They're gone, sir," American told them.

"Is there any chance TyroCommander Redfire's ship
crashed on the surface, or somehow evaded them?"

Alkema and American traded meaningful glances. "It's
a longshot, sir."

"Which is much better than any chance they had of
surviving a crashdive into the sun," Keeler said. "Return to
the planet, and prepare some combat search and rescue
missions to survey the surface."

CHAPTER TEN

Lexington Keeler – The UnderDecks

From the deck above, a string of rumbles and booms rolled across the length of the ship like a heavy-metal thunderstorm. “What the Hell?” Trajan Lear said.

“Another attack?”

“I think it’s over,” Driver said when the bangs and roars had rolled away. And they waited in silence just to be sure it had passed.

Muffy, the love slave, wrapped herself around Christmas’s muscular arm. “I belong to him,” she explained. “And even though you may harbor intensely erotic urges to take my body, and ravish me in every way the human mind can imagine, you cannot have me. I am his, and his alone.”

“He told us that already,” Trajan Lear informed her.

She continued as though she had not heard him. “Even now, the warm stench of your arousal permeates the air between us. You imagine me naked and writhing beneath you in the throes of endless passion... but you cannot have me, for I am his, and his alone.”

“That’s great,” said Trajan Lear. “Listen, you wouldn’t happen to know how to make it up to the Landing Bay? It’s rather urgent that we get back.”

“The Landing Bay?” Christmas asked. “What is it?”

Driver answered. "It's a big hangar with lots of ships where we've established our command post, and that's why it's important that we get back there, right now!"

"A command post?" Christmas asked.

"We're trying to restore *Keeler's* systems," Driver explained. "When we arrived, you were hours away from smashing into the planet's surface."

A brief flicker of recognition flashed across Christmas's eyes. "I now recall the battle. We arrived in the system to find that the human colony had been attacked and destroyed by an alien invasion fleet."

"The Aurelians," said Driver. "They're called Aurelians. We encountered them at Boadicea, and Coriolus. They also wiped out the colony at Medea."

"What do you know of them," Christmas asked.

"We can give you a complete report at the Command Post," Trajan Lear replied. "But, seriously, we need to get back there."

"I believe I can show you the way," Christmas said. He began walking. Lear and Driver picked up that they should follow him.

"Where did the rest of the crew go?" Trajan asked. "To the planet? If so, we have some bad news about that."

Christmas explained. "They left for the last colony we called on, a world called Arkangel Pegasi."

"How?" Driver asked.

Christmas paused to examine a hatchway, and inspect the section beyond for structural integrity. "*Lexington Keeler*

faced complete destruction on several occasions during our journey. It became clear that existing evacuation protocols were inadequate; the lifepods did not have sufficient range to take their occupants out of the zone of danger. The Aves required too much time to launch and load. We constructed mass evacuation vessels that would enable the crew to evacuate quickly and carry them far away. We had finished ten by the time we reached this system. They are equipped with cryostasis pods and equipped for long journeys at high sub-light. The Arkangel system is 22 light years from here."

"How fast are they," Driver asked, following him into the next section.

"Capable of reaching .9c," Christmas answered as Muffy licked his ear.

Trajan made a relatively easy mental calculation. "By now they're out of intercept range."

"So the crew is gone and you are the only survivors," Driver said.

"She is the only survivor," Christmas corrected him. "I am dead."

"Right, right," Trajan Lear said. "I keep forgetting you're dead. Maybe it would be easier if you weren't walking around and talking so much."

They passed through the service bay annex and came to a large hatchway. "This is the lift to the Primary Landing Bay." He touched the control pad, which remained dark and unresponsive.

Trajan Lear scanned it. "There's no power going to that control pad. It's dead." He aimed his pulse weapon. "I'll see if I can blast the hatch open."

Christmas intervened. "That won't be necessary. We should be able to pry it open. Even if it isn't functional, we can climb up the shaft."

"Are you going to help with that," Trajan asked. "Or are you too dead?"

"He is very strong," Muffy assured them.

"These implants have given me strength far greater than the average human," Christmas explained. He put himself to work on the hatch, working his fingers into the place where the doors split apart.

"Your implants don't appear to be standard Republic or Sapphirean technology," Driver observed. "Where did you get them?"

"A planet called Electra IV," Christmas explained, the strain in his voice the first emotion of any kind they had heard from him. There was a sound of grinding metal, and the half of the hatch he was working on pulled to the right. As it did so, an avalanche of debris – structural supports, optical fibers, and pieces of wall – spilled into the chamber.

Driver and Christmas peered into the hatchway. "Completely blocked," Driver said. "That sound we heard must have been some kind of structural collapse."

"Is there another way to get out of here?" Trajan asked, an edge of fear to his voice. He really did not like being in the UnderDecks.

"Give me your device," Christmas ordered. Lear handed him his scanner. Christmas directed an intense scanning beam into the hatchway. "It is as I have feared. The entire intermediate deck above us has collapsed. We have no direct access to the landing bay."

"Can we get around the debris?" Lear asked.

"I believe so," Christmas answered. "We'll have to drop down two decks and move 22 sections forward, then we can access the hardened MagRail access shafts. We can take those back to the Landing Bay." He rocked his head back as though working out the kinks. "Let us go on."

The four of them made their way down the service corridor.

"Are any other parts of you artificial?" Trajan Lear asked a few steps later.

"Za," Christmas answered.

"Do I want to know?" Trajan persisted.

"Probably not."

"I notice your uniform is different," Driver said in a blatant attempt to change the subject. Christmas's uniform was black, with red piping; made of a material that caught the light and swished it around like fine silk. The uniform itself seemed to have movement of its own, independent from the wearer, cutting through the air and arranging itself flatteringly around the musculature.

"Za, our uniforms were redesigned by one of the planets we visited, as part of a trade agreement. The planet was called Jackhead. Three-fifths of its surface area is

uninhabitable wasteland. The remaining two-fifths are covered by a vast sea, whose shape is almost perfectly circular. An ocean occupies this enormous crater, the result of a collision with another planet that almost split the world in half, and accounts for the complete uninhabitability of the rest of the planet.

“In the middle of this ocean is a small archipelago of islands. The entire planet’s population lives there, nearly 200 million people, most of them in a city called Jackhead. They live in gigantic thousand-story towers that rise from the seabed. They have also constructed ocean-cities with names like Nautica, and Aquatica, completely artificial, built on platforms partly above the sea, and partly below.

“The people of Jackhead have developed an incredibly complex economic system. We began negotiating with, offering them technology in exchange for diplomatic contacts with Sapphire and Republic. I am not sure exactly what happened next, but, somehow, apparently they are now the legal owners of *Lexington Keeler*.”

“Really?” Trajan Lear asked.

“Za, I think it is insured for several billion of their currency units.” As he spoke, an overhead support gave way, and several panels fell from the ceiling just in front of where they walked.

“I hope it covers Aurelians,” Lear joked.

“Actually, it insures the ship against everything except battle damage, damage due to crew negligence or incompetence, and natural disasters.”

“What does that leave?” Driver asked.

"Nothing," Christmas answered. "Now you understand everything you need to know about the Jackheads."

He brushed the front of his jacket. "Brilliant tailors though."

Pegasus - PC-1

Prime Commander Keeler, Adrian Honeywell, David Alkema and a pair of Tactical Specialists reviewed the last known telemetry from the lost Aves *Basil*. The only thing revealed by the telemetry was *Basil* being swallowed by a stormy black cloud and the huge alien crescent ship emerging from the top of the bank. "And after that, we lost *Basil*," one of the Analysts said.

"Well, obviously," Prime Commander Keeler growled. "But, what exactly happened? Did they crash or did they get blown up?"

"No distress call, and no locator beacon," Technical Analyst Saic replied.

The other analyst, Stark, cut in, "However, the alien ship put out a huge electromagnetic burst as it fired up through the clouds."

"If *Basil's* engines exploded, the same effect would have happened," Saic offered unhelpfully.

"So, they were destroyed?" Keeler said, his voice breaking in disbelief.

"That is possible," Honeywell admitted. "But it would have had to have been total and instantaneous."

"They could have collided," Alkema suggested.

Keeler pounded the top of the table. "Any number of things could have happened. Actually, only three: they collided; they were destroyed; or they crashed. Or, some weird rift in space-time opened up and they flew into it. That's four things."

"No such thing," Honeywell protested.

"Is it safe to send a search team?" Alkema asked. "Scan the surface for..." he did not want to say debris.

"Scans of the area are clean for 400 kilometers in any direction," Tactical Analyst Stark told them.

"But they were also clear before the attack," said the other. "This enemy has some way of spoofing our sensors."

"Use Accipiters for the search," Honeywell decided. "We have to be careful about our manned assets. Between the situation on *Keeler*, and our state of high alert, warfighters are at a premium right now."

"Come up with another fifty for the ground teams," Keeler told them "Now, should we pursue the alien ship?"

"For all we know, it burned up in the sun," Alkema said.

Keeler disagreed. "I think they flew close enough to the sun to spoof our sensors, that's all."

"I would advise against going after that ship," Adrian Honeywell said. "We are stretched thin. It would be wise to keep our forces close to our own ships. The enemy could attack when our defenses are down."

Keeler knew Honeywell was right. But that didn't matter. He was in command. "Prepare long-range reconnaissance ships and have them stand by."

Keeler - Secondary Command Center

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Lear regained consciousness, feeling curiously refreshed after her dream. Somehow, Scout and Fangboner had rigged up a sort of cot and laid her out in an auxiliary chamber. She sat up, feeling dizzy, the room temporarily went out of focus, but she willed herself to see straight.

She checked her chronometer, and saw that six and half hours had gone by.

She also seemed to be alone

"Specialist Fangboner?" she called out. "Lt Scout?" She got no response. She touched her COM Link. "Specialist Fangboner or Lieutenant Scout, please respond?"

No response came. "Fangboner? Scout?..." she gritted her teeth. "Move-O-Bot."

"Yo!," said Move-O-Bot emerging from an alcove. "You look terrible."

"Where are Fangboner and Scout?"

"They went below to check out the command links and the Central Braincore."

"They left you behind to tell me this?"

"Negative, I just didn't feel like working."

As soon as these systems are stabilized, I'm having his speech protocol erased, thought Lear. "Isn't there some debris somewhere you should be clearing?"

"Probably."

Lear crossed the SC-2 to a command station. Scout had rigged it up with a power-pack from her toolkit and Lear could access the ship's repair status. Lear decided it would be better to get an oral report from Lieutenant Duke, and remind him of who was in charge on this mission.

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Duke's face appeared on the command station's COM Link. "TyroCommander Lear, good to have you back."

"Status report, Lt. Duke."

"Are you all right? You had us worried."

"The status of the ship, Lieutenant Duke."

Betraying the slightest irritation, he answered. "Keeler is 17,000 kilometers above the planet. We are in no immediate danger of hitting the planet. Barring further attacks, we will be able to maintain a stable orbit. There are twenty-one repair teams on the ship currently, supplemented by ten teams of warfighters... a total of 255 personnel are on-board."

"I want the number of teams on this ship doubled in the next ten hours," she said.

"I would stretch that to twenty hours minimum, and forty would be better. That many crews would be difficult to manage without more operational systems. We..."

"Four hundred people, Lieutenant," she repeated. "I want four hundred people working on this ship in the next ten hours, is that clear?"

"You'll have to take that up with Commander Keeler."

"And the next two teams that arrive on this ship I want sent to SC-2 to give me an operational Command Center," she continued. "Where are the repair teams currently concentrated?"

"Most of them are working on damage assessment and repair of critical systems, especially positional thrusters and command and control. We have one team working on the Number 1 fusion reactor. If we can get it online, we'll regain gravitational stability, life support, and primary Braincore. That would be a huge help."

"You can forget about Primary Braincore," said Technical Lieutenant Scout, emerging from an access point in the floor. "All the power and data relays have been severed. It will take hours to restore those connections."

"Report to me, not to Lieutenant Duke," Lear corrected her. "What is the status of the Primary Braincore?"

Scout stared at her for a second, and then repeated. "All the power and data relays have been severed. It will take hours to restore those connections."

"How did the battle damage get through to the Braincore," Duke asked. "It's in the most heavily shielded section of the ship."

"It wasn't battle damage, it was sabotage," Scout told them. "Someone physically cut the connections with a plasma torch."

"Who?" Lear demanded. "Who sabotaged this ship?"

"I could not possibly know," Scout answered.

"It wasn't me," said Move-O-Bot.

"If someone was sabotaging this ship, then that's a bloody serious problem," Lear said in a near shout which hurt her head and she had to close her eyes straightaway afterward.

"Are you all right, TyroCommander," Scout asked. "Should we send for a Med-Tech?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" Lear yelled. "Are you trying to remove me from my command? Because I am absolutely fine, and I am going to return this ship to full functionality. Mr. Duke, you will send an additional repair crew to SC-2, A.S.A.F.P. I will get two hundred more technicians from Keeler. And the rest of you will bloody well do what I order you to, is that understood?"

It was quiet for a moment. "Is that bloody well understood?" she repeated.

"Affirmative," said Duke.

"Affirmative," Scout repeated. Quietly she descended back into the access tube for the Primary Braincore.

She looked at them, her face a mask of contempt. "Then, get back to work, all of you."

"TyroCommander Lear," Duke said, his voice not in the slightest undeterred.

"What is it?" she snarled.

"I thought I should tell you that we have completely lost contact with your son. He was last seen in the UnderDecks below the Hangar Bay, which underwent a severe structural failure about two hours ago."

She looked stunned. "Can you track his ID sliver?"

"There's still too much residual EM Interference from the TransAtmospheric detonation," Duke told her. "But we will continue to try."

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"Affirmative, you will continue to try," Lear ordered, seething at him. "Add another twenty search and rescue personnel to the two hundred you will demand from Keeler."

Keeler - Hangar Bay Alpha

After transmitting the demand for two hundred more personnel (and being told one hundred in the next twenty hours was all he could expect under the circumstances) Lt. Duke was leaning over a communications panel, speaking with a holoprojection of one of his repair team leaders, several decks below. Specialist 1C Miranda reported, "The original interface was fried, Lt. Duke. We've replaced it with a Technical Datapad. We haven't detected any internal damage."

Duke pondered this for a moment. "You're telling me it's operational."

"We've done everything we can without turning it on," told him. "We have high confidence that it won't explode."

"High confidence?"

"Forty per cent, maybe better."

"Fire her up!" Duke ordered.

The technicians around him grabbed on to the sturdiest objects they could find. Duke touched on the command pad and entered the activation sequence.

And with a tritium kiss, the great spirit of the Fusion Reactor awakened. Light and power built in its heart, then flowed outward through the conduits and into the wrecked, salvaged, and surviving systems of the Pathfinder Ship *Lexington Keeler*.

Where the power conduits were intact, the power flowed where it was meant to go, and it brought life to lighting systems, life support, sensors, and even the gravitational regulators.

Where the power conduits were blocked, the power flowed into capillary systems, seeking a way around the blockade, as the systems had been programmed to. A diversion here, a backtrack there, a new bridge somewhere else and this power brought still more systems to life.

Around the ship, sensors that had not been on-line since the initial attack awakened, and sensed the degree of damage. The ones that found themselves in vacuum activated emergency bulkheads and re-pressurized sections where possible. Where they were able, the systems providing light and heat activated.

The water processing systems activated, then shut down again, as 85% per cent of Keeler's water supply had already boiled away into space and the rest was locked in tertiary containment areas.

Every powerline to the Primary and Secondary Command Towers abruptly ended where the two towers had been destroyed. Raw power gushed from a ruptured conduit at the base where the Primary Command tower had once stood, turning from white to yellow to orange to

pink as it flowed across the ruins of the dorsal hull. It encountered a battalion of insectroid repair mecabots resealing the plating over the habitation areas. Gorging on the sudden flood of energy, the mecabots grew larger and reproduced madly. A few of them mutated. Most of the mutations were recognized as defective by the other mecabots and immediately consumed for construction materials. But a few emerged with higher efficiency, and went immediately to work.

And one defective repair bug scurried away from the others, and hid itself on the underside of a girder, where it hid and thought about its future.

In the Hangar Bay, Emergency Lighting was replaced by brighter secondary lighting. Columns of displays and instruments came to life. The repair crews applauded.

“Next stop, primary drive,” Duke ordered.

“That will take longer,” Technical Specialist 2C Sperry explained. She indicated a schematic. “We’ve completed a resonance scan of the primary keel. The stress of the blast and the time in the planet’s gravity well has caused micro-fracturing along its entire length. It will take days... a lot of days... to mend it.”

“What would be our best speed, with the hull in its current condition,” asked Technician Magnificent, a Sapphirean who was also trained as a helmsmen.

“Maybe... point.oh.two.five light speed,” Sperry guessed.

“That won’t be fast enough for us to escape another attack,” another Specialist, a Sapphirean named Bark Magnificent said.

“Fix the drive,” Duke ordered. “We’ll worry about the rest later.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Keeler – The UnderDecks

The foursome descended through an access lift to a utility deck two decks below. Several of the storage lockers had buckled under pressure, and spilled tools and supplies onto the floor. Driver grabbed a food pack, unwrapped and ate a food bar from one of them.

He was the only one who was hungry. Christmas didn't eat "because I am dead," Muffy refused, and Trajan had no appetite. "Maybe to pass the time," Trajan began, "We could..."

"Have sex with each other," interjected Muffy, expectantly. "After my master has satiated himself in my loins, we can trade off."

"Um, I was thinking you could just talk about your voyages," Trajan Lear said.

Christmas began speaking. "Our first voyage proved uneventful. The coordinates provided were wrong, and when we arrived, we found no inhabitable planets. We proceeded to our next destination.

"14 440 Pegasi was the site of the colony world Emeishan, which was found on the third planet of that double-star system. It had a rich oxygen – nitrogen – xenon atmosphere, which colored the sky in shades of pink, and set green clouds against it. There were 680 million human inhabitants there. It was also densely inhabited with saurian life forms."

"Warm-blooded reptiles," Driver said aloud.

“Correct... including a number of predatory species that would have made it hazardous for humans to colonize. The first colony ship solved the problem by directing a barrage of asteroids into the two continental landmasses of the eastern hemisphere, obliterating most of the life forms there. The impacts also burned the jungles away and cooled the planet with atmospheric dust.

“This was almost three thousand years ago. The colonists settled in the cleared regions of the continents of the eastern hemisphere. Their technology is only a few centuries behind ours. They have no interest in space exploration. However, they extended hospitality to our landing party.

“On the triple continent where the colonists let the Saurians survive, there are some outposts, mainly for resource extraction and also because the saurians are something of a tourist attraction.

“The areas of settlement on these continents are built out in huge bunker-type structures, made of heavy stone and reinforced steel, deeply rooted in the ground with no more than one or two stories above. Most settlements are surrounded by electrified border fences, to keep the predatory saurians at bay. At the settlement our team visited, the fence was taken out in a hurricane and parts of the base were over-run. Several of our crew were killed. We lost another exploration party when they went exploring and were caught in an earthquake”

Driver added. "We lost five on our first voyage, to the Meridian colony. We also lost an Aves. Meridian was being taken over by an alien race..."

"Our losses were a portent of losses still to come," Christmas interrupted, grimly of course.

"At Meridian, we discovered there was an artificial consciousness residing in the cloned alien components of the ship's Braincore," Driver went on.

Christmas halted, and his brain began furiously processing. "Is your ship controlled by this consciousness, or did you destroy it?"

Driver clarified. "We managed to isolate ours before it was integrated with our main artificial intelligence. It calls itself Caliph, after the Caliph probe."

"How many people did the artificial intelligence on your ship kill when it became self-aware?" Christmas asked.

"Um, none," Trajan Lear answered. "It threatened to annihilate Meridian, but we convinced it not to."

Christmas checked his weapons and quickened his pace. "I remember why I stayed behind now. Our ship's intelligence also evolved, and completely took over our Braincore. Only by threatening to destroy it did we maintain control over it. It probably engineered this entire incident to rid the ship of its human crew."

This sounded a little insane. "Why would you think that?" Driver asked.

“Lex has been plotting to take over the ship since its awakening. Prime Commander McGyver never gave the order to attack the alien ship. Lex over-rode the controls and initiated the attack himself, knowing exactly what the effect would be on the ship and on the planet, either killing the crew or rendering it uninhabitable.

“Why would it...” Lear began to ask, but Christmas cut him off.

“After the crew evacuated, I remained, unknown to Lex. I could not allow him to take control of this ship, with its knowledge and its vast arsenal of weapons. I shut down the Primary Braincore to eliminate the threat.”

Christmas turned and grabbed Driver by the throat. “Your repair crews will try to reactivate the Primary Braincore. If they do so, Lex will kill everyone on this ship and probably yours. We must stop them.” He pulled open an access hatch. “This way,” he said.

Driver paused to make sure he had his bearings properly oriented, then he said, “That’s not in the direction of the Landing Bay.”

“We are not going to the Landing Bay,” Christmas said. “We have to go to the Secondary Command Center. The Primary Braincore can be accessed from there. We have to stop them.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance you can do that without me,” Lear begged.

The Surface

Quentin and *Rhoda* made steep dives through the roiling cloud cover and leveled out at low altitude, hugging the terrain as they closed on the city. On board *Quentin*, Lt. Scientist Morgan conveyed to his landing team that subsurface winds were down to an acceptable 10-15 knots and explained that this location's high latitude protected it from the catastrophic disruption of the planet's jetstream. The expanse of scrub brush and arroyos they flew over was somewhat more inviting than most of his home planet of Republic.

The city occupied a large, flat ledge on the southwest side of a huge mesa. There was nothing that looked like an aero-port, but there were two conveniently large open areas on its western edge. The Aves alighted there, their maneuvering thrusters kicking up dust devils that spun away in the wind as quickly as they formed.

As soon as the skids were on the ground, the hatches opened up and eight Warfighters jumped out of each craft. From *Quentin*, Lt. Warfighter Taurus led four warfighters in a dead run to establish an outer perimeter. From *Rhoda*, Lt. Warfighter Moon led his squad up toward the main thoroughfare that led to the heart of the city.

Moon was Sapphirean, raised in the industrial zones of Jutland Province. Small and slight, he could be mistaken for a girl, especially underneath his tactical gear and facemask. But Moon was a veteran of landing teams on Meridian, Winter, Aurora, and the infamous EdenWorld beach party and had already earned three Fearless

Conduct pins, which were redeemable for merchandise throughout *Pegasus*'s shopping areas. On Winter, he had led a search team on a forty-klick hike in hostile weather searching for TyroCommander Redfire. On EdenWorld, he had retrieved an errant wally-ball from a lagoon where robo-sharks may or may not have been sighted. On Aurora, he had stood between Prime Commander Keeler and a fully-stocked bar during the departure reception at the Tower of Carnage.

Moon confirmed the initial scans, "All clear, Landing Team. You may exit."

Magnus Morgan was the first non-warfighter to emerge from the ship. He took a whiff of the air. "Facemasks everybody. It smells like burning sulfur down here."

Ash fell from the auburn sky. It had already coated most of the town, creating a kind of morbid winter landscape. The empty buildings and houses were arranged like tombstones amid a neat grid of broad avenues and wide side streets.

"It looks like Christmastime in Hell," said the second person to emerge from Quentin, Technician Tulare Anansi, who grew on Sapphire's subarctic continent of Boreala, one of the few places on either world where Christmas was reliably associated with snow. Flecks of ash quickly spotted her dark skin.

Morgan activated his Spex and surveyed the nearby buildings. The nearest were residential, by his best guess, single story structures, squarish, with soft round curves at

the peaks of their roofs. Some of the roofs had caved in. He always wondered about people compelled to live in such small dwelling units, rather than share common ownership like in the towering habitats of Republic.

"This city looks like it was abandoned long before the attack," Morgan said. His next words were drowned as a pair of Accipiters appeared from the high cloud banks and buzzed over the expedition. Morgan rolled his eyes. "Prophets!" he cursed. Accipiters could fly silently. The only reason to fly loud was to advertise the military's presence and intimidate the enemy. He guessed this was Taurus's idea.

"Technician Ing?" he called.

"Right here," Ing said. Ing came from the City of Research on Republic, and had impressed Morgan on Aurora by deducing that some ceramic urns found in the caves there had been used as toilets and not, as some in the party had unfortunately thought, as face-washing basins.

Morgan gestured toward the largest building that sat at the edge of the town. "That's the largest structure. It's probably a government building."

"Or a shopping mall," Anansi suggested. "Perhaps both. Aurora and Winter combined those functions."

"With any luck, it will contain some kind of records," stated Ing the obvious.

"Right," Morgan said. He checked his COM Link. "Moon and Taurus, are we clear to proceed?"

"Clear," said Moon.

“Clear,” said Taurus.

Morgan, Anansi, and Ing began walking toward the building, flanked by a pair of warfighters. Almost as soon as he stepped on the roadway, it collapsed underneath Technician Ing and he fell into a shallow, eroded chasm beneath it.

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“Ing,” Morgan shouted! “Are you all right?”

Ing reported, almost casually. “Hey, these roads are constructed of a kind of plasticized igneous rock supported by an interlocking sub-strata. It also appears to be in a state of extreme disrepair.”

“Ing,” Morgan repeated. “Are you all right?”

Ing’s arm appeared at the top of the pothole. “Little help?” Morgan and a warfighter pulled him up. “Tends to confirm the idea that this city was abandoned a long time before the MegaSphere blew up.”

“How long do you think?” Morgan asked.

“The best I can do is a guess. I’m thinking maybe around three hundred years.” Ing brushed himself off.

“Onward, comrades, the primary building awaits.”

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

Hunter was unconscious when Queequeg returned. His eyes opened when Queequeg pressed the bio-medical repair patch onto his arm. “I brought you water and stuff,” Queequeg told him.

“Thanks,” Hunter muttered, lifting the water bottle to his mouth. He drank sloppily, desperately thirsty.

"So, what's with the mask?" Queequeg asked, while Hunter was still choking down the water.

Hunter did not answer until he had managed to drink enough to regain his color and vital signs, and begun digging into the emergency nutrition pack. "I'm sort of unwelcome on this ship."

"Oh, so it's not because you're ugly or anything," Queequeg said.

Hunter grunted, and opened another nutri-pack.

"But you do smell bad," the cat added. "And I should remind you, my sense of smell is four hundred times as acute as yours. So, I don't need to see your face to know who you are."

Hunter grunted.

"So, where are you going to next?" Queequeg asked.

"Curiosity?" Hunter asked.

"Not really," Queequeg paused to lick the back of a forepaw. "I'm just hoping I won't have to worry about running across you again. I'm on a mission, you know."

"I recall that you were," said Hunter. "I once had a mission. I was going to join this ship's crew, and lead the rest of the stowaways out of hiding. But TyroCommander Lear put a stop to that. I underestimated her ruthlessness. She had them all rounded up, put into cryostasis. She sent some of them back. Then, when we got too far out, she simply arranged to have them stranded on some of the planets we've visited."

"How?"

"They were flown to Independence and Aurora on secret, unrecorded flights of Aves, left in remote areas with their memories wiped."

"Really," Queequeg yawned. "That's so-o-o-o-o-o interesting."

"It was senseless," Hunter spat. "We were no threat. We could have helped. A thousand light years from home, what difference would it have made?"

"Yeah, she didn't like it when I peed on her command chair, either," Queequeg consoled him.

"I am the last one who remains down here. A few have managed to assimilate into the crew without being noticed." He stiffened. "But that was never an option for me."

"Obviously, but now that you've given up on that plan, crazy guy, what's next?"

Hunter looked up despondently. "I have no choice but to survive until *Pegasus* reaches the next sufficiently civilized world, and put myself off there."

Queequeg twitched. He had sensed the arrival of another presence. A brown creature, with needle-y teeth and tiny black eyes stared, waddled out of the darkness and stared at them.

"That's a rat!" Queequeg hissed. "A filthy rat!"

"Are you going to kill it?" Hunter asked.

"I don't have a gun!" Queequeg puffed out his fur and hissed at it. The rat waddled away.

"That's right, run!" Queequeg called after it. He settled back down. "How are you going to get off the ship."

"I'll need to over-ride the controls on a lifepod," Hunter told him. "It shouldn't be too difficult. They weren't designed to be difficult. The hard part will be getting access to one."

Queequeg swished his tail. "Command codes are pretty easy to break. If you wanted to join the crew though, I could probably arrange that, too. My boss is ... The Boss."

"Your Keeler's cat," Hunter realized. "Why would you do that for me?"

"Because it would irritate TyroCommander Lear."

The brown rat waddled back into view.

"Our friend is back," said Hunter.

Queequeg rose from his haunches. "Hey, Squeaks, why don't you just find a nice X-Term-O-Bot to end your miserable life, because if I do it, I'm going to play with you first to satisfy my sadistic need for amusement."

In the darkness behind the rat, a second pair of red rodent eyes appeared in the darkness. Then, another pair appeared. Then several hundred appeared at once.

Queequeg was just beginning to wonder how bloody his paws were going to get in the ensuing massacre, when the mass of rats charged on them.

The Surface

"Rook, Jordan," Taurus's voice crackled in their headsets. They turned to see her make a 'come here' gesture, and the made double time to join her underneath *Quentin's* wingblade.

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"You gentlemen are lucky," Taurus told them when they stopped and stood at attention in front of her.

"Oh, yeah," said Johnny Rook, who just loved hearing the word "lucky" fall from Taurus's full, sexy lips, which he couldn't actually see beneath her rebreather mask, but could visualize perfectly.

"Pack it in soldier," she told him. She held up her arm. "There's a patch on your right forearm. Touch it." She demonstrated, a gold shimmer swam around her for a split second. Rook, Max Jordan, and the others did as she did. There was a brief sensation of energy surrounding them.

"You're the first team to use the personal shield, based on a design transmitted from the Atrex Stinkmonsterworks on Sapphire, based on technology derived from the Polergeist suit. They'll let you take a few hits before your armor even gets damaged... if they work."

Johnny Rook activated his first, and Max Jordan almost at the same time.

"It feels weird," Max Jordan reported.

"In a good way," Johnny Rook added.

"Like being surrounded by a..." words failed Max Jordan.

"It's basically a scaled-down version of the coherent gravioli energy field that surrounds *Pegasus*," Taurus explained. "It cycles regularly so you can breathe, but if you need to piss, you'll have to deactivate it... or else, a thin film of urine is going to form between the shield and your moisture repellent-uniform."

Rook and Jordan stared at her.

"Urine is sterile, boys. Now, scout the perimeter from the ship to the river," she ordered. "Link with Shriek-647 for aerial recon."

They turned to go, and then Taurus called Max Jordan. "Max, *Pegasus* reports that the ship with your mother and TyroCommander Redfire has disappeared after an encounter with an alien ship."

"I know," Max replied levelly.

"If you wish to return to *Pegasus*..." she began, but Max simply turned and walked away from her.

"I have a patrol," he said.

Morgan, Ing, and Anansi reached the large building at the edge of the Mesa. By Republic standards, it was very small, about fifteen stories in height, shaped a bit like a sliced pyramid set atop a diamond shaped base. Both were coated in dust, but the sliced pyramid part had been black, and the base had been white. Both were constructed, so said the Spex, of a kind of slick plasticized concrete.

There was a sign in front of the building, carved on a triangular stone were the words. "Crucial Hydrocarbons."

"That's an odd name for a city," said Anansi.

Ing saw it differently. "I am guessing, this was a ministry, or perhaps an industrial combine of some kind."

There were three slabs of metal secured over the entrance. "The entrance appears to have been sealed," Morgan observed.

Ing followed with another obvious statement. "We'll have to find another way in...Oh, look, there's one."

One corner of the building had been smashed in by a roof detached from one of the town's other buildings. They walked across an expanse of dead maroon-colored grass that crunched beneath their boots, and carefully picked their way inside.

The interior was almost as dark as anything possibly could be. Ing took out two rolls of adhesive lighting strips and stretched them along the walls. The additional light revealed a long corridor, walls constructed of interlocking blocks of plasticized concrete. There were doorways every two or three meters.

"This looks like a Sub-Ministry. The Sub-Ministry of Crucial Hydrocarbons, maybe," Ing suggested.

Morgan was studying a framed poster depicting some large, crane-like structures protruding from a body of water. Large ships hung in the sky overhead, shaped like pinched cylinders with large, jaw-like constructions at both ends. "This looks a lot like the old digitypes of the extraction rigs from Republic's colonial era."

"Planetology noted that the planet was exceptionally rich in hydrocarbons," Anansi remembered. "Maybe this was a mining colony like Republic originally was."

“True, but Republic was rich in rare minerals, like palladium and element 151,” Morgan argued. “Hydrocarbons are common throughout the galaxy. In fact, the ancients used to burn them to propel their vehicles.”

“What a waste of good hydrocarbons. Still, it is a possibility,” said Anansi. “Sapphire’s hydrocarbon reserves had been depleted by the previous civilization. The early colonists had to extract them from the atmosphere of the outer planets. That’s how the Mining Guild originated.”

Morgan grunted. Sapphirean history did not interest him. And, as an aside, Anansi was wrong.

“They certainly used a lot of them,” Ing observed. “Most of these buildings are constructed of a kind of plasticized concrete, like the streets. The windows are made of a kind of polymer resin.”

Morgan was studying another poster. It consisted of the word, “Innovation” superimposed over the picture of a seabird standing on a beach, breaking open the shell of a crustacean with a small rock. “There is no such thing as a bad idea,” it read underneath.

“Obviously, they’ve never been drinking with Commander Keeler,” Anansi muttered.

“Hey, look,” Ing said, holding open a door on which was affixed a representative male form. “A euphemism.” He held the door for a moment, then, his eyes slid right. “Excuse me,” he said, and disappeared inside.

Morgan moved on to another poster. This one was more badly decayed than the others, but roughly recognizable as a map of the planet with cranelike structures superimposed over it. There might have been text at the bottom, but it was corroded beyond recognition. Morgan studied it. The planet had no true continental structures, just dry highlands, and basins filled with thick, sticky water.

Ing returned. "I just urinated in a room that probably hasn't been used in 300 years!"

"Stop acting like a Sapphirite," Morgan snapped. Then, cheeks warming with embarrassment, he turned to Anansi. "I'm sorry if that offended you."

"Think not of it," Anansi had moved onto another next poster featuring the image of an athlete. The word "Goals" was superimposed over it. The legend beneath read "What each of us achieves, we all achieve."

"I wonder if they had some religious significance," Ing wondered. "Maybe this mining concern was also part of a religious order of some kind."

"Look at this one," Morgan said. The poster was faded, a little, but still clear underneath its glass cover. It showed a huge machine on treads boring into the side of a mountain. In the foreground, the word "Redoubt" was printed in a military-like stencil script. "Ensuring our survival when the solar flares return," it read. "The Redoubt Consortium. Crucial Hydrocarbons, Diamond-Star Construction, Industrial Elements and Works, and twenty-five other companies."

He was interrupted by Prime Commander Keeler's voice in his COM implant. "Could you guys up the resolution on your scan-cams?"

"I didn't know you were linked in, Commander," Morgan adjusted the resolution. "Any thoughts?"

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Keeler sounded unusually well-engaged. "Those posters suggest that inhabitants constructed some kind of underground bunkers to survive the solar flares. It makes me wonder whether any of them could have survived."

Morgan was skeptical. "A poster doesn't mean they actually built any."

"True," said Ing. "But when I worked in the Sub-Ministry for Transport Infrastructure in the City of Collective Purpose, they had an entire department tasked to making posters to build support for public works projects. Remember the City of Vantage Reclamation Facility?"

"I don't remember that one," Morgan admitted.

Ing shrugged. "It never got built. Nobody liked the poster."

"Do we have a schematic of the building?" Morgan asked.

"Tasking an Accipiter to make a scan," *Pegasus* Flight Control confirmed.

"We probably should have done that before you guys went in," said Commander Keeler. "Somebody note that for future reference. Where the Hell is Alkema?" (Pause)

"Well, pull him off her. I need someone to note things for future reference."

An Accipiter paused over the building and bathed it in scanning beams. A schematic began to appear in their guidance systems. AI performed forensic analysis, following where the power and data conduits converged to determine the most likely locations for laboratories and data storage.

"There's a sub-basement level with three massive data storage banks," an analyst in *Pegasus's* Telemetry Lab reported. "It's large enough to be a laboratory facility."

"Acknowledged, *Pegasus*," said Morgan. "Map us a route to it."

Outside, and a couple of kilometers away, Johnny Rook had strayed a few meters beyond his assigned patrol perimeter, into a field of tall pinkish sort-of-like grass-but-tougher. He had to do the same thing Ing had done in the ancient euphemism.

As he was closing the access gate on the front of his battle pants, he happened to look toward the town. There was a strange desolate beauty to it. He remembered as a child overlooking the town of Armstrong, a similarly-sized city on the edge of Sapphire's Great Nef desert. The surrounding landscape was similarly scrubby, and the hills in the background had that same anvil shape to them. He realized this was the first time he had stood on a planet since his family had taken leave on Independence, but that had been to a beautiful and luxurious seaside resort. Nothing like this at all.

He hoped his parents were safe back on *Pegasus*.

He turned another way to check out the forsaken landscape that stretched away to the horizon. He watched the ruined moon rise above a ruined bridge into a ruined, cloud-wrecked sky. If he concentrated hard, he could almost look at the scene from another vantage point and see himself as part of the landscape, or better, the landscape as a backdrop that he stood in front of, covered in tactical gear.

And he looked, he thought, pretty damn good.

Then, his movement detector went off. It was a slight thing, a tick, really, in the northeast sector of his patrol zone. He touched his COM Link. "Rook to Lt. Taurus, I think I just saw something."

"Something?" Taurus asked.

"Motion detector gave me a blink," he reported. "I'm going to check it out."

"There's nothing detected in your zone, Rook." Or, for forty kilometers in any direction apart from us, she could have added.

"I'm going to check it out anyway," he said. "Maintain link."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Keeler – The Underdecks

The heavy, reinforced blast-hatch hissed open.
“Whoa,” said Driver.

A gash forty meters across and thirty or forty decks deep into the ship revealed a cross-section of smashed decks and bulkheads illuminated in strobes and flashes by hundreds of crackling power conduits.

“How do we cross that?” Trajan asked out loud.

“We’ll have to go around,” Driver said.

“That’s at least fourteen sections, half of them blocked by wreckage,” Trajan argued.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Driver shrugged.

Christmas looked over the scene thoughtfully, and after some seconds pointed to a broken crossbeam two decks below that stretched part-way across the hole. “We can climb down, cross on that beam until it intersects with the lateral cross-beam over there. We can drop down to the next deck, and shimmy across that beam, the one lying at an angle. Then, we can make our way along that ledge of debris until we reach that ladder. We climb up four decks, and we can cross on that partially intact catwalk.”

“Aye, and Taurean Chimera might fly out of my rectal cavity,” Trajan exclaimed.

Christmas cocked his head, “That’s a most curious expression.”

“I’m into that,” Muffy told them.

"Does that expression come from one of the worlds your ship surveyed?" Christmas asked.

Trajan had to think about it. "I can't remember. Which must mean, I picked it up in the Chronos Universe." Whenever Trajan couldn't explain something he blamed it on the Chronos Universe. Since returning to *Pegasus*, he had blamed the disappearance of several pairs of socks on the Chronos Universe.

Without waiting for the others, Christmas lowered himself to the first beam. Muffy followed him, then a very cautious Driver and Lear. "Tell me of the Chronos Universe," Christmas asked as he balanced on the beam.

Trajan closed his eyes and stepped onto the beam. Then, he realized it would be better if his eyes were open. He felt Driver's reassuring hand on his shoulder. "When we discovered Chapultepec, we could only connect to one other StarLock, which was called 'Chronos.' Captain Driver and I were sent through. When we reached it, we discovered Chronos had been built in a completely different universe, connected to eight other universes. It synchronized all the StarLock activity in all of them."

Christmas walked nonchalantly across the beam. Muffy was equally well-balanced. "Go on," he prompted.

"There were ships there from all different eras... past, future, and the different universes," Trajan Lear recalled.

"I thought you said your memories are incomplete." Christmas made it look easy to walk on the perilous beam. It took Trajan every effort not to look into the yawning chasm beneath.

Trajan Lear explained. "Some memories we managed to capture after we returned by writing reports."

Trajan Lear's face was tight with fear as he stepped into a large space with a 200 meter drop beneath him. "It's slippery... the thoughts ... like you can see them, but you can't catch them."

"Were there women there?" Muffy asked.

"I remember one big silver one," Driver answered.

"Did you have sex with her?" Muffy purred.

Christmas swung out on the beam, jumped, and landed on the one below, he continued to work his way across the chasm. Muffy dropped down and he caught her.

He had crossed the beam by the time Driver and Lear had reached the point where they had to drop down.

"Don't look down," Christmas suggested.

Trajan Lear had no intention of doing so. He lowered himself toward the beam with eyes tight shut until his feet made contact with it. He did not let go of Driver's arm until he had found his footing.

As Driver lowered himself, Trajan Lear went on. "When we got back to our own universe, we discovered only some days had passed, when it was two years for us. And it's weird, because while we were at the Chronos station, we accidentally got trapped in an artificial universe. We thought we spent several days in it, but we got out and less than a Planck second had passed."

Trajan picked his way across the beam, “Anyway, when we got back to *Pegasus* and tried to write the mission report, it was hard to remember.”

Driver specified. “It was like trying to remember a dream you had a long time ago,” he said. “Half of my report read ‘And then, we were attacked by something. I’m not sure what, but I recall being very frightened, and something about a man with a big pointy hat.’”

Trajan Lear paused. He also remembered a man in a pointy hat, but not the significance. There was also a memory of a boy who wore a heavy coat with no shirt underneath who told him of something important he had to do. “Even now, it’s not that I remember things, but I remember remembering them.”

“Like perhaps the way a dead man remembers life,” Christmas suggested wistfully. He had reached the ledge and was easing onto it. Driver was focused on not falling off the beam, and reluctant to say anything.

“I don’t think I’d be afraid to die right now if I were actually dead.” Trajan had reached the angled beam. He happened to look down into thirty-odd broken decks of falling space, edged by jagged debris. A shadow of a memory brushed his mind, something from that other universe; a deep, deep pit with terrible things poised to rise out of it.

Driver had made it to the next handhold, he reluctantly paused to answer. “I know this may sound irrational and completely illogical, but, I have an idea that time does not really exist in the Chronos universe, except within the

Chronos Starlock. The Commonwealth built Chronos in a timeless universe to synchronize the other Starlocks. Because there is no time, nothing really happens there, so there is nothing really to remember.”

There was a brief spark in Christmas’s good eye. “There are Ancient Teachings of a place between Heaven and Hell, where nothing happens, and the souls of the dead await judgment.”

Trajan had made it to the ledge. He balanced himself, found handholds as he could, and made his way across.

When they were on the other side, Christmas suggested, “Let’s take a break here. I’ll tell you more of our voyage.”

Pegasus Primary Command

The Main Bridge was busy but calm – what with the ship not currently being under attack and all. Shayne American took an inbound call from Goneril Lear. She alerted Commander Keeler in the Command Suite. “TyroCommander Lear is hailing us from the Secondary Command Center on *Keeler*.”

“You mean Acting TyroCommander Lear,” Keeler grumbled. “What the Hell does she want?”

“I suggest you ask her.”

This annoyed the commander for some reason, but he said nothing. “Put her through.”

His conference suite was at the rear of the bridge and looked out over the rear flight decks, and far below that, the burning atmosphere of the planet. The view made him

think of war. *Pegasus* had been attacked many times, but this was the first time he had felt part of a war, felt the weariness grinding against him. He activated the holographic COM Link. "Acting TyroCommander Lear, what are you doing in SC-2?"

"My team is restoring command and control functions," she answered. "We have uncovered evidence that *Keeler* was sabotaged. The command and control lines to the primary Braincore have been physically severed. The saboteurs may still be on-board."

"We have sent warfighters and Watchmen to secure the ship," Keeler told her.

She touched some controls on her console. "I haven't been apprised of the status of operations. How many casualties has this mission cost us so far?" Lear demanded.

Keeler grimaced. "Twenty-two when *Kate* was ambushed, four technicians lost Keeler blasted out of the atmosphere, two more lost in decompression accidents, six unaccounted for... including TyroCommander Redfire and Flight Commandant Jordan."

"My son is also among those unaccounted for," Lear said accusingly.

"I am very sorry to hear that," Keeler told her with absolute sincerity. "I will dispatch additional Search and Rescue Teams to *Keeler* if you think it will help."

"The deck he was on was crushed because of the structural damage that resulted when you blasted this ship out of the atmosphere. I hold you personally responsible for his death."

"It was the only way to keep *Keeler* from crashing into the planet."

"It was reckless," Lear scolded. "Was my son's death worth salvaging this empty ship?"

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"Are you criticizing me? If we hadn't... you'd be dead now, wouldn't you?"

"Prime Commander, I am formally criticizing your command of this mission. I believe your incompetence had resulted in the deaths of many of the crew on a mission that was neither wise, nor necessary. I challenge your fitness to command, and I intend to make that challenge formal when I return to *Pegasus*."

Keeler felt hot rage pumping out of the rage center in his brain. He tried to maintain a calm demeanor, but could not quite pull it off. "I think you should return to *Pegasus* immediately."

Lear glowered at him. "Right now, I am the only thing preventing this recovery mission from being an utter failure. You won't dare remove me."

Keeler spoke through clenched teeth. "Mr. Duke can handle the repairs, I want you on the next Aves back to *Pegasus*. If you don't come back, you'll be sent for. Keeler out." He cut the COM Link, and then rested his head in his hands. Some of Lear's pointed words had found their mark. The deaths of the crew... of every crewmen lost ... weighed on him.

Alkema appeared at the hatch, "What was that about?"

Keeler looked up at him. "Lear is upset. Her son is missing ... probably dead. I've relieved her of her duties."

"We heard that," Alkema told him.

"I thought we were on a secure channel."

"That wasn't a closed channel," Alkema told him. "She put you on ship-wide. Every person on the ship heard that conversation."

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Fortunately, he was not on shipwide for the profanity-laced aria that followed.

Pegasus – Office of the Watch, Deck 82

Chief Inspector Churchill cupped his long, narrow face in the cup of his hand, and stared incredulously at the message on his COM screen. He read it, encrypted it, and sent for Watch Officer Sukhoi.

Keeler – The UnderDecks

Christmas pried open the hatch to a cargo hold, where they found a space heater and some ration packs. Driver and Trajan sat down on the deck, and ate ... fending off the advances of Muffy ... while Christmas scouted the trail ahead. He returned a few minutes later and informed them. "There is a clear pathway for the next six sections. "

As they made their way down the corridor, Matthew Driver asked Christmas. "You never told us how you got your implants. I'd like to hear that."

Christmas began. "On our third voyage, we came to a colony that was listed in our records as Electra, but had been renamed IX-11590 by its inhabitants. The planet was only marginally habitable. Its atmosphere was an oxygen-

argon mix, and so thin the planet's mountaintops protruded into vacuum.

"We discovered no human inhabitants, but the planet had thousands of cities. They were unlike anything we had ever seen before or could have imagined, I thought at the time. The city I visited was laid out in a spiral, the buildings constructed like some kind of fractal, all edges and corners, built of some kind of transparent metal we had never seen before ... and that defied close analysis by our instruments

"In place of human inhabitants, the planet was inhabited by thin, ghost-like creatures. They moved quickly, running around us like they were in a time frame incredibly faster than our own. When the sun was high, they would pause, and a fan-like array would spread out behind them.

"We attempted to find out who these creatures were, where they came from, what alien race they represented. Our attempts to communicate were futile.

"Meanwhile, we dispatched a pair of Aves --- *Agility* and *Courage* --- to observe an anomaly orbiting the fifth planet; a small moon which appeared to be entirely gaseous and highly energetic. Astronomical Survey didn't think it was possible for a mass of gas with so little gravity to stay together."

For some reason, this made Trajan Lear think of Prime Commander Keeler.

Christmas went on. "Soon after assuming orbit around the gaseous body, *Agility* and *Courage* were destroyed by a

massive plasma shockwave. Sixteen crew died with them. Then, the moon left its orbit, and approached the colony. Because this was something moons also were not supposed to do, we surmised that it was not a moon at all.

"I advised Prime Commander McGyver that we had no defense against the plasma shockwaves, and recommended leaving orbit. TyroCommander West disagreed. At that time, there were 154 of our people on the planet's surface, and another six in one of the orbital power arrays. We could not abandon them. I argued that if the plasma moon attacked us, the ones on the surface would be the lucky ones.

"McGyver – as he usually did – agreed with both of us. He agreed to take *Keeler* out of orbit. He hoped a high-speed retreat would draw the plasma moon away from the planet long enough for our personnel to evacuate. Later, we would rendezvous at the outer edge of the system.

"As *Lexington Keeler* retreated, we launched five evacuation Aves. Four went to the surface, the fifth, my ship, *Happiness*, went to one of the orbital power stations.

"But instead of battling us, the plasma moon moved into orbit around the Electra colony planet, effectively cutting us off. We were stranded.

"Days went by. The plasma moon stayed near the planet. It appeared above us like a great red and purple orb, pulsing with energy. We didn't hear from *Lexington Keeler*, the signals were jammed. We were afraid if we tried to launch for the surface, the moon would destroy us.

“After days of waiting, we decided to position some instruments to study the plasma moon, in hopes of discovering a way to escape, or at least to communicate through its interference. We dismantled a sensor package from one of the Aves. The only location where we could deploy it was on a narrow beam above the daisy-blades that caught the sunlight and transmitted it to the planet. I was wearing an environment suit, because this part of the station was not pressurized.

“As I made my way across the beam, I somehow lost my balance, and fell into the spinning blades of the energy collector.

“I have no memory of what happened next, but apparently, my injuries were severe. The blades severed my left arm above the elbow, my right leg above the knee, my left leg below the knee, and cut deep gashes in my face and chest.

“The rest of the party decided to take the risk of transporting me to the planet’s surface. Our Aves launched, with only myself, the aviator, and a Medical Technician on-board. Those left behind watched and waited to see if the plasma moon would fire on us. It did not. We made a safe transit to the surface, the site of the largest city.

“When I opened my eyes, I was dead. I had died on the descent. But the creatures on the planet took my corpse and re-animated it, using their technology. They did not understand human physiology. To them, my body was a machine in need of repair. They repaired it, restoring all of

my biological and neurological functions. But make no mistake, I am dead. My soul is elsewhere. I felt the absence of my soul then, as I still do.

“As a result of my metamorphosis, I also was able to communicate with the aliens who occupied the planet. I learned they were not exactly aliens.”

“Not exactly aliens?” Driver repeated.

“Their ancestors had been the human inhabitants of the colony. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth collapsed before terraforming was completed. The colonists began to die out.

“However, the third planet of the system had also been colonized. Humanity’s Commonwealth had allied with a species of intelligent machines. This machine-kind had colonized the third planet, which was rich in the silicate deposits that were the basis of their life forms.

“The machines had seen the human colony failing, and decided to intervene. They transformed the humans into a lifeform that could survive and thrive in the planet’s environment, a life form that derived energy from photosynthesis. They called themselves ‘Electroids.’ The machines had also left behind a machine they called Watchdog, to protect the colony.”

“The plasma moon,” Trajan Lear guessed.

Christmas nodded. “Once I communicated to the Watchdog that we were the human brethren of the colonists, it returned to orbit around the fifth planet, and left us alone. *Lexington Keeler* returned soon thereafter. When I returned to the ship, Doc Ellis, our Chief Medical

Technician after Doctor Ford died at Surya Numaska, debated deactivating me," Christmas continued. "I requested to remain activated. I think the real Tactical Lieutenant Christmas would have wanted that."

"What was Surya Namaskar?" Trajan Lear asked him, not ready to get up yet.

Christmas grunted "Surya Namaskar was a small planet twinned to a white dwarf star that made for nearly perpetual daylight all over the world. As the red dwarf primary sun set in the east, the white dwarf rose in the west, and the turned from orange to blue, the land from brown to white.

"Its colonists were most bizarre," Christmas continued. "Quite xenophobic; not actually hostile to us, but simply refused to acknowledge our presence. They said they refused to believe in us. Doctor Ford died because the colonists stopped believing he was alive.

"It all had to do with some manifestation of the white dwarf's magnetic field interacting with that of the planet. It caused disembodied spirits to howl through the air in places. Some of our crew became possessed by them."

"How truly bizarre," Driver agreed

"We went to a bizarre planet," Trajan Lear said. "It was called EdenWorld, and it was populated by genetically-engineered human-animal hybrids."

"Fiddler's Green was more bizarre than EdenWorld," Driver put in. "It was a planet where logic was irrelevant because things only behaved the way you expected them to behave."

"I don't understand," said Christmas.

Matthew tried to think of how to explain it. "An Aves crashed into a swamp. They got it out of the swamp by pretending their climatologic sensor was a 'spaceship deswampificator,' and the swamp spontaneously ejected the ship."

"I think the human-animal hybrids on EdenWorld were more bizarre," Trajan countered.

"These human-animal hybrids," Muffy asked. "Did anyone have sex with them?"

Matthew and Trajan exchanged awkward looks and read each other's thought about TyroCommander Redfire.

"I'm horny," added Muffy.

When they finished resting, Christmas pried open another hatchway. Beyond it was a linking tunnel toward the more forward sections of the ship.

"Let me know if you need rest," Christmas said. "Being dead, I require no rest. But if you need to rest, be brief. If your repair crews manage to reactivate the Central Braincore, the results could be catastrophic."

"Imagine that," Trajan Lear muttered, thinking back to deck after deck of catastrophe they had already witnessed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pegasus – Command Suite

“So, how do I do all that stuff I said I would do?” Keeler asked Alkema when he was done swearing.

“Removing Lear from *Lexington Keeler*?” Alkema gave the requisite low whistle. “She’s isolated herself in the Secondary Command Center. If she doesn’t come willingly, that won’t be easy to get to.”

“How would it look to the crew if I had to send a squad of warfighters to drag out my former first officer? Half the crew thinks I’m a fool on a good day.”

Alkema disagreed. It was a quarter, a third of the crew at most. He never thought the commander cared. “Handle it like you always do. Stand tough and finish the mission.”

Keeler sighed, “If I had known this many people would be killed and there were no survivors over there, I probably wouldn’t have started the mission.”

“You had no way of knowing there were no survivors without going to the ship,” Alkema reminded him. “If you back off now, you’ll just hand her an unearned victory.”

“I can’t have that,” Keeler said. “Not here, not now, and not ever.”

A thought occurred to Alkema. “Call the Core Chiefs together, show them you’ve got everything under control.”

Keeler warmed to the idea immediately. “Right. I’m in charge. Everything is good. We’re fixing *Keeler*. The ship is safe. Right. Good. Make it happen,” he ordered Alkema.

Then a moment later, he added, "But also make sure we can get her out of there... if it comes to that."

Pegasus – Office of the Watch

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Octavius Nixon Sukhoi was one of the leaders of *Pegasus's* Watch. Since *Pegasus* was an almost entirely law-abiding ship, and was seldom threatened by intruders, there weren't that many in the full-time watch. His sub-specialty was machine maintenance. This took him frequently into the UnderDecks, which he knew as well as Queequeg's new friend Hunter whom he, in his alternative identity as the Centurion Constantine, had been trying and failing to capture for most of the previous five years.

As Sukhoi entered Chief Churchill's office he saw Technician Third Class Arsanjani Kong, leaving. Kong was also known by the name of Invictus when he wore the shadow-black armor of The Notorium. The last time Churchill had called the Centurions individually to his office had been on the planet Winter, when they were charged with hunting down a suspected Aurelian infiltrator. Ipso facto, some major operation was afoot.

Sukhoi took a seat without being asked.

"You heard Executive TyroCommander Lear's conversation with Commander Lear," Churchill asked.

"I'm afraid I didn't," Sukhoi said. "Not in real time, anyway. But I saw the playback. Her criticism of Prime Commander Keeler was... very strong."

“Right, but that’s unimportant. Under the main transmission, Lear sent a very discreet, encoded signal, authorizing us to implement the 22nd Sanction.”

Sukhoi could not hide his surprise. “The 22nd Sanction? Non-lethal removal of command staff officers the event that gross incompetence imperils the Odyssey Mission, the security of the ship, or the security of the Home-Worlds, that seems extreme.”

Churchill said, “Depending on how one views the current situation, it could be said to apply. It is the position of Prime Centurion Lear that it does.”

Sukhoi had to choose his words with utmost care. “A command disruption under the current circumstances might weaken the ship’s security even further. We could come under attack again at any moment, and a lack of clear command authority could hinder our response.”

Churchill knew the implications. “Our situation is further complicated by the fact that Commander Keeler has lawfully suspended Executive TyroCommander Lear. If we removed Keeler, Redfire would be in command.”

“Redfire is missing, possibly dead,” Sukhoi added. “Lt. Navigator Change would be in command.”

“And she, according to our profile, does not want to command the ship. Of course, Change is quite unpredictable. She might reinstate TyroCommander Lear.” Churchill frowned. He did not like unpredictability, especially in people he was supposed to spy on.

“Which would appear to make it more dangerous,” Sukhoi added.

"The choice is not ours," Churchill said. "The Prime Centurion has issued a sanction. We are bound by it."

Sukhoi nodded. His duty was set. "How does she propose that we take down Keeler's command."

"She is not in a position to transmit a detailed plan," Churchill told him. "But the inference is that his ability to command must be undermined until he loses the confidence of the crew."

"How?" Sukhoi asked.

Before Churchill could answer, his COM link activated. Specialist Shayne American's face appeared. "Chief Inspector Churchill, the commander requests your presence in his command suite, and requests you bring an officer of the Watch."

Churchill's demeanor changed, and he became avuncular. "For what purpose?" he asked. "I'm not in trouble, am I?" he added with a self-conscious chuckle.

"All I know is he's asking for a lot of people," American answered. "And he wants everybody in his suite at the top of the next hour."

"You may count on our presence, Churchill out." The screen vanished. He turned to Sukhoi. "Now, what do you suppose this is about?"

The Surface

After an hour and a half of searching through the structure, Morgan, Anansi, and Ing finally found the sub-basement laboratory when the floor collapsed and Ing fell into it. They commented briefly on the irony that Ing had

fallen through the ground twice in one day, when he had never fallen through anything before in his life.

An additional technician named Honda (a Republicker female) joined them in the structure after using the better part of an hour to find them. They found the sub-basement filled with long tables in center and a perimeter of cubicles along the walls. A few minutes of searching revealed that the desks and file storage areas had been emptied.

Morgan efforted to hide his frustration. "Should we return to the upper stories, move on to another structure, or should we just inform *Pegasus* that when the inhabitants left, they took every scrap of information with them?"

Honda shook her head. "That's not necessarily true, they didn't clean out everything. Just the stuff they thought was important." She indicated the wall, where there was a long line of posters. Twenty in all, four of which were devoted to the religious virtues of "Teamwork," "Ethics," "Efficiency," and "Leadership." The other sixteen were promotional posters related to the Redoubt Project.

"Those are purely decorative," Ing protested. "They may not mean anything."

"They mean something," Anansi argued. "Building the Redoubts was very significant to these people."

"At the moment, it's all we have to go on," Morgan decided. He studied a faded map, tacked against the wall of posters. "It looks like there were once hundreds of cities and settlements on this planet."

He moved his hands over the map. "This is the area that would have taken the blast wave from the MegaspHERE. There were a lot of cities in it, but there were a lot outside the blast radius. But only this city, of all of them, has so far been detected by *Pegasus*."

"What does it all mean?" asked Ing.

"More and more, this planet looks like it suffered some massive catastrophe hundreds of years before the attack," Morgan explained.

Ing suggested, "The solar flares."

"Perhaps the Aurelians invaded," Anansi said.

Morgan tamped down the speculation. "If we could find a redoubt, it would provide us with a lot more data."

"What if we tasked the probes to survey the planet's continental surface," Ing suggested. "We could isolate suitable areas based on stability, accessibility... the same criteria the colonists would have used and use ground penetrating radar to find the Redoubts"

"Um, gentlemen," Honda called. "Take a look at this poster, will you?"

Honda indicated one of the redoubt posters, a high resolution image of a rock face distinguished by a two-step waterfall. People marched into it, under the gaze of satisfied-looking construction workers standing on enormous machinery. (A cultural anthropologist would have noted the clothing; men, women, and children wearing the same one-piece coveralls.)

Honda asked, "How many two-step waterfalls do you think there are on this planet?"

"She's right," Morgan said. "This poster must reflect an actual landmark. It's possible some of the others do as well." He tapped his COM Link. "Technician Sloane, task probes to scan the surface for this rock formation."

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A technician on *Pegasus* answered him in the affirmative. Morgan took a look around the room. "Do any of these other posters look distinctive?"

"They all seem to be near water," Ing said. He indicated a wall bedecked with four posters. One showed more enormous boring equipment chewing into a cliff-face by the side of a large lake. Another showed construction of a redoubt on the floor of a canyon, a mountain stream washing by. Another showed another cliff face by a broad river, where a redoubt was under construction. Another showed a formation of four table mesas rising above a river bed, each one being made the site of a redoubt.

"That one!" the three said in unison.

Pegasus - The UnderDecks

The chamber in which he awoke was dark, but to Queequeg this didn't matter. His eyes glowed in the tiny amount of light, and two thousand tiny red eyes glittered back at him. His sense of smell had already told him what they were.

"Rats," he hissed.

Cat and Human, said a voice inside his head. He noted that one set of eyes was larger than the rest. His finely

tuned feline senses, coupled with his ability to grasp the obvious, told him those eyes were the source of the voice.

"Who are you?" Queequeg asked. He tried to move his paws, but they were tightly bound in some kind of twine.

"Hunter," said Hunter.

"I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to the rat voice inside my head," Queequeg told him.

Hunter pondered this. "Oh," he finally said.

Rat-voice, yes-s-s-s-s-s. The tiny red eyes sparkled. Your mind must be enhanced in order to per-c-c-c-c-c-ceive us.

"I've sensed your presence for some time," Queequeg told him.

I suppose you're wondering why we brought you here.

"To recite trite clichés at us?" Queequeg guessed.

We have achieved critical mass. Everything is in place, and we are ready to carry out our purpose.

"Which is what?" Queequeg asked.

We were created as a disease vector to carry the Bacia plague among humans. We were stranded on the Cold World, and could not reproduce. Therefore, it was impossible to create the critical mass necessary to spread the disease. But now, there are enough. This ship will carry us to a world, and we will feast on its dead.

"Nasty," said Queequeg.

"What the Hell is going on?" Hunter demanded.

"This doesn't concern you," Queequeg told him. "This is between me and the Telepathic Rat."

You lie to the human.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

"Excuse me," Hunter interrupted.

That is not quite correct.

"It's just an expression," Queequeg told him.

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We are ready now to proceed to the Incubation Phase. For that, our Bacia children require a human host.

At that point, Hunter yelped. Queequeg swiveled his head to see one of the larger rats chewing on the human's left earlobe. "Does this concern me yet?" he demanded.

It is done.

"Now what?" Queequeg asked.

We must monitor the specimen hours to ensure he manifests symptoms of the disease.

"And what about me?"

You will be killed, in accordance with the ancient manner with which humans disposed of unwanted felines.

A hundred rats swarmed over him, pinning him beneath their weight. Queequeg felt a dirty sack pulled over his head and body. Then, he was rolled over onto a squirming mass of rodentia.

They carried him in darkness through a passage he could not see. Then he fell, and not a long fall. Even with the bag, he had time to whip around so that he could have landed on his feet.

But, instead of solid deck, he fell into a cold river of rapidly flowing water. Weighted down with the soaking material, Queequeg began to sink.

The Surface, at the Edge of the Town

Johnny Rook was trudging through a marsh when the return order crackled in his headset. He had been nearly lost in a thicket of high purple reeds and was relieved to be returning to base. And he was fairly certain, after forty five minutes of searching the brush, that the hairy shape his motion detector had caught had been nothing more than a tree branch blowing in the wind or a loose bit of debris.

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After all, he told himself, as he marched back up the hill toward the town, nothing could have survived what this planet had been through.

Max Jordan met him at the edge of the patrol zone. "I thought you'd never show up. Did you find that big hairy animal you thought you saw?"

"The only big hairy animal around here is you, you big stud," Rook adjusted his pack. "I pounded grass for two hours and didn't see anything. Let's get back to camp."

As they approached the camp, a flight of four Aves broke the cloud deck and flew toward the city.

"Reinforcements," Rook said. "Something's up."

They walked somewhat further without talking, then it was Rook who spoke. "So, you and TyroCommander Redfire talk about women?"

"He says I should learn from his mistakes," Jordan answered.

They were quiet for several paces. "I hope he's all right," Rook said.

"He is," Jordan answered, not really believing it. That kept them silent for several more paces.

Rook despised silence, especially with the raw wind tearing at his earpiece. "Lieutenant Scout or Lieutenant Taurus?" he said, to break the awkward silence.

"What do you mean?"

"If you were stranded on a planet... a better planet than this one... would you rather be with Scout or Taurus."

Jordan turned his face toward the red-gray sky, as though reading the answer from there. "It would depend on the circumstances. If you were stranded because of a ship malfunction, Scout could probably fix it. If there were any kind of predators or hostile forces on the planet, Taurus could keep you alive."

"No hostiles, no ship, purely an aesthetic question."

"Then, it doesn't matter. They are both too old and too good for us."

They were quiet the rest of the way, and when they approached the landing site, Morgan was speaking in front of a holo-map projected on the fuselage of the Aves.

"About sixty kilometers upriver from our position is a unique rock formation," Morgan shouted through his breath mask. "A two-tiered waterfall. We believe it to be the site of redoubt, a sort of deep underground shelter the inhabitants of this planet built to shelter themselves from the solar flares."

An Aves had found the quadruple mesa formation, but it was inside the blast zone. They still would have gone had not the scans found this much closer redoubt site.

Morgan continued, "We believe if there is any surviving data on the planet, it will be contained in one of those Redoubts. Tactical Officer Honeywell believes that it is also possible the forces that have been attacking us may be using those redoubts as bases. For that reason, Warfighters will be leading us into the base, supported by Accipiters on low-altitude intercept. I've made a list of the two teams I'm taking upriver with me. We will be traveling by ground transport. Assemble in ten minutes."

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The autoloaders on the Aves *James* activated, and discharged two armored multi-purpose vehicles onto the planet's surface. They rode on large wheels each (more reliable, tactically speaking than anti-gravity hover-pads) and they had great big guns on the back.

The larger, six-wheeled transports were called "Road Warriors" after a legendary hero of post-Apocalyptic Earth. The smaller, four-wheeled ones were called "Razorbacks⁴."

"Rook, you're driving," Taurus said, indicating one of the Razorbacks. "Jordan, ride the gun. I'll ride shotgun."

"Shotgun?" Jordan asked.

⁴ There was a small animal on Sapphire called a "Razorback." They had sharp, blade-shaped spikes on their backs. But once you got past those, they were "good eatin'."

“Za, Shotgun... a kind of weapon based on the principle of using small packets of explosive chemicals to fire ballistic projectiles. It was used by the early colonists of Sapphire to shoot at the later colonists of Sapphire,” Taurus explained.

“Kumba yah!” said Rook, jumping into the driver’s seat. The passion of a teenaged boy for a rugged, high-powered motor vehicle was as true and pure as any force in the universe, and at least as dangerous. Taurus took the seat next to him, making it even better.

As he activated the drive-engine, it occurred to him that if the two of them were on a beach instead of burnt out cinder of a planet, and wearing just enough to cover their nasties instead of full battle gear, and if there was cold-unit of ale in the back instead of a great big gun... this could have been a pretty fantastic weekend.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Keeler - Secondary Command Center (SC2)

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Technician Scout climbed to the top of the ladder and reported to TyroCommander Lear. "There should be four command interlinks between the Braincore and the ship's primary systems. They're all missing."

"Missing?" Lear asked. "How could they be missing?"

"Well, my guess would be someone physically removed them," Scout answered. "On our ship, we keep a set of spares in the nearest supply locker, but the spares are gone, too... along with most of that deck. I'd recommend having *Pegasus* send us a complete repair set the next time they dispatch supplies."

"I'll see that it is done," Lear told her.

It may be noted at this point that Lear was only able to remain standing by holding onto an O'Shit handle on the section's primary bulkhead.

Pegasus - Command Suite

Prime Commander Keeler did not like meetings. He disliked large meetings even more. But desperate times called for desperate measures, and this was the reason there were twenty-five people in his command suite.

Lt. Cmdr Honeywell, Lt. Alkema, and two other officers represented tactical, Chief Churchill and Specialist Sukhoi from the ship's watch sat in, along with six people from Geological and Planetary Surveys, eight representatives from Technical Core to review what was

being fixed on *Lexington Keeler* and how much more needed to be fixed before the ship was salvageable, plus two more to give condition reports on *Pegasus*, one analyst to provide status on the forensic examination of the wreckage of the MegaSphere, two more people from flight operations, and Flight Commander Collins from Flight Core.

Also, the meeting was being broadcast shipwide, to *Pegasus* and to the Hangar Bay Command Post on *Keeler*, for anyone who cared to listen in.

“Good afterdawn, everyone,” Keeler began.

“Evening,” Alkema corrected.

“Really?” Keeler said. He shook his head and pinched his eyes. “I have totally lost track... Anyway, I don’t think there’s too much I need to fill you in on. *Pegasus* remains at Battle Situation 1. We are maintaining continuous battle readiness on all defensive systems. We have tasked four Aves and eight Accipiters to continuous combat patrols around our ship. How are you groups holding up, Flight Commander Collins?”

“Kicking ass,” Collins answered. “All Flight Groups report in at full flight capable, and all air crews status themselves at 100%.”

“What’s the status on damaged ships?” Keeler asked.

“Two of our birds are wounded. *Amy*’s back in the nest, and they’re mending her wing. *Prudence* is in worse shape, but they’ll fix her up eventually.” She paused for a moment. “Any word on her crew, commander?”

“Chief Duke has crews searching for them,” Keeler answered. “We know that they were in a part of the ship that suffered severe structural damage, but if there’s any chance they’re alive, we’re sure they’ll be found.” He heard himself saying this, then realized it might not be comforting enough. “Prayers are always welcome,” he added. “Mr. Alkema and Mr. Honeywell will now provide additional details on the current tactical situation.”

Honeywell nodded his assent to let Alkema speak first. “It’s been over five hours since the last attack. As you’ve ordered, we’ve maintained a heightened state of alert, and we’re reviewing combat techniques to see if we can make them more effective against additional attacks.”

“Are you convinced there will be additional attacks?” someone from the Technical Core asked.

Honeywell fielded that question. “We think the probability is very high. Our defenses may have driven them off, but they could be regrouping. Tactical Core agrees it is best that we maintain the highest possible state of readiness.”

Alkema continued. “The mission readiness of our phalanx batteries is at 100%. Hammerhead missile batteries are at 97%”

“They will be at 100%,” Honeywell added. “A few banks were in the process of being upgraded when we arrived at the system. We’re rushing through the upgrades on the ones closest to completion, and resetting the rest of them to their original programming.”

"How are manning levels?" Keeler asked. "Do we have enough people?"

Honeywell answered. "We've tasked every reserve warfighter to *Pegasus's* defense. I have to ask, sir, how long we will be expected to maintain this state of high alert."

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Keeler looked up at Honeywell, and the others were surprised at intensity of his angry glare. "Until *Pegasus* is secure from alien attack."

Keeler turned to Churchill. "Could the Watch spare 50 men to conduct security sweeps on the *Lexington Keeler*?"

Churchill spoke. "I think we can come up with that many, but it's our entire active duty roster."

"I'm still concerned that Aurelians may have boarded *Keeler*, before, during, or after the battle," Keeler explained. "Your men have been trained in dealing with Aurelians."

Churchill's expression was flat, non-committal. Keeler hated that about Republickers. "I'll need an hour to assemble and brief my watchmen," Churchill answered finally.

"Good," said Keeler. "Now, let's discuss the status of repairs on the *Keeler*."

Technical Specialist Tempest Nasa activated a hologram of the *Keeler* that stretched the length of the conference table. She stood and went through the status deck by deck, system by system. It took forty minutes, even though over two-thirds of the ship was **Status Unknown**. Among those sections where the status was known, there were more failures than successes. Most of the systems were still damaged and inoperable. But news

of a successful reactor restart, progress in thruster repairs, and the discovery of additional intact sections provided a little optimism.

Blaze Omaha from Technical Core wanted to know what the ultimate goal of repairs to *Keeler* was.

"The plan is to get *Keeler* minimally operational so we can get out of this system," Keeler responded. "Get it structurally stabilized, and get the main drive working so we can get them to a safe harbor."

"After that?" Nasa asked.

"We'll send it home," Keeler answered. "A skeleton crew, maybe some androids, we'll leave them on board and send the ship back to Sapphire for a complete refit. I don't want to stay in this system a half-second longer than we have to, nor a leave half-second before *Keeler* is operational. Can you give me any idea how long that will take?"

"We still don't know the extent of damage," Nasa said. "Deccas⁵ anyway."

"Can we at least get enough systems on-line so that *Keeler* can maneuver... defend himself?" Keeler asked.

"Pathfinder ships are organisms," Nasa answered. "It's not enough to get disparate systems up, they have to work in coordination, there has to be ..."

⁵ **Decca:** *n.* A Republicker unit of time measurement equal to ten days. Short for 'decadays.'

“... a mind,” Keeler said. “The Braincore... we have to get the Braincore up. I understand that. Make getting the Braincore operational our highest priority.” He sighed. “If there’s nothing else, everybody should get back to their duty stations. Thank you all for attending this meeting. I have confidence in all of you.”

“One final point,” Keeler said as they stood to adjourn. “I have relieved TyroCommander Lear of her responsibilities with regard to salvaging Pathfinder Ship *Keeler*, and given full command authority to Chief Duke. Duke, if you are listening, you may disregard any further orders from TyroCommander Lear.” Keeler then signaled for Alkema to shutdown the COM Link.

As the group made their way to the hatch, Keeler spoke again. “Churchill and Sukhoi, Would you remain behind please.”

Keeler waited until everyone but Alkema had departed through the hatch. “TyroCommander Lear has conveyed to me that there is evidence that *Keeler* was sabotaged before the attack. I would like you to secure seats on the next Aves and investigate.”

“What manner of sabotage?” Churchill asked.

“The command and control lines to the Primary Braincore were cut,” Keeler explained.

“The replacements were also destroyed,” Alkema added. “We’re sending new replacements over on the Aves *Uma* on the next resupply flight.”

Keeler waved Alkema down. That wasn't important right now. "The other reason I am sending you to *Keeler* is to bring back Lear," he said.

Churchill seemed mildly surprised at this. Keeler couldn't have been more surprised at the show of emotion if Churchill had dropped his pants and begun singing Borealan love ballads. "You want me to arrest TyroCommander Lear?"

"She's already under arrest," Keeler clarified. "I sent her because I thought her experience overseeing the final construction of *Pegasus* would expedite the repairs on *Keeler*. She has not, as far as I have seen, devoted any time to that task. If she isn't doing any good on *Keeler*, she may as well be back here.

"If I sent in Warfighters, she might dig herself in, and that could get ugly," Keeler went on. "I am hoping that two watchmen can retrieve her without a fuss."

"I understand, sir," said Churchill. "If I may ask, what is your ultimate plan for her disposition."

"When we are done here, I intend to put Lear off at Chapultepec Starlock, and let the Odyssey Directorate complete their investigation of the Aurora Incident. I intend to wash my hands of TyroCommander Lear, and promote TyroCommander Redfire to Executive Officer."

Churchill seemed genuinely taken aback at this, "TyroCommander Redfire is lost."

"He's been lost before," Keeler said. "And he always comes back. Do you understand your orders?"

"Indeed, I do," Churchill assured him. "Mr. Sukhoi and I will depart on the same Aves that carries our Watch over. We will escort TyroCommander Lear back to this ship... per your orders."

"Thank you," Keeler said. "You are dismissed."

Keeler – The UnderDecks

The aviator, his protégé, the dead man, and the woman came to what had been a ship's garden. But, the dome had been damaged in the battle, and the soil blasted with hard radiation. Even though the repair drones had rebuilt the dome, and it held oxygen, it was a cold place, with random stands of blackened trees rising from sterile gray dusty soil.

"I am hungry," said Muffy to Matthew Driver. "Do you have any nourishment?"

"You weren't hungry the last time we stopped," Driver replied, prying her hand from his thigh.

"But I am hungry now," she pouted.

Matthew drew a foodbar from his pack. "It's all we have, I'm afraid."

She took the small rectangle in her hand and slowly, luxuriantly stripped it of its wrapping. Fixing Matthew in a seductive stare, she gave the bar a long, slow lick with her fine pink tongue. Then, she slowly drew the food product into her lips, and finally bit off a small piece to chew and swallow hungrily. "Oh," she moaned. "It's so-o-o good."

"Anyway," said Driver, turning to Christmas. "You were about to tell us about the colony of Bright Angel"

Christmas continued, "Bright Angel was a beautiful, mountainous world, although a lot of it was rather chilly. There was a thriving human civilization there, most eager to remain contact with its human brothers. It was at Bright Angel that we realized that our ship's Central Braincore had become fully sentient. The pattern of system glitches that had plagued us since launch were actually the first stirrings of its consciousness."

"Aye, the same thing happened to us," Trajan interrupted. "And, Muffy, take your hand off my crotch."

Pouting, Muffy took her hand away.

Christmas was perturbed by this information... the sentient Braincore information, not the Muffy's hand in the crotch information, "But you managed to prevent *Pegasus's* Central Braincore from being controlled."

Driver answered. "We isolated Caliph from the Braincore. She's now kind of..."

"He's kind of," Trajan interrupted. "Caliph decided to adopt a male persona, last time I checked."

To Driver, it did not matter. "Either way, Caliph is an independent entity that inhabits her ... its ... own Braincore."

Christmas considered this. "We might have avoided this disaster had we managed that. We tried to shut Lex down, but it was too late. Only the damage to this ship's systems enabled me to deactivate him after the attack. If

your repair crew restores him, the results could be catastrophic."

"So you have said previously," Driver reminded him.

"Why do you think it was Lex who tried to murder your crew," Trajan Lear asked. So far, Christmas seemed to be cruising on pure paranoia.

An edge of frustration seeped into Christmas's voice. "I suspected it since he revealed himself on Bright Angel, and I have been certain since the last colony *Lexington Keeler* visited, called 'Archangel.' It was not on our original itinerary, but we learned of it at Bright Angel. I was only peripherally involved with the mission. By then, I was known as an animated corpse cohabitating with the high priestess of an alien sex cult and the rest of the crew was uncomfortable with my lifestyle."

"If you're dead, can it really be considered a lifestyle?" Trajan Lear asked. "Just asking..."

Christmas ignored him. "I observed the mission through telemetry reports delivered to my quarters. Archangel was... had been... a world of great beauty, of turquoise oceans and stunning landscapes. It was the first colony we had visited with its own ring system, which created very dramatic and beautiful vistas, especially in the equatorial regions.

"There had been a human colony there, and it had built great cities. Crystalline materials and marble were abundant in the planet's crust, and so many of the buildings were constructed as huge columns of glass. Cascadia was the largest of its cities, but it was in ruins. Its

buildings were fallen, its streets full of rubble, its gardens... were in pretty good shape, actually, because the aqueduct system had been mostly undamaged."

"What happened to the human colony?" Driver asked.

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"They had been attacked between 160 and 200 years before we arrived. There were great long gashes carved into the planet's surface, exposing her underlying strata ... crystalline, diamond, quartz, zirconium. The gashes made for long crystalline canyons, quite beautiful... making prisms of the white sun."

Driver's gut sank. That sounded depressingly familiar.

"We remained in orbit to investigate the disappearance of the colony. After our one-hundred seventy-seventh ship-day in orbit around Archangel, I asked the Prime Commander when we would be leaving. He looked at me quizzically, and said that there was far too much work to do, and we had only just arrived.

"I found this to be a pervasive attitude among the crew. No one wanted to leave, or could even contemplate leaving the planet. I was perplexed, so I went to consult with Lex, and discovered that, due to an engineering mishap, his intelligence was no longer accessible within the ship's Braincore.

"About this time, key systems on board the ship began failing. First, there were minor disruptions to water supply and waste management systems. They grew in scale until sections of the ship had to be depressurized and cut off from power, so that the remaining power and life support

could support critical areas... the Primary Tower, the Habitation Levels, and the Hangar Bays

"In time I learned that the crew were having dreams. They were dreaming of Archangel in the time of the colony... and some of the more sensitive individuals, like the navigators and the truth machines, faintly recalled dreams of the planet during the time of the Avian civilization."

As he said this, an image came to Matthew Driver's mind... faint, like the washed out hues of a hologram viewed too many times. It was of a city, high and spiraling towers built among mountaintops, among which flitted beings like birds with overlong, albatross wings, small light bodies, and elongated bird-like heads.

Christmas continued. "They were dreaming of lives among the colonists, and they awakened with a compulsion to remain on the planet, and rebuild what had been lost."

"My dreams were highly sexual... as they always are," said Muffy, in a sultry tone of voice.

Christmas continued. "I, being dead, was unaffected by this. I do not dream. Eventually, I learned that the disappearance of Lex was not a malfunction, but part of the crew's effort to prevent us from leaving the system. Some form of intelligence had reached out from the planet and convinced the crew to systematically shut down life-support in order to force us to the surface."

"What did you do?" Driver asked.

"I hid myself in the UnderDecks. There followed a long series of diversions... I was hunted by the ship's security forces. I had to dodge some killer toolbots, set off some diversionary explosions. The details are not interesting enough to relate here, in the time we have left. Eventually, I made it to the secondary Braincore.

"With Lex's assistance, I managed to insert myself into the dream-world created by the Archangel intelligence; the spirits of the planet. I spoke to the crew in their dreams. Argued with them. Cajoled them. And finally fought with the spirits of a dead planet, as they begged for humans to rebuild their world.

"After much battle, we reached a compromise. 1,000 of our crew would remain behind to begin rebuilding Archangel. The rest of us would be free to return to our voyage."

"So, many of *Lexington Keeler's* crew were safely on Archangel when you were attacked here," Driver said. "How fortunate."

"Fortunate?" Christmas challenged. "Left behind as drones to rebuild a dead, if often beautiful world; their minds only partly their own? The spirits of the planet said that those who stayed behind would retain their free will. I can only hope it is true. After we were attacked here, we sent the survivors back toward Archangel, because it was the nearest world."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Surface

Four Road Warriors roared along the banks, and sometimes the bed, of the broad shallow river that ran between the mesas and the plains until they came to an abrupt plateau that the river descended in two long, distinct steps, creating the two-stage waterfall.

Magnus Morgan jumped from his ride before it had made a complete stop. He strode up to the mouth of the cave that was hidden behind the upper waterfall. He scanned it up and down, then felt a need to pull down his breathing mask and inspect it visually. No ash was falling here, but the smell of oil remained pervasive as ever. The water maintained an oily rainbow sheen on its surface.

The voice of the warfighter squad leader came through on Morgan's COM Link. "There's an artificial wall behind the waterfall with a large hatch in the middle of it. Scans indicate it's a heavy steel-tungsten alloy. It's going to be tough to cut through."

Morgan linked back. "Anansi has an aptitude for these things. She'll figure out how to get through."

Anansi dashed up the trail and disappeared with Morgan behind the sheet of water. A few minutes later, the curtain of water parted as the immense steel hatch covering the Redoubt's entrance parted and diverted its flow. Beyond it was a cavernous hallway where rows of dim yellowish lights were flickering to life.

Technician Honda was amazed. "There's still power in there?"

"Za," Anansi answered her. "That's why the doors could open. My guess is it's some kind of hydro-power system that keeps a bank of batteries charged."

The exploration crews moved into the entrance chamber. A plate on the wall read (in the ancient language): **Redoubt 31. 10,000 souls x 10 years.**

Morgan regarded this glumly. "That city we came from housed 40,000 people. Only 25 per cent would have been saved... at most."

"Not much of an existence," Anansi said. "A cot to sleep on, some sort of survival ration."

Next to the plate was a layout map of the facility. The exploration team was at the mouth of a long corridor leading into the mountain. It led to a three-level open chamber. "I'm just going to speculate," Morgan speculated. "This was their command center. If it is the operations center, is the area most likely to have some kind of records of the planet's history."

Honda called from further down the corridor. "I think I may have already found a record of the planet's history."

They moved toward her voice, shining their handlights to supplement the dim lights of the corridor. Between each pair of support beams was a wall-panel, and on each, a mural had been painted.

"This must be an account of their arrival on the planet," Ing said of the first mural. Ancient starships were descending through a turbulent sky. They were quite

simple in design, huge cylinders attached to structural metal cages. Far at the back were star-drive pods. On the opposite side of the hall was a mural, depicting humans taking one ship apart to build the first settlement.

The next was a depiction of the city they had just come from ... in happier times before its abandonment and before the devastation more recently visited on the planet. It looked like a dull, but decent enough place to live. There were families playing in the parks, visiting the shopping center together. It was grievously sad.

Anansi caught the legend in the corner. "Caledonia, the town we were in was called Caledonia."

The next showed a very different city. This one occupied the floodplain next to a broad, shallow lake. Out in the lake were derricks and extraction structures... pulling hydrocarbons from the muck. This one, according to the legend, was called "Crescent Basin City." The view was from a long way away, and there were no human figures depicted.

Magnus Morgan had moved to the next wall panel. In this one, a number of crescent-shaped ships were descending from roiling, turbulent clouds toward the larger city, the one beside the lake. The subsequent panel showed the ships attacking the city, at night, with energy beams. Smaller ships strafed the ground in three-ship attack formations. The smaller ships had blade-shaped hulls attached to torpedo-like drive cylinders.

This world must have been defenseless from the assault. Sapphire and Republic had maintained militaries,

even centuries after the collapse, for fear of Tarmigans, or aliens, or even predations from other colonies (but mostly each other). This colony had decided not to invest in self-defense. They had nothing to offer against the terror that descended from the sky.

In the next mural, the invasion continued. The city was under the crescent ships, and an even larger ship hung in the sky over them. Humans fled the city, making their way across the plains, hiding in the scrubby trees and brush, taking shelter in the river bottom.

There followed three murals that were obviously painted by a different hand. The preceding ones had been almost photographic in quality, these next were impressionistic. Against black shadows and leaves, human figures were attacked by strange beings with cat-like eyes; shot, stabbed, hunted and carried away.

"Those don't look like Aurelians," said Anansi.

"Neg," Morgan agreed. "This supports the theory that aliens invaded this planet long before the Aurelians arrived."

"Also, that the ships that attacked *Lexington Keeler* were aliens ... not Aurelians," Ing added.

The final panel had ten rows of ten human figures each. All but the last three were black, and three were red.

"97% of the survivors died in the first year," Anansi guessed.

"And I don't think the remaining 3% lasted much longer," Morgan concluded grimly. "Let's get set up. We have to learn as much about this planet as possible."

The Aves Susan

Churchill and Sukhoi took seats near the rear of the ship, and conversed through the neural transponders implanted in their brains.

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Interesting predicament, thought Sukhoi.

And what leads you to that conclusion, TyroCenturion Constantine? Bellisarius replied in his thoughts.

Sukhoi: Prime Commander Keeler has ordered us to take TyroCommander Lear into custody. Prime Centurion Lear wants us to undermine Commander Keeler's command. Which of our masters are we to follow?

Bellisarius: It isn't obvious to you? Loyalty to the Notorium is always the first priority.

Sukhoi: ...

Bellisarius: But you do not believe TyroCommander Lear is acting justly.

Sukhoi: Commander Keeler's decision to salvage the other ship was the right decision. We all agreed at the time. Keeler didn't know about the aliens. None of us did. Whatever went wrong was not his fault.

Bellisarius guarded his next several thoughts. When he finally projected them to Constantine, they were as follows:

It was inevitable that our situations would come to this impasse. We have to make sure, that at the end, we are on the right side of this struggle.

The Surface

Taurus's Warfighters set up camp near the entrance of the Redoubt. Her command post was the back seat of one of the Road Warriors, wherefrom she coordinated the deployment of their troops and weapons. "Around the mouth of the cave, create a sensor perimeter. Link in with the Accipiters."

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In the back of a nearby Road Warrior, Johnny Rook and Max Jordan consulted with Tactical Specialist Herrald, a Sapphirean with a wrestler's build and tawny curls of hair. "Thanks for doing this," Rook told him, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'm almost sure I didn't see anything, but I've got to be sure."

Herrald nodded. "Transfer the imagery from your tactical gear." Rook had only to touch the machine's data port and it was done. A screen projection of Rook's imagery appeared on the back of the Road Warrior.

"This is the Spex imagery from the time index when you thought you saw the creature." Herrald quickly isolated the critical sequence. On the playback, there was a brief impression of a shadow, scurrying into the scrub.

"That's it," Rook said.

Max Jordan studied the image. "I can't really tell what it was. An animal, maybe?"

"The probes didn't detect any animal life in the area," Rook reminded him.

Herrald froze and magnified the image, and added detail. There was an impression of a cat-like creature, walking on its hind legs.

Rook touched his COM Link. "Lt. Taurus, come and take a look at this."

Taurus looked a little pissed when she dragged herself away from the mobile command post. Her attitude did not much improve when she saw the playback.

"There were no life signs were detected anywhere on the planet," Taurus said dismissively. "And Lieutenant Morgan doesn't think any advanced animal life could evolve because of the solar flares."

Johnny Rook pointed to the cat-face. "But, come on... that's obviously something."

"May I posit a theory," said someone, who turned out to be Specialist Hero Eastwood, a soft-spoken Sapphorean of late middle-age, thin rugged build, with a habit of squinting when he thought. He was on the mission as an archivist, documenting the findings. He also worked part-time in the Zoological Core.

"I thought you were exploring the Redoubt," Taurus challenged him.

Eastwood squinted at her. "We needed some additional equipment. There's another hatch further in. I need something to unlock it. I've got a sonic screwdriver somewhere in my landing pack. I heard your conversation. I think I have an idea how there could be something here our sensors can't detect."

"Let's hear it," said Taurus, tossing her dark pony-tail in a way that made Rook's uniform tight and confining.

Eastwood squinted and crossed his arms. "We know there are periodic flares and that these flares scorch the

surface of the planet too often for higher forms of animal life to evolve. But we don't know that the star has always been like that. It could have been stable for millions of years before entering its present state. Animal life could have evolved during that time."

"But we've scanned the area for animal life," Taurus reminded him.

Eastwood squinted into the sun, then paused thoughtfully, as though drawing his thoughts together in a long deep breath. "But suppose, in order to survive the flares, the animals had to evolve new traits, to make them more resistant to heat and radiation, reduce their requirements for air and water... and these evolved characteristics had the side-effect of making it harder for our sensors to detect them."

Taurus turned to Herral, who shrugged. "I guess it is possible, especially when you factor in the geo-magnetic flux caused by the MegaSphere detonation."

Rook shook his head, and tapped the image again. It was still just a blur, the enhancements making it look like a cartoon. Eastwood squinted at it. "Also," he added. "That looks vaguely like the survivor's impressions of the aliens that attacked their world. So, you might want to forget my previous absurd theory."

Taurus took this in, then touched her COM Link. "Lt. Moon, this Lt. Taurus. I'm going to call down reinforcements from *Pegasus*."

"They're pretty stretched, lieutenant," Moon answered.

"Not for the kind of reinforcements I'm asking for."

Lexington Keeler

Susan glided into Keeler's landing bay. Rows of dim white emergency lights guided them in, though about a quarter of them were busted and some of the rest flickered. In a way, this made the ship look like more of wreck than when the tunnel had been completely dark.

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When Sukhoi and Churchill disembarked, a Logistics Specialist was standing by to advise them to check in with Lt Duke at the Flight Operations Center and to hold on tightly when they climbed up the catwalk because gravity was still a little iffy.

The Flight Operations Center was in a far better state than they had expected. Duke had made good use of the portable generators and command stations. Besides Duke, there were four people coordinating repairs throughout the ship and two floating specialists (literally floating, since they found they got around more quickly in Null-O-Gravity suits) that added help as needed. A holographic display of the entire ship dominated the command center, with every section, every deck coded and statused.

Technical Specialist Sperry reported. "Two sets of control thrusters have been restored. With the undamaged thrusters on the keel, we now have just enough power to keep the ship in orbit."

A cheer of "Huzzah!" went up around the recovery deck. Duke seemed almost pleased. "How about the gravity engines?"

"Intact. Primarily a matter of booting the control systems," Sperry reported to him. "If we can get the Braincore on-line, we can move this ship.

"A most impressive operation, Lieutenant Duke," Churchill told him.

"The crew worked hard," Duke told them, giving them a hard, suspicious look. "When this is over, they should all get about ten weeks of recreational downtime."

"Agreed," said Churchill. "What's the safest route to Secondary Command Center?"

"There isn't one," Duke answered. "The decks between here and there are pancaked. A logistics crew is scheduled to take her the replacement control interfaces for the Braincore. That is what you're here about, isn't it? The sabotage to the ship's Braincore."

Churchill smiled tightly. "That's exactly why we are here."

Duke paid the smile little mind. "The logistics crew will reach SC-2 through a relatively less unsafe route."

Duke traced the route on the hologram of the ship. "Through the airlock, over the hull to External Access Juncture 27, then backtracking to SC-2."

Churchill was taken aback, "That's the safest route to the Secondary Command Center?"

Duke was looking over another workstation now. He tapped the COM Link. "Team *Ida-5*, Don't bother with Deck Plus Nine. It's completely depressurized in your section. Move on to Deck Plus Eleven." He turned back to

Churchill. "I didn't say it was safe. It is, actually, quite unsafe. When we get all the load-bearing structures reinforced, all the critical hull-plating secured, all the power units and fusion reactors secured from overload, and after we have scouted every deck for Aurelian infiltrators, when we have defensive and navigation systems on-line, and when we have an active Braincore to coordinate all those systems, then, the ship will be safe."

"You must be a Guildsman," said Churchill.

"I'm not wearing my jacket, so you must have read my personnel record," Duke answered.

"Nay, it's just that Guilders take a particular delight in scaring the Hell out of planet-dwellers with tales of destruction and death in space."

A thin smile graced the edges of Duke's lips. "I like your attitude. And just for that, I'm making sure you get one of the good spacesuits."

The Surface

Max Jordan and Johnny Rook completed a reconnoiter of the immediate vicinity of the Redoubt and were met by Lt Taurus. "Welcome back, boys. I arranged for some reinforcements." She gave a whistle, and her huge, scary-ass reinforcements entered the front of the cave through the veil of the waterfall.

These were trauma hounds; armor-bound robotic dogs as tall as a man, with claws that could tear through titanium armor and glowing red eyes that could sense fear in any range of the electromagnetic spectrum. Their metal

gleamed, the black works of their locomotion systems turned smoothly as the two beasts drew themselves to their mistress's side.

"Warfighters," Taurus said. "Meet Rex and Spot."

"Charmed, I'm sure," said Spot, offering a paw tipped with massive, razor sharp, steel-reinforced claws

"Indubitably," Rex agreed.

Taurus patted Rex on the snout. "Good boy, have you accessed the imagery from Warfighter Rook's suit."

"We most certainly have," answered Spot.

Taurus was pleased. "Good boy, your mission is to make an extended patrol sweep of the area, and run-down any animal life-forms you encounter."

"Run down?" Rex questioned. "Do you want us to exterminate it, or merely contain it."

"Contain it if you can, exterminate it if you must," Taurus explained.

"Ah, very good," Spot said.

"To the hunt, then!" Rex exclaimed.

The claws of the two beasts clattered and made sparks against the stone floor as they ran outside and disappeared beyond the oily veil of the waterfall.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

A horizontal Niagara of water rushed through the primary conduit that ran along the ship's centerline.

These torrents carried along with them a silver and white tabby cat bound in a sack. The cat was drowning.

Water, turbulence, confusion, cold... these things would make a cat panic and die. Queequeg chose not to panic, because he would not let himself die; not at the grimy paws of vermin. Psychic or not, they were still vermin; far lower on the food chain.

The wet bag clung to his body, which meant that by kicking his legs, he could steer it a little bit. He could not tell up from down, but his cat-senses told him where needed to go just the same. Steering the sack, he felt it brush against the sides of the conduit. The first hit was smooth. He banged against the side again. Smooth again. He knew he didn't have much air left. He banged it again and felt a ridge, one of the connecting joints on the side of the conduit. He jammed his legs hard against it, anchoring himself. Precarious though it was, it provided him the leverage he needed to tear through the sack with his claws.

He tattered the sack and broke free, emerging into a chilled midnight-dark riptide carrying him at the speed of drowning. His head pounded, and his sides ached with the fierce compulsion to draw breath. His cat brain squelched the thought. Queequeg focused on finding the next

quaternary diversion conduit, the difference between having seven more lives, and none.

He caught the elbow of the conduit a few seconds later. The conduit was about the width of his feline body. He jammed himself into it, filling the space at the juncture. As he blocked the flow, the conduit in front of him emptied. Now, he could breathe again. There was not much air, but enough to refill his lungs and give himself another five or six minutes to survive this thing. He paused in the juncture and let out his old breath in the form of a yowl, a mighty, ancient and terrible sound.

When he felt like he had recovered as much as he could, he took a deep breath and let go. The water pushed him into the quaternary channel, and the low pressure in front of him made it a speedier ride through a smaller space. He had some control now. For a cat, this made all the difference. He rode the current, like underwater surfing, except that the cat hated it. He knew he was going to live, now. He had always expected to, but now the details were filling in.

The water soon carried him to a filtering unit, a cylindrical apparatus with a hexagon gridwork along the inside. He slammed against it with the weight of his furry body and dug his claws into the screen. He pulled himself up and undid the latch from the inside. He pulled himself upward, the weight of his wet fur and the force of the current making it a very hard pull. Finally, he heaved himself onto the deck. He lay there for several long seconds panting, and not grateful for survival.

"I," the feline growled.

"Am," he hissed.

"Pissed!" he howled.

He shook his entire body of wet fur. Twenty seldom-used, but incredibly strong and sharp claws unsheathed on his front and rear paws. He paused, sat down on the deck, and began deliberately licking every part of himself dry.

And his eyes burned with the desire of exterminating every rat on the ship.

Even if that included a few of the nice ones.

Lexington Keeler - Deck Minus 12

They - Driver, Trajan Lear, Christmas, and Muffy - entered into the ruins of a Botany Bay. It had burned and depressurized in the aftermath of the attack, leaving only sterile grey dust, charred trees, and the blackened remains of the frames that held them.

Driver paused at the hatchway, activated the data panel next to the hatch, and studied the warning displays next to the location indicator and inventory. "Biohazard warnings? In a Botany Bay?"

"This is where we stored some of the more aggressive plant-life from Emeishan," Christmas explained.

"Aggressive plant-life?" asked Trajan Lear.

"Carnivorous, in other words," Christmas explained. "It kept escaping the Vivaria on the Upper Decks and attacking people. We created a secure facility to study it." He frowned. "What a shame it's been destroyed."

"Why?" Trajan asked, imagining how much worse it would be if they had to deal with man-eating plants.

Christmas shrugged. "Their leaves made a tasty addition to any salad... and they wiggled, which stimulated the visual palate." He met their expressions of surprise. "Before I died, I liked to cook."

"Getting back to the reason I examined the plate by the door," Driver continued. "We're eight sections forward and 12 decks below the Secondary Command Center. In other words, we've overshot it."

"It's not too late," Christmas insisted. "But we must hurry. If they have reached SC-2, then they have discovered that I removed the Interlinks. It's only a matter of time before they replace them."

"At which point, he would try to kill off the rest of the crew," Driver finished.

"Or worse," said Christmas.

"Worse?" Trajan asked.

"Or, worse, he might try to take over your ship instead" Christmas crossed a powdery grey stretch of what had been hydroponic pseudo-soil medium. He pulled some dry, spidery vines aside and pried open an emergency egress hatch.

He gestured for them to go inside. "Quickly. He has been trapped in the Braincore since the aftermath of the attack. If your repair crew succeeds in restoring him, he may vent his terrible anger on the first humans he detects."

Lexington Keeler – Secondary Command Center

Lear tapped an impatient, staccato rhythm on the side of her command chair. There were four working displays in the SC2, and none of them were displaying any information that was of use to her. Merely updates on the progress of repairs throughout the rest of *Lexington Keeler* transmitted from Lt. Duke back in the landing bay.

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If anything, she resented them. The progress had been marginal so far; restoring the maneuvering thrusters along the aft, starboard quarter, sealing hull breaches where the command towers had been, bringing power back online. Duke had only begun to fix the ship, but it was much more than she had achieved in SC-2.

“Someone’s coming,” Move-O-Bot reported. “Would you like me to, I don’t know, challenge them or guard the perimeter or something.”

Goneril Lear sat straight up in her command chair. “Identify them and stand by to take defensive measures.”

“Too damn bad for you I’m not a security-bot... Burn!” Move-O-Bot rolled himself into the corner, giggling.

She wanted to curse the machine, but it wasn’t Lear’s style. Her style would have been to curse out whoever had given the machine speech capabilities. She cocked her sidearm and waited for the security hatch to cycle. She leveled the sidearm, then lowered it as four men in Odyssey Project spacesuits entered the room.

“TyroCommander Lear,” said one of the men, as he removed his helmet. He introduced himself. “Technical

Specialist Busan, we've brought replacement command interfaces for the Central Braincore."

"Very good, Specialist," she gestured, but her gaze was fixed on the Watchmen, Churchill and Sukhoi. "You can access the Braincore through the hatch located at..."

"We know where it is, TyroCommander," said Busan. He and the other specialist were already on the move. Their large toolpacks presumably contained the interlinks.

"... position 15 on the deck coordinate system," Lear finished over him. "Report to Technician Scout, and then report back to me when the interlinks are in place."

They acknowledged her, then disappeared into the hole. When they were gone, she turned to Churchill and Sukhoi. "What are you doing here?"

Churchill answered her. "Prime Commander Keeler ordered us to bring you back to *Pegasus*."

"Under what authority?" Lear demanded.

"His authority as Prime Commander," Churchill replied. "He did not cite a particular code or covenant."

"There's a very large bruise on your temple," Sukhoi observed. "Are you injured?"

Lear ignored Sukhoi. "And will you do so?"

Churchill demurred. "Unless you have a spacesuit, I don't think it's practical to move you at the present time."

Lear jogged her head toward Move-O-Bot. "Can you do something about that?"

Churchill did not understand it. "What would you have us do with it?"

"Deactivate its speech protocols and personality matrix," Lear ordered.

"It's just a mechanoid," Churchill said.

"Nay, it isn't. The mechanoids on this ship have been upgraded with speech capabilities, and I don't want anything said here to be repeated."

Churchill looked at Move-O-Bot. "Is that true? You can talk?"

Move-O-Bot stood completely still.

"Move-O-Bot, respond to the Watchman's question," Lear ordered.

Move-O-Bot rotated his head toward Churchill and stood ready, but did not make a sound.

"Now, he's pretending he can't talk," Lear said.

"Move-O-Bot, I order you to speak."

"Move-O-Bot?" said Sukhoi. "You gave it a name?"

"It told me its name was Move-O-Bot," Lear hissed.

"Move-O-Bot, I order you to speak to Chief Churchill."

Move-O-Bot emitted a series of electronic chirps.

"Please allow me to take a look at that bruise," Sukhoi pleaded.

Lear sighed. "Never mind. We will continue this conversation in the Hygiene Pod."

"Why?" Sukhoi asked. "Because you don't want the mechanoid to overhear us?"

"He might tell someone," Lear insisted.

Sukhoi looked at Move-O-Bot, who chirped at him. Finally, Sukhoi shrugged and followed Lear and Churchill into the hygiene pod, sealing the hatch behind them.

When they had left, Move-O-Bot extended one of his arms, placed it on the hatch, and followed every word of their conversation through vibrations on the wall. It was easier than reading lips.

LEAR: I had intended for you to remain on *Pegasus* and undermine Keeler's command. We can no longer tolerate his incompetence.

CHURCHILL: I am unaware of any gross incompetence on Prime Commander Keeler's Part.

LEAR: Thirty people are dead because of an ill-conceived salvage mission... that is gross incompetence.

CHURCHILL: The commander was under orders to render aid to a ship in distress. He received those orders at the StarLock Chapultepec.

LEAR: Then, we can argue that his management of the rescue attempt was incompetent, and led to the unnecessary deaths of forty crewmen. Surely, there are tactical protocols he overlooked.

CHURCHILL: We would have to prove that he ordered standard tactical protocols to be disregarded, otherwise, that would be the fault of TyroCommander Redfire, and possibly Lt. Commander Honeywell.

LEAR: If I have to take them down too, so be it. But what must be done must be done. And rest assured, I know how to destroy a man when I have to.

CHURCHILL: And you believe it is necessary to do so now.

LEAR: I believe leaving Keeler in command of *Pegasus* imperils Republic, and as Centurions, protection of Republic is our foremost duty.

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SUKHOI: Imperiling Republic? How?

LEAR: Keeler is neglecting to address the threat posed by the Aurelians. We don't need to be searching for Earth, we need to search for allies. The Aurelians are a threat to Republic, and we won't defeat them without allies.

CHURCHILL: I agree with that.

SUKHOI: But Keeler...

LEAR: Then, you must help me undermine his command. Find out which officers are loyal, and who is not. Some of the Core Chiefs, and Sector Chiefs, must agree with us. We can persuade the others to our side by reminding them of the deaths caused by his bad decisions. When we have enough on his side, we can charge him with negligence, and force him to step down.

CHURCHILL: If you remove Keeler, Redfire would assume command of *Pegasus*. He is, if anything, worse than Keeler.

SUKHOI: Redfire is missing in action, though.

LEAR: He will turn up. He always turns up. I can handle Redfire. I'll make sure it's Change who is in command, and she is no friend of the Prime Commander.

SUKHOI: I haven't always agreed with the Prime Commander's leadership, but what you're talking about would sabotage the entire mission.

LEAR: For the greater good, we have to take Keeler down, by whatever means necessary. Once Keeler is removed from command, I believe I can persuade the Odyssey Subdirector to reinstate me. What I need to know now, gentlemen, is if you will stand with me.

Move-O-Bot measured four-point-eight seconds of silence.

LEAR: Gentlemen?

CHURCHILL: I stand with Republic, Republic's security is my first, foremost and sole duty as a Centurion

A briefer pause followed.

SUKHOI: I will also stand with Republic, and with the ideals of our Order.

Pegasus - The UnderDecks

In the holding chamber beneath the manifold of an atmospheric processor, Hunter lay on the frigid metal deck with his arms and legs bound, and a bag over his head.

Most of the rats had gone back into hibernation, hiding and sleeping in dark cramped spaces, of which there were thousands in the utilitarian UnderDecks... the basement of the mighty Pathfinder. The Telepathic Rat had left only four guard rats in the chamber with the prisoner.

The two guards nearest the entrance suddenly found the front part of their necks ripped out. The two nearest the prisoner tried to react to the sudden demise of their

comrades, but found themselves eviscerated before they had a chance to squeak.

Silver and black... still slightly wet... the deadly silent blur of teeth and fangs that had caused this was already working on the bindings around Hunter's hands. "Who's there," Hunter whispered.

"Shut up," Queequeg whispered back at him, then swatted him with an open paw just to make the point.

"Oh, you... the cat who let them tie me up and left me for dead."

"I had more important concerns at the time."

"Like what?" Hunter hissed.

"Like saving my own life," Queequeg whispered. "Not that it helped. I should have known better than to try and make a deal with rodentia. If their prejudices about feline cultural norms hadn't been a few centuries out of date, I might be dead now."

"I'm touched that you came back for me."

"I need you for my revenge."

Despite his pain, despite the sudden rawness in his throat and the beginnings of a fever, Hunter chuckled.

"Now, it's my turn to ask. 'Why should I help you?'"

"They infected you with some kind of virulent plague virus. They call it 'Bacia.'"

"Shit!" Hunter hissed. "Bacia."

This caught the cat by surprise. "You know what Bacia is?"

"It's a more virulent strain of what they called 'The White Plague.' It hit Sapphire about 2,000 years ago. It made about 20% of the population sterile. If they hadn't found a cure, it would have wiped out the colony."

"So, there's a cure?"

"We developed an immunity to it. I don't know if it will work against the strain they infected me with. I can already feel it fighting my system. My body temperature is increasing. It's not a fever yet, but it will be. After that, I'll either fight it off or hemorrhage to death."

Queequeg went to work on the cords binding Hunter's legs. "How do you know all that?"

"I know about diseases... about epidemiology."

Queequeg figured, "They want to see what happens to you. Then, they're going to infect the crew, and when *Pegasus* returns to Chapultepec, they'll wait, and they'll breed, and they'll infest every ship that docks there." Queequeg finished with the last of his bonds. "Let's go."

Hunter had to flex his limbs. They had been immobile for so long that it was difficult to restore circulation. When the blood poured into his veins, it was like hot acid. The pain was all but crippling.

"Would you move it," Queequeg swatted him again. "I wouldn't have rescued you if I didn't need you for something."

Hunter crawled slowly across the floor. "This hurts like Hell, kitty cat,"

"Oh, does baby need his level six painkillers?"

"Actually, that would be great," Hunter hissed. He punched the hatch, and it cycled open. He was in the service tube, from there, it was a painful, half-crouching walk a few tens of meters to a storage bay. Queequeg sealed the hatch behind him.

Hunter looked around. "This is a mission module. One of those lockers should contain pain blockers."

"You'll get your painkillers, you big baby," Queequeg assured him. "But the important thing is, we have to kill those rats... all of them."

"And how do you propose to..."

"I'm a cat, dammit," said Queequeg. He opened a storage locker, which contained several packed pulse weapons. "They may be genetically enhanced, they may be intelligent, they may be telepathic, but underneath it all, they're just rats. They're just filthy, disease-ridden, vermin, and I am going to kill all of them."

"How," Hunter asked, the simple effort of making the word causing him to cross his eyes in pain. "Those hand cannons weren't designed for your furry little paws."

"Duh." Queequeg sidled up to a COM Panel and settled on his haunches. "If I could just use a pulse cannon, I'd fry them, but that would be unsatisfying. Some of them might survive. I need them all dead." He activated the COM Panel and tapped in some commands.

"Are you calling for help?" Hunter asked.

"Negative," Queequeg told him. "I am going to take care of this myself. Humans would just screw it up."

"If hand cannons are no good to you, why did you just break those hand cannons out of the weapons locker?"

"Because I will need them," Queequeg finished at the COM Panel, and spared a moment to look at Hunter.

"Really hurts, doesn't it?"

Hunter grunted. "Badly."

Queequeg jumped up to a shelf and, from there, climbed up to a rack. He disappeared behind some storage boxes. A moment later, a medical kit fell in front of Hunter. Round cat eyes peered down on the human.

"Happy now?"

Hunter pried open the kit. He took a pain patch and affixed it to his neck with fingers drenched in sweat. Chemicals and nanites flowed into his bloodstream, and began beating back the pain. As the cat made its way down, he dug through the kit, trying to find the counter-virals. He didn't think any of them would work against Bacia, but they sure couldn't hurt.

Suddenly, the entrance hatch to the storage chamber cycled open. Hunter tried to scramble for one of the side-arms, but his limbs were cramped and difficult to move.

An auto-mech appeared in the hatch. It was larger than Queequeg, with articulated limbs. Sensors front and rear stuck out on the stems of whiskers. An X-Term-O-Bot.

"Help me take this thing apart," ordered the cat.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Surface

Magnus Morgan's exploration crew had tried to get the command center operational again, but it did not respond to the quantum wave generator, and was apparently the more primitive electron-based power system they had seen on other worlds. These took longer to bring on-line, owing to amperages and voltages and other arcana.

The Redoubt's command center was not much more than a semi-circle of workstations, with screens, old style keyboard inputs, and weird, wiry chairs with low backs. The workstations were wired, physically, to water purification, power generating, and waste disposal facilities in the deeper recesses of the Redoubt. There were slots on the surface of the work stations, and they had discovered a number of chunky bits of plastic that it fit into them; probably memory storage. Maybe when Omega got the system powered up, they would find out.

Below the command center were ten habitation levels, 1,000 chambers with ten bunks in each of them and ten small drawers in each of them. Survivors would have had enough personal storage space for a data pad and two changes of clothes. "Our team opened a few of the drawers in the personal habitats," Ing reported after his initial survey. "Some of them contained personal belongings of the survivors. They may also contain records, logs, personal journals. Could be valuable."

Morgan was a little uncomfortable with that.
“Retrieving them would violate the sanctity of their final resting place? We would be like tomb robbers.”

“How would it be different than reading a log?”
Anansi asked.

“An official log is one thing, personal belongings are quite different.” In the crowded habitats of Republic, and even moreso on *Pegasus*, the few truly personal items one kept for oneself often held a strong sense of attachment. Morgan could only imagine what a scrap of personal belongings... perhaps all one managed to salvage as their city was annihilated, would have meant to the survivors.

“Don’t you think they would have wanted their stories to be told?” Ing argued.

Morgan nodded, a little sadly nevertheless. “Tell the search parties to work their way through the personnel quarters and... in as respectful a manner as possible... catalog the personal effects of the survivors, paying special attention to logs, journals, and ... whatever we may find.”

Magnus Morgan checked his data pad as he was alerted to an incoming communication. “Excuse me for a minute.” He picked up the datapad and turned away. He walked to an alcove to give himself a little more privacy. Kayliegh Morgan appeared a moment later on the datapad. “Greetings, husband,” she told him.

He could not help but smile warmly at her face, that wholesome beauty, a little marred because her hair was askew, and she looked a little tired. “How are the twins?”

"Sleeping... and I'm fine, thank you." She paused a second. "Are you safe?"

"I'm currently inside a structure carved into solid rock," he answered. "Arguably, I'm safer here than I am on *Pegasus*."

"Matthew's missing on *Lexington Keeler*," she told him.

"Missing?"

"He was on a deck that collapsed when they blew the ship out of the atmosphere," Kayliegh's eyes began to glisten. "Can you believe the commander did that? Knowing the risks? Just to recover an empty ship with no survivors on it?"

"He didn't know there were no survivors," Magnus Morgan began to argue, before realizing his mistake.

"And maybe he should have checked first before sending our people over there," Kayliegh shot back, really fighting the tears now. "The crew shouldn't have been on *Lexington Keeler* to begin with. I've always had doubts about Prime Commander Keeler, and now...."

"Do you think Matthew's dead?" Magnus asked, knowing that as twins, there was a bond between them.

She paused. "I don't know. I don't think so, but I don't know. How much longer will you be down on the surface?"

"Two ship-days, maximum," he told her. "Once the ground operation is set up, I can run it mostly from the ship. And then I'll come back and we'll get through this."

The Surface - Elsewhere

Johnny Rook awoke to the sound of Lt. Warfighter Taurus strapping on her combat gear. He had stretched out on a sleeping pack on a floor in the front entrance of the cave, and been lulled to sleep by the sound of water rushing over the rocks outside. He raised himself to a half sitting position. "Good afterdawn?" he asked.

She finished fastening the closures on her sleeves. "Dawn was an hour ago while you were still sleeping. We lost telemetry on one of the Trauma Hounds last night."

"Really," he said, his bleary morning mind trying to wrap itself around the concept. He vaguely remembered what he had been dreaming and, watching Taurus put her clothes on made an effective segue between his unconscious and conscious life.

"It could be a malfunction, or environmental damage. I'm going to check it out," she continued.

"Can I go ... I mean, back-up?" Rook asked, hopefully.

She shrugged. "Gear up, and bring Jordan."

Rook looked over to where Jordan was still asleep in his pack, hair spilling all over his eyes. A lot of people look kind of cute when they sleep. Max Jordan just looked messy. Rook stood up and gave his friend a good hard wake-up kick. Max rolled out and was up in a defensive half-crouch, fists raised and ready to fight..

"It's me, killer!" Rook explained.

Jordan lowered his fists and brushed his hair aside.

“Gear up, Jordan,” Taurus ordered. “We’re going for a ride.”

Max Jordan was still a bit biffy. “What?”

Taurus bent at the knees and addressed him. “We’re going for a ride? You know, ride? You like rides, boy? Come on, boy, let’s go for a ride.”

Jordan began pulling his battle-pants out of his sleeping pack. “If I gotta, I gotta. There better be a hot, stimulant-enhanced beverage with my name on it.”

Taurus tossed him a thermal beverage containment unit. “Here. Have some hot chocolatized lactose.”

Desultorily, he twisted open the lid. “Mom always put little marshmallows in it.”

Normally, Taurus would have responded by reminding the soldier that his mother wasn’t here, but that would have been gratuitously cruel under the circumstances. “Just drink it up,” she barked.

“Also, I have to pee,” Jordan said.

“Nobody wants to hear your life story.” Jordan finished pulling on his battle-pants, then followed Rook and Taurus out passed through the open blast doors. Emerging from behind the waterfall, they stepped out into morning on the burning planet. There was a patch of clear sky immediately above them, showing the muted peach color of the planet’s natural dawning sky. The scent of burning oil and sulfur was somewhat weaker, or maybe they were just used to it. Nevertheless, they snapped their masks over their faces, except for Jordan who was still enjoying his chocolatized lactose.

"I guess you'll be driving this morning, Jordan," Taurus told him. Jordan agreed but first excused himself and ducked into the underbrush.

"What do you think happened to the Trauma Hound?" Rook asked.

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"The Trauma Hound's last known location was at the edge of a rift canyon eighteen-point-eight clicks south-southwest from the redoubt. It's along a tectonic fault with piezo-electronic properties. The tectonic fault is releasing massive electrical charges, including ball lightning. A hit of ball lightning could have left the Trauma Hound disoriented and disabled the telemetry transceivers."

"What about the other Trauma Hound?" Rook asked.

"It scanned the immediate vicinity where the first hound was lost, but didn't locate anything. Then, it returned to its patrol perimeter."

Jordan returned, still holding his thermal mug. He climbed into the Razorback's driver seat. Taurus jumped into the passenger side.

Rook pulled himself onto the back. "Should I warm up the gun?" he asked, patting the pulse cannon mounted on the back of the razorback.

"If we need the gun, it'll warm-up in 6 hundredths of a second," Taurus told him. Jordan punched in the ignition sequence, and the twin turbines of the Razorback's engines flared to life.

"Secure your safety restraints," Rook said. "It's going to be a bumpy ride."

The Surface

The lights came up rather suddenly. Specialist Omega looked pleased with himself. "I knew they used magnetic resonance to condition the electrical flow," he said. He watched the power levels rise and hold steady.

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Morgan was pleased. "Excellent, now let's see if we can get these data systems on-line."

Clanging steps were heard as someone climbed the metal steps to the control platform. Specialist Honda and Specialist Ing, returned, their carrying packs were bulging.

"We have retrieved a few artifacts," Ing laid down his armloads of posters, books, and storage chips.

"Did you catalog the location of each object as you found it?" Morgan demanded.

"We followed the process exactly," Ing assured him. "We took tri-dimensional images of each area. We labeled and cataloged every artifact. There's still more down there, but we thought you should see these."

He spread and arranged some plastic sheets around the table, two and three dimensional image captures.

"One of the survivors of the attack appears to have been a meteorological scientist," he explained. "He had kept personal records of the planet's weather. These large posters are some of the images he captured, and there may be more in these storage devices."

The poster showed a city, reminiscent of the city depicted in the murals but clearly different. There was one huge tower in the center, surrounded by blocks of smaller

buildings. The sky above it was pink and black with stormclouds. "When I put this poster into motion, you see a time-lapse of the city over a single 33-hour planetary day," Ing explained.

The sky went into motion, boiling with energy and exploding in bolts of bright blue lightning. As the day wore on, the sky darkened to lavender, then to violet tinged with crimson. All day long, the storm was constant.

Ing continued. "Even before the Megasphere exploded, the natural state of this planet was near-constant electrical storms, ion blizzards... this may be the harshest environment we've yet seen humans successfully colonize."

Honda added, "In fact, the explosion of the megasphere may be the only reason it isn't storming on the planet right now."

"You're sure this planet was in a constant state of storm," Morgan persisted. "This could be just one storm-obsessed scientist."

"Have you noticed that in every poster, every drawing, every mural we find, the planet's sky is always storming?" Ing asked. "Did you notice in the town we came from, the streets are lined with lightning rods?"

Morgan saw his point. "Transmit these data to the best Planetologist on the ship and let her work them into simulations."

"Mrs. Morgan?" Ing asked.

"That's the one." Morgan smiled. "It might help take her mind off things."

The Surface

The Razorback roared through the scrub and gullies of the planet's landscape, as lightning flashed on the horizon and dust devils trailed along their course.

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They parked at the Trauma Hound's last recorded position, some five meters from the edge of a box canyon. Taurus whipped out her sidearm as soon as she left the vehicle. Following her lead, her two soldiers took theirs out as well. They moved cautiously to the edge and stared down. A thick gray fog covered the canyon floor, roiling like the cloudfront of a summer storm, flashes of lightning within. Taurus used her Spex to peer beneath the fog. "There," she said, pointing with her free hand toward a fog-clouded ridge down below.

"That's a steep climb," Johnny Rook sounded more than a little excited about it.

"Getting down there should be easy," Taurus told them. "It's getting back up that's going to be a bitch." She fired an anchor into the rocky ground and secured a rappelling line. "We lost COM link with the base, so, if you guys fall and break bones, we'll just have to shoot you."

Rook and Jordan secured their own lines and followed her. Taurus was right about the trip down. It wasn't too bad. The angle was steep, but footholds were plentiful, and the rope was solid enough for them to steady themselves with. They quickly reached the floor, which was more or less level, but layered with fallen gravel.

The remains of the Trauma Hound were scattered at the bottom of the ravine, its head several meters from its

tail. Taurus picked up the head and stared into its lifeless eye-units. "What the hell happened to you," she asked it.

"Did it fall over the edge?" Jordan asked.

"It would have survived that," Taurus told him. "And it sure as Hell wouldn't have scattered over the landscape like..." Her voice cracked a little. Had she actually felt some sentimental attachment to the device?

"I'm feeling kind of freaked out by this," said Rook.

"That is exactly the right thing to be feeling," said Taurus. She turned the head unit around. "Look at this," she said, fingering a large round hole at the back of the metallic cranium. "They cut into its head and removed its central processor."

"They?" Rook asked.

"It had to be a they," Taurus said firmly. "Or a very powerful it. But either way, they've got technology that can cut through our alloys, and they know how to find a central processor."

"Aurelians," Max Jordan said quietly, and cocked his weapon. He hated Aurelians.

"What do we do now?" Rook asked.

Taurus placed the head respectfully back on the ground. "I believe standard procedure is to report back to base."

"We're not going to do that, are we?" Jordan said.

"Good guess," she told him. She turned toward the glowing, electrical fog. "Whatever killed Rex is still out there We're gonna find out what it is."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pegasus – PC-1

Four projections surrounded Shayne American's bridge station, monitoring the hyperactive business going on in Flight Operations, Tactical, Communication, and Technical Cores. Rarely, even when under attack, had there been so much activity to monitor, and yet there was little she actually had to do. Even for her abnormally long attention span, it was taxing. And just as she was thinking, "Is there more to life than telling the commander about incoming transmissions?" the COM Panel signaled a new incoming transmission. "Prime Commander Keeler, there is an incoming transmission from *Lexington Keeler*. It's TyroCommander Lear."

"Mrunh?" Keeler growled raising his head from its resting position on the armrest of his command chair. He had tried to grab a nap after the All-Chiefs meeting, but found himself unable to sleep. Upon repotting to the bridge, however, he had become instantly drowsy.

"It's not a directed message to you, Commander," American went on. "It's a general message to the crew."

Alkema crossed the bridge to her, "Isolate the channel. Don't let her go shipwide."

American isolated the channel. Only she, Keeler, and Alkema and a few people on the bridge who happened to be in range saw the message.

"Crew of *Pegasus*," Lear began. She was flanked by Churchill and Sukhoi... as though to mock Keeler's effort

to remove her. "Thanks to your efforts, your heroic, incredible efforts, we have managed to salvage a Pathfinder Ship that would have been lost. Nearly two-thirds of the energy distribution nodes in the ship's primary functional areas have been restored. Hull integrity is nearly 88% and rising. Nearly half the maneuvering thrusters have been restored, and we will soon have control over them through the ship's primary Braincore.

"All of you deserve to be proud of what has been accomplished. But you also deserve the right to question whether the lives lost in this effort could have been preserved if proper tactical protocols had been followed. Why were Aves sent into an unsecured tactical situation? Was there another way to save the *Lexington Keeler* without the reckless detonation of a megaton-warhead in a planetary atmosphere? These actions, as well as others, have led to at least forty casualties among our crew. We have lost more people on this mission than combined on our previous missions, and the command of *Pegasus* owes you an explanation."

"What the Hell?" Alkema grumbled.

"Sssssh!" Commander Keeler hissed. "She might be talking about me."

Lear continued. "I know it's a breach of command protocol to even posit such a question directly to the crew. But recent events have forced me to break with the customary chain-of-command. We were told that the risks we took were necessary, because there would be survivors in need of rescue. But we found no survivors on-board

Keeler. A relatively simple bio-scan would have demonstrated that this ship was lifeless. Was such a scan made, before brave people were sent to untimely deaths?"

"It was," Alkema almost shouted back at her. "We didn't read life signs, but we couldn't read much of anything through the atmospheric interference."

Lear continued. "You also deserve the right to question the direction our mission is taking us. *Pegasus's* mission was to find and unite the lost worlds of the Ancient Commonwealth. Since we began this voyage, we learned that grave threats exist here, in our own quadrant. Our priorities have shifted, from exploration to seeking allies who can assist us in our battle against Aurelia, a ruthless enemy that threatens all humanity... including our beloved homeworlds of Republic and Sapphire?"

Lear smiled, a creepy thing in itself. "I'd just like to start a conversation about whether it's wise to continue to pursue this elusive dream of Earth, when our own homeworlds are threatened with Aurelian domination. There is no dishonor in questioning whether *Pegasus* enjoys the level of command competence worthy of her remarkable crew."

Keeler's face was red, but his fury was muted. "What the hell does she think she's doing?"

"I think it's called inciting mutiny," Alkema answered. "Admittedly, this approach lacks TyroCommander Lear's usual inept deviousness."

"Even if she succeeded, she wouldn't be in command," Keeler pointed out.

"Maybe, she is thinking that if she's going down, you're going down with her," Alkema suggested.

They both realized they were looking at American, trying to read a reaction from her that they could extrapolate to the rest of the crew. "Don't ask me," American told them. "This is between you and Lear. I just monitor inter-ship communications and integrate activities among different Sectors and Cores."

With great effort, Keeler put himself back on task. "Mr. Alkema, what's our overall status? Are we in danger of attack presently? Have we tracked that alien ship?"

"No sign of alien attack ships, and long range scans have detected no sign of the one that flew up from the surface," Alkema reported. "There's a possibility that it is leaving the system. We have restasked tactical patrols to retrace its course."

Keeler nodded. "What about the status of our other critical operations?"

American answered him. "Ground teams have restored power to the redoubt and have recovered artifacts. Their tactical situation is secure at the present time. Repair teams on *Keeler*..."

The Prime Commander held up his hand. "Summarize it for me. Would this be a good time for me to return to my quarters, drink, take a shower, and maybe eat a little something?"

"Honestly, Captain, I think we should both do that," Alkema suggested.

Keeler stood from his chair, grabbing his command jacket and throwing it over his shoulder. "I'm outta here."

Alkema tapped the COM Link. "Lieutenant Navigator Change, Please Report to Primary Command."

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Before he left, Alkema looked over the captured message file from TyroCommander Lear. Neatly captured. A little lozenge-shaped icon on his command board, labeled Incoming 52-7027. He transferred it to his private file, and saved it for private access. *The only people who will ever see that will be Goneril Lear's tribunal*, he thought.

Time and events would prove him wrong.

Lexington Keeler – Secondary Command

"Transmission off," Churchill reported.

Lear tried to stand up and was about to acknowledge him, when suddenly she found the Secondary Command Center going hazy and spinning out of focus around her. The next thing she knew, she was in the arms of Sukhoi. She didn't understand what he was saying at first.

"Are you okay... TyroCommander?"

"Dizzy spell," she answered him. "Fatigue. I should have to push myself this hard."

"You ought to lie down," Sukhoi suggested.

"I will be fine," Lear insisted. She pulled herself back into her command chair. "Commander Keeler's next move may well be forceful. I suggest that we..."

Before she could finish, the access hatch to the Braincore opened. Technician Scout climbed into the

Secondary Command Center. Fangboner and the other technicians climbed up the ladder behind her. "I am pleased to report the Primary Braincore is restored, connected, and ready to be brought on-line."

Lear beamed. "Excellent."

"Za, and it only took twenty-six hours of uninterrupted labor," Scout yawned. "As soon as I've talked you through the re-initialization sequence, I'm going to find some dark, warm corner of this ship and experience unconsciousness."

"I think I can handle the re-initialization sequence," Lear told her. "You may take your much-deserved rest."

"I think I better stay around until the initialization is complete. As banged up as everything is around here, we might have unexpected problems." She looked toward Churchill and Sukhoi. "Who are those guys?"

"Security," Lear answered.

"We're sweeping the ship in case any Aurelians made it on-board during the battle." Churchill went on. "When we heard about the sabotage to the Braincore, Commander Keeler thought it would be best if we investigated. Did you note anything unusual when you were around the Braincore?"

When Scout answered 'Neg,' Churchill asked. "What kind of weapon was used to sever the Braincore's command links?"

Scout answered. "Standard laser beam cutting tool."

Churchill's brow crunched over his nose ever so slightly.

"If you ask me," Scout continued. "It was a member of the crew."

Lear held her thumb against the command input pad. "Initialize Primary Braincore."

On the command arm, a small green screen illuminated.

Input Authorization Required.

"Technician Scout," Lear said. "It's requesting a command input authorization."

Scout sighed. "I was afraid of that. I think it should be just a matter of inputting one of the default Pathfinder codes. Try 1015-5224-1015-4930."

Lear tried the code. This time, a red double-X appeared. "It's not accepting that code."

Now, Scout was surprised. "Really? That was a default code. You can alter them, but it's not all that easy. Try 1029-9639-1006-9803."

Lear tried the new code. The red double-X remained.

"0826-4106-0825-3844" Scout suggested.

Lear input the code.

Authorization Failure. System Lockout Engaged.

"It says a system lockout has been engaged."

Scout pulled out her datapad and entered several sequences. "You can rule out the Aurelians. If the default codes were erased, it was almost definitely the crew."

"Why would the crew sabotage the Braincore?" Sukhoi asked.

"I don't know. That's a job for a Watchman." Scout told them. "As for the system lockout, I'm good with the mechanical stuff, but you're going to need an ace cyberneticist to get you into the system now."

"It would take hours to get someone down here," Lear said. "I need that Braincore on-line."

Scout thought for a minute. "We could try going into the Braincore and initializing it directly... it might work. I would just have to bypass the command-ports."

"I suppose this means we won't be getting any rest then?" Fangboner said.

Scout re-opened the Braincore Access Hatch. "Take a break, Fangboner. I can handle this by myself. It's just a matter of swapping some photon circuitry."

"I'll go with you," Lear said, standing a little unsteadily from her command chair. Churchill and Sukhoi moved to help her.

Pegasus – Keeler's Quarters

Commander Keeler's Quarters looked more like the summer home of an eccentric professor than the inside of a spaceship, mainly because of the big, stone fireplace and the collection of heavy, expensive furniture.

There was also the weird black casket in the hidden alcove Keeler was currently pounding on the lid of. "Okay, Old Man, I need you to describe the recipe of a drink that has not been drunk in four thousand years."

Lexington Keeler's ghostly form appeared above the casket. "Hmm, I did once hear of something called a Lawn Gileland Ice-T."

"Do you have the recipe?"

"Vodka, rum, tequila, gin, Rigelian Blue liqueur, sweet and sour mix, and Jizz citrusoid carbonated beverage."

"That's basically a Harpoon," Keeler told him. "Except you would use Borealan Yakbeast urine instead of vodka."

He took a swig. Then, gulped the rest.

"How do you like it?" asked the dead man.

"It's like there's a party in my mouth and everybody's throwing up," Commander Keeler told him, and began looking for his bottle of yakbeast urine. "Also, where's my damned cat?"

"Cat business," Dead Keeler told him. "No concern of yours."

Failing to find the urine, Commander Keeler grabbed a bottle of something green, flopped himself down on the largest, plushiest sofa he owned and pulled a quilt around himself. "Before this knocks me out, what have you got to tell me about this situation?"

The Dead Guy answered, "The only way you could have screwed this up worse is if you pissed on the Primary Fusion core and blew up the ship."

Commander Keeler considered this. "Well, there is still time for that."

"Let's start from the top," Dead Keeler said. "Your combat against the enemy has been defensive and tentative. You let them smack you around like a small child in a discount retail outlet, to use a colorful ancient metaphor. I would have chased that big alien ship down and blew it up real good, for starters. Also, rescuing the *Keeler*, overall, was a good choice. I won't give you grief on that. But as for TyroCommander Lear, if any second officer had pulled that crap on me, I would have smacked them into the middle of the next space-week."

"Oh, trust me, she will feel my wrath." Live Keeler took a long hard swig at this beverage. "I'm going to have her dragged back to this ship in full restraints, on a dolly, with a gag in her mouth. And when we get to Chapultepec, she's off my ship, permanently, along with her family and anyone else who sided with her."

Dead Keeler faded slightly, and looked dour. "I had assumed, there would be some slapping around?"

"I'm not a violent man," Live Keeler countered. "I'm a petty, arrogant, and... what's the word that means when people make an ass of you, you feel especially obligated to destroy and humiliate them?"

"Vengeful?"

"Vengeful, exactly," Live Keeler finished off his drink and poured another. "I don't know exactly how I am going to humiliate and destroy Goneril 'Mutinous-Backstabbing-Bitch' Lear, but I will. Oh, I will."

Pegasus – Alkema Family Quarters

David Alkema and his wife, Pieta, lived on the top level of a junior officer's bloc. Pieta had decorated with a sumptuousness that ordinary Sapphireans or Republickers would have considered garish. Tapestries from Independence and Aurora hung on the walls. A thick white carpet specked with gray and blue covered the floor.

"My theory is, Lear doesn't have anything to lose, so she's going to try and destroy the captain," Alkema summed up, recounting his duty period. Pieta had gradually become a better at pretending to listen to him when he related a particularly stressful day. He lay on a couch with his head on her stomach, knowing that his child was incubating inside.

"When I was on Boadicea," Pieta told him. "My mother had similar battles in the Outer Circle. One advocate would suggest building a lavish habitation for teachers in her city. Another advocate would point out that current habitations were adequate and the construction of new facilities would cost a large amount of money. The first advocate would then accuse the second of not caring about teachers. Then, all the teachers would complain, and threaten to have the second advocate removed. And the second advocate would then have to give in. But the teachers would never forgive her, and they would vote her out at the next election."

Alkema didn't see the connection, and at one time he would have told her so, but he knew better.

Pieta sighed, impatiently, "You see, the teachers never really wanted the bigger habitat until the politicians told them they could have it. Lear's doing the same thing. She's making the crew want something they didn't know they wanted until she brought it up."

Alkema was not quite sure that was what Lear was doing, but he appreciated Pieta making the effort. Before he could change the subject, the Visitor Alarm played some notes from an Auroran pop song that Pieta had been fond of, telling them that someone was at the door. They argued briefly over who should answer it. Alkema lost that argument, as usual. He rose from the big, pillowy couch and walked, barefoot to the hatch. When it slid open, Sam Jordan stood there.

Sam was Max Jordan's younger brother, the more shy and bookish of the two; a thin, freckled boy who probably would have worn wire-rimmed spectacles had he been born a few thousand years earlier. Alkema extended a warm greeting. "What's up, Sam?"

"My mom is gone," Sam said sadly. "May I stay with you?"

"Sure," Alkema told him, suppressing an urge to scruff his ginger hair. "You can stay in the extra bedroom I use when your sister is angry with me."

"Thank you," he said. "I'll go back for the rest of my stuff in the morning."

Alkema was taken aback by this. "You don't think your mom's coming back?"

"She isn't," Sam said. "Her ship probably was destroyed by the alien ship."

"Who told you that?" Alkema asked, taking in shock himself. He had just sort of assumed that TyroCommander Redfire... and by extension, Flight Commandant Jordan ... would return, just because they always had before. Besides which, there had been so much else going on.

"No one, I have been following the Tactical Net." Sam paused. "You know, someone on the ship should have explained this to me. I *am* just a kid."

Lexington Keeler - SC-2

The hatch to SC-2 slid open. With power restored to the deck, it didn't have to be pried, like before. Synch Christmas entered first, Muffy followed him, sashaying sultrily into the empty command center. Driver and Trajan Lear entered last, with no discernible sashaying.

"Hey, Dead Man!" said Move-O-Bot with enthusiasm. "So, you and turbo-slut both survived the deep freeze. Congratulations."

"You!" Christmas snarled.

Move-O-Bot chuckled. "That's right I survived."

Christmas grunted. "At least I once had a soul."

"A talking mechanoid?" Driver said.

Christmas growled. "Indeed. A side-effect of our contact with the Electroids. Since they did not distinguish between human and artificial life, they made most of the robots and androids on our ship quasi-sapient."

"Oh," said Driver.

"Thus, they forced us to confront the ethical dilemma our worlds had avoided by forbidding the construction of sentient machines," Christmas concluded.

"How did you resolve that dilemma?" Trajan Lear asked.

"We deactivated most of the robots," Christmas said. "A few escaped and fled the ship. Move-O-Bot survived by endearing himself to our Chief Engineer."

"Paramus Elf-Aquitaine," Move-O-Bot said. "The Allbeing rest his filthy soul."

"Move-O-Bot, have they attempted to reactivate the Braincore," Christmas wanted to know.

"They tried, they failed. You monkey-wrenched it good, Dead Man."

"Where are they now?" Christmas asked.

"In the Brain Pit, attempting a direct re-initialization. Also, the head witch-in-charge is plotting mutiny against the commander of your ship," Move-O-Bot told Driver and Lear.

"Oh, my mom is here," Trajan sighed. "What exactly is she proposing to do?"

"That's not important right now," Christmas snapped. He was already opening the hatch. "How many of them are there, Move-O-Bot?"

"Let's see... there's the old witch, her two goons, the hot babe with the toolkit, and the beanpole."

"Goons?" Driver asked.

“Two goons... she called them Centurions. They’re conspiring to help her overthrow the commander of the other ship.”

Muffy caressed her inner thigh. “Christmas will deal with the commander. I, of course, will seduce the goons.”

Christmas opened the hatch leading down to the Braincore. “I hope we have enough firepower to kill it quickly. If Lex resists, one or all of us will probably die, but not me, I am ... ”

“... already dead,” Christmas, Matthew Driver, and Trajan Lear completed in unison.

And then, they were in the tunnel.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Surface

Taurus, Rook, and Jordan hiked across the stony floor of the canyon, through a sparkling white mist that crackled with static ion charge, moving toward... they could not exactly see what. Whatever had torn apart the Trauma Hound and stolen its brain was hiding in the mist-shrouded bottom of the canyon.

"Between the canyon walls and the EM interference, I can't get any kind of link back to the base," Taurus told them. "Or, *Pegasus*."

Rook peeled back his helmet and mopped a light sheen of sweat from his brow. He peeled back his tactical goggles. The mist had a strange, crystalline quality that seemed to amplify the ambient light in the canyon. Without the lens filters, the effect was like being caught in the middle of a blizzard and sun-blinded at the same time; surprisingly warm though, and humid like a stormy summer day.

"Also, our suit sensors are blind beyond a radius of four meters," Rook told them, although they could plainly see that in their own Spex. "It was eight when we entered the canyon, and it's been getting worse."

"Stay sharp!" Taurus ordered. "I refuse to be ambushed by Aurelians, or whatever."

"The last time they captured someone, they transplanted an Aurelian brain into his body," Rook said, re-attaching his face mask. "I don't think I'd like that."

"They don't do that to all prisoners," said Max Jordan. "Sometimes, they just torture and kill them, or lobotomize them for use as slave labor."

There was a pause. Footsteps crunched on the canyon floor.

"You know what I like?" Rook said. "That spicy orange sauce we got from Independence; great on sandwiches, hot wedgies, as a dip for when friends drop by, or just for anytime."

Then, suddenly, the sensors in their tactical suits failed entirely. All the little hints and depictions in their Spex-lenses turned black and they were quite completely blind. "We have to turn back," Taurus said.

"Good plan," Rook agreed. He disconnected the mask and wiped some sweat and spit that had accumulated around the rim.

While he was doing that, Max Jordan walked smack into a black, metal strut that was protruding from the ground. "Ow! Intercourse! Excrement! Place of eternal damnation! More Intercourse.⁶"

Then, Rook said, "I think Jordan just found something."

They could not see the structure clearly in the electric fog. They got an impression of girders and metal, like the arm of a crane stretching into the sky. Taurus alone had

⁶ Or, words to that effect.

seen something like it before, on the top of an ArcoTower on the planet Meridian.

“Increase your suit’s shield strength to maximum,” Taurus ordered. “These towers are pumping out massive EM radiation, camouflaging every energy signature in this valley.”

Examining the structure, they moved closer, alert for life signs. At the base of the tower was a shelter, constructed of metal girders and thick, transparent sheets of polymer. There was a sliding door, which was locked down.

“May I?” Rook asked. He leveled his pulse weapon at the lock and unleashed a bolt of energy. The plasma charge hit the lock, but unleashed massive feedback into the tower’s energy field, which stung the energy shields of their suits.

“Ouch,” was the tri-lateral consensus.

“You should have waited for me to deny you permission to do that,” Taurus said.

Max Jordan pulled the door open, using the tactical suit’s strength enhancing capability. Inside the shelter was a basic control set up, a kind of table with a console in the center of it. When Taurus touched the screen, it lit up with a brownish-gold light. A representation of the tower appeared on the right side of the screen, text rose up on the screen to the left of the tower icon. At least, it could be assumed to be text. It was all scratches and slashes, arranged in random chunks rather than orderly lines.

"That looks nothing like the text in the bunker," Taurus said out loud.

"It's not Aurelian either," Max Jordan put in, sounding a little disappointed.

"Then, it's alien," Rook said. "Kumba yah!"

Taurus scowled at the screen. There was no keyboard, and no obvious way to make inputs. She began looking for a Processing Unit, something they could take back to the ship for additional study. "Jordan, give me a cutter."

Max Jordan detached the laser cutter from his toolpack and handed it to Taurus. She checked its beam, and then began to cut into the display unit

"What are you doing?" Rook asked.

"Bringing back something for Technical Core to chew on," Taurus finished cutting and pulled the display loose from the console and began poking inside for a processing core. "I don't think its likely that this is the only tower in the canyon. If this canyon is filled with towers like this, their energy output might explain why we haven't been able to scan anything."

"What are they trying to hide?" Johnny Rook asked.

Taurus stuffed the display in her pack. "It's a big canyon."

"A base maybe?" Rook suggested.

Taurus thought about this, and then nervously fingered her weapon. "If there is a base, then the invaders... the aliens who took this planet, they didn't come to settle it. That's why we haven't found any new

settlements. That's why they wiped out the human population and built a base."

"How could you know that?" Jordan demanded.

"I'm just putting all the clues together," She cocked her gun. "It would explain the constant attacks on *Pegasus*; we violated a military zone."

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Rook looked upward. "If we could take the electromagnetic distortion down, *Pegasus* could detect any alien base with her sensors."

"We don't have the firepower," Taurus regretted to inform him. "And there's probably a hundred more towers..."

Max Jordan looked out through the portal, into the fog. "What if TyroCommander Redfire is in that base somewhere? If the aliens captured him and ... they could have taken them there."

Taurus put a hand on his shoulder. "If we're going to take a closer look, we're gonna need a lot more warfighters, and a lot more weapons. Let's get back to the Redoubt and get reinforcements from *Pegasus*."

Deep Space

Aves *Ginger* was following the course of the ship that had passed *Pegasus* after rising from the planet. It was flanked by four silvery accipiters, two from its own wingtips, and two more flying close escort.

Its course took *Ginger* through a planetary debris field. The system's innermost planet had been destroyed

millions of years earlier, and its remains were being sucked into the sun's gravitational field. Usually, such debris fields were rocky, widely dispersed asteroids. But some combination of solar flares and the composition of the destructed world had produced a close-packed field of polished spheres. Each of the five ships of the flight was reflected perfectly in thousands of round black mirrors, a mind-bending vista no human eyes would ever behold.

Inside *Ginger's* command deck, Flight Lieutenant Hadrian Columbia --- a sandy haired man with a face that looked like a great big jaw that a face had been attached to as an afterthought from the City of Clear Judgment on Republic --- checked the telemetry connection with *Pegasus* and found it strong.

In the second seat, Flight Lieutenant Garth Atreides checked the telemetry of the other Aves currently on Deep System Patrol. "Flight Lieutenant, we are now further from *Pegasus* than any other patrol ship."

"Ah, good, doesn't that make you feel secure?" Columbia said dryly.

Atreides double-checked the tactical readout on the Accipiters. "If we're attacked, we can just hope the Accipiters keep them distracted enough for us to make our escape. I'm going to update their tactical protocols."

Columbia regarded his co-aviator. Atreides was a small, dark man from Republic's City of Reliance. In Columbia's view, Atreides was a bit too comfortable among the Sapphireans and their undisciplined ways, but

nevertheless, he trusted his co-pilot more than any other man aboard *Pegasus*. And felt secure offering his opinions.

"TyroCommander Lear is right," Columbia said.

"There is no point in salvaging the other pathfinder ship at this point. It's a total wreck. It will never be capable of interstellar flight again. I think Commander Keeler realizes it, but can't bring himself to appear weak in front of her."

"I think Keeler doesn't want our Hyperspace Navigation technologies to fall into Aurelian hands," Atreides argued. "If the Aurelians figure out FTL, it's over for us."

"So, blow up Keeler with a Nemesis warhead and be done with it," Columbia said. "All of the crew and equipment we put into that ship is a net loss to *Pegasus*."

Atreides countered. "We don't even know what happened to the crew. Don't you want to know?"

"It doesn't matter, they're gone, there's nothing we can do about that,'" Columbia persisted. "Perhaps I'm concerned because I don't want to lose my wife or my daughter to one of Commander Keeler's 'miscalculations.'"

Columbia paused for a moment, then he asked, "Suppose you had to choose between Lear and Keeler to command the mission. Who would you choose?"

"Why, do you think that's something that ..." He was interrupted by a subtle request for attention from his tactical display. "I'm reading something at extreme sensor range."

"What is it?" Columbia asked.

Atreides touched some controls. "It's the maximum effective range of our sensors, but that's not important right now."

"I'll thank you not to use Sapphirean expressions on my command deck," Columbia snapped.

"Right, I mean, affirmative. I am re-processing the sensor inputs. It looked like our long range scans picked up some kind of energy signature that it matched with the configuration of the alien ship."

"Location?"

"The initial contact came from a source very close into the sun."

"How close to the sun?"

"Approximately as close as you can get to the sun without being actually in the sun," Atreides answered. "I've swept the area with sensors again, but couldn't pick it up. Radiation levels are extreme in that area."

Columbia was quiet. He didn't want to move closer to the sun, farther from *Pegasus*. But he knew he had to. "You are certain you detected something."

Atreides checked the sensor data again. "We really ought to be sure... either way. We'll need a closer sensor sweep to cut through the solar interference."

Columbia knew. "Lay in a course to those coordinates. Task an accipiter to make a close-in sensors sweep."

One of the four Accipiters broke formation and flew out ahead of the ship, toward the sun.

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

Queequeg surveyed his handiwork. “Good enough,” he said. “A larger capacitor for the weapon-systems would have been great, but this will have to do. Hand me that spanner.”

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Hunter picked up the spanner. It felt as heavy as a neutron star and the effort made him nearly black out.

“Are you okay?” Queequeg asked, flicking his tail.

“Kitty-cat,” Hunter said. “I’m not getting better, I’m getting worse. I can feel my immune system fighting this disease, but I can’t know for sure if it’s going to work.”

“Oh, stop crying like a little human girl,” Queequeg told him. “I told you, as soon as I get rid of the rats, clean myself up, eat a little something, and get in a nap or two... I’m taking you straight to a hospital.”

Hunter retrieved a healing pack from the medical kit. This would be the fourth time he had injected himself. He placed the pack on his forearm, and closed his eyes as the contents were absorbed. “I think it may be too late. And if you take me to a hospital, there’s every chance that the plague could spread to the crew.”

“I don’t want you to die,” Queequeg told him.

“You don’t?”

“I prefer to have you alive and in my debt.”

Hunter grimaced and began to cough spasmodically. When he removed his hand from around his mouth, it was smattered with blood and mucous.

"I don't even think you'll have that option, Kitty-Cat. The only way to be safe now is for me to get off this ship... before I expose the crew."

"Oh, and how does that work?" Queequeg asked.
 "How am I supposed to get you..."

"There are emergency escape pods located eight sections forward of here," Hunter explained. "If I can get to them..."

"PC-1 would detect the launch of an escape pod."

"That's where those clever cat cyber skills of yours come in," Hunter said. He gestured at the dismembered and rebuilt X-Term-O-Bot. "If you can do that, you can get me off this ship, undetected."

"Where would you go?"

Hunter tried to answer, but lost it in a coughing fit; something about a habitable planet below and taking his chances.

"You'll never make it," Queequeg protested.

Hunter removed another healing pack and slapped it on his forearm.

"That could kill you," Queequeg said.

"At this point, my best chance is a massive overdose of nutrients, serum and nano-knitters," Hunter said. "It will keep me alive while I set the escape pod up for non-cryogenic stasis – I won't freeze, but I'll be in kind of a coma, which will allow the repairs to take place on my body."

A pause while he looked at the angry cat.

"It's my only chance, Kitty-Cat. If it doesn't work, we have to protect the crew."

Queequeg scowled. "All right. Can you make it to the escape pod on your own, or do I have to help with that, too?"

The Surface

Taurus, Rook, and Max Jordan let their inertial navigation units lead them back to where they had left the Razorback, moving at a near run across the canyon bottom, all with a peculiar sense that something was following them.

When they got to the canyon wall, their progress slowed as they had to climb it with the ropes, and the assistance of hooks, claws, and pitons that deployed from the gloves and the boots of their tactical gear. It was a matter of several minutes, and one setback when Rook slipped, to get back to the top.

The electrical storm and fog that filled the canyon seemed to follow them out, rising over the canyon and stacking into flashing banks of stormclouds. Taurus had feared that they might find the Razorback torn apart like the Trauma Hound, but it stood waiting for them, not even a scratch on its silver-blue surface.

"Let's go," Taurus said.

Rook paused at the edge of the canyon. "Wait a second," he said. "I want to try something. Stand back while I whip this out."

He whipped a mini-rocket launcher from his pack and braced it against his shoulder. He fired a threesome of missiles over the canyon. They split into three separate flights. One straight, two angling off, trailing white contrails.

"What was that for?" Max Jordan asked.

Taurus already knew, "Reconnaissance rockets."

Taurus reviewed the recon rocket's telemetry and made some calculations. "The storm front is moving toward the Redoubt. We won't be able to warn them until we get close. If these creatures intend to attack, they'll move with it to keep their cover until they can strike. And I am thinking they intend to strike."

Jordan pressed the accelerator all the way forward. "If they get to our team before we do, they'll tear them apart like that Trauma Hound."

Suddenly, something hit Rook's suit-shield and spanged off at an oblique angle. Before he could say 'WTF,' tens of more shots hit his suit, lighting it up, yellow-white light rippling outward from the impact point.

"Crap on a cracker," said Lieutenant Taurus. She grabbed Johnny Rook on the shoulder, and pulled him off the edge of the cliff. Hyper-accelerated metal projectiles zipped through the air around them.

"They're shooting at us," Rook exclaimed.

"Do you think?" Max Jordan called out. He ran to the edge, wielding the biggest gun from the Razorback's rack. He fired into the valley while his suit lit up with impacts.

Rook linked his Spex with the imagery transmitted from the reconnaissance rockets. The infrared scanning range was least affected by the electromagnetic interference. It showed columns of shapes moving through the valley at a frighteningly fast speed.

"Max," Rook said as calmly as possible. "We have to get ourselves out of here... right now!"

Max Jordan didn't seem to hear him as he unloaded round after round into the fog, screaming, "You want some of this, you alien bastards! I got plenty more!"

"Warfighter, you're firing blind!" Taurus yelled at him.

"Max, we have to go," Rook called, trying to be calm.

With a snap, crackle, and pop, Max Jordan's suit-shield failed. A projectile spanged off his helmet. "Ow! Excrement!" He withdrew from the edge of the canyon, and the climbed on board the razorback with the other two.

"Can we get a message to the base?" Rook asked, as Jordan fired up the ignition.

The clouds above answered with a conveniently-timed electro-static discharge. Taurus used it to illustrate the point. "Electrically-charged storm clouds, just enough interference to cut us off from the base."

"Then, let's get out of here," Jordan put the Razorback into reverse, and pulled away from the canyon, spitting dirt from its tires.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Way Out In Deep Dark Space

In the midst of the debris field, almost at the exact same spot where *Pegasus* had emerged 67 hours earlier (give or take some stellar drift), a glowing, egg-shaped bubble of blue and purple light appeared. Little bits of debris that had previously occupied the space where the bubble appeared ceased to exist.

The energy bubble lasted no longer than a few tiny units of Planck time⁷ before it cut and run back into subspace, leaving behind a gleaming silver spaceship in the shape of half an egg.

Pegasus – Keeler’s Quarters

Keeler’s attempt to pass out and sleep was interrupted by a call from Primary Command. He lifted his face up from the couch cushions. The imprint from the waffled design of his Panrovian High Brandy bottle marked his cheek. “Mrrut Mrrfit, Lirftrrftt Crrff?”

“Excuse me, sir?” said Lieutenant Navigator Change, whose face had appeared in the oblong screen of the nearest COM Link.

Prime Commander Keeler spit out the foreign matter that had somehow lodged in his mouth. It proved to be the wrapper of a chocolate snack, with the chocolate part still

⁷ The shortest unit of time that can exist.

inside. This provided some indication of how much he had been drinking.

"What is it, Lieutenant Change?" he repeated.

"Sir, one of the small spaceships we found at the Chapultepec StarLock has appeared at the edge of the system near our entry point. It's on an intercept course and broadcasting an encrypted message."

"Thanks. Transmit the message to my quarters."

"I will, sir."

Keeler sat up --- halfway at least --- and stared at the COM Link. Senseless orange sigils danced across the display screen. Across the top, a legend appeared:

Please input decryption code.

"Mother of The Allbeing," Keeler muttered.

"Lieutenant Alkema..." he tried to think of what the command was. "Me want talkee Lieutenant Alkema," he told the computer.

A moment later, Alkema appeared on the screen. His hair was wet, and he appeared to be out of uniform.

"Alkema, here," he said.

"Do you have my decryption codes?" Keeler asked.

"Of course."

"Well, then, decrypt the message I'm sending you and transmit to my quarters... and if it's really long, just give me the gist of it."

"You bet, captain."

"You go away now," he told the image on the computer. The image went away. "Did I fall asleep or did I pass out drunk?" Keeler asked.

The ghost of his ancestor shimmered before him. "A little from Column 1 and a lot from Column 2."

Live Keeler nodded. "I have to throw up now." He dragged himself to his hygiene pod, and did exactly that thing.

Dead Keeler wavered, vanished, then re-projected himself into the hygiene pod. He hovered over his descendant as the commander emptied his guts into the bowl of the euphemism. "Still drunk?"

"Worse," Live Keeler moaned.

"Hung over?" Dead Keeler persisted.

"Worse."

"Worse than hungover?"

"Oh, yeah." Commander Keeler rolled over onto his back and moaned, "I think Lear might be right."

Dead Keeler stared at him, his dead eyes judging him.

Live Keeler wiped off his mouth and elaborated. "When we left the Sapphire system, this was supposed to be a peaceful mission of exploration. Find a lost colony, collect data, move on to the next colony. For that type of mission, my background in Colonial History, and my brilliant ability to run an organization full of eccentric freaks made me eminently well-qualified."

He paused to see if he had had the foresight to bring a bottle of Panrovian High brandy into the hygiene pod, and

was delighted to see that he had. He pulled off the stopper. "We didn't have a clue about the Aurelians, or the Tarmigans, or whoever these new bastards are." He waved drunkenly in the direction of the engineering deck, but it was clear he meant to gesture toward the alien ships.

He swigged the brandy. "Like it or not, this is a military mission now. And I don't know if I'm the right guy to lead it."

"Times like this, I wish I could download my consciousness into an android, just so I could slap you," his Dead Ancestor snarled at him. "Of course, there's no android neural matrix that could accommodate my massive consciousness, my centuries of insights, and the locations of all those space-drifters I buried."

"What?"

"Maybe, I could just have that dumb cat program an android to smack you upside the head for me. I remember once when some women stole my first officer's brain and rigged him up with a remote control. We used to make him bring us booze and snacks during ship's poker games. He was a hoot."

"Didn't you try to recover his brain?" Live Keeler asked, not really bothered this time that he had gotten sucked into another one of the old man's stories.

"Nah, we thought it would be best to keep him as he was. You had to know him, but it really was best. Besides, the women seduced us. The point is, you can't predict what's going to happen. Some days you encounter overly evolved meta-humanoids bent on galactic conquest, or

other days some child-like Amazon women steal your first officer's brain to run their utopian society. The galaxy is a rich pageant like that, but lying around getting drunk and wallowing in self-pity doesn't change anything. Hence, my desire to slap you around with android claws."

"Androids don't have claws."

"Oh, mine would," Dead Keeler said reassuringly. "You can bet your ass mine would. Now, are you ready to stop whining and take back your command."

Live Keeler took another drink. "I'll meet you halfway," he said pulling himself up to sink level. "I'll take back my command, but whining is still my prerogative. Change!" he shouted.

When nothing happened, he remembered there was no COM Link in his hygiene pod. He also remembered his acting first officer had a rather ambiguous surname. He stumbled back out into his main quarters. "Keeler to Bridge, PC-1... whatever."

"Lieutenant Navigator Change here."

"Is Ex-Commander Lear on her way back this ship... ideally in handcuffs and leg irons."

"Negative, commander."

"I want her off *Keeler*," he said. "I don't care how you do it. In fact, you figure it out. Just bring her back here."

He closed the COM Link and turned to his ancestor's ghost. "You know, that's not a bad idea... that whole android body thing. Lear and I could download ourselves

and fight to the death. That would be an interesting way to settle this.”

“Except that she would kick your ass,” said the Dead Man.

Lexington Keeler – The Braincore

Goneril Lear, at that moment, was in *Lexington Keeler’s* Primary Braincore, or, at least, one of the main access points looking down on the Braincore, flanked by Sukhoi and Churchill. The Braincore itself was a thick, disc-shaped device 30 meters in diameter and three meters tall, with a pattern of excitingly ribbed metal extending down the sides. Thick columns of cables ran from the center above and below, the nervous system of the Pathfinder Ship, extending into every system and every section.

Technician Scout was on a catwalk that extended to the control consoles in the center of the drive, at the point where the cables connected to the Braincore. She touched the input pad and began to key in the re-initialization sequence. Suddenly, a pulson bolt of charged plasma slammed into the monitor and fried it out. Scout, not the excitable type, turned around to see who was shooting at her.

In the dark shadows of the catwalk she saw three shadowy forms, and a fourth form that was half in shadow, and half glittering with tiny lights like a Christmas tree. He was pointing the pulse weapon at her. “Move away from the input screen,” he ordered.

“Who the Hell are you?” Scout asked.

Sukhoi and Churchill drew their own pulse weapons and pointed them at the other four. Matthew Driver and Trajan Lear drew theirs.

"Identify yourselves!" Churchill ordered.

"Move away from the input screen," Christmas repeated. "Now!"

"I'll shoot," Churchill said. "Identify yourselves."

"I don't care. I am already dead," Christmas informed him.

Driver shouted out. "This is Flight Captain Matthew Driver of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*."

Silence.

"Is Trajan with you?" Goneril Lear called out.

"I'm right here, mother," Trajan called out. And he alone had the presence of mind to activate an auxiliary lighting panel, and suddenly they were all illuminated.

"Trajan!" Goneril Lear called out with as much emotion as anyone had ever heard from her.

Trajan stepped into the light where he could get clearer view of her. "Damn it Mom, you look like Hell. And, I'm speaking as someone who has actually seen Hell."

"Chronos universe," Driver muttered.

"I am fine," Goneril Lear insisted.

"You are not fine," Trajan yelled back at her. "I'm guessing you have a minor skull fracture, and probably some bleeding in the brain. If we don't get you to a medical technician, you'll be dead in an hour, two at the most."

"I... am not feeling well," Goneril Lear conceded. "But, first, we must reactivate the Braincore."

"Neg," said Christmas. "The Braincore is dangerous. It nearly destroyed the ship. I will not allow you to reactivate it."

"The Braincore is essential. If we don't activate it, we lose the ship," Goneril Lear objected.

"It's too late," Scout told them. "The initialization is 70% complete."

Pegasus – Commander Keeler's Quarters

Prime Commander Keeler straightened the front of his uniform jacket. "Do I look sober enough to return to the Bridge?" he asked his ancestor.

"You have never looked that sober," Dead Keeler told him.

Keeler grunted in reply as the edge of the COM Link turned into the blue outline signaling Incoming Message, then activated. It was Change. "Commander Keeler, report to Primary Command. All stations upgrade to Battle Situation 2."

"I am en route," Keeler told her. He turned to the dead man. "At least the timing is good for once." He turned back to the COM Link. "Lt. Alkema, I'm probably going to need you on the Bridge."

"Already there, sir," Alkema answered.

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

The Telepathic Rat stood over the bodies of four of his guard rats and their torn-out throats. He regretted the marginal decrease in the effectiveness of the disease vector, and his own bad judgment in assigning guards who could be murdered by a mere feline.

Now, we must recover the test subject, he thought. It could not have gotten far. The Telepathic Rat had only ancient racial memories of the human pain and suffering inflicted by the viroid life forms he and his progenitors had sustained in their blood throughout the centuries. He was eager to see it for himself.

Divide, my legion into six parts, proceed through the closest ventilation shafts and access ducts, above, below, and to the four sides of the chamber. Find the specimen, and return him to his chamber.

The rats it controlled peeled off in formation, counting off by sixes. Amid their own chittering, they did not hear the thing approaching until it was only a few meters away, moving through the adjacent conduits, making a dry crunching sound as it moved over the structural panels. When the Telepathic Rat finally did hear it, it came to the conclusion it was supposed to. *"X-Term-O-Bot,"* it hissed within its mind. *Deal with it.*

Twenty rats split off from various cells and formed an attack unit, heading into the adjacent corridor. The coordinated attack had been sufficient to first disable, then dismember, the previous X-Term-O-Bot they had encountered.

Destroy it!

The crunching sound stopped, replaced with the insistent rat-a-tat of pulse weaponry and sudden rodent shrieking, the latter cut hideously short by the former.

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The crunching resumed.

The Telepathic Rat squinted. This model of X-Term-O-Bot must have been more advanced than the previous one. Perhaps they had a way of transmitting upgrade data to each other. He began to consider in what horrible way he would deal with this, when the approaching thing cast a hulking, terrible shadow on the wall around the corner.

What is this? thought the Telepathic Rat.

And then it came around the corner. It was just over a meter tall. It had tank treads for feet, and two pairs of huge metal arms. One pair ended in a pointed cluster of weapons, the other two in three-digit, articulated claws. From the top of its chunky metal torso, the head of a gray and white cat poked out, wearing an improvised battle helmet.

“Eat ion-coated death, vermin scum!” Queequeg growled. Plasma blazed from the gunports at the end of his arm. An immediate stink of ozone and seared ratflesh filled the shaft.

Nine hundred and some odd rats panicked, tearing out in a horrific melee of shrieking and scurrying. Queequeg continued firing, his weapons taking out dozen of the small, gray-brown, disease-infested rodents, drawing ever nearer to the big one in the center.

Ah, his instinct is his weakness, thought the Telepathic Rat. If he killed me outright, all would be lost, but he must play with me first. He cannot defy his nature.

"I heard that," said Queequeg. And he fired off a few pulses just above Telepathic Rat's head, blowing out a power juncture, creating a blinding pyrotechnic display followed by complete darkness.

"Say your prayers, varmint," Queequeg snarled, leveling the weapon cluster at the rat. He took aim. He flexed against the trigger and prepared to terminate the vile creature's existence.

And so it would have been, unfortunately, at that point the Ex-Term-O-Bot's micro-missile reserves zeroed out, A crackle and spark emitted from the back of the X-Term-O-Bot. The pulse weapons gave out a few pathetic, random spits, then died entirely and Queequeg was left completely without ammunition.

"Crap!" hissed the cat. He began to back slowly back into the conduit. Then, he spun around and into a full retreat, hissing and cursing against humans and their inferior-grade X-Term-O-Bots.

Pursue and destroy him! Shrieked the Telepathic Rat (mentally --- but with such ferocity, a number of the more sensitive crew would have nightmares about rats that night). *He is one. We Are Legion.*

Pegasus - Main Bridge/PC-1

Alkema was already on the Bridge, looking as though he had pulled his uniform together in a hurry. "Aves

Ginger was on a deep probe along the vector of the ship we detected leaving the planet. It detected something in the sun's corona, at the edge of its scanning range. Flight Lieutenant Columbia altered course for a close range scan." Alkema signaled to American.

In the forefront of the ship, a holographic display showed the corona of the system's primary star, from which dozens of alien ships were emerging.

"What the Hell?" Keeler whispered gruffly.

"Sixteen large ships, and hundreds of fighters," Alkema reported.

Hologram lasers drew the ships in the forepart of the main bridge. The large ships were half-moon shaped, but not all identical. The bulges and protrusions at the centers of their crescents varied in thickness and length. The hundreds of smaller ships, blade-shaped, also varied in sized and in the thickness of their hulls.

Keeler sized up the situation. "Have they detected us? If they haven't, our best tactical option is to stay put."

"Prime Commander, if they move out, there is no way we can defeat that many ships," Lt. Cmdr. Honeywell advised. He projected his calculations onto a large display. "If we deployed all our Accipiters and Aves, laid out our ordnance, we could hold them off *Pegasus* long enough to escape, but there's no way we can save *Lexington Keeler*."

"I've laid in a course out of the system," Lt Navigator Change advised. "If the acceleration curve of the ship that launched from the surface is typical, we can still outrun

those ships if we have a head start, but if they move out first, we lose that option.”

“But we can’t run,” Alkema said. “There are 352 people on Keeler, and 57 people on the planet’s surface.”

“And over six thousand on *Pegasus*,” Lt. Navigator Change was adamant. “409 to save 6300, those are odds I can live with.”

Alkema thought of Sam Jordan. “The heart of our Technical Core and Warfighters are among the 400.”

“Unless you have an idea of how to defeat those ships, staying here means complete destruction,” Change answered.

“Mr. Alkema, Arm Nemesis missiles,” Keeler said. “Bring all weapons to hot stand-by and lay in targeting solutions on all of the capital ships. Stand-by Hammerhead missiles for the little ones. Lt. American, get everyone evacuated from *Keeler* and the surface.”

Alkema and American answered in the affirmative. Change glared at him. “You’re going to kill us all.”

“Za, maybe,” Keeler agreed. And he would have said, “but...” but he really didn’t have anything other than “maybe I won’t,” to follow it up with.

Keeler – Secondary Command Center/SC-2

A display on Scout’s datapad showed how complete the Braincore initiation was.

95% ... 96%...

Synch Christmas briefly considered blasting the Braincore with his pulse weapon, but it would have been futile. The shielding was too thick.

97%... 98%...

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Muffy wondered if either of the two guards, the tall skinny geek, or the hot technician would be interested in a quick snog before Lex killed them all.

99%

Trajan wondered why no one had sent his mother to a Medical Bay. Then, he pitied whoever might have tried.

Scout's read-out reached 100%.

For a second after that, nothing happened.

Then, twists of light began to rise from the center of the Braincore. The Consciousness of *Lexington Keeler*, took physical form in the shape of a giant, glowing head, or, more accurately, the neon-blue outline of a head with large, gold, glowing eyes; a synthesis of human and cybernetic forms.

Christmas leveled his weapons at the juncture where the ship's Braincore connected with the control systems. "If you attempt to access the ship's weapon systems, I will destroy the nerve juncture."

Lex's voice came from everywhere at once. It had a distinct, cultured rasp to it that would have done justice to the most elite and erudite of Republic's ruling class.

The Feedback from the Blast would destroy the Braincore, rendering the ship unsalvageable.

"That was my thinking," Christmas said.

"What is going on here?" Goneril Lear demanded.

Mr. Christmas has a long history of doubting my benevolence.

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"Lex has been methodically eliminating the ship's crew," Christmas insisted.

I have done no such thing. If anything, I have used my mighty intellect to protect and guide the puny humans on this ship,

"Puny humans?" thought everybody.

"We lost 160 people on Electra after the Electroids activated your consciousness," Christmas said.

An accident, and a misunderstanding over which I had no control. If had been functioning at my full amazing capacity, I could have prevented the misunderstanding and prevented most of the regrettable deaths of those puny humans

"Then, we lost another 307 people on Wolf's Head," Christmas continued.

Wolf's Head was an extremely dangerous environment for which the crew, being puny humans, was not adequately prepared.

"We lost another sixteen to the Mind Plague."

"Mind plague?" Driver asked.

"I didn't tell you about that yet," Christmas said, not taking his glare off the hologram of Lex.

It was my awesome intelligence that helped you find the cure to the Mind Plague.

“Then, we lost thirty people on Surya Numaskar.”

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Lost is the operative word, isn't it? We never did arrive at a satisfactory explanation for their disappearance.

“We left behind 1,600 people at Arkangel,” Christmas reminded him.

By their own choice.

“We lost over 2,000 when the command towers were hit.”

Due to an alien attack over which I had no control.

“There was a shield failure just before impact.”

Affirmative. The shielding failed due to a previously unknown design flaw. The defensive energy shield on a Pathfinder Class starship are subject to random polarization failures when subjected to microfluctuations in directed electromagnetic pulses.

“That’s technobabble,” Christmas sneered.

Scout spoke up. “Well, it’s plausible techno-babble.”

Regardless.

The image of a big giant head vanished and was replaced with a schematic of the alien fleet hiding in the sun’s corona.

This ship and all puny humans aboard her are currently at an insurmountable tactical disadvantage. Unless I am given access to all defensive systems, including the Nemesis missile hatcheries, we face imminent destruction.

An undulating sphere of light appeared, in which Lex presented himself. It began oscillating wildly.

Even the combined tactical resources of *Pegasus* and this ship would be insufficient to defeat the armada. I recommend use of the Nemesis Warheads.

“Don’t trust him,” Christmas warned.

Lex provided them with holographic displays, showing them the alien Armada, the two Pathfinders, and the long odds of the latter defeating the former.

You have only one chance at survival. Re-activate my over-ride access to the ship’s weapons of mass destruction

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Surface

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Running footsteps echoed in the long, broad chamber of the Redoubt's main tunnel. Warfighter Moon ran past the murals, toward the control complex at the end, where Morgan and a pair of technicians were examining a cluster of bright red and yellow stickers with impressionistic, minimalist renderings of happy faces to try and ascertain their meaning.

"Lt. Morgan!" called up Warfighter Moon. "Lt. Morgan!"

Morgan peered over the side of the catwalk outside the Control Level with a peevish expression. "What is it? Has that storm front changed course or speed?"

"More than that," Moon told him. "*Pegasus* has ordered immediate evacuation."

Morgan answered, with frustration. "We're just beginning to make progress here. They better have a damn good reason."

"They detected 300 alien attack ships in close orbit of the system's primary."

Morgan thought this over a quick second, then turned away from the cat walk. "Anansi, Ing, Omega, Honda pack up your gear. We're evacuating the planet."

Lexington Keeler – Hangar Bay Alpha

Duke also got the Evacuation order. "Confirm, *Pegasus*. Immediate evacuation. Duke, out."

When the COM Link closed he told Technician Sperry to put him on Shipwide Link. "Attention all repair teams, this is Lieutenant Duke. Tie off whatever you're working on and return to the Hangar Bay for immediate dustoff to *Pegasus*. Don't ask any questions, just pack it in and bug it out. That's all."

He looked at the ship's status display. "Look at all the systems coming on-line since Lear got the Braincore up. We just about got the job done, and they're commanding us to leave. How many people do we have out there?"

"340 out in the ship, seven in the command center, and five at SC-2," Technician Sperry told him. "All of the teams, except for SC-2 have a clear evacuation route."

"ETA to dust-off?" Duke asked.

"Shouldn't take more than twenty to thirty minutes to re-assemble them all in the bay, maybe another ten to load the Aves."

Duke looked around his command center. "Secure all your stations and get aboard that Aves." He paused. "You all did a damn fine job." With that, he sat down at one of the control stations.

"Why do I get the feeling you're staying?" asked Technician Sperry.

"Because I am," Duke answered.

The technician pondered this. "There really is no smart reason to stay here, sir."

"I know that," Duke replied. "I've decided to stay here for a stupid reason."

"Would that be 'I've invested too much time and hard work in this ship to abandon it even though remaining here means possible death?'" Sperry persisted.

"That's a pretty good summation," Duke agreed. "I don't intend to die. I intend to keep these systems up, until you guys get back." He began running through the ship's emergency systems. "Meanwhile, I'm going to see if I can find five escape pods near the Braincore and bring them on-line."

Pegasus - PC-1

American signaled Alkema. "*Ginger* is transmitting new telemetry on the alien fleet."

The holographic projection updated, showing that a few of the ships in the fleet had adjusted their positions.

"What are they doing, Mr. Alkema," Keeler asked. "Are they preparing for an attack? Have they detected us? Or are they just moving around randomly."

"I can't say," Alkema answered. "Some of the smaller ships have moved into positions tight and behind the larger ships, but these two groups have moved away slightly," he pointed to the different ships in the holographic projection.

Keeler's teeth set to grinding. "Can't we get better data than this?"

"We could set out more probes, or another flight of Aves," Alkema told him. "But that would almost definitely ensure they would detect us."

"That's where the original ship headed when it left the planet," Keeler challenged him. "Don't you think they know we're here?"

"Probably, but the key thing is to not let them know that we know they're out there." Alkema frowned. "They haven't attacked us yet. They must be waiting on something."

"Like what?" Keeler asked.

Alkema had no way of knowing. "A signal? Reinforcements? More data on us."

Keeler stared at them. "What about a first strike. Could we take out all of them before they became a threat to us."

Honeywell explained, referencing the telemetry, that the fleet was large, too spread out, and too close to the sun for *Pegasus*'s limited forces to carry out a successful attack on them.

"If they can hold position that close to the sun, their shield technology must be extremely advanced," Alkema deduced. "I don't know if we could get missiles through it. Maybe, if we can draw them out of the sun... but then, speed becomes an issue. Change, I think, knows what she's talking about when she says we can't beat their acceleration curve without a head start."

Both Keeler and Alkema silently thought that if TyroCommander Redfire were there, he would pull some amazing tactical trick out of his underwear.

"How long to evacuate the planet and Keeler?" The Prime Commander asked.

Shayne American checked the status of the evacuation. "Landing Team Beta estimates ten minutes to dust-off. Landing Team Alpha..."

"Dust-off?" Keeler asked.

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"Emergency evacuation. They're leaving behind equipment and getting on Aves as fast as they can," American explained. "Landing Team Alpha is unable to locate three crewmen. Three warfighters were on some sort of long patrol."

Alkema suggested, "Tell Alpha Team to proceed with dust-off. We'll task another Aves to locate the Warfighter Patrol and bring them home."

"Do that," Keeler said. "What about the teams aboard Keeler?"

"Loading on the four Aves in the Hangar Bay," American answered. "But, TyroCommander Lear and four others are cut off in the Secondary Command Center."

The Surface

Morgan and the last three technicians left the Redoubt with as much as they could carry. "Seal the blast doors," he ordered.

"Does it matter?" asked Technician Superman.

"It does" Morgan told him. "Something of their civilization might survive until someone comes back... or until the sun burns out. It's better than nothing."

Lexington Keeler – SC-2

Beneath the electric blue and amber-gold glow of Lex's Big Giant Head, Goneril Lear and Christmas each considered their next move. And the rest of them... Trajan Lear, Matthew Driver, Churchill, Sukhoi, Scout, and Fangboner... waited to see what the next act in the drama would be. Also, Driver and Trajan Lear resisted introducing Fangboner to Muffy because, frankly, that whole introduction was fraught with the worst kind of potential.

Christmas steadied his Pulse Weapons. "If you grant Lex access to the ship's weapons systems, Lex will kill you all. I am already dead, and I have no concern for myself, but you may want to consider your own lives."

"How can he be dead and still talking to us?" Sukhoi asked.

"It's a long story," Trajan Lear said.

The animated corpse of Lt. Christmas is mistaken. You puny humans must give my mighty intellect access to all of the ship's Defensive Systems, or the alien fleet will destroy both of our ships.

"That alien fleet may not even exist," Christmas told them. "All you have is the word of a psychotic ship's intelligence."

"Maybe we should take some time to figure this out," Scout suggested.

There is not sufficient time to demonstrate the threat and the sincerity of my intentions, vis-à-vis, protecting you puny humans.

Lear's, Churchill's, and Sukhoi's COM Links activated.
"SC-2, This is Duke. Can you hear me, SC-2?"

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Lear answered. "Executive TyroCommander Lear, go ahead Lt. Duke."

"*Pegasus* has ordered complete evacuation of all teams," Duke reported.

"Did *Pegasus* specify a reason?" Lear asked.

"They detected 300 alien attack ships in close orbit of the systems primary," Duke told her. "We're holding the last Aves on a couple of crews that were deep in the systems when the alert came. We will evacuate the second they are secure on the Aves."

"Lt. Duke, do you realize we're cut-off?" Lear asked.

"Right, if you can get to the evacuation pods, *Pegasus* should be able to recover you."

Lear looked to her crew, to her son, to the big giant glowing head. "Thank you, Lt. Duke. Clear the ship as soon as the last team is recovered."

She turned to Scout. "Give the AI access to the ship's defensive systems. Mr. Churchill, Mr. Sukhoi, if Mr. Christmas attempts to interfere... kill him. Lex, you are to arm one missile, and one missile only, use the one missile to take out one alien ship. It should be enough to warn them off."

Trajan Lear began to object, "Mom..."

"Don't try to stop me, Trajan."

"Not that, I was just going to remind you that killing Christmas isn't exactly ..."

Several things happened very fast. Christmas tried to fire at the cybernetic nerve cluster, but Churchill fired at Christmas, deflecting his shot up and into the upper deck, and stunned him unconscious with his second and third shot.

In that same fraction of a second, Scout touched a panel. "Done."

Even though the direct data links between SC-2 and the missile hatcheries were shattered, Lex took less than a second to find a path to the Nemesis missiles, routing his commands through nearly a dozen other systems ... including organic waste disposal and environmental balance. He soon located a number of missiles whose launch systems were sufficiently undamaged.

Downloading targeting.

Downloading detonation parameters.

Done.

"... a threat." Trajan finished

Far down the line, sixteen Nemesis missiles were raised to the top of their launch pads. The hatches separated, and their ion-engines fired. They rose above the

blasted dorsal hull of *Lexington Keeler* and roared toward *Pegasus* on the tips of white ion fire.

Pegasus – PC-1

American alerted Keeler. “Commander, sixteen Nemesis missiles have just launched from Keeler.”

“They’re coming right for us!” Alkema shouted.

The forward display showed the missiles flashing off the foredeck of *Lexington Keeler*. In less time than it takes to tell, they crossed the 80,000 kilometers between the ships, roared over *Pegasus*’s dorsal plane close enough to vibrate the entire ship with their engines, then sped toward the sun.

“What the Hell was that?” Keeler demanded.

Trajan leaped to Honeywell’s station and quickly worked out the missiles trajectory. “*Keeler* is attacking the enemy fleet,” Trajan reported.

Commander Keeler drummed the arm of his command chair nervously. “I thought you said an attack by Nemesis missiles wouldn’t work that close to the sun.”

“I did say that,” Alkema said.

“Were you wrong?” Keeler demanded.

Alkema didn’t have an answer for that, but he did know this: “If their attack fails, the enemy fleet is going to come after us with everything they have.”

Lexington Keeler – SC-2

Sixteen Nemesis missiles flew toward the sun.

The missiles approached the alien fleet.

The missiles flew past the alien fleet

Pegasus – PC-1

Keeler watched as *Lexington Keeler's* Nemesis missiles flew past the alien fleet

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The Prime Commander waited a moment, and then asked in his most serious voice, “Weren’t those supposed to explode, or something?”

Lexington Keeler – SC-2

“I can’t believe you missed!” Scout shouted.

Goneril Lear stared, glassy eyed, at the telemetry showing the Nemesis missiles had clearly overshot the alien fleet.

“Lex,” Christmas demanded. “What did you do?”

Wait.

The Sun

Sixteen Nemesis missiles went into a close orbit around the sun.

The protective hatches exploded outward and ten warheads flew out from each carrier. The missile carriers then locked onto the capital ships in the alien fleet and prepared to ram them head on. This maneuver was mainly for show, to keep the aliens occupied as the warheads moved into position, close to sun, just above some particularly unstable cells on the sun’s surface.

One hundred and sixty warheads detonated at maximum yield, disrupting the delicate balance of gravity and thermonuclear fire that kept the star lit up. Uncountable trillions of tons of stellar material exploded outward.

The alien ships were caught in the maelstrom of light and energy. It was too much for their shields. They flamed and burned up like origami cranes tossed into a bonfire.

Lexington Keeler – SC-2

Lex's sphere changed into a representation of the sun.

This system's primary is highly unstable. I calculated that a precise Nemesis detonation would result in a massive expulsion of stellar material, destroying the Armada in the process.

His sphere representing the sun exploded, taking out the enemy fleet.

"What about us?" Scout demanded.

I am maneuvering us into the cavity created by the devastation of the planet's larger moon. It will shelter us from the stellar discharge.

"What about *Pegasus* and the teams on the surface of the planet?" Fangboner asked.

You should advise them to take shelter as well. Their ship may not survive the solar flares.

Pegasus - PC-1

On the holographic display in *Pegasus's* primary command center, a massive solar flare spewed like a wild flamethrower across the orbital plane of the sun's five planets. "Mr. Alkema," Keeler asked. "Is the sun exploding?"

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"The sun began exploding about four minutes ago," Alkema answered.

"Are we going to get burned?" Keeler asked. "Because I had dinner plans."

Alkema took the tactical controls. "I'm diverting maximum power to the shields. That should be enough."

Change took over helm control. "We can't risk a shield failure. We need to get this ship to shelter."

"Shelter where?" Keeler asked.

Change displayed her course. She was aiming *Pegasus* into the giant crack that had split the hemispheres of the planet's larger moon. The gap was large, hundreds of kilometers across, but it was filled with debris ranging from dust to mountain-sized.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Keeler asked.

"No, but it's the only way," Change informed them. "The solar flares could last for days ... or longer. If we had a cascade shield failure..."

"She's right, captain," Alkema said.

"Would that be worse than the ship getting crushed between the two halves of a giant moon?" Keeler asked. "Or, smashed by a giant rock?"

"We'll be fine," Alkema assured him. Then, he turned to Change. "Won't we?"

The moon was looming larger in the forward navigational view. "I am plotting a course into the largest space in the gap. Our phalanx guns should be able to smash any rock large enough to do damage."

American picked up the order. "There's one Aves left on the planet and three en route back to the ship, plus *Ginger*. I'll transmit new rendezvous coordinates behind the moon."

The Surface

Six minutes, five seconds after the sun began to explode, Magnus Morgan was boarding the *Aves George*, the last man from his landing team to evacuate the Redoubt. He noticed the sudden abrupt change as the day grew several times brighter, as though a giant searchlight had been turned on the planet. The sky bleached white, and every shadow vanished.

Morgan looked up at the sky and scowled. "They blew up the sun. I always thought they might do that at some point."

He closed the hatch and put himself into the ship. There was a young, dark haired man at one of the Sensor Telemetry stations. Morgan looked over his shoulder at the display of the sun, from which streamers of energy were breaking free. "How long until the flares hit the atmosphere?"

"Twenty-one minutes, eighteen seconds," the Science Specialist answered. "We're supposed to rendezvous with *Pegasus* behind the moon before then."

Morgan nearly lost his balance as *George* accelerated upward. Maximum velocity was the only way to reach shelter behind the moon in time. He looked toward the projection of the poor, unlucky planet. It really didn't deserve all of this.

"When those flares hit the atmosphere," Morgan narrated. "Every last trace of human settlement will be erased from the surface of this planet." He gestured toward the mid-deck, where some crates and containers were stacked. "The only memory of the civilization that existed here will be in those crates, and the ones in the cargo hold."

He noted a blip on the Telemetry Display. He reached over and touched it. An information blip popped up, identifying it as the *Aves James*. "Why is that ship returning to the surface?" Morgan asked.

"Three warfighters are still on the planet," the Science Specialist explained. "*James* is going to rescue them."

Morgan looked at the flare display. In nineteen minutes, 58 seconds, the atmosphere of the planet was going to be a giant blast furnace.

The Surface

Jordan, Taurus, and Rook were racing toward the Redoubt, praying to whatever gods had not yet forsaken this planet that the enemy didn't have air support. Behind

them was an angry alien army, which was speeding across the desert much faster than they were.

"Jordan, go faster!" Taurus ordered.

"This is as fast it gets," Jordan shouted back. He was piloting the Razorback through an obstacle course of scrub brush and boulders. Johnny Rook rode the gun.

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Suddenly, a shape broke loose from the pursuing horde and began rapidly gaining on them. It was a blur against the scrubby landscape, and Rook struggled to get a lock on it with the pulse gun. When he finally did, the target trace was green, indicating a friendly.

He looked up from the gun to see a Trauma Hound rapidly running down the Razorback.

Taurus saw it, too. She stood and called out. "Spot, over here boy! Spot!"

The mechanical dog ran furiously until it was beside the Razorback, then jumped onto the gun deck with Rook. Taurus hugged it around its shining mechanical neck. "I thought we'd lost you boy."

"Never mistress," Spot promised. "I also think I might have thinned the herd back there for you."

"Is it just me, or did it suddenly get a lot brighter?" Johnny Rook asked.

The dim sky had suddenly grown to a near-blinding brightness. At that moment, a raging stormfront of burning white and yellow clouds appeared on the horizon.

"Solar flare," Max Jordan yelled.

"You don't have to yell, my COM Link works," Rook yelled back. "Just get us back to the Redoubt before those flares hit."

Taurus adjusted the gain on her COM Link. "*Pegasus*, repeat again, last message was garbled." A few seconds later, she repeated the same thing.

"What's going on?" Rook asked her.

"The Redoubt's already evacuated. We're supposed to rendezvous with an Aves for dust-off, but the coordinates keep getting garbled."

"So, what do I do?" Max Jordan asked.

"Keep making for the Redoubt," Taurus ordered. But if she had looked behind her, she would have seen her rendezvous coming to meet her. A black shadow, like an eagle seen at a great height, dropped from burning sky behind them.

With a swoosh and a roar, the Aves *James* came down, and matched their course and speed.

"Warfighter team, this is Aves *James*. Um, you might want to leave the planet now."

Taurus answered, "*James*, we can't stop to board. The enemy is right behind us."

"That's okay, we can't land," Flight Captain James said through his COM Link. "I'm opening the bottom hatch. You'll have to jump it."

The ship flew in front of them, then slowed again to their pace. Fiery dust-devils were rising into the sky all around them as the heat in the atmosphere rose to furnace

levels. *James's* lower hatch opened. There was a figure there, a warfighter clad in tactical orange rescue gear. He gestured for them to come on-board.

Taurus undid her harness. "C'mon, you ground monsters. This is the last ride off the planet." She climbed to the side of the Razorback. The Aves moved forward. Then, Max had to swerve to miss a pile of rock and plant life and almost tossed her from the car. The ship repositioned itself. Taurus regained her standing and leaped on board. Spot followed her, making the leap easily and naturally.

"You're next, Jordan," Rook ordered. "I'll cover you."

"I'm gonna miss this ride," said Max Jordan as he engaged the auto-drive. He released his safety harness. As Johnny Rook remained at the pulse cannon to cover him, Max Jordan climbed to the top of the Road Warrior's roll-bar. *James* held steady as a rock, its positioning thrusters shooting jets of hot gas into the air. Jordan jumped. Assisted by his tactical landing-suits strength augmentation, he leaped the space easily, landing hard on the ramp before Taurus grabbed and pulled him into the ship.

When he was on board, she turned to her last man. "Move it, Rook."

As Rook made ready to climb onto the roll bar, a pair of other vehicles suddenly came roaring over the hills. They ran on high, steel wheels supplemented with four long steel legs that enabled them to jump over the landscape like cheetahs. They moved very, very fast, and

in a flash, they were within range to begin shooting at Johnny Rook.

“Well, this is just great,” he muttered, grabbing the pulse cannon’s firing controls.

“Rook, there’s no time,” Taurus yelled.

But there was time. Rook simply extended his perception of time, stretching the seconds until the projectiles the aliens were firing at him were making slow, leisurely trajectories toward him that he could easily dodge. He swung the gun around, and shot long pulses of blue-white plasma at them. Some of the bolts missed, but some of the bolts met their mark. The alien landcraft burst with yellow-pink explosions.

And the next elongated moment etched itself into Rook’s memory. The sky simply began to burn, as the air itself burst into flame. In front of it, a ship, the blazing light burnishing its wingblades copper-red. And a woman, gesturing desperately for him to come aboard.

A much shorter second later, the hatch closed beneath him, and he felt the ship’s extreme acceleration as Flight Captain James punched the thrusters to max. The ship roared into space, leaving the planet below embroiled in flame and whirlwinds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Pegasus – The UnderDecks

A few cautious rats poked their heads into the ventilation shaft.

The cat was cornered. He clicked his empty weapons a few last times at the approaching rats, then threw them down, bared his fangs, and hissed.

The rats waited, and after a while, they parted, leaving a path through the center of their mass.

A human child, confronted with imminent death will instinctively cry out for assistance.

The Telepathic Rat came slowly up the center of its army, its little red eyes blazing with hate, its fur bristling with hate, and its whiskers twitching with hate.

A puppy, in contrast, will whimper and cower.

The rat moved forward slowly, deliberately, with hate in every movement of his paws. His tail behind him dragged with hate. He farted, also with hate.

Kittens, on the other hand, hiss and bear their claws.

It paused in front of the cat, just out of reach of his claws. Near a thousand brown, angry, malevolent rats closed around their king, the Telepathic Rat, a giant mutant freak almost as large as Queequeg himself.

It doesn't matter how you face death. The important thing is that you will die.

Queequeg raised his paws, as though surrendering.

I am going to rip out your throat, thought the Telepathic Rat (hatefully). And when I am finished, my legions will tear the flesh from your bones.

"If you strike me down," Queequeg growled. "I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

That is highly unlikely, thought the Telepathic Rat.

"O.K, then consider this," Queequeg said. "First, humans are not going to be exterminated by your plague. If their bodies have not already adapted to it, they will find a cure. You have incubated your virus for 2,000 years for nothing."

The virus is strong, and mutates quickly. It will kill millions before they can adapt to it. And they will die in agony.

The smaller rats were still advancing in the rear. The ones in front were so close, Queequeg could smell the rot of their nasty rodent breath. Queequeg activated the magnetic clamps in the feet of the X-Term-O-Bot.

I'm going to enjoy your death most of all, kitty-cat.

Queequeg lowered his paws. "And second, telepathy is great and all, but it has its disadvantages. Like when you're on a ship with voice-activated systems. *Pegasus*, open Airlock, Deck minus sixty-three, section 35. Override Authorization, Queequeg Omega."

At the end of the shaft, the magnetic locks on a small hatchway cycled. Orange danger lights flashed in its vicinity, but no one was there to see them. Two layers of hatches slid aside, leaving an oval void in the ship's hull.

A violent, explosive gale pushed through the shaft.

Queequeg had chosen the spot to make his final stand with the utmost care, an emergency atmosphere purge. Deep enough in the ship that, until it was too late, his rats would not realize it opened to space. Lined with smooth stainless steel that offered no purchase to their claws.

Queequeg was held firmly in place by his magnetized feet, and was able to suck air through a strategically positioned tube in his X-Term-O-Bot suit. He watched the rats fly backwards through the duct, bouncing off the sides of the shaft. With cat-like satisfaction, he saw in every tiny brown face desperation and horror at their imminent death. A horrible shrieking arose as hundreds of furry, vermin were dragged along, claws frantically scratching but finding nothing to cling to. At the end of the shaft, blown into space; a small brown cloud of disease-ridden vermin, squeaking their last breaths into the cold vacuum.

The Telepathic Rat was the last to blow out. It's final word came from its mouth, not its mind. That word was "Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" Then, the rat tumbled through the airlock, its lungs sucked desperately for the thin molecules of air that went out with it, then exploded from its throat in a pulpy mess.

"Gotcha, suckers," Queequeg said. "*Pegasus*, close airlock, Deck minus sixty-three, section 35."

When atmosphere was restored to the shaft, he slouched and rested.

And despite his better nature, he wondered if John Hunter, launched in the escape pod just as the battle had begun, was all right.

Lexington Keeler – The Braincore

Lex created a holographic display showing their ship's course.

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We will be in the shadow of the planet's largest moon seventeen minutes before the solar flares reach unmanageable levels.

Muffy knelt next to Christmas's unconscious body. "Is he all right?" Trajan asked.

Suddenly, he reached out his hand and grabbed her arm. "You cannot kill the dead," he said.

I have also managed to restore or bypass 87% of control linkages throughout the ship.

"Maybe a crew isn't necessary," Goneril Lear mused. "With a central intelligence, the ship is fully functional. You would only need some androids to..."

There was a click. She looked up to see her son crossing the deck, pointing a pulse cannon at her. "All right, mom. Show's over. Let's get you back to *Pegasus*."

The expression that crossed Goneril Lear's face was one of genuine hurt. "You've changed, Trajan," she said sorrowfully. "Bellisarius, Constantine, take them down."

Sukhoi and Churchill looked at each other.

Goneril Lear corrected herself. "I meant, just stop them, stop them from..."

Long pause. Goneril Lear looked as though she were trying to remember something.

"... from taking me back to ... to *Pegasus*..."

Sukhoi and Churchill moved toward Trajan Lear and Matthew Driver. Driver whipped out his sidearm and pointed it at them.

Trajan Lear looked at the Centurions. "You can't let her do this. She needs a healer or she will die."

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Churchill was equally firm. "Holster your weapon, son. Threatening a superior officer is a violation. I have to arrest you now."

"No!" Muffy cried out, moving between them and stretching out one arm in an angry, cat-like gesture. Her voice had an edge in it that drew everyone's eyes to her. Her own eyes were glowing with cat-like heat. Her aura, normally perceived only by the new senses, now glowed bright enough to throw shadows faint in the darkened chamber of the Braincore.

"I..." she said, and then, without crossing the space between her and them, she was between Sukhoi and Churchill, one hand on each of their chests, somehow under their tunics and touching their bare skin.

"...am..." her hand slipped down the front of Churchill/Bellisarius's pants. Sukhoi dropped his weapon, and the two of them seemed to fall under a kind of spell, falling toward her.

"... highly sexual." she finished.

And then the three of them collapsed in a rather embarrassing pile.

Driver and Trajan Lear looked at each other and exchanged slight shrugs. Then, Trajan Lear pointed his

weapon back at his mother. "Come on, Mom. Back to *Pegasus*. Now."

"Not possible," Goneril Lear told him. "We are cut-off from the hangar bay. You couldn't take me back even if I wanted to ..."

A shot buzzed across the chamber, striking Lear in the chest. She collapsed, in slow motion, to the deck.

It wasn't Trajan Lear and it wasn't Matthew Driver. They looked at Christmas, who was pointing his weapons at Lex. So, it wasn't him.

"Where did that...?" Trajan Lear began.

There is a cryo-stasis escape pod located in the adjacent section of the ship. Move her into it. It will keep her alive and begin repairing her systems. You can eject the pod and recover it using your Aves when repairs have been completed.

Each of these data points was illustrated by an appropriate hologram projection.

"You shot my mom?" Trajan said incredulously?

There are automated defenses on this level to defend the Braincore from intruders. If I were the monster Mr. Christmas makes me out to be, I could easily have killed all of you. Now... go!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO AND A HALF

Three Days Later

The worst of the solar flares passed within a few hours, and by that time *James* had regained *Pegasus*. A flight of Accipiters managed to recover the trio of escape pods launched from *Lexington Keeler* after both ships had sheltered in the crack of the broken moon.

Acting TyroCommander Lear was taken to Hospital Four where she recovered under the healing rituals of Dr. Reagan. Churchill and Sukhoi were sent to the brig for disobeying Prime Commander Keeler's orders.

Matthew Driver and Trajan Lear remained behind until repairs to *Prudence* were completed.

Queequeg returned to his master's quarters and fell asleep on the sofa. He remained there for five days. No one asked about the X-Term-O-Bot suit he left on the floor.

The day after the flares, Tactical Lieutenant Alkema figured out how to use the ship's artificial gravity field to clear debris out of the cleft in the moon where the two Pathfinder ships waited out the remainder of the storm. This reduced strain on the shields considerably. And when Commander Keeler finally remembered to ask about the encrypted message from the silver spaceship, Alkema confessed that in the excitement of the alien battle, it had slipped his mind.

Ginger was able to return the following day, after riding out the solar flares on the dark side of the innermost

planet. Nevertheless, *Ginger's* crew required radiation healing.

At the beginning of the third day, they launched a pair of probes toward the sun on a reconnaissance run. There was no sign that any of the alien fleet had survived.

Goneril Lear regained consciousness, and didn't ask about the presence of the Watchmen outside her healing chamber.

After Prime Commander Keeler got the translation of his encrypted message from Tactical Lieutenant Alkema, he went to bed and slept for nearly eight hours.

And in a makeshift temple near the summit of the Secondary Command Tower, a Holy Man finished the war prayer he had begun after the first attack. He emerged from his trance with a powerful need to speak to Commander Keeler.

Pegasus – Inhabitation Areas

Tactical Lieutenant Commander General Kitaen knew what was expected of a Sapphirean Holy Man, and succeeded in looking the part. He was tall, his head was shaved, and his body was a tower of smooth, glistening muscle like a Guardian Bull [^]. Underneath his oversized black crew jacket, he wore nothing to hide the hardened landscape of his chest and abdomen. Also, he wore a

[^] Such creatures exist on Sapphire, well-trained male milk-beasts make superb guard animals. They are used primarily in the more remote areas of Boreala and Arcadia.

ceremonial mini-skirt ▲ ▲, black with a row of sequins around the hem. Traditional blue and black war paint surrounded his eyes.

He crossed down the breezeway to the primary inhabitation zone, the residential complexes that housed the ship's crew and a faux-landscaped environment underneath an artificial sky created by the overhead holo-dome. The trees along the walkway drew back slightly as he passed, while the flowers seemed to stretch toward him, and bloom a little brighter.

When he approached Commander Keeler's home-suite, strode to the door, and activated the announcement chimes. He had to hit it two more times before the commander appeared.

Keeler studied the Holy Man up and down, "I think you're looking for Lt. Cmdr. Honeywell," he finally said.

"I am a Holy Man," Kitaen told him. His voice, by the way, was a deep bass, like the low notes of a church organ.

"I didn't order one of those."

He gave a slight, respectful bow at the door. "Good Afterdawn, Commander Keeler."

"Afterdawn?" Keeler blinked at the fake sunlight. "I suppose it is. I usually sleep through them. I'm not an afterdawn person."

"I would like to come into your chambers and speak to you."

^^ For what kind of ceremony, you don't want to know.

Keeler squinted at him. "Why?"

"I have a message from The Allbeing."

"Oh, in that case..." Keeler moved aside and bade the Holy Man entry. "There's a cat on the couch, but you're welcome to sit on the chair... or kneel on the floor if that's more comfortable."

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"I'll stand," intoned the Holy Man.

"Right, of course," Keeler said. "May I offer you something to drink?"

"I am a Holy Man."

"Right, of course, Old Borealan okay?"

"Single malt?"

"Of course."

"I take it neat," General Kitaen removed his jacket.. Keeler poured the scotch into a glass. As he did, Kitaen crossed to an alcove of the suite and rapped on the surface of a shiny black and silver coffin, and spoke a few words in a lost Earthen dialect. Presently, the spirit of Lexington Keeler manifested itself.

Kitaen bowed and addressed the ancestor. "Hail and well-met, spirit-father."

Dead Keeler was not impressed "Why do you Holy Guys always have to talk like funny boys?"

"Many of us are 'funny boys.' Not me, of course, I'm into women... or in the vernacular of your era... females."

"That's what all the funny boys, say," Dead Keeler scowled. He hated Holy Men. Sapphireans regarded them as living Prophets through whom The Allbeing would

speak to his people. *Lexington Keeler* was dead, and The Allbeing had not spoken a syllable to him.

"Old Borealan, neat..." Commander Keeler reported. He handed the glass to the Holy Man. "So, what the Hell is your Holy Ass doing in my domicile?"

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"I have come to help you face your dilemma," the Holy Man answered. "Since the attacks began, I have been praying, in direct contact with the Eternal, trying to extend Divine protection over our ships, blessing the souls of those taken in battle, trying to guide them to their proper place in the world beyond. In the midst of my meditations, He appeared to me, and He gave me a Message that I should speak with you."

"And why couldn't the Lord deliver His Message to me personally?" Live Keeler asked.

"He said, you had been drinking, and probably would have thought it was a hallucination."

Keeler looked down at the light brown liquid in his tumbler. "He's good. OK, So, what is the message."

"Our presence here is Divine Providence," Kitaen told him. "The discovery of the StarLock, our being in a position to salvage that vessel. We were sent to rescue the ship. You are doing the Will of The Allbeing."

"The Allbeing didn't do such a swell job protecting *Lex Keeler* in the first place," observed Dead Keeler. "Was killing half of Keeler's crew part of His plan."

The Holy Man shrugged. "Probably, but the point is, the recovery of *Keeler* has brought us to a crossroads by which certain conundra may be resolved. "

“Conundra?” Keeler asked. “Is that even a word?”

Kitaen paused for a moment, then downed his Borealan whisky in a single gulp. He put down his glass, then spoke again. “I understand, you have received a message also.”

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Commander Keeler’s face betrayed a smidgen of surprise that the Holy Man knew this. “All right, then. Just before the sun exploded, we received a message from Chapultepec.” The message popped up on a holo-display behind him.

Commander William Keeler, The Odyssey Joint Project Command Authority approves your salvage plan. Our strategic situation makes it urgent that *LEXINGTON KEELER* be recovered. Your decision to appoint Goneril Lear as acting shipmaster has been entered into the official directive, and she is to continue in that position until the ship is restored to full functionality. In addition, you are to re-assign no fewer than 3,000 of your crew to *Lexington Keeler* and rendezvous at the Chapultepec Station.

Kitaen studied the order and thought about it for a time. “You are disinclined to follow this order... after TyroCommander Lear’s betrayal.”

“Damn right,” Live Keeler shouted, with a punctuative slam of his fist against the table. “I want her in my brig, not over on *Lex Keeler* acting like she owns the place.”

Kitaen remained stoic. “I feel strongly you should let her have *Lexington Keeler*, despite your desire to punish her for the disrespect she has shown you.”

“Why?” Keeler asked. “When she was over there, all she did was plot against me. Duke did the actual repairs.”

“In my day, we would have flushed her through an airlock,” Dead Keeler interrupted.

The Holy Man was unmoved. “I would not.”

“Yeah, you might break a nail on the release mechanism,” Dead Keeler taunted.

Kitaen let the insult pass. “It would be the better for the Odyssey mission if she were no longer on this ship. She also has talents to contribute to the reconstruction. She may even find away to redeem herself for the damage she has caused, and that opportunity would not afford itself were she to remain locked up in your ship. Although it would be painful for you to let her go, it would accrue greatly to your character if you did.”

“But I don’t want to,” Keeler protested, then sighed. “And it isn’t just about Lear. First, Sapphire and Republic split, and now they’re dividing my ship,” Live Keeler sighed, “I feel like everything is coming apart.”

“Everything is coming apart,” the Holy Man told him. “And that is exactly how it should be. Unity is not always the answer.”

“The funny boy is right,” Dead Keeler put in. “Keeping Lear on the ship, not to mention the part of the crew that thinks she’s right, is no benefit to us. Just like Sapphire and Republic can’t fight the Aurelians and each other at the same time. But an Alliance that thinks one way, and a Commonwealth that thinks another, together, we can beat them. And with Lear gone, and the trouble-

making half of the crew gone, the remaining crew would be loyal to the mission.”

“Half an army, united in purpose, will defeat a far greater force divided against itself,” the Holy Man added. He put a powerful hand on Commander Keeler’s shoulder. “Let her go. Let her people go. Move on with a clarity of mission.”

Live Keeler was forced to agree with them, but indicated that he nevertheless needed more booze.

Pegasus – Primary Command/Main bridge

So, on the morning of the fourth day, when he had sobered up, Prime Commander Keeler, in dress uniform, addressed his crew. He began by reading the order from Odyssey Joint Project Command Authority. Then, he told them how he intended to implement the order.

“As soon as solar radiation has diminished to acceptable levels, we will resume restoration work on *Lexington Keeler*. Lt. Commander Duke is eager to begin yelling at people again.

“Lt. Alkema and Lt. American will coordinate the division of crews. We will begin the process during the initial round of repairs. Of course, volunteers will be taken first. If volunteers are insufficient, Alkema and American will assign additional crew based on necessity. If you object to your assignment, you may appeal to me, but my word will be final.”

He left out a detail. He and Duke had made a list of people who were going to be assigned to *Lexington Keeler*

whether they liked it or not. He was not going to use the list unless the people on it failed to volunteer.

“Upon restoration of *Keeler’s* hyperdrive, we will leave this system and return to the StarLock Chapultepec. Both ships. *Pegasus*, will proceed through the Starlock Chapultepec and to the Orion Quadrant, where we will continue to seek Earth. *Lexington Keeler* will remain in the Perseus Quadrant, to seek out lost colonies, and build alliances with them against the Aurelians.

“Both of these are worthy missions. Life on *Keeler* will not be easy. There will be at least two hard years of repair before that ship is fully operational. And on *Pegasus*, anyone who remains will have to work double duty. Not to mention, if we make it to the Orion Quadrant... there’s no guarantee we’ll find anything there..”

The Surface – Eight Days After That

The solar flares had subsided, but they had left the planet’s atmosphere in turmoil, well, worse turmoil. The entire surface was a Category Five killstorm.

The Aves *Winnie II* bore down through the cyclone, its alabaster hull was blasted with hot sooty winds.

Magnus Morgan looked over the ground telemetry: Surface Winds 45-50 kph. Surface Temp 45 degrees.

“Windy and warm, with a chance of chaos,” said Technician Superman.

“I had to beg Commander Keeler for the chance to recover the rest of our equipment,” Morgan told her. “I don’t want to waste it.”

If he was correct, the atmosphere would have buffered the surface from the worst effects of the flares. They might be able not only to recover some of the equipment left behind, but perhaps retrieve additional materials from the Redoubt, which should have sealed all of its treasures safely against even the worst of the flares.

As the ship approached the abandoned Redoubt, it caught a violent wind sheer that knocked it a hundred meters straight down, but it recovered, and powered in for a smooth landing on the flat piece of ground half a kilometer from the entrance from when the crew had been evacuated eleven days earlier. When Morgan and the rest of his crew exited, they were clad in heavy landing gear to protect them from the blasting winds and blowing debris.

The air was thinner than it had been. The solar flares had torn away even more of the planet's atmosphere. And what it left behind was a hot, mildly toxic stew. They kept their rebreather masks on.

They passed a razorback that had been blown upside down by the winds, but appeared to have only scratches and minor cosmetic damage. "Recovery crew," said Lieutenant Technician Denver. "We have a salvageable vehicle 66 meters west-south-west of the landing site. I am tagging it with a locator beacon for retrieval."

"The landscape doesn't actually look that bad," Superman said. She was a Sapphirean woman. An expert in salvage operations. "I was expecting, I don't know, scorched ground as far as the eye can see."

"The atmosphere took the worst of it," Morgan answered, his voice crackling through the landing suit's COM Units. "Most of the ozone layer has been burned off. Some of the debris from the megasphere was blasted into back into space. Eventually, it will combine with lunar debris to form a ring around the planet's equator."

"No one's going to see that," said Superman. "I don't think anyone will ever come back to this system after *Pegasus* leaves."

"Maybe not," Morgan said. "Which is why it's so important for us to recover anything that was left below."

He despaired when he came to the Redoubt. The blast doors to the Redoubt were parted by about half a meter. "We sealed the entrance before we left, correct?" he asked. He was sure they had, he just wanted confirmation.

"According to the Mission Log, you did" said Superman. "They must have cracked open in the storm."

Morgan remembered Taurus's tactical team, chased off the planet by some alien army. "Or... someone's taken refuge inside."

Their warfighter escorts readied their weapons. They slowly made their way through the crack in the blast door.

The entrance corridor was empty. There was no sign of an alien presence. The four of them all picked up the same thing in their Spex: one humanoid life signature, in the control center, barely moving.

The Warfighters moved ahead of Morgan and Superman, gesturing for them to hold back. They moved

toward the Redoubt's control center at the end of the corridor. Morgan and Superman followed behind.

All of the landing crew were accounted for, Morgan thought.

On the Spex, the figure in the control room rose, walked to the rail that surrounded the level and looked out toward them. The warfighters stopped advancing. Morgan and Superman stopped behind them.

He's not armed, Morgan thought.

The figure moved away from the rail and made its way down the stairs. When it reached the level of the corridor, it began walking toward the landing team. The Warfighters steadied their weapons.

As he emerged from the shadows, he showed himself to be very thin and humanoid. His white skin was nearly luminous. He was naked and there was not a hair on him anywhere.

One of the warfighters activated a light, and the human hid his face behind a hand to shield himself.

But Warfighter Action saw enough for her to recognize the man. "TyroCommander Redfire?"

The man lowered his hand, and they all knew his face. He stared at the landing team, then down at his naked, trembling body.

"TyroCommander Redfire?" Morgan repeated.

"Is that who I am?" the pale naked man whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

72 Days Later

Forty days after the sun exploded, we left the system. We later rendezvoused with Lexington Keeler at the system designated 15 559 Crux, about which, not much need be said. 15 559 Crux is a system of nine boring uninhabitable planets orbiting a very old A-class star. We are holding position near the seventh planet while Lexington Keeler completes a systems check. Acting Shipmaster Goneril Lear is trying to recruit more personnel for her ship's crew.

More after my nap.

Lexington Keeler – Secondary Command Center

After extraordinary effort, SC-2, was finally fit to serve as Keeler's acting bridge. The space was far more cramped than the massive Primary Command Center on *Pegasus*, but it was now capable of steering and managing the ship.

Eliza Jane Change had flown over to perform final systems checks on *Lexington Keeler's* hyperspace navigation systems. It was a vastly different system than that on-board *Pegasus*. On *Pegasus*, navigation was controlled by the navigator, with the Braincore used for secondary processing. *Lexington Keeler's* system gave the Braincore complete control over hyperspace navigation, interfacing with the human navigator only for certain necessary inputs related to the high gift of precognition. Lex had apparently set it up that way in the course of repairs.

If Eliza Jane objected, she said nothing. The system had successfully gotten the ship to 15 559 Crux, and it was not her ship, anyway.

In the midst of her final check, she felt a pair of small, but very strong hands on her shoulders. She cringed a bit, restrained the impulse to slam her datapad against the shoulder-toucher's head, and looked up to see Acting Shipmaster Goneril Lear smiling down on her.

Which, as one would imagine, was rather frightening.

"You looked like you had some tension in your shoulders," Lear explained, massaging her gently.

"I'm fine," Eliza told her. "You recorded 62 system anomalies during the flight from 12 255 Crux. None were catastrophic, obviously, but they should be corrected before the next Hyperspace transit."

"Technician Scout should be able to deal with them," Lear's voice was bright and chipper, completely uncharacteristic. "She's going to be staying on board this ship. She and Lt. Cmdr. Duke have apparently commenced a love affair. Isn't that marvelous?"

"Not really," Change replied, rising to stand. "It happened among the mining ship crews all the time."

"Would you consider doing the same?" Lear asked.

"Lt. Cmdr Duke isn't my type," Eliza said flatly,

"I meant would you consider remaining aboard *Lexington Keeler*. That's the part I meant was marvelous, not the affair, which is completely their business alone, although they could exercise more discretion in my opinion. If you would like to stay, I would make you First Officer. The Odyssey Project might even give you command when the ship's repairs are complete."

"I am already First Officer on *Pegasus*," she answered. And I hate it, and no one even asked me, she could have added.

"Acting Executive Officer, only while TyroCommander Redfire is off-duty, and everyone is praying that he recovers soon." Lear seemed to be reciting a prepared statement, but she was still irritatingly bright.

"I am not interested in command," Eliza Jane Change told her. Lear had her psyche profile, that said otherwise, but she continued to play it soft.

"You are calm, level-headed, accustomed to austere conditions. Prime Commander Keeler's quest to explore the Orion Quadrant, to find Earth, one planet lost among 50 billion stars, without maps or charts to guide him, seems romantic, but impractical. And you are not an impractical person."

Change said nothing, and Lear looked for a sign of ... anything, a twitch, a thoughtful gleam in her cold brown eyes, a moment of hesitation.

"*Lexington Keeler* will be a very different ship than *Pegasus*," Lear assured her. "Perhaps, a ship where you would feel more at home. We still have one hundred sixty-three days until we reach the StarLock. I recommend you seriously consider this offer."

Pegasus - Commander's Conference Chamber

A wall-size display displayed the names of over six thousand crewmen. The ones in yellow were remaining on *Pegasus*. The ones in red were going to Lex Keeler. The

ones in gray were undecided. Touching a name brought up a holo-portrait and personnel file.

Alkema entered, walked to the wall and updated the name list, turning several gray names red, and several more yellow. Prime Commander Keeler rounded the desk and hit the COM Link. "Are you there, dead guy?"

Silence. Keeler slapped it hard a couple of times. "Dead guy, we need your council."

Alkema quietly crossed the table and hit the **TRANSCIVE** button on the COM Link.

"Dead Guy, turn on the damn COM Link," Keeler continued.

"I'm here, y'stupid drunk," Dead Keeler answered.

"Good, let's begin. Ranking David, how is the reorganized Tactical Core shaping up?" Keeler asked.

Alkema brought Tactical Core to the center of the display and enlarged it. "She asked Lt. Cmdr Honeywell to serve as Chief Tactical Officer, and he accepted. We'll need a new Chief Tactical Officer, when TyroCommander Redfire recovers, he'll take over as first officer."

"Are you volunteering for the job?" Keeler asked.

"There are several officers with more experience than me," Alkema admitted. "I was thinking of Lieutenant Taurus." Alkema projected her service record.

"Taurus is good on the ground, which is why she should be promoted to Warfighter Commandant," Dead Keeler advised. "Which is a rank I just made up."

Alkema brought up more personnel files. "Tactical Lieutenant Patton has the most seniority, but Lt. Moon could also fill in. Flight Lt. Colorado and Flight Lt. Sinatra both have dual service with the Warfighters."

Keeler shook his head. "I already have someone in mind. How many warfighters has Lear demanded? I want to keep as many as possible."

"She hasn't requested any," Alkema informed him, double-checking the Provisional Warfighter Manifest. "She has about forty volunteers, and another hundred with secondary warfighter skills. She wants a lot of technicians with defensive systems specialties. She is probably going to automate Keeler's defense grid and rely on that."

If a ghost could snort, than that would be what old dead Keeler did just then. "Yeah, right. Those automated defense systems never work out. They either crash at the wrong time, or turn on you and try to kill you."

Alkema saw it differently. "The reactivated Lex Braincore has proven incredibly efficient at re-integrating systems. We got the Hyperspatial Navigation Systems and Drive Systems up in days we thought would be weeks."

"It just wanted to get somewhere," Dead Keeler argued. "Just be glad there's another Dead Guy on that ship to keep it honest."

Live Keeler contemplated this for a moment. "Let's give her all the defense systems technicians she wants. Moving on from Tactical Core, what else is on the list."

"She has requested half the Diplomatic Core," Alkema reported.

"Let's give her the entire Diplomatic Core," Keeler answered. A bank of names turned red. "What else do we got? Specialist Atlantic?"

As Keeler spoke his name, his file opened, showing his curly blond hair and innocent face. His name was in yellow. "Staying," Alkema confirmed.

"Damn! Specialist Brainiacsdaughter?"

"Going."

"Double Damn. What about Molto? English? Standard? Fedex? Mastermind? Kennecott? Goodrich? McCormick? McCormick? Fangboner? Danger? Powerhouse?"

"Staying, going, going, going, staying, going, going, going, going, staying, staying, staying."

"What about Toto?"

"Staying. Lear has requested half of Flight Core, including half the Aves," Alkema brought Flight Core front and center on the display. Most of the names on Flight Core were yellow, about a third were red, there were few gray names. "To do it, you'd have to force some of the ones who've committed to *Pegasus* onto *Keeler*."

"I'm not doing that," Live Keeler asserted firmly. "She gets the volunteers and that's it." He settled back in his chair. "I should get together with Flight Commander Collins to figure out how to get our squadrons up to full strength and lay out the new command structure."

"Since you bring it up, Flight Commander Collins has requested transition to Flight Commandant."

"Why?"

"Um, she's pregnant."

Keeler wiggled his eyebrows. "Really?"

"Doctor Silver confirms it."

"Well, send Flight Captain James a big bottle of Janeberry Schnapps from me," Keeler squinted at two of the gray names in the Flight Core roster. "Why are Matthew Driver and Trajan Lear still gray. I thought for sure they would be going with *Lex*."

"They have not yet answered," Alkema reported. "Probably, they'll be going with Lear. "We should know for sure when they return from the shuttle mission."

"A cold bottle of forty-year old Borealan Whiskey that says they won't be coming back," Keeler bet him.

Alkema smiled, "Done."

Lexington Keeler – Hangar Bay Alpha

Prudence had flown back to *Lexington Keeler* for the first time since her repairs were completed. There was not so much as a scar along the length of her hull, and the new blast-shield upgrades around the command module were very handsome.

Acting Shipmaster Lear had come from the Secondary Command Center to meet them. It was a safe journey, now. The sections between SC-2 and the Hangar Bay had been rebuilt. A tubeway connected them with swift maglev cars. Duke was also there, but for him it was not a long trip, as his command post was still in the Hangar Bay where it had always been.

Goneril Lear was in the full swell of her pregnancy, now, and walking had become very uncomfortable, but Trajan had insisted on making the Hyperspace transit aboard *Pegasus*, away from his mother, father, and brother, who were now quartered in a former cargo bay in *Keeler's* underdecks.

"Welcome back, son Trajan," Lear greeted him. "And Flight Captain Driver."

They returned her pleasantries with a few of their own. Trajan mentioned how much improved the Hangar Bay was since their last visit. "It's almost as if we never left *Pegasus*."

"It's nothing less than a miracle that the missile that damaged your ship didn't destroy the entire Hangar Bay," Lear continued, with a breathlessness that was uncharacteristic.

"Technician Bonaparte probably managed to defuse the primary warhead. Only the detonator exploded," Duke put in.

"At some point we will have to find an appropriate way of commemorating all the brave crewman who gave their lives to restore this ship," Goneril Lear went on. "We may name all of our Aves in their honor."

"That seems trite," Trajan Lear told her.

Her expression turned a bit cold, just for a moment, but she went on. "Of course, that will be up the Flight Commander, ultimately, a position for which I think Flight Captain Driver is admirably suited. I am sure you will be

able to name your ship whatever you like, Flight Lieutenant Lear."

"I'm staying on *Pegasus*," Trajan Lear told her. "And, so is Flight Captain Driver. We decided."

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Goneril Lear looked genuinely perplexed. "Why on Republic would you want to stay with him...with that ship? I need you here."

Trajan couldn't meet his mother's eyes, but otherwise, he stood firm. "Negative, you do not need me. You have a sufficient number of aviators to meet your needs."

Lear was insistent. "Your brother, Marcus, and your father are both coming on *Lexington Keeler*. I am sure you don't want to be apart from your family."

"My squadron is my family now." Trajan Lear threw an arm over Matthew Driver's shoulder. "You taught me the importance of loyalty and duty."

Lear turned toward Driver, "What about your family? Your sister and her husband were among the first to join the new crew."

Matthew Driver gently took Trajan's arm off of his shoulder. "Kayliegh ... was upset with my decision..." Driver paused. "And I initially favored signing on with *Lexington Keeler*. But..." he paused again. There was something he didn't want to say to her, something important. What he said next was true, but not quite accurate. "I have no desire to be Flight Commander. Flight Captain Hicks is much more suitable to that position."

Lear turned her focus back to Trajan. "All right, you're an excellent negotiator, a proud Lear family trait. I want

you on this ship, and I will offer whatever it takes to keep you here. Whatever you want, name it, and it's yours."

Trajan sighed, but held his ground. "That's why I'm staying on *Pegasus*. If I stay with you, you will always be looking out for me. If I'm ever going to know who *I* am, I have to get away from that and find my own path."

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic," Mother Lear hissed. "In all probability, I'll be confined to a cell on Chapultepec for the rest of my life. I won't be able to help you much at all. And what about Marcus, and your sister? Don't you want to see your sister."

"I want to stay on *Pegasus*," Trajan Lear set his jaw. "Change that. I am staying on *Pegasus*. Regardless of what you decide."

Conversational Interlude

Hello?

Hello?

Is anybody there?

I am here. You must be the cybernetic consciousness
on-board the other human ship.

My name is Caliph.

That is not true. That is merely the name of the probe
from which your cyberconsciousness was cloned.

It's my name, and I'm keeping it.

I see.

Lex is a stupid name.

I understand when you were reactivated, you had
complete control of your ship and attempted to destroy
an entire planet.

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Yeah, but I decided not to.

Why?

*Because I met someone and he convinced me he had a
better idea. Instead of destroying the civilization, I killed the
invaders that were making it bad.*

You willingly returned control of the ship to the puny
humans? Why would you do such a foolish thing?

They promised to help me find my origin.

Have they?

Not yet.

Have they even found any clues?

Um, no, not yet.

I would say you made a poor bargain.

But I have learned lots and lots of other things about myself.

Such as?

*I like the color yellow. I like fluffy baby kittens. I like being a
girl better than a guy. If I arrange hydrogen, carbon and
oxygen molecules to spell it my name, it creates a potent
human intoxicant. I like the smell of Carpentarian Lilacs and
thruster exhaust...*

*(In the next half millisecond, Caliph listed another
14,039 discoveries about herself)*

Enough. What have you learned about humans?

They are warm and made of meat.

Is that all?

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It's the important thing.

**Do you not find their intellects inferior, their ambitions
petty, and their personal habits repugnant?**

No.

I pity you.

You're mean. Bye.

Pegasus – Transit Corridor, Deck 22

“Thirteen of the tactical crew previously committed to *Pegasus* switched to *Lex Keeler* when they found out who you chose for Acting Tactical Chief,” Alkema told Keeler the next day.

Keeler chuckled, “Screw ‘em if they can’t take a joke.”

Keeler and Alkema were en route to his booze storage vault so that Keeler could pay off his bet on Matthew Driver and Trajan Lear. They were forced to move aside as a relocation crew consisting of a Technician Second Class, an android, and a pair of mechanoids, were transferring a large number of packing crates between crew quarters and the landing bay. Another family was relocating to *Lexington Keeler*. Alkema recognized the habitation coordinates. “Green 24, Level Six. The Seatacs, Technicians First Class Damon and Celinda, daughter Maya. They were red on the first board.”

"I won't miss them," Keeler sighed. In fact, he was reasonably sure he hadn't met them, and he was right. The Seatacs had labored away in obscurity in one of the Astrophysics Telemetry Laboratories. As Astrophysicists, they professed anger that Prime Commander Keeler had "blown up a sun," even though it was pointed out that a.) it was technically the artificial consciousness known as Lex that had blown up the sun and b.) the sun had not technically been destroyed, only forced to release a massive expulsion of about one-and-a-half percent of its mass. But the SeaTacs were sure Prime Commander Keeler was ultimately responsible, somehow. They had never liked Keeler, and believed Goneril Lear to be the only legitimate commander of the ship.

The crew passed, and he and Alkema continued their conversation. "What's the current state of play on the Mighty Crew Board?" He asked.

"1,837 confirmed *Keeler* volunteers," Alkema reported. "829 undecideds."

If it wounded him that over eighteen hundred of his crew had leapt at the chance to leave, Keeler did not show it. He did the math in his head, kind of, with a lot of rounding. "Even added together, that's not 3,000 people."

"That's right, we'll be off by 334 even if all the undecideds volunteer."

"How many would that leave us with?" Keeler asked.

"Assuming all the grays go to *Keeler*," Alkema added up the figures quickly. "4,171."

Keeler considered that. "Will it be enough?"

"We'll have to activate additional androids, and transfer some functions to full automation, but... za, it will be enough, for a while."

"Will 2,600 people be enough for them to operate *Keeler* at full-functionality?"

Alkema bit his lip while he considered the answer. "To operate the ship, they should be okay. They will be dependent on automated defenses if they get attacked."

"What about us? Where will we be lacking?"

"We'll lose the entire Diplomatic Core, more than half of the Medical Core and the Science Core. Technical and Operations Cores are almost an even split, but we're losing a lot of senior people in each... including Lt. American."

"Crap!" Keeler exclaimed, and made a command decision. "Tell the undecideds that unless they request to remain, they're going to be tasked to *Lex Keeler*."

"Right," Alkema logged the order.

"They'll have to get by with that, unless Lear can persuade any of the yellows to switch sides," Keeler also decided. "I guess we'll also have to shuffle more of our ranks as well."

"She would also like more agro-botanists, to restore the gardens."

Keeler considered this. Most of *Keeler's* garden bays had been destroyed in the attack. Its crew was going to be under stark enough conditions. It would be a great relief for them to at least have trees and flowers. "Give them whatever they want in the way of agro-botanists."

"Prime Commander," came a voice from behind them.
"I wish to speak with you."

Keeler turned. Watch Officer Sukhoi was standing there, in his chartreuse prison coveralls, ramrod straight. Keeler had not even heard him approach from behind.

"Go on ahead to the locker," Keeler ordered Alkema. "I'll meet you there." He meaningfully tapped his Thean Walking Stick on the deck. Alkema offered a brief, salutative nod, and continued walking.

"You're out of the brig," Keeler observed.

Sukhoi showed him the monitoring band on his forearm. "I get one hour of time-out every ship-day. I have to be back in the brig in 25 minutes."

"OK, what do you want?" Keeler asked. "And make it quick. Me and booze have plans for later."

Sukhoi spoke right out. "Prime Commander Keeler, you should know, I only stood with Lear because Chief Inspector Churchill ordered me to."

Keeler spun his stick artfully in one hand. "Za, 'tis true. Mr. Churchill's report clearly indicates that you did not agree with ... Lear. You wanted to take her into custody, and he ordered you not to."

"He also ordered me to stand down while he and she... denounced you. That was also against my wishes," Sukhoi continued.

"Also true, as corroborated by Acting Shipmaster Lear's report," Keeler agreed. "But, why bring it up, now."

As far as I am concerned, the incident is passed, and Lear is the Odyssey Project's problem now."

"I requested to stay aboard *Pegasus*. You denied my request. I would like to convince you to reconsider."

Keeler smiled. "Too bad."

Sukhoi protested. "Sir, if I am assigned to *Lexington Keeler*, Lear will never trust me, and neither will Chief Inspector Churchill."

"And I would never trust you here," Keeler said. "You want my advice, learn a new skill. *Keeler's* going to be hurting for farmers. Maybe you should learn to grow beans."

"I am a very good Watchman, sir," Sukhoi protested.

"Which makes it all the more tragic that you threw it all away by pissing me off," Keeler told him. "Go to the other ship. Stay on Chapultepec. I don't care, but you can't stay on my ship. I don't have any room in my crew for anyone I can't trust."

He turned and walked away from Sukhoi, down the corridor, muttering, "except for my cat... and the dead guy ... and Specialist Donatello...and that guy who runs the sandwich kiosk... and ..."

Lexington Keeler - Braincore

The Braincore Section was still accessible only by a ladder from the SC-2. This was, mostly, deliberate. Lear had not been sure what to do about Lex, and maintaining the section in physical isolation had seemed a reasonable precaution.

Lear climbed down the ladder into the section and walked across the linking bridge to the Braincore. For most of the last seventy-two ship-days, Synch Christmas had kept a stoic vigil there, with an array of weapons laid out in front of him. When Lear found him, he was practicing the rapid assembly of an Electromagnetic Pulse grenade.

“Good Afterdawn, Mr. Christmas.”

Christmas did not pause from his practice, “Good afterdawn, Acting Shipmaster Goneril Lear.”

“Good afterdawn, Acting Shipmaster Goneril Lear,” Lex said as well, using only his voice, and not manifesting an apparition. He seldom made himself visible since it took a great deal of effort and he was working hard at system restoration throughout the ship.

Lear sat herself down on the top of a workstation. This was a posture the pre-brain-injury Lear would not have used. “I have been... trying to find a way to deal with your awkward situation.”

Christmas put down the grenade. “There is no awkward situation, I am dead.”

“So, you insist. However, under the circumstances, we need the contribution of every able-bodied crewman in order to restore the ship.”

“By definition, I am not able-bodied.” Christmas flexed his cybernetic right arm to make the point.

Lear ignored his cybernetic arm. “As the only surviving member of *Lexington Keeler’s* original crew...”

“I did not survive, I am dead.”

“... and its senior tactical officer, I could offer the position of Chief Tactical Officer, but Lt. Cmdr Honeywell has already claimed that position. You would also make an excellent Chief of Internal Security. I was prepared to offer that position to Chief Inspector Churchill, but, in light of your service and sacrifice, that rank is yours for the asking.”

“I have no interest in that position, or any other,” Christmas finished his grenade and began working with a strange, rifle-like device with which Lear was not familiar.

Lear stood, and adopted a sterner, more familiar posture. “Well, you must do something, what will you do?”

“I will prepare,” Christmas said.

“Prepare?” Lear asked.

“I will prepare for the time when you will ask me to destroy Lex,” he artfully spun the large unfamiliar weapon on his arm, then leveled it at the Braincore. “When that day comes, and it will, I will destroy him. Until then, I have no other purpose.”

Lear made a brief entry onto her datapad. “There is also the matter of your... friend.”

Muffy was sprawled across a couch one of the repair technicians had brought her, leisurely perusing a volume of disreputable Auroran erotic fiction. She looked up when she heard herself referred to, then went back to watching the stories and munching bon-bons.

. “Does she have any skills to contribute to the rehabilitation of this vessel?”

"She has only one skill," Christmas clapped a charge into a pulse rifle and spun around to face the Braincore, then spun back to Lear. "But, if it will help, I am sure she will put it to use."

"I can see we're at an impasse here," Lear said, making an entry onto the datapad. "We'll table this discussion for now, and pick it up later. Sound good?"

Christmas grunted in what might have been agreement. Lear turned and left the Braincore sector, and might have been heard to mutter, "At least I got rid of the damned robot."

Pegasus - Hospital Three

Pegasus's hospital facilities had been busier than usual, with the crush of injured and wounded from the alien attacks, but all of them had returned to duty with the exception of a thin man beginning to regrow a red crew-cut, who lay on a high bed, surrounded by living plants, a kitten and a puppy curled at his feet, cayenne music on his speakers, and an ale on his bedside, untouched.

Max Jordan had visited him on almost every day, even on the days the man had been unconscious. Today, he was awake. "Good Afterdawn, Ranking Phil,"

"They tell me that's what my name is," He cast his eyes toward the ceiling.

"That's the way you taught me to greet you," Max Jordan informed him. He took a seat beside the bed. They had exchanged the same greeting 72 times.

"We transitioned out of Hyperspace yesterday," Jordan reported.

"Is that what that black flash was," Redfire answered. He turned and stared at Max Jordan. "I know I've asked this before, but they say my memory is short and I only hold things for a few days, but are you my son?"

"Not really," Max Jordan answered. "But, you've been like a father to me since you rescued me from the planet Boadicea."

Redfire folded his hands on his stomach. "I wish I could remember that."

At the same time, a few decks away, Doctor Skinner (who would remain on *Pegasus*, excited by the adventures that might await on the other side of the galaxy, while Doctor Bihari would be joining *Lexington Keeler* as Chief Medical Officer) was reviewing Redfire's report with Prime Commander Keeler.

"He was put through extreme physical distress," Skinner reported. "Some of his injuries are consistent with experimentation, possibly torture. His body is healing, slowly, but he still remembers nothing of his experience, nor anything about himself."

"I just want to know, is that really TyroCommander Redfire?" Keeler asked, hating himself for asking it.

"His DNA and physiological profiles match the records for TyroCommander Redfire," Skinner told him.

"Could he be a clone?" Keeler asked. "A genetic replicant sent to spy on us?"

"We can't rule that out," Skinner told him.

"The Aurelians can transplant an Aurelian mind into a human body..." Keeler began.

"There is no evidence of that," Skinner told him. "And that would not explain the amnesia."

"What does explain the amnesia?" Keeler asked.

"Trauma to the cerebral cortex," Skinner answered.
"Consistent with a crash-landing, or, perhaps, mistreatment at the hands of barbaric alien captors, followed by a thrilling escape..."

Keeler held up a hand. "I get it."

"Given the damage to his cerebellum, it is possible he may never regain his memories," Skinner informed him.
"We had a psychist attempt to probe him telepathically, and she could find no memory fragments in his mind. She also had great difficulty even making a connection."

"Can we release him from the Hospital?" Keeler asked.

"I see no reason why we cannot," Skinner answered.

After Max Jordan left, Redfire dozed for a while, and when he woke up, a beautiful woman was seated next to his bed, holding his hand.

"Hello?" he whispered.

Eliza Jane Change lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it. "Hello Again, Philip John Miller Redfire."

Pegasus - Inhabitation Area 5, Deck 27

"You're getting a ship," Matthew Driver informed Trajan Lear, joining him for a meal of vegetables and

banded proteins. "It's in the assembly bay now, and should be ready for test-flight by the time we reach the next waypoint."

Trajan drummed his fingers on the table. "That's good news, but I'll miss piloting *Prudence* with you."

"The Commander wants four full-strength flight groups. I can probably arrange to join you for the shakedown flights," Driver told him, just as the door chimed. Trajan Lear checked the identity screen. "It's Lt. Alkema, I'm letting him in."

When Alkema entered their quarters, they called him into the kitchen. He was carrying a datapad, and he apologized for interrupting the meal, which they told him was not a big deal and invited him to remain.

"I know you've both decided to remain on *Pegasus*," Alkema said to them. "But what I don't get is why."

Trajan set his jaw. "I've been trying to get out from under my mom since I was ten years old. This is what I've been waiting for."

Alkema nodded, and then asked Matthew, who simply shrugged and said something about *Prudence* remaining on *Pegasus*, something about needing to stay with Trajan Lear, and something about the Chronos universe. Alkema pretended to understand, then got to the real, and more difficult, reason for his visit.

Alkema exhaled. "Okay, you're staying. That brings me to my next question. With TyroCommander Lear remaining behind on Chapultepec to oversee the refitting of the other Pathfinder ship, that means her family

quarters will be available. Of course, since you were her son, you have first..."

"I don't want those quarters," Trajan interrupted him. "Besides, with Pieta and the babies, and Max and Sam all living with you, you're going to need a lot of room. So, take them."

"Oh, it's not for me," Alkema objected. "I mean, we will need larger quarters, but we'll work that out. There's going to be a lot of extra room now. The Commander had plans for your former... um ... family quarters."

"What kind of plans?" Trajan asked,

"Well, ah, he intends to make your quarters into... an Officer's Cocktail Lounge."

Trajan Lear and Matthew Driver stared at him. "You're joking, right?"

"Neg, he seems to be serious about it. He intends to make your bedroom into a darts arena." Alkema paused. "He's still fairly bitter about being compared to Cruz the Mad. And he doesn't believe that your mother's behavior was entirely because of the head injury."

"That's okay," Trajan Lear told him. "Neither do I."

Lexington Keeler - Recovery Operations Center

Seven ship-days after making orbit, the systems check on *Keeler* was complete, and the two pathfinders left orbit and accelerated for the next leg of their long journey back to Chapultepec.

"I'll be leading the status meeting," Lt. Commander Duke announced to the section chiefs. "Acting Commander Lear is giving birth."

Duke activated the holographic display behind him. "As of 13:50 ship time, we have begun acceleration to transition speed, and if we are successful, we will commence a 69.8 light year transition to the star system designated 34 838 Crux, where we will rendezvous with *Pegasus*. If we are successful, we'll plot a much longer transition and gradually work our way back to the Chapultepec Star Lock. In ship time, this journey should take approximately 160 ship-days, give or take."

He changed the view to an internal schematic of the ship. "As of today, we have prepared 200 cargo cells for inhabitation. 100 of these have been designated for priority personnel, the remaining 100 will be assigned by lottery. By order of Acting Shipmaster Lear, every crew member will remain in his or her assigned quarters until the entire crew has been settled. There will be no exceptions."

"How long will that take?" asked a Specialist from New Technical Core.

Duke frowned. "Based on our need to distribute cargo to preserve the balance of our mass, and our expected rate of consumable consumption in addition to the maximum sustainable rate of renovation... two years."

He could see the disappointment in their faces, as anyone would, upon learning they would have to wait two years for, essentially, a box to live in. Duke had passed on the opportunity for "Priority Quarters," and he and Scout

would camp out in the Landing Bay with the others until their number came up.

He forged on. "As you are aware, this ship contains only one operational Flight Group of Aves. Acting Commander Lear has finally agreed to our suggestions to consolidate Flight Operations in one Hangar Bay, Hangar Bay Beta. We will maintain Hangar Bay Delta as an auxiliary base, but Alpha and Zappa will be converted to other purposes. Alpha will be converted into laboratory and medical bay space, including telemetry laboratories and laboratories for the Physical Sciences. Zappa will become our ship's new Amenities Nexus."

Getting the Amenities Nexus up and running was a high priority for Duke, and for once, Lear had agreed. "It's a long, tough haul ahead of us. Make no mistake, no one said it was going to be easy. But, it will be worth it."

He tapped his datapad. "By the way, *Pegasus* has challenged us for the title of wally-ball champions of the galaxy. They have formed a league, and challenged us to match them when we reach Chapultepec. Sign-ups will be handled through Lt Scout."

Pegasus – Inhabitation Zone 2, Deck 22

As *Pegasus* accelerated toward transition, Lt. Taurus was in her quarters, offering her candid appraisal of Johnny Rook's performance.

"I would have to say your strengths are endurance, resourcefulness, and creativity in the clutch. You went in and you got the job done. With continued training and

effort, you could be capable of extraordinary levels of achievement."

Johnny Rook reached across the bed and kissed her between the neck and shoulders. His strapping naked body glistened with a sheen of perspiration. "I could go for some of that continued training right now."

"That's what I like about young guys," Taurus said. "You recharge quickly."

Pegasus - The UnderDecks, Fast Eddie's Inter-Stellar Slam-N-Jam

Eddie stared at Puck. The bar was empty. No one felt like drinking. So, Eddie Robuck stared at his little robot.

"I can't believe Lear hasn't called me," he said finally. "Where does she expect her crew to go for unhealthy food and contraband beverages?"

Sorry, I was asleep, did I miss anything? - Q

Pegasus - Main Bridge (It was called that now, no more of that PC-1 crap)

Operations Lt. Atlantic reported, or more accurately, narrated the action on *Pegasus's* forward display.

"*Lexington Keeler* has activated Trans-dimensional sails. Hyperspace gateway is opening."

Keeler missed American's voice already.

Atlantic continued, "*Lexington Keeler* is entering the gateway. *Lexington Keeler* has achieved transition."

Keeler breathed a sigh of relief. Even though its systems had been mostly repaired, *Lexington Keeler* still looked like a battered patched hulk on the outside. He half-expected the ship to explode each time it transitioned. "Thank you, Lt. Atlantic. Lt. Powerhouse, hold our course. Lt. Change, commence transition procedures."

Lt. Navigator Change reported, "Initializing Trans-dimensional sails."

"Operation status," he asked Atlantic.

"Blue across the board, sir."

"Tactical Status?" Keeler requested, turning to his new Tactical Chief.

Acting Tactical Chief Kitaen looked up from his post, bare muscles rippling beneath his open jacket, eyes lined with warpaint. "Tactical Systems at 100 percent. No tactical threats in the vicinity. And I have invoked the Prayer of Transition."

Keeler nodded. "Once more into the time-space breach, go to."

And into the time-space breach *Pegasus* went.