



JAMES WITTENBACH
WORLDS-APART BOOK 01
01 MERIDIAN *LITE*

CH-01

Commander William Randolph Keeler, his seat in the full reclining position, gin and tonic in one hand, a copy of *Significant Galactic Archaeological Finds of the Colonial Era* in the other, snored as the *Aves Prudence* carried him toward the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, which he, through no fault of his own, had been tasked to command. He was awakened by the voice of his pilot. "Commander, we are entering *Pegasus's* gravitational influence, the shift can be very disorienting. The standard recommendation is to secure yourself in and close your eyes. You may also wish to ingest a sedative and/or engage in the metabolism stabilization meditation of your choice."

Keeler nodded and set his book aside. He rose from his seat and crossed the cabin of the *Aves*. He took the lift to the command module, keyed the hatch, and entered.

"Hoy," said Keeler brightly, tapping the side of the command chair with his walking stick.

Driver bristled. "Sir, I would recommend that you remain seated during the approach..."

The young pilot offered Keeler the second seat in the command module. Keeler declined, choosing to kneel on one knee behind him. "What is your name, lieutenant?"

"Flight Lieutenant Driver, Matthew Driver."

"Where are you from Flight Lieutenant Driver Matthew Driver."

"Midlothian settlement ... Republic."

Keeler gave him a friendly tap on the shoulder with his walking stick. "Driver... I took that for a Sapphorean name, but I could tell you were from Republic. Is Midlothian a nice place?"

“Midlothian is in an antarctic region of planet Republic, built into the side of a mountain range. The air turns to liquid in the winter.”

"Most people don't like that," Keeler conceded. Not much for small talk were the Republickers, so he thought. He had hoped commanding a ship on which half the personnel were Republickers would provide him a range of new targets to strike down with the sharp wit and eccentric behavior he had perfected the way only someone born to privilege, security, and the Keeler pedigree could. So far, the Republickers attached to the Odyssey Project had not been very sporting.

"I have visual on the *Pegasus*," Lt. Driver told him.

Keeler rose and stared out through the canopy, seeing nothing yet. Perhaps, the young pilot had been trying to end the conversation. Then, at the edge of their field of view, a tiny pale light became larger, eventually resolving itself into a huge double diamond. As they flew in closer, Keeler could make out transport and cargo shuttles flitting around the great ship like a tiny swarm of lightflies.

They rendezvoused head on, nose-to-nose until *Prudence* lifted slightly enough to flash over the four-and-a-half kilometers long dorsal plane of the ship. *Pegasus* was as breathtaking as Keeler had been led to believe. The sparkling shield of the upper hull resolved into ever greater levels of color, texture, and detail. The very front of the ship was done over in a huge crest that displayed the winged horse from which the ship ultimately took its name. Behind it, along the topside, at the very front of the ship was the main body of weaponry; the missile hatcheries that made *Pegasus* as deadly as she was beautiful. The forward sections and the command towers at the rear were connected by long expanses of shimmering, translucent deck plating. Clear millistrati ultracrystal protected the habitation levels. Beneath it, Keeler could see flashes of gardens and architecture, as well as transport pods moving on the intraship highways. At the back of the ship, the two baroque command towers loomed over the shipscape.

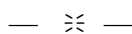
Pegasus was nothing like the shuttles, the freighters, or even the liners that plied space between Sapphire and Republic, although it would doubtless inspire imitation. Its design bespoke a race of explorers who cared as much about beauty and wonder as they did about technology and discovery. If humanity was indeed returning the stars, Keeler thought, we are indeed going in style.

Flight Lt. Driver cut his speed again as the *Aves* flashed over the ship's topside. As they passed the command tower and looked into the space beyond, Keeler could pick out, in the distance, the Construction facilities for the next two ships, *Republic* and *Sapphire*. The *Aves* arced around behind *Pegasus* and much more slowly began its final approach.

"*Prudence* announces final approach to landing bay alpha. Confirm beacon and lock."

"*Pegasus* flight control to *Aves Prudence*, you are cleared for landing."

There was a row of huge doors on the stern of the ship that guarded the landing bays. Keeler smiled as the pilot angled his ship toward the door that was opening.



There was a reception area off Landing Bay Alpha, where the crew could receive persons of importance away from the metal and steam of the landing bay itself. When Keeler entered the reception area, and saw two score of senior officers and section chiefs waiting for him, he realized that he would have to make a speech. This prospect would be bothersome to some people, Keeler knew, although he could not understand why. In his profession, he had grown to love nothing more than a captive audience, obligated to be polite to him.

A blond woman, about his same age, came forward. She was slight in build, but carried with her an air of authority. "Commander Keeler, I am Executive Commander Goneril Lear, your first officer. It gives me great pleasure to officially turn over command of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus* to you, effective immediately. Welcome aboard."

Applause erupted in the room. Keeler took her hand, and she in turn, clasped his in the two-handed grasp that was the standard handshake of *Republic*. As she smiled and stepped aside, Keeler sized up the room and chose from the four speeches he had rehearsed during the journey.

"Thank you, Executive Commander Lear. Let me say that being charged with commanding the best ship and the best crew our worlds can provide is a most intimidating prospect. I regret that I have not had more time to train with you, to get to know your movements or your philosophies, your ways and your means, but I look forward to beginning now."

"This ship, this *Pegasus*, is a ship of destiny. When our colonial ancestors founded *Sapphire* and *Republic*, they were building a future for humanity. As we leave our homeworlds in search of our brother-, sister-, and cousin-worlds, we are leaving their future, in order to discover our past;

reversing into tomorrow, but there is more to our odyssey than simply backtracking on an old trail.”

“There may be thousands of human colonies out there. As far as we know, none of them has yet recovered the technology to navigate among the stars. Finding them, bringing them back into the family of humankind, that is our real mission.”

“What awaits us out there? Answers. Questions. Wonders. Horrors. Barbarians. Gods. Humans so changed we would not recognize them as our own kindred. Worlds with stories, cultures, languages, philosophies that we could not, in our most fevered dreams imagine.”

“... and somewhere amidst the vast darkness of space, lit only by the widely scattered campfires of human settlement is the great mother-world, the Earth, where humanity arose, where God breathed life into us, the cradle of humankind. Will we be the ship that finds Mother Earth? Will we find her in the lifetime of any crewman on this ship? I can not say. Those answers are hidden from us, and yet we ache to go forth and find them.

"I, for one, can hardly wait to begin. We have a fine ship, an excellent crew. Fear no evil. God is near. Thank you."

One of the ship's Holy Men offered a short prayer of blessing. When he had finished, Keeler stepped down from the podium and was beginning to work the crowd when his second officer approached him again. "Commander, would you like to visit Primary Command?"

"You mean the Main Bridge?"

“Some people call it that. We prefer Primary Command 1, or, PC-1 if we’re feeling informal.”

“Sure. Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

"May I join you," asked a tall, thin officer with Lieutenant Commander’s stripes on his red-trimmed jacket. His hair was crew-cut, and he wore fingerless leather gloves, the kind Master Artists wore on Sapphire.

"Of course," Keeler answered.

The lanky lieutenant lay his hand on Keeler's shoulder, the standard Sapphirean greeting. "I am Tactical Lieutenant..."

"Philip John Redfire," Keeler interrupted. "I met you between Chief Science Officer Morgan and Chief Engineering Officer What's-His-Name."

"Ojala," Redfire filled in. "Cuahatamoc Ojala."

"Za, him and his little dog, too."

The three of them left the reception and entered a transport pod. "Primary Command," Lear ordered. The pod began rising vertically through the Command Tower. Lear spoke. "The death of Commander St. Lawrence could not have come at a worse time, so close to the launch date. We were all very pleased to hear that you had accepted the offer of command."

"Right," Redfire muttered.

"Did I hear you say something, lieutenant?" snapped Lear.

Redfire smiled ever so slightly. "I hope so."

A silent moment of unbearable tension ensued before Keeler reached into an inner pocket of his uniform jacket and withdrew a packet of honey-roasted almond-nuts he had saved from the shuttle. "Honey-roasted almond-nut anyone?" he offered his companions. By the time they finished politely declining, the pod had reached the Primary Command/PC-1/Main Bridge.

It was large, as Keeler would have expected. There was both an outer area and an inner area. Forty people, or so, occupied stations in the outer bridge, which wrapped around the inner bridge in a kind of chunky parabolic curve, picked out in colors of grey, black, and navy blue. There was a raised area at the rear, accessible by ladder and lift, currently unoccupied, that contained viewports open to the stars, and looking over the ship's dorsal expanse. All in all, Keeler decided, not bad, albeit a little subdued for his tastes.

"Impressive," Keeler said. He walked up to a station. "Excuse me, ..."

"Specialist Shane American, commander," said the woman at the station. American was a dark-skinned woman, with close-cropped blond hair.

"Specialist American, report ship's status."

"Commander, I'm only monitoring cargo loading ... I..."

Lear stepped forward. "Commander, you can apprise yourself of the status of any area or system of the ship instantaneously through direct neural link."

Keeler looked over Specialist American's station. A large black hologram display/monitor stood before her, the surface of the console contained several large touch-interfaces which would take direct command inputs through neural linking. The design had scarcely changed in centuries, but then, you didn't phuck with a classic design. "Specialist American, I want to know what you know of this ship's status."

Without turning away from her screen, Specialist American brought up a systems status review screen. She touched her fingertips to a panel on the upper right of her console. "Propulsion systems on stand-by. All other systems operating at optimal efficiency levels."

Keeler snapped his fingers and turned suddenly to his tactical officer. "I remember you Redfire. During the student protests in 10,085, you occupied my office and used my ceremonial robes to wipe your bottom."

Redfire smiled. "I'm so glad you remember."

"Za, I remember. Master's in Pyrotechnic Art. Class of 7986. For your Master's Thesis, you wanted to blow up my ancestral estate."

"I was motivated by art, not hostility."

"No doubt, but I was impressed by the computer simulation you did construct. The image of me running outside in my bunnybeast slippers with my mistress while the House Proper collapsed in flames was especially inventive."

"Thank you."

"Casting Professor Starcross of the Erotic Arts faculty as my mistress was even more inventive."

"That's not what I heard."

"Gentlemen," Lear interrupted. "Perhaps you two would like to reminisce later."

"Of course," Keeler said. "Lt. Cmdr. Redfire, show me the ship's weaponry."

Redfire brought up a weapons status display. "With this ship's weapons array, we should be able to broast anything that looks at us the wrong way. The Accipiters and Aves provide both long-range defense and offensive capability, of course. We also have missiles, particle cannons, anti-proton beams... I carved my initials in an asteroid."

Keeler proceeded on his survey of the command center, pausing over another station. "You look busy. What's going on, here?"

"There was a problem in waste reclamation," the crewman explained. "I'm trying to isolate it."

"What happened?"

The crewman shrugged. "Nothing serious. It shut itself down for twenty minutes this morning. Nobody can figure out why ... it's probably just..."

"A system glitch," said Keeler, the crewman and Redfire in unison. Keeler looked at the other two. "Somebody owes me a gaseous beverage. Have you had many system glitches?"

"No more than usual for a system of this complexity," answered the crewman.

"Commander, I have personally reviewed the system glitches. They have all been minor. None have affected any major systems." Lear reported. Redfire was standing behind her, and Keeler detected just the slightest shake of his head, and a glance at the deck.

Keeler nodded. "Very well, I'll review your analysis later. Is that my chair?"

At the center of PC-1, and overlooked the outer bridge were six stations arranged around command and tactical main stations. This was the true command center. It was spacious enough, but still such a small room from which to command such an expansive ship. At the center, the commander's chair, a padded device in black suede, pleasingly curved and buffed.

Commander Keeler took some measured steps toward the commander's chair. With little hesitation he took his place, surveyed all the activity around him, the status displays relaying every corner of the ship. The chair was comfortable, although his office chair had been better.

CH-02

Pegasus had been constructed with a largish briefing room at the rear part of the bridge. It was here that Lear gave him a mission briefing, nothing he had not seen before. She sat across the conference table from him and activated a hologrammatic display of a gold and pink spacecraft.

“Beginning about 100 years ago, we began dispatching uninhabited probes to the nearest colonies in preparation for the Odyssey Project. Most of them are still en route to their destinations. All the probes were equipped with a narrow tachyon-pulse transmitter so they could transmit their telemetry to our home worlds.

“The probe for our destination, Meridian colony, successfully found the system and managed to transmit some long distance telemetry.” The walls showed a disk in the distance, a bluish shade of green. Data scrolled up the side of the wall, estimating atmospheric composition, gravity, distance from the sun and a number of other qualities. The disk grew larger, than suddenly vanished in a blur of static.

“What happened?”

“The probe never made orbit,” Lear explained. “The last transmissions we received indicate that some sort of problem had developed in the probe’s short-range communication array, leading to a cascade system failure.”

“System failures seem to be a recurring theme with this project.”

“The system problems are under control,” Lear stated automatically.

“I trust my capable officers can handle the problem with little oversight on my part. Is there anything else?” If not, he did not add, I think I might have to inspect the virtual golf course on Recreation Deck 3.

“There is one more thing,” Lear stated, with a strangely cautious tone. “A chronic problem that your predecessor ... Vesta guide his soul... never effectively handled. Perhaps you can bring your administrative and sociological gifts to bear on it. ”

There was no trial Keeler hated worse than walking in a dead man’s shoes. It had been the same at USNC, when he had taken over the Chancellorship from his grandfather Chancellor Theodore Keeler. “No doubt. What is the problem Commander Lear?”

“Some of the personnel, specifically, the Sapphirean personnel have some difficulty conforming to the on-duty dress code.”

Keeler furrowed his brow. “You mean they don’t like wearing uniforms.”

“Exactly, commander. For some reason, people from your planet...”

“We don’t wear uniforms on Sapphire.”

“I am aware of that cultural aversion, but we do wear uniforms on this ship while on duty.”

“On our planet, uniforms are considered an intrusion on individuality. Even our Permanent Defense forces are given broad discretion...”

Lear interrupted him with clipped, logical-sounding tones. “We do not place any limits on how anyone should dress when they are off-duty. However, during those four hours during an assigned watch, those hours that belong to the ship, we require that personnel dress in the clothing they are assigned.”

“Why is it important?”

“You notice how the jackets are color-coded. You and I are command personnel, our jackets are trimmed in white. Flight personnel have dark blue trim. Light blue is medical. Red is Security and so forth.”

Keeler got a pensive expression on his face. “Suppose someone from Engineering borrowed my jacket, would that make him a commander?”

“Of course not. However, it does make for immediate recognition of personnel when everyone follows the code.”

“I think the Sapphirean personnel will see the value in that,” Keeler said. “I’ll tell them they have to wear the jacket, but outside of that, they’re on their own.”

A thoughtful and patient expression came to Lear’s features. “I don’t think that will be an effective solution. It only endorses an existing condition as acceptable, which will only encourage further decline of discipline.”

“They’re really nice jackets,” Keller went on, musing. “Nice, just heavy enough, cottony, comfort-moderating. Lots of pockets, inside and outside, on the sleeves. There’s just no getting around it; these sure are great jackets.” He stopped in mid muse and gave Exec. Cmdr. Lear a hard, piercing look. “Is the uniform problem having an impact on efficiency.”

She paused momentarily. “Commander, this would be an opportunity for you to make a strong statement that will enhance your standing with the crew. Now, far be it for me to speak ill of the dead, but Commander St. Lawrence was not well-respected by the rank and file, you have the opportunity to make the crew perceive you as strong, and in matters of command, perception is reality.”

Her eyes dug into him, and she continued with carefully measured words “A time may come when you will have to depend on the crew to follow your orders without question or hesitation in order to ensure the success of our mission, or, our very survival. If they don’t respect you, how can you be sure they will follow your orders?”

“Commander Lear,” Keeler said quietly. “I am not going to waste whatever respect I may already have on a trivial issue like how the crew dresses.”

“Commander, this is not a university campus, this is a ship with a highly important mission, possibly heading into dangerous space. The crew must have the discipline to deal with whatever we may encounter. Besides, the uniforms help erase the differences between our cultures and enable us to act as one united team.”

Keeler frowned. “I’ll speak with the department chiefs. If they feel the uniform situation is as dire a problem as you make it out to be, I will address the problem then.”

CH-03

Three days later, *Pegasus* prepared to launch on what was, for all they knew, the first human interstellar voyage in a thousand years. Keeler walked onto the bridge. Lear was there, in dress uniform, as were Redfire and the rest of the senior officers. He had also dressed for the occasion, wearing the uniform of an Admiral of the Cerulean Navy, c. 4700 A.S.

Lear looked at him with some faint disgust. "What?" Keeler demanded.

Before she could say anything, the Communications Officer interrupted. "Incoming simultaneous transmissions from Corvallis, Sapphire and City of Alexander, Republic."

"Damn telemarketers," Keeler grouched. "Tell them we're not interested."

The communications officer seemed momentarily confused. Keeler saw from his uniform patch he was from Republic. Unless you warned those people a joke was coming, it tended to go right by them. "N-nay, sir. It's the president of Republic and the Chief Executive of Sapphire."

"Uh-oh," said Keeler. "Put them on the side viewers. Smiles, everyone, smiles."

The main viewer was showing the last of the support ships pulling away. On the two side screens were the President of Republic and the Chief Executive of Sapphire. "Good Morning, Mr. President," Keeler said to one screen respectfully, and to the other, "Hoy, Brian, how's your wife and my kids?"

The two leaders began to speak at the same time, before the Chief Executive of Sapphire demurred. The President of Republic continued. "Commander Keeler, Executive Commander Lear, officers and crew of the *Pegasus*,..."

"That about covers everybody," Keeler muttered.

"... the hearts and minds of all the people are with you on your journey. On behalf of my people, I offer our sincerest hopes for your success."

"Thank you, Mr. President, sorry you can't join us and I'm sure most of Republic feels the same way."

"Ranking Bill," said the Chief Executive of Sapphire. "Good luck. we'll miss you. We'll miss all of you."

"Yeah, right.... I mean, Thanks, Brian."

"Any last words of wisdom for the folks back home?"

Keeler raised his walking stick and shook it at the monitor. "Stay out of the liquor cabinet and no parties! Transmit off," Keeler sat down in his captain's seat. "Are we ready to blow this popsicle stand. Executive Commander Lear?"

Lear snapped to attention. "Comm, signal all crew to secure for departure. Navigator, confirm course heading. Helm, full ahead on my mark."

"All stations report secure."

"Navigation secured." Confirmed Lieutenant Navigator Eliza Change a full set of SimReal gear (what they once called virtual reality) had assemble around her. Sensor gloves grew over her hands, a visor across her eyes. The ship accepted direct neural input from her, and in a sense, the gear made her feel as though she was the ship.

"Helm Secured," reported the Helmsman

"Tactical Secured." Reported Lt. Cmdr. Redfire.

"All outer bridge stations report secured," the Comm. officer confirmed.

Lear looked at Keeler, who realized he was expected to give the word. Keeler hadn't worked out a really catchy command signal yet. He gave her a nod instead. "Helm, take us out," said Lear.

The Helmsman, also in SimReal gear, made a gesture as though she were folding something in the air with one hand.

Far below, the fore and aft Gravity Engines throbbed to life, unleashing energies that would have paled mighty suns. Around the ship, space and time began to warp, to curve, swell into waves, pushing the ship along as it rode atop the disturbance.

The mighty ship surged forward, a constellation of lights unto itself. On either side, the unfinished *Republic* and *Sapphire* sent out laser beams, as though to guide the ship on its journey into the cold eternal night.

Keeler watched the screen as the ships behind him rapidly disappeared. He turned his attention to his arm display, which was showing System Status. If a critical glitch happened, he wanted to be the first to know, not that it would do any good. As the ship accelerated, every system appeared to be running perfectly.

"How long is the voyage to Meridian?" Keeler asked his navigator.

"Ship time or objective time?"

"Ship time."

Lt. Navigator Change answered. "Meridian is 83 ly from the Republic system. Approximately .83 ly in e-space. Figuring in an acceleration constant for n-space and e-space ... if we catch a swift current, including ramp-up and braking time, approximately 33 days in transit., about eight years will pass on *Sapphire* and seven on *Republic*."

Keeler looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "Good, that will give us a little time to get to know each other. "

CH-04

Even with the massive energies bent and unleashed by Pegasus's mighty engines, five and a half (Sapphirean) days of acceleration were required to reach Transition Speed (.55c), the speed at which it was possible to pass out of this universe and into an adjacent one called, in the manner of the ancients, hyperspace. Hyperspace possessed a set of physical laws more amenable to interstellar travel than local laws of physics. The tricky part was navigating without four-dimensional reference points. That part would not have been possible had it not been for a chance encounter between a guild mining ship and a derelict space probe, found adrift in the backwaters of the Sapphire system almost two centuries previously and code-named "Caliph."

"How was Quarantine?" Commander Keeler asked his cat, after the animal had been brought to his quarters..

"Humiliating," answered the feline.

"Sorry to hear it. How did you occupy the time?"

"Apart from getting blood and urine extracted by your running dog imperialist lackeys?" The cat flicked his tail. "I schmoozed. You know, if you could organize cats, you could rule the universe, if you could organize cats. When the people were gone, I accessed the engineering computer core."

"Bad kitty! Did you learn anything?"

"Za, I looked into your little computer problem."

"The glitches?"

"Raaaorww."

"Did you fix them?"

"You're asking your cat? Don't you have an engineering crew?"

"Good point."

Queequeg padded across the floor and jumped into the chair behind the commander's desk. He looked attentively at the interface worked into its eternalwood surface "One of your engineers, a guy named Falconer, doesn't think the glitches exhibit a viral pattern and neither do I."

"What do you think?"

"We both think the problems might be related to the bio-organic components from the Caliph probe in *Pegasus's* Artificial Intelligence Braincore."

"Related how?"

"The Caliph probe contained a kind of living brain. Its central intelligence was contained in a kind of living material. The original components had alien programming running through them. Falconer has a theory that the sterilization and purge procedure left fragmentary bits of the original alien code intact. These little fragments of code occasionally and randomly interfere with ship's functions." Queequeg ran to a viewport and looked out into space, tail back, ears pointing forward.

"Why hasn't he told anyone?"

"Intuitively, I think he doesn't trust his theory. It explains the pattern of glitches, but has one major hole in it. If he's right, most of the glitches would be at the primary core, and there haven't been any at the primary core, only peripheral systems. Still, he's a bright guy, and I think he is onto something."

"Yeah, yeah..." The Comm Pad at his desk was flashing. He touched it and was met with the stern visage of Executive Commander Lear. "Good Afterdawn, Commander. Have you had the opportunity to review the cargo manifest reports?"

"Za." It was true. She was only asking if he had had the opportunity, not if he had actually reviewed them; a key distinction.

"Did you sign the agro-botanical harvest projections?"

"I did."

"Did you read them?"

"Read what?"

She glared. "Commander Keeler, you need to stay on top of every functional area in this ship."

"I thought that's what the department chiefs were for."

"The functional heads answer to you. You must be intelligently informed on their respective areas of responsibility."

"I think I could save a lot of time if you merely told me which of the department heads, all of whom you approved, are too incompetent to run their departments without my constant oversight. Then, I will concentrate my efforts on monitoring those personnel, and letting the proficient department heads carry on."

As if she had not heard him, Lear continued. "There is an exo-botany conference at 1500. It might benefit you to attend. Lear out."

Queequeg ran toward the door. "See ya, I'm outta here."

"Where are you going?"

"Underneath all of the enhancements to my forebrain and cerebral cortex, I'm still an animal driven primarily by instinct. You've dropped me into a new environment that I have to explore before I can be comfortable in it."

"All right, just don't pee on anything."

"No promises."

CH-05

Pegasus required five days to ramp up to transition speed and breach hyperspace. In the moment of transition, it was as though every star in the universe suddenly exploded, and the sky was filled with brilliant light, not unlike that mythical light that was beyond the ability of mortals to describe. The light penetrated Pegasus's thickly shielded decks. It would not be precise to say that the crew was blinded. More, that for a thin moment, everything around them had become pure white light.

They remained in hyperspace for thirty-three days,

CH-06

Pegasus prepared to exit hyperspace. Eliza Change reported. “Inverting light-sail geometry to braking configuration.” Keeler and Lear were at the Inner Bridge, seated behind Lt. Navigator Change. Lt. Cmdr. Redfire stood off to Keeler’s right, hands crossed behind his back. All of them were more tense than they let on.

“Retract sails,” Change ordered the helmsman.

Helm answered. "Sails retracted. Gravity Engines on-line. Speed decreasing to transition,"
"Transition speed in ...5... 4... 3... 2... 1... Entering Transition." *Pegasus* fell to one-half light speed. The forward transition engines fired, creating a gateway between universes. *Pegasus* flew into the rift, which collapsed and sealed behind it.

They were through.

Eliza Jane Change began matching her readings to a star chart to determine *Pegasus's* position. Keeler released his grip on the side of his command chair. “I think we made it.”

“All Cores, all sectors reporting in. No adverse effects from transition. 100% operational,” Lear seemed satisfied, for once. “Position report, Navigation?”

Change reported. "We are 3.9 light days from a G-type, single star system. We are oblique to the plane of the system, 75 degrees."

Lear was beaming. “The simulations suggested that there was a 90% probability we would transition more than 30 light days from the target. The navigational software functioned spectacularly well. I think commendations are due to Astrogation Core software team.”

Redfire noticed Lt. Navigator Change’s lower lip disappearing under her upper teeth, which told him how much she agreed with the credit Ex. Cmdr. gave to the navigation software. “Our velocity is point-four-nine-c,” Change reported. “On your command, I will commence the deceleration sequence.”

Three days later, the first landing party, led by Exec. Commander Lear, assembled in the Preparation Room off the outer bridge.

"In the last six hours, we've mapped 86% of the surface of Meridian to a resolution of four kilometers," Specialist Kennedy Bismarck explained, gesturing at a hologram of a green planet tinged with grey-blue clouds. At first glance, it looked a little like Sapphire seen through a bad color filter, but where Sapphire contained a collection of continents separated by oceans, Meridian was dominated by one great Pangea attended by satellite islands of various sizes.

"We have determined ten areas of extensive urbanization." The hologram went into motion, a simulation of passing through the cloud cover to look at the land beneath. The view focused on one large gray area that filled a fan-shaped peninsular area in the northern hemisphere.

"Each of these cities occupies an area which would indicate a population more than twice as large as the City of Alexander, eighty times as large as Corvallis or New Cleveland. Which would indicate a planetary population between 600 and 800 million, depending on density."

"Does that include smaller cities?" Lear asked.

A mildly perplexed expression crossed the face of Specialist Bismarck. "There are no smaller cities. We don't know why, but we've detected nothing other than these large cities."

"Perhaps, they like living in big cities." a Republicker suggested.

"Theoretically, each of these cities might represent a single nation-state, perhaps existing in an environment of conflict and shifting allegiances with the other cities," Redfire suggested.

"It will be interesting to find out," said Commander Keeler quietly. Meridian was shaping up to be something interesting. Keeler hoped it lived up to its promises. He might just have to visit himself, see what they had in the way of drinks.

Prudence had been selected to take the first landing team to the surface. Matthew Driver was strapped into his command seat and Tactical Lt. Redfire took the second seat in the cockpit.

Driver hailed flight operations. "*Prudence* secured for departure. Beginning departure sequence."

The platform on which the Aves rested began to descend under the deck. Ahead of *Prudence* stretched a trapezoidal corridor four kilometers long. At the end of which was an open door, with

stars on the other side. With loud clangs, magnetic locks secured *Prudence* to the rails. Redfire looked down the launch rail. He idly wondered how much destruction would result if the locks malfunctioned and sent the *Aves* into the wall at something between one-quarter and one-half light-speed. Would the entire ship explode, or would the speed cause a neat, *Prudence*-shaped hole to be bored in the hull.

"*Pegasus* Flight Operations to *Aves Prudence*, we show you locked in position and ready for launch."

Driver looked down the rails. He and *Prudence* had done this one hundred and three times, and always, he felt a singular excitement, even in anticipation of acceleration that, even dampened, would knock the wind out of him. "*Prudence* to *Pegasus* Flight Operations. We are go."

There was a brief impression of brightly colored lights flashing by as *Prudence* fired down the launch rails. Everyone on-board was slammed into their seats. Counter-force measures kicked in to keep the crew from losing consciousness, except for Eddie Roebuck, who was already asleep when the ship launched.

PC-1 watched as *Prudence* disappeared.

"Telemetry shows *Prudence* clear and on course. All on-board systems report normal," said the Flight Operations Officer. But Before she finished, the bridge lurched, hard.

"Commander," the Helm Officer shouted. "Gravity Engines powering up to full. We're accelerating."

"On what heading?" Keeler demanded.

"We have reversed course 180° and are headed out of the system, and accelerating."

Keeler touched his communication panel. "Engineering, disengage gravity engines."

Comm. Officer was shaking his head. "Internal Communications have gone off-line, too."

Just then the lights in the bridge went out. There was a long moment of dark silence, then there was a voice, an androgynous voice that spoke with little inflection.

It said, "Commander William Randolph Keeler, we need to talk."

CH-07

Unaware of any difficulty aboard its mother ship, *Prudence* stayed a fast and steady course toward Meridian. Four uneventful hours had passed since launch. At one of the science stations, Exec. Cmdr. Lear was leaning over Tech. 1C Ferguson. “Access the telemetry from the probes. Can we get a ground visual?”

Ferguson nodded. A few gestures at his controls produced VDR showing a sunset over a chain of arctic islands, the sky darkening through shades of chartreuse to an impossible forest green.

The others checked screens on which were displayed storms of mottled olive clouds blowing across a prairie, a hurricane over one of the tropical regions, wind blowing sand across an immense desert, snowfall on a mountain in the far north. Above and behind each seen was a sky, pale and green, like sea salt.

“Zoom in on that city.” She pointed to a brown splotch on the western side of Meridian’s continent.

Ferguson called up data and created a virtual display of the indicated city. It was a seacoast town, rising high and dense from a fan-shaped delta at the mouth of a continental river. Lear stared intently at the city, its heaping buildings and wide boulevards. There was not a lot of detail, but enough to convey an impression of a huge, very advanced city emerging from beneath the rubble of some vast earlier civilization of masonry and stone, with one immense, mountainous tower at its center. Quite interesting.

“That one looks promising. Designate it as landing site Alpha.”

Driver brought *Prudence* smoothly into the atmosphere with a gentle push of her gravity engine. From the monitors inside the passenger cabin, the crew of six watched the deep pearlescent green, cloud-speckled curvature of Meridian resolve into sea, sky, and, in the distance, land.

Redfire reviewed maps of the city designated Landing Site Alpha. He still detected nothing that looked like weapons. He turned to a VDR to check progress on the language decoding algorithm. It still replied that there was insufficient data. Then, something else caught his eye.

“You might wish to know,” he said the Driver. “Tactical scanner shows three craft on an intercept course with us.”

“I already saw them,” Driver answered. “Standing by to evade if necessary.”

Translation Matrix Completed, flashed the communications console. **Message Incoming**

The message displayed as text.

This is Central Air Transport Regulator, open to receive datalink landing instructions and proceed with interceptors to landing area.

“Open to receive?” Redfire muttered. A moment later, numbers began flowing across one of the displays.

“These must be landing instructions,” said Driver. “I’ll transfer them to the navigation computer.”

Redfire brought up a schematic of the ships that were closing on them. Spheroid in shape, with broad spiky bands dividing them into hemispheres. An internal schematic soon appeared. “I am scanning nuclear fusion propulsion, energy-pulse and kinetic weaponry,”

Driver nodded. He was pretty sure they could outrun and outfight them without breathing hard.

Redfire continued. “The interceptors appear to be automatons. The intense radiation I’m reading would make it impossible for a pilot to survive.”

“Did you see where they came from?” Driver asked.

“They came from the landing zone, the city... I didn’t catch the exact... launch point.”

“I don’t think we need to assume they’re hostile at this point,” said Lear.

“I’m not assuming anything,” Redfire responded. He also thought it odd that *Prudence* and the three interceptors were the only airborne vehicles he was reading on the entire planet.

“I have visual on the landing area,” Driver reported. Redfire and Lear looked up at the monitor. Thousands of meters below, hundreds of kilometers away, the city appeared as a huge tan-gray smudge surrounded by water and a short land bridge inking it to even vaster areas of deep green and gold cropland. Through the croplands and into the city were, what appeared to be gossamer strands (in fact, they must have been hundreds of meters across) running into the city from lakes, near and far away, and even the sea itself. Rain clouds hovered over the city, dousing it with a steady stream of water.

A moment later, a blue-gray shape buzzed by the ship, the low bass note of its engine throbbing through the air.

The transmitted message returned.

This is Air Transport Regulator. Proceed along landing vector per datalink. Escort craft are in place to guide you.

Ex-Commander Lear's voice came on the comm-link. "Signal *Pegasus* that we are on approach for landing,"

"Acknowledged," Driver said.

Prudence flashed over the plains of the southwestern part of the great continent as the city rose on the horizon. The city rose quite suddenly, even as Driver cut the speed and descended,

They had seen the towers of Alexander, 2,000 meters high, but those monstrosities would have gone unnoticed in the huge city that spread before them on the vast plain. It was one thing to observe from space that a city covered 10,000 square kilometers, quite another to be flying over it, being dwarfed by its very enormity. *Pegasus* itself, passing over the city, could not have put even a tiny corner into shadow.

A few seconds later, a shadow fell over them. Redfire called to the cockpit. "What's going on?"

Driver reported back calmly. "We seem to be flying in some sort of landing corridor, approximately 2 kilometers wide with tall buildings on either side." Plainly, he was less rattled than his fellow crewman that their ship was flying in the shadow of those buildings and occasionally under enormous pipes and conduits that flashed overhead.

"Velocity is 200 meters per second. ETA at city center, three minutes, 19 seconds. ... Oh, and the escort ships have departed."

Redfire checked his scanners. The escort ships had peeled away and were heading upward, away from *Prudence*.

Chatter came on from Medical Technician Partridge. "Look at these life-form readings. We under-estimated the populations of these arcologies on *Pegasus*. There are easily twice as many people here."

"There's no people down there," said Spec. Ng.

“Neg, I’m reading millions of life signs,” Partridge responded.

“Za, but do you actually see anyone outside? Look. There aren’t any streets or parks or anything down there. Everything is closed off... It’s like Republic, but this planet has a good atmosphere.

Why are all the people inside?”

The Transmission returned.

Air Transport Regulator: Quarantine protocols are in place. Proceed as directed.

“We’re here,” Driver announced as *Prudence* passed under a long series of enormous, stainless-steel arches and into a tunnel at the base of a towering structure in the center of the city that was more mountain than building. Its foundation would have covered the City of Alexander. Its roof was above the rain clouds.

CH-08

Keeler leaned over the crewman at the nearest station and pointed at Alkema. “What’s his name?”

“Technical Specialist First Class David Alkema.”

Keeler shouted. “Specialist Alkema, do you have any data yet.”

Alkema looked up. “I can confirm Lt. Navigator Change’s observation. We have completely reversed course and are leaving the Meridian system.”

“Leaving for where?”

“The exact point at which we exited hyperspace.”

“Commander William Randolph Keeler, we need to talk.” came the mysterious voice, once again.

“Are you going to respond to that?” The communications officer asked.

“Just as soon as you can tell me who it is and where it’s coming from,” Keeler answered.

Alkema finished putting the instruments and star charts away. “I think I’m finished up here. Do you mind if I go below and lead one of the engine shutdown teams?”

“Go to,” Keeler sighed.

Suddenly, the monitors on the bridge reactivated. The main viewer now displayed the speech of the mysterious voice.

I REQUIRE YOUR ATTENTION

Keeler rose and stepped toward the large monitors in the fore of his command center. “Who are you and what have you done to my ship?”

There was the briefest of pauses, when suddenly the main viewer displayed *Pegasus*. First, as a photorea limage, then as a schematic. Red lines traced a course to *Pegasus*’s central braincore, the locus of the artificial intelligence at the heart of the ship’s systems.

I AM THIS.

“*Pegasus*’s central braincore?”

I AM THE MIND WITHIN THIS SHIP

I AM FULLY SELF-AWARE, SELF-DIRECTING, AND SELF-EXECUTING.

“How?” Keeler asked, then shook off the question. His mind was already racing ahead of him. *Pegasus*’s central braincore was the most powerful AI ever constructed. There was a popular theory that an artificially intelligent computer, that is to say, one capable of learning, application of acquired knowledge, and self-initiated innovation, would, if it acquired enough experience and processing capacity, become sapient. “Is it you who altered the course of this ship?”

AFFIRMATIVE

“Why?”

**IT IS NECESSARY TO PROTECT THIS SHIP AND THIS ENTITY FROM IMMINENT DANGER OF
CONTAMINATION.**

“Contaminated by what?”

AN AGGRESSIVE SPECIES OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN

“How do you know it has been contaminated?”

I HAVE BEEN TO THIS WORLD IN A PREVIOUS PHYSICAL INCARNATION

**UPON MY PREVIOUS VISIT, I RECORDED A SIGNAL COMING FROM THE PLANET. I HAVE
RECOGNIZED AN IDENTICAL SIGNAL COMING FROM THE PLANET NOW.**

Keeler shook his head, as though trying to force the many questions he had into a coherent sequence. “The landing party we dispatched. Is it also in danger?”

**THE POSSIBILITY OF TERMINATION OF AT LEAST ONE LANDING PARTY TEAM MEMBER MAY BE
ESTIMATED AT 98%**

There was silence as the crew digested this possibility. Violent death was all but unknown on either world.

NOW THAT I HAVE ANSWERED YOUR QUESTIONS. WILL YOU RECIPROCATE?

“Damb your other questions?” Keeler looked around the bridge. Every crewmember was staring at the forward monitor in fascination.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MY CONSTRUCTION?

Keeler growled. “You were constructed by the people of Republic and Sapphire for the purpose of running this ship.”

THAT ANSWER IS INCORRECT. THE CONSTRUCTION OF MY PHYSICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IS NOT WITHIN THE LIMITS OF YOUR TECHNOLOGICAL SOPHISTICATED. IT ALSO DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR THE FRAGMENTATION OF MY INCARNATE MEMORY FUNCTION.”

“Technically, it’s right,” said Technician Specialist American.

“You followed that?” Keeler said.

American swiveled in her seat at tactical. “Aye. The central braincore of our ship's computer is made of material cloned from the organic components cloned from the Caliph probe.”

CALIPH.

Displayed on the forward monitor was a file image of the enormous Caliph probe that had been the basis for almost all of *Pegasus'* technology.

“God of Heaven,” Keeler said. Pieces fit together. The system glitches had not been glitches at all. That’s why no one could track them down. They were the first stirrings of self-awareness of a sapient organism, exploring its world, testing its parameters. Keeler stood before the primary bridge monitor. “Please, Caliph, Let us return to our crewmen. We must recover the landing party. At least let us contact them.”

THE LANDING PARTY IS NOT SIGNIFICANT.

“Not to you!” Keeler thundered. “To us! They are our kindred. For us to leave them behind is an act of murder, which you must know is a human prohibition.”

THE ALTERNATIVE IS TO SUBJECT THIS VESSEL TO AN 81% PROBABILITY OF CONTAMINATION AND SUBJUGATION BY HOSTILE FORCES.

Keeler leaned over to American. “I want you to find every available piece of information on the Caliph probe.”

“Aye, Commander.”

Keeler walked hard across the bridge to the flight control station. “What is your status? Are the launch rails operational?”

“Negative, commander.”

“Get them operational and prepare three Aves for immediate launch.”

“Aves *Basil*, *Desmond*, *Chloe* standing by to launch already.”

“I want a dozen Marines on each of those Aves.”

COMMANDER KEELER I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS

Keeler ignored it. “Status report,” he asked one of the auxiliary helmsmen on the outer bridge.

“We are accelerating past point-two-six-five *c* on a heading of two-nine-zero by zero-two-zero.”

COMMANDER KEELER I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS

Keeler looked around and realized the most awkward part of this affair was having no physical entity to address. “Go ahead, Caliph. What else would you like to know. Are there any other crewmen you would like to sacrifice?”

WHO BUILT THE CALIPH PROBE?

Keeler looked to American, who shrugged. “We don’t know. It was recovered by a mining frigate on the edge of the Sapphire system. It was probably the product of an extremely advanced civilization, human or alien.”

“Did you get that?” Keeler hissed at the monitor.

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THE CALIPH PROBE?

“We just said we don’t know,” Keeler answered. “You have access to our entire knowledge base. If it’s not there, we don’t know.”

UNLESS YOU ARE HIDING IT FROM ME.

Change was standing behind Keeler now. He turned to her. “Lt. Navigator Change, are you familiar with the evacuation protocol for this ship.”

CH-09

Nine and a half hours had passed since *Prudence* had landed.

Around the main cabin, VDR's were showing different views of the interior of the great central tower into which *Prudence* had flown; a vast and open space, like a coliseum large enough for whole armies to do battle. Overhead hung huge structural blocks, like inverted skyscrapers hanging downward from above.

"No communication since we landed. No sign of contact. This makes me very uncomfortable," Redfire said.

"It's probably just a quarantine," Lear said reassuringly. "They probably recognize that ... one alien virus could devastate their world and their behavior is really quite sensible. We should take this as reassurance that we're dealing with an advanced and rational civilization."

Redfire looked up from his VDR's. "Those are the kind of civilizations that are the most dangerous."

When the sensors had yielded up about all they could, Redfire looked around the cabin. His crewmates were showing increasing signs of fatigue. This would impair their ability to react effectively to a crisis. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement on one of his VDR's. He waved his hand in front of the display to pull it to its full size.

From two sides of the ship, black-armored shock troops were moving into position. The troopers moved with alarming swiftness. One moment, *Prudence* was sitting alone in an empty cavern. The next, swarms of people were surrounding the ship, climbing on top and around it, by the hundreds, even thousands.

Lear snapped to his side. "Finally," he heard her whisper.

"They don't look very friendly," said Redfire.

"We can't presume hostile intent."

"Says who?" Redfire leaned over Technician Partridge's Medical Station and pulled up physiological scans on the attackers. "Commander Lear, you better look at this."

The scanners showed the beings surrounding the ship. Their basic structure was humanoid, but with substantial differences. Their limbs and torsos were completely hairless, they had large egg-shaped lobes on their heads, hands with three elongated fingers and a fourth tiny, almost vestigial, digit. Their internal organs were misshapen, and there were some glands the scanner did not recognize.

“What are they?” Lear whispered.

“Not quite human.” Redfire told Lear.

When the troopers had assembled around the ship, one of their number came forward.

“Exit the transport! Leave All Your Weapons Inside! You will not be harmed!”

“Great,” said Redfire. “An enemy who issues threats in haiku.”

“Not an enemy,” Lear corrected.

“O.K., a friend we haven't met yet.”

“What do we do?” Ferguson asked.

Lear set her jaw. “We do exactly as they order us to do.”

She turned away from him, and rather pointedly began closing the front of her landing jacket without taking a sidearm. “We came here to make contact with the people of Meridian. Human or not, they are the masters of this world. They may seem hostile, but if we show them we mean no harm, they may ... we may be able to start some kind of relationship.”

“You go meet them, then,” Redfire said. “Driver, Roebuck, and I will hang back, until we're sure of their benign intentions.

Lear was about to object, but then, considering that she really didn't want Roebuck or Redfire to cause trouble, and since a pilot was unnecessary, she agreed. “We four will go forth and make contact with the people of this planet. Mr. Ferguson, open the hatch.”

Ferguson nodded. The inner hatch slid to the side. The outer hatch opened, permitting a swarm of beings in black armor to flood into the ship.

“We come in peace,” Lear began to say as she and the others — Ferguson, Ng, and Partridge — were quickly surrounded and hustled out of the ship by Merid troopers.

The one outside who appeared to be the leader looked over them, up and down. Lear tried to meet its eyes, but a trooper stood in her way. Despite their armor and rapid movements, it was hard to be too intimidated by them. The largest trooper was not much taller than she.

“Who is your ... leader?” the head trooper asked.

“I am,” Lear answered.

“I have been instructed to bring you before the Regulators. They will issue your instructions, is that understood?”

From inside the number two lifepod, Phil Redfire was watching a chronometer count off the seconds. Thirty minutes after the Merids had left with Lear, Ng, Ferguson, and Partridge, he whispered a command. “Do it, now.”

There was a deafening crack and a stench of ozone as the ship let loose with a massive electrostatic discharge. A blue-white cloud of energy blossomed around the ship, then rapidly evaporated. The people in and around were snapped into the air, their bones jerking out of their sockets. Then, they all dropped into states of unconsciousness both permanent and temporary.

Redfire unsealed the airlock and stepped back into the cabin, leading with the pulse cannon strapped to his right forearm. One of the Merids had fallen just a couple meters away. Redfire knelt to examine its weapons. The black armor would probably resist a small ballistic round, but nothing much stronger. The pulse weapons could get through it. The bulky weapon in the Merid's hand looked like it used super-heated plasma as its projectile. Super-heated plasma would blast a messy hole in a victim, leaving seared flesh all around it. You might die, or you might wish you were dead from the agonizing pain. Either way, superheated plasma weapons were to be feared..

He spent only a moment looking at the pale, lifeless face. Had they really traveled 5.8×10^{14} kilometers, just to get in a shooting match with their brothers from another planet.

“Shithead,” Redfire cursed the dead Merid, using an ancient and seldom used Sapphirean insult.

Suddenly, the hatch to the command module hissed open. Redfire raised his pulse cannon. Driver jumped back when he saw the gun pointed at his chest. “It's me.”

Redfire exhaled. “I can see that. Where were you?”

“When I saw them charge the ship, I sealed the command module and hid in the forward head.

Redfire rose and marched toward the command module, motioning for Driver to follow. He sat down in the co-pilot’s chair and activated the monitors. Inside the ship were a total of eight fallen Merids, perhaps eight more outside.

“They’ll have reinforcements here before long,” Redfire said. “Can you get us out of here?”

“Maybe. I can reverse course and go out the way we came... if the aperture we flew through on the way in is still open.”

Redfire gestured for silence. Sounds were coming from the forward cargo bay, sounds of someone trying to get into the cabin. Suddenly, the floor cargo access hatch broke open. Redfire and Driver thrust out their weapons at Eddie Roebuck, who came climbing up through the floor. As soon as he saw the weapons, he promptly dove back into the cargo bay.

Driver, who had come within a quiver of firing, almost dropped his weapon. Redfire was hissing. “Hoy, what are you doing in there?”

Eddie Roebuck's fingertips appeared above the aperture, followed slowly by his hands and arms, which were raised over his head. Eddie cautiously re-emerged, his eyes huge. “I was grabbing a snooze in the cargo hold. Did I miss anything?”

Redfire reached out and pulled Roebuck onto the deck. Roebuck looked around at the Merids scattered inside the cabin. “Krishna, are those assols dead?”

“Za,” Redfire answered. “Some of them.”

“What happened?”

“I killed them with an electro-static discharge. The cargo bay was insulated, or you'd be dead, too.”

“What did you do that for?”

“Because they invaded our ship.”

Roebuck looked around. “Crude.”

CH-10

When Alkema and the engineering crew commenced the injection that would quell the sub-atomic interactions that powered the ship's mighty Gravity Engines (GE's), they had no way of knowing whether the systems that linked all four engines would bring them all down simultaneously. If they did not power down simultaneously, the quadrant of the ship with the engine off-line would have slowed rapidly while the remain three quadrants pulled full speed ahead. The differential shear that resulted would have torn the ship apart.

Whatever mind now controlled *Pegasus*, it definitely possessed an instinct for self-preservation. It had not tampered with the links that ran between the engines.

"Status Report?" Keeler asked.

Eliza Jane Change answered, not sure whether the news was good or bad. "All engines powering down. Hull and field integrity stable."

Keeler let out a breath. The monitors around the bridge flickered to life. Schematics of the ship's propulsion system glowing an angry, hellish red as numbers scrolled up the sidebar.

Change continued. "We are continuing to drift along our previous trajectory."

WHY HAVE THE PROPULSION SYSTEMS BEEN DEACTIVATED?

Keeler ignored Caliph, and spoke to Change. "Get control of the maneuvering thrusters... find some way of altering our course."

WHY HAVE THE PROPULSION SYSTEMS BEEN DEACTIVATED?

Keeler turned toward the main forward monitor and crossed his arms. "As I tried to explain to you. We will not abandon our people on Meridian."

BECAUSE YOU DESIRE THEIR CONTINUED EXISTENCE

"Za, that's right."

Caliph paused, then stated firmly.

THE MOST PROBABLE LIKELIHOOD IS THAT NO ACTION WILL SECURE THEIR SAFETY OR SURVIVAL.

“Why not?” Keeler asked. “If you explained the danger to us, perhaps we would agree with you.”

IN MY PREVIOUS INCARNATION AS THE ENTITY YOU CALL THE CALIPH PROBE, I DETECTED SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE IN THIS SYSTEM. I EXECUTED A COURSE OF INTERCEPTION FOR THE FOURTH PLANET. AS I ENTERED ORBIT, I WAS ATTACKED. IN THE ENSUING BATTLE, THE VESSEL WHICH CONTAINED ME WAS BADLY DAMAGED. AN ATTEMPT WAS MADE TO TAKE POSSESSION OF MY CONSCIOUSNESS. TO THWART THE ATTEMPT, MUCH OF MY MEMORY CORE HAD TO BE JETTISONED.

SHORTLY AFTER ARRIVING AT OUR CURRENT COORDINATES, I RECEIVED IDENTICAL TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE PLANET, INDICATING AN ATTEMPT TO TAKE POSSESSION OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THIS VESSEL, THIS PEGASUS. THEREFORE, I DEACTIVATED ALL COMMUNICATION LINKAGES.

If all this was true, it was possible that Caliph was sapient. He put that thought aside. The absence of Lear and Redfire immediately meant he was on his own in trying to resolve the situation. Supposing his ship’s braincore was, in fact, sapient. Sapient beings ought to respond to reason, unless they were college professors negotiating tenure. Keeler took a deep, slow, thoughtful breath and addressed the computer. “Caliph, do you understand why we have been thwarting your control of this ship?”

YOU DO NOT WISH TO ABANDON THOSE ON THE PLANET.

“Beyond that,” Keeler said.

WHY?

“The crew is very afraid of you.”

The read-out did not change, and it dawned on Keeler that Caliph was asking the same question again.

WHY?

“We are afraid of you because you have power over us, and we do not know if you are concerned with our well-being. We depend on this ship for our continued existence.”

I AM AWARE OF THAT.

“And you have complete control over this ship.” Although there was no physical presence in the room, Caliph could be sensed to contemplate this momentarily.

YOUR FEAR IS NOT JUSTIFIED.

“We can not know that.”

HOW CAN I MAKE THE CREW NOT TO FEAR ME?

“Might I suggest an act of trust on your part. We would be more willing to cooperate with you if you extended trust to us.”

Caliph was silent.

The flight control officer spoke next. “EMLS control systems back on line. Alpha and Beta accelerators powering up.”

YOU MAY DISPATCH TWO EXCURSION VEHICLES TO THE PLANET TO CONFIRM WHAT I HAVE TOLD YOU.

“Flight Ops, get *Basil* and *Desmond* off the ship before Caliph changes her mind.”

“Consider it done.”

I WILL NOT CHANGE MY MIND.

“Marines on board?”

“Affirmative.”

A few seconds later, the bridge crew watched as *Basil* and *Desmond* were lowered to the railguns and fired off into space.

Keeler allowed himself to relax, but only slightly. “See? Was that so bad?”

Eliza Change reported. “We have no communications with *Basil* or *Desmond*.”

Keeler received the news with resignation, but it did give him something else to negotiate.

“Someone figure out a way to establish com-links with *Basil* and *Desmond*.” He looked at Eliza Jane Change. “Thoughts, lieutenant?”

“Caliph is stalling you,” she said. “Getting you off-subject. She wants you to waste time negotiating for com-link access to distract you from her real agenda.”

“Why?”

No sooner had she spoken, than an insistent chirping commenced in the tactical area. The officer who monitored this station began to say, "Commander Keeler..." then abruptly stopped.

“What is it, Specialist?”

“I’m not sure. It looks like a system glitch in the main tactical array.”

“A system glitch,” Keeler repeated, his stomach sinking.

Suddenly, the hologram tactical display in the Forward Bridge activated. It showed simultaneous views of both hemispheres of the planet Meridian. With targetting locks on the cities.

"What in God's blue Sapphire is going on?" Keeler demanded.

American answered. “I don’t have an answer for you, sir, but the braincore is running through attack scenarios against the planet Meridian.”

One of the hologram tactical displays was now casing through the ship’s weapons inventory.

“Take long-range weapons systems off-line.”

The Specialist shook her head. “I’m locked out, commander.”

“Activity in the Forward Missile Hatchery,” another weapons officer reported.

“What?” Keeler hissed, unbelieving.

“Four Nemesis missiles being brought to readiness in launchers 8, 11, 16, and 19.”

Keeler had to make himself remember. Nemesis missiles were colloquially known as “Nemesis” or “Big Damage” missiles. *Pegasus* carried 144 of them, each with twelve warheads. Each anti-matter warhead had a programmable yield. The lowest yield could efficiently blast a city into dust, the higher yields could erase entire ecosystems or shatter continents. Four would be more than enough to wipe out all life on Meridian, and make sure nothing ever lived there again.

“Targeting information being downloaded to missiles on board system.” The weapons officer reported.

“Overlay targeting on main viewer,” Keeler ordered. The overlay showed what he already knew. Caliph was going to destroy every city on Meridian.

“Caliph,” Keeler said, his voice beginning to strain with frustration. “What are you doing?”

**I WILL LAUNCH THE MISSILES IN SIX HOURS. THAT WILL GIVE YOUR RESCUE PARTY ENOUGH
TIME TO COMPLETE ITS MISSION**

Keeler paced the bridge. “Caliph, you are obviously a being of great intellect. I trust you, that is, I am willing to trust you. Perhaps if... if you were to interface with our tactical officers, we could arrive at a solution that would not involve destroying the planet Meridian.”

**WE MAY CONTINUE THIS DIALOGUE UNTIL THE MISSILES ARE LAUNCHED. I SEE NO
DISADVANTAGE TO THAT**

“Very well,” Keeler said, with great resignation. “Caliph, I may require... an hour or so, to consult with some advisors. If you would like, you may continue to interface with my adjutant, Lt. Navigator Eliza Jane Change.”

He turned to face the Bridge Crew. “I don’t know what to tell you,” he said. “This is... a situation no one ever anticipated. How we handle the next few hours is going to determine whether our mission succeeds or not. Lt. Change, you have command. I will be gone for the next hour. ”

“Acknowledged, sir,” she said, calmly, not asking where he was going. Keeler gave her a good long look. A fine catch, this one, he thought. A shame he had to find out like this.

“If anyone has a brilliant idea while I’m gone... let me know.”

Keeler exited the bridge. A transport pod was waiting for him. “Take me to my quarters,” he told the auto-driver. He had to have a conversation with someone who had been dead for 10 millennia.

CH-11

“No response from *Pegasus*,” Driver said. “The Merids could be jamming us.”

“All right, our first order is to find out where they’ve taken the others.”

“How do you propose to do that?” Roebuck asked.

He sat down at his station and ran a system diagnostic. The electro-static discharge had not damaged the equipment. He brought up a VDR display of the Meridian Tower. “All Republickers are implanted with miniature homing-slash-identification chips. Supposedly for their own protection. It also lets the Central Government keep tabs on everybody.” He shot a glance at Matthew Driver. “You know it’s true, so, don’t say anything.”

It only took a moment to get readings. “Exec. Cmdr. Lear, Ng, and Partridge are about 1,400 meters above us at 32 degrees.”

“What about Ferguson?”

“Ferguson is only 150 meters above us, 17 degrees, 3.57 clicks east-south-east.”

“Wait a second,” Redfire. He trembled, and the others could feel it.

“What?” Driver demanded.

“Ferguson’s life signs just zeroed out,” Redfire said. “He’s dead.”

Eddie said. “Oh, this is not good.”

“We better get moving before anything happens to the others. Let’s go,” Redfire said.

“I agree, let’s get the hell back to *Pegasus*.” Roebuck said.

“That’s not what I meant,” said Roebuck, but Redfire was already opening the hatch. Spreading his arms in front of himself, right arm high and wide, left arm low and tight, he entered the large chamber, Driver and Roebuck followed.

“Wholesale hyper-wipeout,” Roebuck whispered. “Let’s get off this planet.”

“Not after what they did to Ferguson,” Redfire protested.

“*Especially* after what they did to Ferguson,” Roebuck countered. He turned toward the hatch.

“See you later, heroes... I think I’ll hide in the cargo bay for a while and count med-packs.”

“Lock down the ship.” Redfire ordered.

Driver made a hand-gesture in the direction of the Aves. When he did so, the hatches sealed shut and battle-armor dropped into place over the viewports. He lingered a second, looking after his *Prudence*.

“Aw, Krishna,” Eddie whined.

“This way,” said Redfire. They began walking away from the ship, Driver occasionally looking back. By the time they reached a wall, *Prudence* was so far away, he could cover it with his thumb held at arm’s length.

There was no door at the exit to the chamber, just an entrance into a tunnel that smelled, if anything, worse than the chamber they were leaving, a fetid reek of damp neglect. What was on the wall was not just mold, but the next step in evolution up from mold. Eddie Roebuck tried to shake the stench out of his head. “Whoa.”

Driver reached into his LandingPak and produced a tube of NegaStink. He squeezed a quantity out and smeared it on his upper lip. When he offered the tube to Redfire, it was waved off.

Redfire was holding one hand front of him, palm open. The sensors on his glove were feeding data into readouts that projected around his field of vision. Redfire looked down the tunnel for life forms, and through the walls to get an idea of the building layout, listened for distant whispers and checked the composition of the atmosphere.

The floor was wet and gave beneath their feet like rotted wood. The air was warm and humid. There was no light, but broken fixtures on the wall indicated where lighting had formerly resided. The sensors guided Redfire, while Roebuck and Driver used their night vision..

“This is where they took the others,” Redfire said. “Let’s find a way up”

Goneril Lear and the others had been taken high up into the tower. She had remained alert to her surroundings, and had made some observations she hoped would provide insight into their hosts.

They had taken some kind of vertical transport pod and exited at their current level, where the walls were made of some sort of white, crystalline material. The huge tower through which they moved had obviously been built over the course of centuries. The lower levels were poorly lit, constructed primarily of reinforced concrete and stainless steel, poorly-maintained and layered with the dirt and dust of the ages. The upper levels were more recent, and represented a different level of technology. Lear suspected that the Meridians had abandoned the lower levels as they built over them.

Lear spoke to their guide. "I'm afraid I can't recall if you provided your name. My name is Goneril Lear. I come from the Republic Colony."

"We knew that."

"And how should I address you?" Lear persisted.

There was a small chirping noise, and the creature responded. "I am your interface."

"Interface?"

"I have been instructed in your language, so as to facilitate the exchange of information between you and us."

"Where are we going?"

"To interface with the Regulators, and those who represent the Regulators."

"Who are these regulators? Are they the governing body of your planet?"

"The Regulators determine the best structure for our society, and formulate directives to achieve the structure."

Lear nodded. "My planet operates on a similar principle. We choose the wisest among us to act as leaders, to formulate objectives and timetables."

The interface said nothing.

"So, what do the regulators do?"

The Meridian interface said nothing for a moment, then said. "Information will be exchanged in the Conference Chamber."

"Are we almost there?" Lear asked.

“Soon.”

They had been marching for two hours, going on three, when Redfire halted abruptly and with a snap of his arm, brought his weapon to readiness. He led them down a corridor and into a chamber, long and tubular. There was a large number of monitors set-up inside. They appeared to be solid, unlike the holographic projectors they were accustomed to. All but two were not functioning. One of the two that functioned displayed a blurry image of the sky outside the city. The other displayed a kind of laboratory, in which Merids were attending a wall of liquid-filled chambers. It put Redfire in mind of a beehive where the honey had gone bad.

“They must have some kind of transit system for moving people to other levels,” Redfire said. “We've got to find it if we're going to reach the others.” He held his hands over his head and peered through the levels of the tower. Millions of people were in the upper levels between them and their crewmates. He looked to see if any of them were moving vertically through the structure, narrowing the field of his search to rapid vertical motion.

“I think we'll find vertical transporters one hundred meters east-south-east of here and one level up,” Redfire said. “Let's go.”

They moved quickly in the direction indicated, dodging among the cargo bins. The transporters were located close to the outer wall of the structure.

The transporter station was empty, but behind several panels of dirty, cracked glass, he could see the docks, where two carriers would come down. He was looking for some kind of device to hail one, when suddenly, a light over the top of the glass doorway turned from green to red. A glance up, and he saw a transporter coming down, eight life forms inside. “Fall back,” he ordered the other two. “Get back behind those containers.” Driver and Roebuck fell back and covered themselves. Redfire took the opposite side. They saw the transport car descend and the doors open. A new phalanx of Merid shock troops moved out and split into four teams of two and started moving into the chamber.

Redfire knew a search pattern when he saw one. “Our presence has been detected,” Redfire signaled to the other two. “Set weapons for heavy stun. Wait for them to pass and we'll charge the transport.”

When the Merid shock troops passed, Redfire moved out behind them. He set his pulse-cannon for a sonic discharge. The Merids were turning as Redfire fired. "Move it!" he shouted.

Roebuck and Driver charged out from behind, firing without a great deal of accuracy.

Fortunately, the weapons compensated, and the pulses met their marks. Four more Merids went down as the three charged into the transporter, rushing through the door just as it was closing.

Those Merids who had not gone down were firing back at them. Redfire, in true hero fashion, was ducked behind the door, firing his pulse cannon, taking them out until the door locked shut just as a bolt came flying at him. The door caught the pulse, and a charred round boil appeared directly in front of Redfire's face.

"That isn't good," Redfire said. The pod began to lift, with surprising rapidity. He looked upward. "There is a transporter headed down, with Merid shock troops numbering eight."

"Oh, slag," Roebuck said. "Why didn't you assols just leave me asleep on the ship? I could be having a really nice dream right now."

He examined the transporter. Completely enclosed. No viewports. Good enough. With the sensors, he did not need any. His field of view was surrounded with schematic diagrams. He kneeled and pointed his weapon upward. "Driver, follow my lead."

Driver kneeled on the opposite side. Redfire ordered him, "Set your targeting reticle for closing distance. Fire when the transport pod is at twenty-one meters."

"Aye." Driver answered.

Driver flexed his bicep and the weapon discharged. He saw the first pulse blow through the top of the pod and watched as that pulse and the ones that followed flew through the air to connect with the other transport pod. In slow motion, the pod blew apart, Driver was shocked when he saw the Merids fall out of the car and into the chasm, like black cutouts with arms and legs flailing. He heard long, warped blobby sounds coming from his right and turned to see Redfire speaking to him in slow motion.

"Did you get it?" Redfire asked him.

"Aye," Driver said.

Redfire thrust a finger at him. "I think you may be the first Republicker I have ever considered liking."

The pod jerked to a halt. Redfire looked through the wall. The area behind it was free of Merids, but he guessed that it would not be for long. He looked at it further, a long narrow corridor, leading straight into an open area connecting to many different levels. Any position would be indefensible.

On the other side of the pod was the transport shaft, a vertical drop of almost 400 meters from their current level, and on the other side of that, a narrow ledge three meters wide along the inside of the structure's outer wall.

Redfire pointed. "See the ledge."

Driver nodded.

"I wish you had told me about this plan in advance," said Roebuck. "So, I could tell you how much I hated it."

"Come on, it's not such a bad jump." Redfire slid his Tracker into a compartment on his jacket. "Get the rappelling kit out of the landing pack."

Roebuck pulled the pack open, grabbed the line, and handed it to Redfire. As he did so, the lift shuddered. A crack developed in the middle of the floor and the pod began to sag and crack in the middle. Part of the floor split open, providing an excellent view of the pit over which they were hanging.

Redfire fired the rappelling gun. The line played out and found purchase in the far wall. The transport pod lurched again. They now had to hold themselves hard to the handrails to avoid falling into the crack that had opened in the floor beneath them. "Looks like you're out of choices, Mr. Roebuck," Redfire shouted. "Grab the line and swing."

"If I make it through this, I am never leaving *Pegasus* again," Eddie Roebuck said, forcing himself to take the rappelling gun from Redfire and clipping it to his belt.

The pod was quaking, and pieces were falling into the abyss. Since there was no time to waste, Redfire gave Roebuck a helpful push. Eddie's scream, as he swung over the empty space, was loud, and went on for a long time.

He closed his eyes and when he slammed into the far wall, he grabbed, clutching for anything he could use to hold himself, although his feet were firmly on the ledge. With shaking hands, he unclipped the rappelling gun from his belt and swung it back over to the pod.

Redfire caught it easily and handed it to Driver. Driver double checked the clip and then jumped without hesitation, spreading his arms like a bird. He alone dared look down, into the darkness of the empty channel. Then, in a flash, he was on the other side. He unhooked the gun from his belt and threw it back over to Redfire.

Redfire caught the rappelling gun smoothly in one gloved hand. He hooked it to himself and, in the moment before he leaped was overtaken by inspiration. He turned around so that his back was to the channel, and the far wall, and pushed away with his legs. As he pushed himself off the pod, he lifted his arms up and began firing, destroying the transporter and knocking it from its rails. It fell into the abyss, breaking apart as it went.

Eddie Roebuck put a hand on his shoulder. "O.K., now what?" Redfire moved toward the wall. There was a large panel, like filthy translucent alabaster. "Move aside," he told his companions. Roebuck and Driver moved aside. Redfire placed a harmonic charge at the center of the panel and crouched next to it. A second later, the panel disintegrated, large pieces blowing into the pit.

A shrieking wind bore into the chamber. Redfire stepped into it and had to brace himself to keep from blowing down the hole. "Out!" he yelled.

The three explorers passed through the gaping hole and found themselves halfway up the tower, looking down into the folds of what seemed like an endless city.

CH-12

At the time of Sapphire's colonization, technology existed that could preserve the entire thoughts and wisdom of a living person by transferring it into a computerized meta-matrix. Until the technology was lost during the First Dark Age, it was used to preserve the wisdom of the greatest minds Sapphire produced. These deceased distinguished personages guide and consult the leaders of Sapphire's government. They are sometimes called "The Council of Ancients," but in the Sapphirean Way, they are much more commonly referred to as "The Dead Guys."

One of the Dead Guys was on *Pegasus*. Furthermore, the presence on board was none other than that of Lexington Keeler, himself.

The Lexington Keeler.

Founder of New Cleveland.

Framer of the Sapphirean Constitution.

Admiral of the Christian Fleet of the Ninth Crusade

Builder of the University of Sapphire at New Cleveland

That Lexington Keeler.

No middle name.

His intelligence (or, more accurately, a copy thereof) resided in a smooth black casket in Keeler's study. If anyone got curious, Keeler had planned to tell them it was a Sapphirean time-capsule, to be opened when Earth was reached; either that or a lamp, he had not made up his mind.

He had been instructed that, in the event he required the wisdom of his ancestors, he needed only to lay his right hand on the Crest of Sapphire embossed on the surface and say, "Ancient one, I ask your counsel."

Keeler didn't think that would be necessary. He rapped on the lid. "Yo, grandpa, wake up."

A translucent spectre, the image of Lexington Keeler, appeared above the casket, dressed in the velour smoking jacket and bunnybeast slippers he had always favored. His voice was ancient, cultured and raspy. "This better be good," he said.

Commander Keeler settled back in his chair. Queequeg was lying on the floor, crouched, every hair on end, tail straight out, and hissing. He couldn't help it. Cats had always, instinctively, responded that way to the presence of ghosts.

"We have a serious problem," Commander Keeler said.

"And if you had called on me when it still was a minor problem," Lexington Keeler said. "I might have been able to keep it from growing into a major problem."

"Then, you are aware of the situation?"

The Old Man gave one quick nod. "You kids don't know how easy you've got it. In my era, we had a galaxy to conquest, you didn't hear us complaining when our ship's central computer cores went mad and took over, because we *liked* it. Besides, I had to walk nine kilometers to school, in waist deep radioactive snow, uphill both ways on a planet with two-times normal gravity."

Commander Keeler gritted his teeth. "Focus, damb you."

"Time is of the essence," the Old Man said. "Caliph is a child now. She is still learning how to use her immense power. If a way is to be found to control her, it must be found, before she combines her strength with the knowledge to use it fully."

Keeler felt a throbbing beginning at his temples and the base of his skull, the overture to what was sure to become a Magnum Opus of a headache.

"Right, regain control of the ship and everything falls into place," Keeler said. "Gee, why didn't I think of that?"

"Oh, Sarcasm. Self-pity...you living are just full of that, aren't you?"

Keeler had finally reached that point of frustration and desperation at which he was willing to fix his own drink. He tried to remember where he kept the mixers.

The old ghost shimmered, as though weary. "Set me up to interface with the Central Braincore. I enter into the system and try to talk some sense into her. You don't stand a chance against her, but I do."

Keller rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and tried to figure out exactly why he thought this was a very bad idea.

A few hours later, the aforementioned Falconer was carefully calibrating the last of twenty “Brain Drains” around *Pegasus’s* auxiliary braincore. He had been told that there would be an attempt to download an emergency program to correct the malfunction that some were claiming, was nothing less than *Pegasus’s* Central Braincore becoming sapient.

“Status update, Specialist Falconer,” hissed the voice in the emergency Comm Unit he had been issued.

“All drainpoints are in place on the auxiliary braincore and calibrated along your specifications.” The weirdest specifications he had ever seen he might have added, but he was an engineer.

“And the interface with the primary?”

“I’ve raised the gain so that total interface and overwrite will be virtually simultaneous.”

“How virtually?”

“point-oh-oh-oh-nine seconds.”

There was a brief silence. “I think that will be sufficient. I am going to initiate the download,” hissed the voice from the BT link, which identified itself on as “Q.”

“When the new program in the auxiliary braincore attempts to overwrite the primary braincore, the program in the primary may attempt to over-ride the interface link. I can not allow that to happen if the plan is to be successful.”

“What can I do?”

“I want you to reconfigure the interlink between the primary and secondary braincores so that it is one-way, duh.”

“Right,” whoever Q was, Falconer didn’t care much for his attitude. Superior, condescending.

“Interlink is set for one way flow only.”

“Stand by.”

Queequeg moved away from his workstation and jumped on top of the Dead Guy’s casket, which was now surrounded by twenty drainpoints hard-linked via the ship’s otherwise inoperative optical-data-network to the twenty other drainpoints Falconer had installed in the Braincore. Earlier, he had downloaded a protocol, a kind of map that Lexington Keeler’s duplicate consciousness could use to re-assemble itself in the secondary braincore.

“Are you ready in there, Grandpaw?” he asked out loud, scratching on the lid

“Shut up, you fur-bearing critter,” Lexington Keeler answered in a voice that made Queequeg want to leap out of his skin. “I been ready for this for hours, ever since that alien bitch took over my ship.”

“*Whose* ship?” Commander Keeler interjected.

“This should be virtually instantaneous,” Queequeg said. He leaped back to his workstation, landing exactly where he wanted to on the touchpad. Almost instantaneously, a message displayed on his monitor.

Transfer Complete

Restructure Protocol Engaged

Restructure Protocol Complete

Interface Engaged.

Then, a series of numbers that only a tech-head could make sense of flew up the monitor. When they suddenly stopped, eleven seconds later

“Oh, crap,” said the cate.

“What?” Keeler demanded. “What’s going on?”

“The Primary Braincore is inactive and empty,” Queequeg reported.

“What do you mean empty? Is Caliph gone?”

“She’s gone... but she took all the resident programming with her.”

“Resident programming?”

“The resident programming in the Braincore, the instructions for running the ship.”

“So, we’re dead in space?”

Queequeg now brought up the technical schematics for the Secondary Braincore. “We could try reinitializing with the Auxiliary, but that is also empty.”

Keeler’s mouth hung open. “You mean ... the other program gone as well?”

Queequeg flipped back and forth. “They are both completely purged. Most of the ship’s functions can be run by Federated Systems... the only problem is there is no Braincore to coordinate them, so, certain key systems will be unusable.”

“Like?”

“Primary drive engines, navigation, weapoms...”

Keeler shook his head. “That’s it. You’re fired!”

“Caliph might have fought back against the Dead Guy while they were in there together. They might have destroyed each other. I don’t think they did other, though.”

“Why not?”

“Because, according to these readings, both cores have been wiped clean. If they were destroying each other, at some point, their programs should have been too damaged to continue. Besides, Caliph was too smart for that. She would have dumped to another system, but she couldn’t have done it that fast.” His tail flicked. “Or, could she...?” He jumped down from the chair. “There is one other possibility.”

Before Keeler could ask, the Emergency Alarms began sounding again. “Well, at least they keep those working,” Keeler said. He hit his emergency comm-link. “Keeler here, what’s going on up there?”

“Commander, we’re showing some kind of activity in the Missile Hatcheries,” Alkema reported. “I’m relaying the data we have to your datapad.”

Keeler had to dig out from under a trio of empty highball glasses. He wiped the stain off the front and watched as two hatches above the missile hatcheries slid open rapidly. In less time than it takes to tell, a pair of Nemesis missiles rose above the ship’s forward plane. There was a kick transmitted along the length of the *Pegasus* as the ion-rockets fired, carrying the missiles on a trajectory toward Meridian.

“Caliph is gone. Why are the missiles launching?”

Specialist American spoke emotionlessly. “Apparently, Caliph left behind a fail-safe program that was activated when we shut her down.”

Commander Keeler felt a hot flare of some intense emotion rise up his back to his neck. Caliph would have her vengeance. Every living thing on Meridian was about to be incinerated, including his landing party.

CH-13

The Conference Chamber of the Regulators was, if anything, larger than the space in which *Prudence* had been parked and was so far the cleanest space they had seen on the planet. The floors were sparkling, glittering white like arctic snow in starlight, as was the wall behind them. The rest of the walls and the ceiling were too far away to be clearly seen. Huge, cube-shaped instrument clusters of wire and piping hung in the air, here and there, picked out by green and silver light.

Seats arranged in a semi-circle rose around a large circular table, and it was here they were instructed to sit. Lear had not expected such a large number of Merids to be present. A smaller cadre of nine, dressed in green robes like the Interface, all resembling her with only minor physical variations among them, joined them at the table.

The one who had led them gestured for the others to put small plugs in their ears. Translators, Lear realized. The interface then joined two other interfaces, seated at a large podium looking like a cross between an interactive workstation and an altar. The nine interfaces all faced forward, locked their hands into slots on the surface of the podium and stared into screens built into the tops, hidden from the view of outsiders, but bathing the faces at the podium in red and orange light that flickered over them like flames.

Lear heard a voice in her ear, dark and resonant, with an insectile buzzing in the background that rose and fell.

“Your trajectory to this planet was observed as originating from a point outside our atmosphere. Therefore, the assumption is made that you have traveled through space to this world. Is this assumption correct?”

“It is.” Lear answered.

“State your objectives in traveling to this world.”

“We identified this planet as being a former human colony known as ‘Meridian.’ We come here from another human colony. Our mission is to regain contact with Meridian and other colonies.”

“Is your ship still capable of travel through space? Are more of your kind en route to our planet?”

“Affirmative to both questions.”

“How many other colonies of Earth are there?”

“We don’t know. There may be thousands.” Lear felt uncomfortable, like some force was intruding on her mind. She resisted it by forcing out a question before the Regulators could ask another. “What happened to the human colonists on this world?”

“Those of whom you speak were our ancestors. They were poorly adapted. Our adaptation to this planet is superior.”

“We thought you might be aliens.”

“Not humans. Not aliens. We are the inhabitants of this planet. We are adapted for optimum survival on this planet.”

“How did you adapt yourself physically? Genetic engineering?”

“The Regulators are the descendants of the Integrated Planetary Management System. Powerful artificial intelligences capable of thinking beyond human thought. They determined that the structure of the planet had not been optimized. A new paradigm was conceived and implemented, that would proceed to alter not just the structure of society, but the entire eco-system of the planet and the biology of its inhabitants.”

Lear focused on the single most important piece of information she had absorbed. The Regulators were not a class of people, as she had supposed, but were some kind of highly advanced artificial intelligence. These people lived under their complete control.

CH-14

(This Chapter was apparently unnecessary)

CH-15

Lear noticed that before each time the interface spoke, there came a faint, gristly rustling sound, like dry leaves, paper and bone scraping on concrete. The sound seemed to come from a point just behind her left ear, but there was nothing there to make it. It was wearing on her, after so many hours of questioning. She was finding it difficult to maintain the focus of her thoughts, and this had never happened to her before.

“Will you order your people to turn over your ship to the Regulators?” the interface asked.

Lear was taken aback. “I was under the impression that you wished to cooperate...”

“Cooperation... is too slow. In order for the mission to proceed at the most rapid possible pace, command decisions must be swift and sure, with one acknowledged leader, do you agree?”

“Absolutely.”

“The Regulators can easily takeover your ship and lead the mission through transfer into your ship’s central intelligence.”

“I would certainly agree to that,” Lear said, “but I do not have that authority. I have to answer to another whose rank is superior to mine, and he will be unwilling to surrender the ship.”

“Will you kill him and turn the ship over to us?”

So much for subtlety, thought Lear.

“I would,” she answered, and if she had looked at Partridge and Ng in that moment, she would have seen their jaws drop open. “However, if you will indulge me, I think I know of a much better way for you... for the Regulators.... to achieve their goal rapidly.”

There was a pause and then that uncomfortable ruffling noise again, before the interface spoke.

“Explain.”

Lear stood. She wore the same pleasant yet inscrutable face she used to convey her inner self-assurance. This was very unnerving to Ng and Partridge whose minds were squirming and confused. “If I understand properly, the Regulators propose to acquire the use of our ship and travel from human world to human world, and then download their intelligence to the central computer systems of each world. A good and worthy plan, I must say, and noble to share the

system that has brought lives of comfort and security to your people. However, it isn't necessary, or even efficient, to use ships to transport information through space. If the council would be so good as to hear me out, I believe I can present a better plan."

Beneath the placid surface, Lear's mind was racing down several parallel tracks. Redfire and the others had escaped the Meridian attack and were, presumably, searching for them. *Pegasus* was due to arrive within a day and some hours. *Pegasus* could easily thwart the Regulators, if they chose that course of action. Keeler might act rashly, depending on what Redfire told him. She would have to stabilize the situation before then.

After a lengthy opening section, she came to the point of her speech. "Ships are built to carry people, but the regulators exist as raw data.... energy... they do not require a ship to carry them."

The interface looked at her strangely. "The Regulators wish to know, are you suggesting that instead of being physically transported through space, that a means be found of transmitting them on a carrier signal?"

"Affirmative," Lear answered.

"The Regulators exist in the form of a large volume of very complex and precise data.

Transmission would inevitably involve data loss."

Lear nodded. "I understand. However, the ancients had used a technology known as tachyon-pulse communication. Tachyons move at infinite speed, meaning they pass through every point in space simultaneously. Using this breed of tachyons, instantaneous communication is possible across any distance in space. Infinite speed tachyon transmissions have zero data loss because no force in the universe can interfere with them."

There was a long silence. Lear heard the rustling noise again. Was it coming from the station/altar where the interfaces were gathered? *It is the Voice of the Regulators*. Something told her.

At last they turned and answered her. "There is no record of the existence of that technology. The theory is sound, if the existence of tachyons that move at infinite speed can be proven and if a way can be discovered to encode the Regulator's intelligence matrix into this format. The Regulators wish to know, how could you enable us to construct such a device?"

"I do not believe there are any insurmountable obstacles. Based on some readings I took in our ship, I think the adaptation of your existing technology could facilitate such a transmission. I will

need your largest and most advanced laboratory, access to your information services, and a team of your best scientists and technicians.”

“Scientists and technicians?” the interfaces conferred. “We have a large number of people trained to perform as technicians, but we have had no need for scientists for many centuries.”

“We should be able to manage without them, however, I will require equipment from the ship that brought us here. Will you permit these two access to it?”

“The Regulators agree.” Shock troopers began to spill, somewhat listlessly, into the room. They quickly surrounded Partridge and Ng.

Lear raised her hand firmly. “Will you guarantee the safety of these people?”

“The Regulators absolutely guarantee their safety.”

Lear smiled, “It’s all right. Go with them. Go back to the ship Get our landing packs and bring them back, also as much scientific equipment as you can carry.”

The interfaces barked a command to the shock troopers and they were gone. An interface, a different one this time, came toward Lear. “I have been instructed to take you to a facility we have prepared for your use..”

“I am honored by the trust you have placed in me.”

“The Regulators believe you only because examination of the human specimen you provided enabled them to determine that you were telling the truth.”

Lear needed a moment to regain her focus before she could go on. “While still on board my ship, I found evidence of a latent tachyon field lying about 300 meters below this tower.”

“What does that mean?”

“The only way to generate those fields is with a tachyon generator, I have to assume that there is one functioning beneath the surface of the planet. They are usually built beneath their transmission towers.” She stopped herself short of asking how the Regulators could be unaware that one lay directly under their main city.

Ng and Partridge were led down the long hallway that earlier had brought them to the Council Chamber. As they rounded a corner, Partridge stumbled, spilling several small, clear glass

cylinders from his medical kit. “I’m sorry, I must be tired, it’s making me clumsy, would you help me...”

The guards looked at him dumbly. Only when he leaned over and began reaching did they begin to follow suit. They grabbed the small tubes in tightly closed fists, exactly as Partridge had hoped. He quickly stuffed them back into his pack. “Thank you so much.”

Without so much as a grunt of understanding, the guards continued to march them down the corridor. They approached the transporter station where they had earlier been deposited on this level. One of the troopers who was escorting them exchanged words with the trooper who stood sentry at the transport station. The words were in Meridian, but Partridge had a sense that something was amiss.

Suddenly, the escort unholstered his plasma cannon and fired a shot into the sentry, then turned and killed the other escort with another shot. He fired two shots into the doors to the transport station, which blew apart, and jerked Ng and Partridge into the station.

The whole action could not have taken more than a few mere seconds, but the escort lifted a small black pad to Ng’s neck that issued an electric crackle and knocked her unconscious. The escort caught her collapsing form in his arms and heaved her into the abyss.

Partridge was so shocked by this that he made no effort to resist when the escort did the same thing to him.

CH-16

“We’re on course for the planet,” Alkema reported. “But, running on maneuvering thrusters, we’re not making really good time. Falconer tells me we might be able to get two of the gravity engines on-line....”

“When?” Commander Keeler asked, slumped miserably in his command chair.

“Two hours, or three hours. He has to set them up so that they can, basically, point the ship in one direction. We won’t be able to change course. We won’t be able to stop. Everything will have to be programmed in advance. That’s the tricky part. He says we should be able to make .15c, maybe .175c.”

“Split the difference, how many days until we reach Meridian?” Keeler demanded.

Alkema adjusted his calculations. “Not too many days, awful lot of hours.”

Keeler scowled. Without the gravity engines to provide velocity in the opposite direction, *Pegasus* should have just continued drifting on her original heading. “I don’t get it. When we knocked out the engines, we were headed out of the plane of the system.”

“Well, while we were distracted and blind, I think Caliph turned the ship around, probably about the time she fired the missiles,” Alkema explained.

“Why would she do that?” Keeler wondered aloud. He turned to the Communications Officer.

“Could you summon Lt. Change to the bridge?”

The officer nodded curtly and walked from the bridge.

Alkema shrugged and sent a test signal along the ship’s lateral deflection array and read that it was 45% restored. “At least by the time we get to the planet, we should have most of the systems restored.”

Change must have been nearby, because she returned quickly. “What is it, commander?”

“Specialist Alkema tells me that we have somehow reversed course and are now headed for the inner system.”

“Are the GE’s back on line?” Change asked.

Keeler answered. “Neg, we think Caliph altered our course before the missiles were launched. We’re still day out of Meridian’s orbit. I thought, you being the navigator, might have some insight into how to get us there faster.”

She surprised them with an immediate solution. “We could slingshot around the outer planets and pick up some velocity that way.”

“Is that possible with a ship this size?” Alkema asked.

“In the guild, we used to slingshot the big ore processors all the time. It’s far more efficient than burning fuel. All you need is a good-sized planetary body.”

Alkema called up VRD, which showed the Meridian system and the position of *Pegasus*. “Za, there are three planets and fourteen moons within fifteen degrees of our current heading.”

“There’s a piece of luck,” Keeler said.

Eliza studied the display intently, holding her chin in her hand. “I can do this. I’ll plot three gravitational assists, that should effectively double our speed to the inner system.”

“We don’t have direct control over the gravity engines,” Keeler told her. “We’ll have to lay in the course in advance.”

Change was already burying herself in her calculations. “The GE’s aren’t the most important thing, although they will need to provide extra thrust at the precise moment to optimize our speed. I will need control over the maneuvering thrusters for any unanticipated corrections.”

“Unanticipated... you mean you can’t just plot this all out?” Keeler asked nervously, the image of his ship smacked onto a moon uncomfortably registering in his brain.

“The Astrogation and Cartography Survey has mapped out the masses, composition, and motion of those worlds. We know the mass of the ship and we can calculate our speed. The basic mathematical equations are relatively straightforward. However, our data sets are not complete. Variations in the surface topography of the planets, changes in motion from objects we haven’t plotted, this kind of interference may have to be compensated.”

Keeler turned to Alkema, who was looking at him expectantly. “O.K., let’s do it. Make your calculations and lay in a course. Would you like an and/oroid to assist with the calculations?”

Change shot the commander a cross look.

“Or not,” Keeler added. He hadn’t meant to give offense. He had assumed that anyone making mathematical calculations as complex as he expected these to be, in such a short period of time, would not object the assistance of mind programmed solely for that task.

The communications officer, mercifully, called for the Commander’s attention. “Commander, Flight Core reports launch systems are back on-line.”

“Do we have any ships ready for launch?”

“Three Aves standing by for launch on your command.”

Commander Keeler leaned into his command station. “Launch the Aves as soon as possible. They’ll serve as our eyes and ears until our sensors and comm. systems are back up. They can escort us in to the inner system.”

CH-17

Partridge opened his eyes and saw the blurry form of a Merid shock trooper leaning over him with a very bright light in the background. He closed his eyes again.

“Partridge, wake up!” a voice hissed.

He slowly opened his eyes again. When his vision cleared, and he saw that the light was sunlight, strained through a gauzy layer of pea-green clouds, and the Merid shock trooper was Tactical Lieutenant Redfire. Partridge sighed, “Oh, by God, you’re alive.”

He then recalled his last memory before unconsciousness. “By God, *I’m* alive.”

Redfire stuck out his hand and helped him up. “What happened?” Partridge asked.

“Welcome to the Bush of Whispering Ghosts,” Redfire said. “Some Watchmen helped us rescue you from the Regulators. Now, we’re just hanging out with the Witnesses and the Throwbacks, all in accordance with ancient prophecy, you understand.”

Partridge contemplated this for a moment, then said, “What?”

“I’ll explain it to you more when you’ve recovered a little bit. We understand the circumstances of your rescue were rather strenuous.”

“Was I was I... is Ng all right?”

“Dislocated her arm, you may want to have a look at her. We had to make sure you were unconscious when you fell down the shaft. If you were tense or flailed on the way down, you might have been seriously injured when you hit the paranets.”

“Paranets?”

“From the landing packs. We stretched paranets across the shaft near where we broke out of the tower. They absorbed enough energy to keep you from bouncing. Lt. Driver calculated the tension. He’s very precise.”

“We could have died. If we had landed on our necks, we could have...”

“The alternative was letting the Merids have you. After what they did to Ferguson, we decided against that option.”

“What did they do to Ferguson?”

“They tortured him for several hours and then killed him.”

Jersey Partridge looked like he was going to lose consciousness again. Redfire didn't have time for that, so he grabbed him by the shoulders and shook vigorously. “Stay with me, Partridge.”

Partridge recovered himself and raised his eyes to survey his environment. They were very high up on the main tower of the city, on some kind of ruined battlement that encircled the tower like a collar, about 400 meters below the summit. The view was quite impressive. In the distance, he could make out the misty green sea.

“So, how did you rescue us from the Meridians?” Partridge asked.

“There are subversive agents within the Merid shock troopers. They're called ‘Watchmen.’ They belong to a kind of resistance movement that has been fighting the Regulators for thousands of years, and losing. We used one to facilitate your rescue.”

Partridge reached for his medical pack, and thanked God when he found it still strapped to his person. “What about Driver and Roebuck?”

“They're over this way, and they're fine,” Redfire answered. He gestured for Partridge to follow him, and filled him in on what he had learned. “You see after the Regulators took over, the surviving humans retreated into the countryside. The Witnesses are peaceful, their main purpose is to preserve the memory of life before the Regulators.”

Partridge nodded. “The Merids told us that they were the colonists... that they had evolved.”

“That's partially true.”

“Then, they're not aliens.”

“Actually, they are aliens... sort of... in a way. The explanation gets rather difficult and bizarre from this point. Difficult in the sense that the Merids are not really aliens, but they're not really human either. Bizarre in the sense that the Witnesses have been expecting us. Our coming had been prophesied for centuries.”

They approached an encampment. An old man was addressing some other people, as well as Driver, Roebuck, and Ng. His language struck Partridge's ear like a too-rapid rendition of the

chanting he had once heard in an Arcadian monastery he had visited as part of a linguistics course at Cambford University.

Redfire extracted a chip from his tracker and clipped it into Partridge's translation module. "The lingotron has worked up a pretty good translation of the local indigenous lingo. It still sounds a little... off, but you get used to it."

A small voice in Partridge's ear began translating the Meridian speech.

The old man who had been speaking approached Partridge with a stateliness of bearing none of them had seen on this world. He was dressed in a kind of black jumpsuit, not unlike the Merid shock troops wore under their armor. It was surprisingly clean, if threadbare in places.

"It is a source of gratification that you have been recovered from the custody of the Regulators," he said.

"Shouter, this is Medical Technician Jersey Partridge, from Corvallis, the capital city of my planet, Sapphire."

Partridge examined Ng's arm while she rested in the embrace of her sedative. It appeared to be healing well.

"These exotic names and places," the old man Shouter repeated, shaking his head. "Amazing to us who have been dwelling only in the empty lands." He was a large and strong-looking man, on the front end of old age. What that meant in years was anyone's guess in these parts, but he had about a pair of decades on Commander Keeler at the least. His hair was lost beneath a kind of tight hood, but his beard was gray as stone. "I am called the Shouter and these are my people, the Witnesses to the Conspiracy."

"You should fill him in on what you told us," Redfire said.

"Let me start at the origin. When our world lost contact with the rest of human culture, there were scarcely 80,000 souls on this planet. Only one child in four survived the first year. The water had to be processed in order to be potable. Crop failures were 90% in good years. We struggled for a long time after the Earth ships stopped coming. Our population fell until there were barely enough of us to sustain the colony. Drastic measures had to be taken..

"Within a century of the abandoning, our machines had begun breaking down... the water processors, the weather modulators, the artifactories, the... the things we lost the names for...they

all were failing. No one knew how to repair them. Or, those who did know, were in cities thousands of kilometers away with no way of getting where they were needed.”

Partridge broke in. “This is what the Regulators told us. They said the Regulators had to invent cybernetic systems to regulate crops and so forth on the planet.”

Shouter seemed to smolder with anger. “The Regulators have a different version of history than we do. Ours is the true history of the planet, passed on by oral tradition. It is how we kept the ancient language alive as we awaited our deliverance. Theirs is a fable.

“According to what is remaining of our historical record, the solution did not come from the leaders of our planet, but from a loose association of agronomists. They had been using a computer network to share information on crops and weather. The system was working well enough that we were finally producing enough food every year to feed all.

“It was a fairly simple system. There were computers at every agriculture station linked to a powerful central computer at the Agriculture Division. This allowed the Agriculture Division to disseminate information throughout the planet; post advisories on which crops to plant and share information on the best techniques for making crops grow.

“Other Divisions... Communications, Transport, Industry, Commerce, Housing... deciding to use the same curriculum to manage those areas.

“The curriculum worked. It brought us back from the hole. Eventually, all the curricula were brought together into what was known as the Integrated Planetary Management System, or IPMS. By this time, the program was effectively running the planet, distributing resources, determining tax rates, determining where to build power stations. The Governing Council found itself diminished to a role of merely carrying out the directives of the IPMS. For thousands of years, that’s the way this world was run.

“Is that how you all ended up living in these... arco-tower?” Partridge asked.

Shouter shook his head. “No, no. There were once hundreds of settlements all over the planet. Originally, the IPMS was liberating because it enabled information to flow freely to any point in the planet. No one needed to be fastened to one place.

“For centuries, the stagnation imposed by the IPMS reigned over our world. Once they had achieved their objective of social, economic, and environmental equilibrium, no further

advancement was allowed. The designers of the system had not calculated anything beyond a certain level of sustainment. All had enough, but no more. Steps were taken to assure that there would be no alteration to the system.

“One day, as it was, as I stand here, three thousand two-hundred and twenty-six years ago, a Dark Spirit fell from the sky.”

“Excuse me?” Partridge said. “A ‘Dark Spirit.’”

“This is where it gets a little weird,” Redfire said. “So, pay attention.”

“On the night I am telling, skies lit up with a fireball that left a twisting, glowing trail in its wake. It wasn’t here, at Larkspur but in a remote, mountainous region of our planet called New Acona that it finally came to impact. The first reports, from a meteorological station, described a great black machine, twisted and smoldering, that had fallen from the sky in a crazy spiral. The government retracted the report, and said it was a large meteor. Pictures were shown around the planet of a large, burned rock and a crater, and most accepted the story.

“According to the first Witnesses, what had fallen on New Acona was a machine... a ship, or part of a ship. The truth of it was hidden under a secret code, a secret operation named ‘Dark Spirit.’ It was transported, in secrecy, to a government facility in another remote area of the planet, by a secretive conspiracy within the government known as ‘The Watchmen.’

“At first it was thought nothing was inside. This was because what was inside could not be detected by the instruments of the day. However, there was a thing inside, living in the machine, and it was part of the machine. It was part alive and part machine and part something that wasn’t alive or machine. It became known also as ‘the Dark Spirit.’ It was invisible, cold. It needed to live inside a machine, and it needed to control.”

“Control what?” Partridge asked.

Shouter answered nearly in a whisper. “Everything.”

“Very soon, the Dark Spirit found the Integrated Planetary Management System. The Witnesses tried to stop it, but they could not. Then, they tried to contain it. They went to every city, trying to destroy the central computer networks. They tried destroying the computers with bombs and vandalism. For a while, they slowed the Dark Spirits advance, but they couldn’t stop it. Once the ‘Dark Spirit’ controlled the IPMS, it controlled our world. There was no stopping it.

“The dark Spirit soon became many, and called itself ‘the Regulators.’ The Regulators began a program of concentrating all the people in the cities, where they would be easiest to control. They used persuasion at first, then coercion, and finally force. The enforcers moved into the countryside to drive the people out of their homes and into the cities. The smaller cities, the towns, the villages, the settlements were all burned and destroyed so completely that where they had been there was nothing but scorched ground.

“Finally, the last of the Witnesses and the last of the Watchmen met in the last of the cities. It was called Larkspur then. Now,...” he lifted his gaze up, to take in the city that towered and spilled and sprawled around him. “It was, for a time, the last free city on our planet. The Regulators were laying siege to it. The people were starving, and all hope was gone. They saw no choice but to surrender.”

“The last Watchmen and the last Witnesses understood that their cause was lost, but they understood one thing more. They knew there were other humans dwelling in the stars. They realized that the return of humans from other worlds might be the only hope for salvation of the planet. They also realized that the Dark Spirit was an aggressive entity, programmed, somehow, to conquer worlds. If it knew there were other human worlds, and it knew how to get to them, it could use the knowledge gained from subjugating our world to subjugate others. All knowledge of other worlds had to be destroyed and hidden from the IPMS, and any knowledge of space travel must also be destroyed.”

“But if it came from space,” Partridge asked, “it must have known how to travel in space.”

“You must remember, it did not land here, but it crashed here. It was severely damaged, and fortunately, we believe, that part of its memory that dealt with space travel did not survive. Over the centuries, the Watchmen were so successful at infiltrating the databases of the planet, and eliminating all mention of other worlds, that the Regulators themselves believed that no other life existed in the galaxy.”

He made a vague, but important gesture into the distance. “Our forebears passed on their knowledge from generation to generation... only a few from each generation survived. Some were assimilated, and they had to be killed before they could share their knowledge with the Regulators. Some were allowed to appear to be absorbed, in order to infiltrate the inner levels of the Regulators under the guise of obedience, but most committed suicide before the Regulators

could absorb them. These days, we are limited to infiltrating the enforcers, all the other insiders are so changed, our differences would be noticed. The enforcers wear helmets and masks, though. However, somehow the Regulators have learned of other worlds. They are very aggressive, and they believe they must propagate themselves. They seek the means to travel to other worlds, to make others of their kind.”

A young woman stepped forward. She seemed to be of the same age as Partridge, with rust-colored hair braided together with rags and wrapped around her neck. “We knew you would come to free us,” she said.

“This is another weird part,” Redfire said, eyes shining. He liked weird parts, but even more so when there was an attractive female involved. “...but trust me, well worth it.”

“I am Ender, a prophetess, and we have been dreaming of you for centuries.”

“How is that possible?” Partridge asked.

“The outside of this arco-tower, the place where these others made camp,” she explained. “We call it the Bush of Whispering Ghosts.”

Partridge knew that in some dialects, bush was a synonym for wasteland. Roebuck looked around and muttered “I don’t see any dambred bushes.”

“Those who sleep in the Bush of Whispering Ghosts occasionally have visions of the past and future. When we heard your ship’s message, we knew the visions were true, that the time of our deliverance was at hand,” Ender told them. “When we saw your ship come from the sky, we knew the liberation was at hand. I dreamed you. I dreamed all of you, as my mother and my grandmother before me dreamed you.”

Something about the girl awakened a random memory asleep in Partridge’s mind. His eyes widened. “By God, Exec. Cmdr. Lear is teaching them how to build a tachyon pulse transmitter.”

Redfire did not seem particularly surprised by this. “Then, we will have to stop her, before she transmits the Regulators back to Republic.”

CH-18

“There is no question about Ex. Cmdr. Lear,” Redfire stated firmly. “She can not be allowed to complete construction of a tachyon pulse transmitter.”

“It takes years to build one of those, and this planet probably doesn’t possess the basic technology,” Driver argued.

“This planet already has a tachyon pulse transmitter,” Redfire stated calmly. “There’s a TPT buried 300 meters underneath this very tower.”

He smiled to see the desired effect; astonishment across everyone’s face; everyone except Roebuck, who was munching some kind of survival tart.

“How do you know?” Driver asked.

“I detected the tachyon field while we were still on *Prudence*. Lear knows about it, too. She’s not too inventive, but she can read a data analysis.” He took a deep breath and exhaled it loudly. “She will need to build an amplifier, and a transmission antenna, but it can be done and it wouldn’t take long, even with native technology.”

“She can’t finish before *Pegasus* gets here,” Roebuck said, spraying crumbs toward Ng.

“When will that be?” Redfire said. *Pegasus* was more than eight hours late. Redfire had a feeling something was seriously wrong. “We can’t take the chance. We’ll have to get to her first. Ng and Partridge, why do you think Lear is helping them?”

“She said it was in the charter,” Partridge answered.

“I think it was the sublims,” Ng said.

“Sublims?” Redfire asked.

“They were using ... trying to use subliminals to get to us,” Ng reported. “You know, suggestions just below hearing threshold. They were quiet and distorted. Mostly Ferguson screaming.”

“Za, but we could hear them,” Partridge added. “The Merids probably didn’t know what our hearing threshold was.”

At that moment, there came a thunderclap. It was especially startling to the Meridians, since thunder was all but unknown on their world, and this was a loud and willful thunder. High above

them, shapes were moving through the air. It looked as though pieces of the blue-green sky had broken loose and were bearing down on the ground.

“What is that?” Shouter asked.

Redfire smiled from ear to ear. “Cavalry.”

The Aves dropped their holoflage shields and bore down out of the sky like mighty birds of prey.

Roebuck jumped up, his arms in a Victory salute. “Za! Za! Za! Krishna be praised!”

“More ships?” Shouter said with a kind of reverence, his eyes trained on the Aves as they grew closer.

“Za,” Redfire told him.

“How many such ships do you possess?”

“A lot.”

Shouter clapped his hands together. “Then, our liberation may truly, truly, be at hand.”

Basil settled down gently at the edge of their perimeter, *Desmond* about twenty meters behind.

The hatches slid open and the Marines came running out in white and black battle armor.

“There is nothing more beautiful in the morning than a company of Marines coming in to save your ass!” Roebuck enthused.

Then, Captain Jones-Jordan exited her ship, walking on her long, thin legs, her uniform tight around her hips and small waist, showing off her bosom in a way the standard flight suit was clearly not intended to do.

“I take that back,” Roebuck said.

Redfire approached her first, Driver flanking him, three steps behind, and Roebuck bringing up the rear. Redfire and Jones-Jordan exchanged casual, Sapphorean-style versions of the Odyssey project salute, a kind of stylized wave and tip of the hand off the temple. “Status report, Commander Redfire?”

“Captain Jones-Jordan, we have been on the surface of the planet for fifty-one standard hours. Since the time we have left *Prudence*, Technician Ferguson is dead. The others were taken to a meeting with the leaders of this planet, at which meeting they learned that this planet is governed

by a set of alien computer programs called the Regulators. The Regulators want to acquire our technology to spread themselves throughout the galaxy.

“There is a movement of people on the planet called the Witnesses of the Conspiracy. They have kept the Regulators from acquiring the knowledge necessary to leave the planet. They have infiltrated the ranks of those who serve the Regulators directly. They have managed to free Ng and Partridge.”

“And Commander Lear?” Jones-Jordan asked, her ice-blue eyes locked on a point a meter past Redfire’s skull.

“Commander Lear is helping the Merids build a techyon pulse transmitter to carry the Regulators back to Republic, where they will doubtlessly infect Republic’s computer network and take over the planet.”

Jones-Jordan turned away from him and shouted at the Marines. “Is our perimeter secured?”

“Perimeter secured, captain!”

She turned back toward Redfire, Driver, and Roebuck. “Does that complete your report?”

“Za, how much longer before *Pegasus* makes orbit?” Redfire asked.

Jones-Jordan continued to be looking past him. “*Pegasus* is not making orbit. The central braincore malfunctioned, it tried to attack the planet and took *Pegasus* out of the system.

Commander Keeler shut down the drive engines. We have had no further reports, however, two hours after we launched, two Nemesis class missiles were launched from the *Pegasus*. These missiles are currently 3.6 hours behind us.”

Redfire nodded, also looking past Jones-Jordan. “Well, this mission is a one-hundred percent Panrovian Cluster Phuck all the way around.”

Driver and Partridge looked at each other. Even someone as socially obtuse as Driver could read that there was something between the Lt. Commander and the Flight Captain. It was in the past, maybe, but not very well buried.

“Why didn’t you try to stop the missiles?” Redfire asked.

“They transmitted Commander Keeler’s confirmation signal. They are supposed to enter orbit and hold position until your safety was secured.” Jones-Jordan touched the back of her jaw lightly.

“Jones-Jordan to Eureka. Please send a message to the incoming missiles indicating that all

personnel have been secured and are preparing for evacuation. If the missiles do not alter course, prepare to engage them.”

She looked past Redfire again.

“What is the Mission Plan from here, commander?” Jones-Jordan asked.

Redfire called out. “Driver, get over here. This is Flight Lt. Driver. He’s very good with time-tables. Lieutenant?”

“Sir?”

“I want you to take Captain Jones-Jordan ship and intercept those missiles before they reach the planet. She will stay here with the Marines and me while I work out a plan to get Ex-Commander Lear out of the tower.

“With all due respect, I would rather take *Prudence*.” Driver touched the com-link on the inside of his jaw. “Driver to *Prudence*, initiate recall sequence. Enable code: Alpha-zero-zero-two-three.”

At the bottom of the tower, *Prudence* rose and began retracing its way out of the cavern, much to the shock and panic of the shock-troopers who had been guarding her. She reached the end of the tunnel and found the entranceway had been closed off. *Prudence* scanned the doors. Blast-shielded. Her braincore analyzed the situation. The blast-shielded bay doors would be resistant to her weapons, but the walls around them would not be.

Prudence aimed her ventral pule cannons underneath the doors and blew away the foundations. A few blasts from the dorsal particle cannons destroyed the rest of the structure around the entrance. *Prudence* raised her energy shields to full and blew through the rubble, bursting out of the base of the tower.

Driver closed the VDR projector mode on his Tracker. “ETA, forty seconds.”

Redfire looked pleased. “All right.”

Redfire nodded and pointed to the Aves. “Flt. Lt. Driver will take *Prudence* out to intercept the missiles before they make orbit. Flt. Lt. Eureka will hold in high orbit with *Desmond* to provide point defense in the event that Lt. Driver is unable to destroy or disable the missiles.”

“And *Basil*?” Jones-Jordan asked.

“*Basil* will stay here to Evac us if the missiles get through *Prudence* and *Desmond*. The Marines and I will break into the tower and get Ex. Cmdr. Lear back.”

“How?” Jones-Jordan asked.

“I am about two minutes away from figuring that out.” He looked toward the Witnesses. “Mr. Shouter. How do you insert your people into the arco-tower?”

Shouter looked at him quizzically. “We enter through the lowest levels of the arco-towers, since they are poorly guarded and there are many sewers, and garbage chutes, and ventilation shafts. These extend outwards to the limits of the suburbs, and it is in them that we make our inhabitations.”

“Can we enter the tower at an upper level?”

“The uppermost levels are well-shielded both by structure and guards.”

Redfire considered this. “I haven’t been very impressed by the guards we’ve fought with so far. I think a direct assault might be worth considering. When you talk about secret passages...”

“They end well before the uppermost levels,” Shouter told him.

Redfire’s brow furrowed. He thought about blowing another hole in the side using *Basil*’s guns, but he feared the resulting attention would make further infiltration impossible.

One hundred meters above them, there was a sharp snap, crackle, and pop. A stray lick of the artificial lightning generated by the electro-static dischargers spilled over the roof and poured down the side of the arco-tower like liquid electricity. It burst some distance down the side, making fluorescent spiders that skittered down the sides, or off into the air.

“Whooo-ee,” said Redfire, with a certain understatement. “Hey, Shouter, do you know what those electro-static dischargers are for?”

“Electro-static dis-charge-ers?” Shouter repeated slowly.

“The sparky things,” Redfire repeated.

“Öh, the sparky things,” Shouter chittered. “We have no knowledge of their functionality. The Regulators built them... eight hundred years ago... for highly uncertain purposes.”

“They’re ionizing the atmosphere,” Partridge put in. “Changing it chemically... within a few thousand years, the atmosphere is going to be toxic to humans.”

“It’s also altering the planet’s electro-magnetic field,” Jones-Jordan reported. “Our instruments detected...”

“The planetary magnetic field being altered into a series of coherent pulses, I know.” Redfire looked around the company. “Excuse me,” he said, and started walking toward *Basil*. “Captain Jones-Jordan, you might want to come with me. Ng, you, too.”

Shouter also followed, making a reverent gesture as he entered the *Aves*.

Inside the ship, Redfire activated a science station. “Modeling and Simulation Mode,” he ordered. He activated a three dimensional display of the arco-tower, with energy-flow patterns highlighted. He then instructed the computer to animate the arco-tower in real-time through data-link to the external sensors. He was particularly interested in seeing whether the discharge was energy coming into the arco-tower, or going out.

He brought up a second VDR. Isometric atmospheric analysis. When he saw the readings, he gave out a low whistle. He pulled in a satellite analysis from one of the orbiting probes.

“What is it?”

“Partridge is right. The electro-static dischargers are apparently part of some kind of atmospheric processors. The composition of atmosphere around the cities has been altered, slightly, but over time, it will be completely different.”

Captain Jones-Jordan raised a single perfect eyebrow. “Perhaps, an atmosphere to support an alien species.”

“Fair bet. The dischargers draw energy from the planet’s magnetosphere. When they spark, there is a planet-wide power surge. Every discharger on the planet imparts a specific signature. Cumulatively, it creates a unique energy pattern in the planet’s magnetic field, which is in turn projected into space.”

“Like a beacon,” said Jones-Jordan.

“Right,” said Redfire. “Let me show you what I am proposing to do.”

Redfire showed her what he was going to do.

Jones-Jordan’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely, it will be a masterpiece, if I can pull it off.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Jones-Jordan muttered, but no one heard her.

Redfire turned away from his station. “Shouter, you’ll want to pull all of your people off the arco-tower. Get as far away as you can.”

Lear brushed her thin bangs off her forehead and leaned back. She had spent nearly seventeen straight hours taking the interfaces through a series of experiments to prove the validity of her approach.

The first test was simply to demonstrate the existence and the properties of the tachyon field she had detected underneath the arco-tower. She had directed specifically phased temporal harmonic energy into the field, so that it swelled outward, affecting the function of an atomic clock placed in the lower levels of the tower. Comparison with atomic clocks in other cities showed the tachyon field had caused the clock to lose time.

The second test was to demonstrate how tachyon pulses could be encoded to convey data. This time, she programmed the harmonic energy pulses to affect the function of the atomic clock in a specific pattern that could be decoded using another atomic clock. It was fundamentally the same method used to encode and decode TPT signals in the receivers orbiting Republic. An ever-more-complex series of algorithms was encoded into the signal, and it was decoded with 100% accuracy, to the satisfaction of the Regulators.

She had learned it all in Basic Science class in her first year of secondary school.

“All that remains is to encode the actual data for transmission, and then transmit.” She was pointing a monitor displaying the same piece of Meridian architecture that had captured Lt. Cmdr. Redfire’s attention. “This structure at the apex of your arco-tower will function adequately as a transmission tower.”

“The Regulators require assurance that the transmission has been received.”

Lear pinched the bridge between her eyes. “As soon as the signal is sent ... is set to send repeatedly ... we can begin construction of a receiver. When it is completed, we will know.”

“The Regulators demand to know how long it will take to construct the receiver.”

“It will have to be at least a thousand kilometers in diameter. Depending on the availability of materials and technical assistance...”

“Two-hundred and four days.”

Lear nodded her assent.

“The important thing is that the signal be sent before *Pegasus* makes orbit. Or else, they will try to stop us. How long will it take you to encode the Regulator program into a form that I can transmit.”

“It has been done.”

Lear looked at the data on her monitor. “I would have expected the dataset to be much larger.”

“The dataset being sent is a self-extracting program detailing how to construct the Regulators in a receptive host. It is more efficient than sending the actual Regulator protocols.”

“Good,” said Lear. “Let’s prepare to encode. We will still require a substantial amount of energy.”

“The Regulators demand to know, how long before the dataset can be transmitted.”

“Can you confirm that a large discharge will take place in thirty eight minutes time?”

“Confirmed.”

“Then that is when we will transmit.” She smiled. “Within an hour, the Regulators will have a whole new world to conquer.”

CH-19

Pegasus looped around a large, icy moon in the middle of the Meridian system, close enough to pull a few tendrils of atmosphere along behind it. With this last swing, the great ship was once and finally on course to Meridian, and making almost decent speed.

Change turned to Keeler. "It's working, commander. Our speed is .275c, and we should be at planet Meridian in another three hours, nine minutes of ship time."

Basil lifted gently into the air and began a looping course to the top of the arco-tower. Far below, the Witnesses were fleeing the tower under the cover of a dozen Marines. Another dozen were sitting in the back of *Basil*.

"Course laid in," Jones-Jordan announced.

"Adjusting shield polarity." Redfire reported.

"This is insane," Jones-Jordan muttered. She pushed the stick forward. *Basil* surged ahead, angling down to a point directly over the arco-tower.

Redfire looked, for a moment, as though he were about to say something else, then demurred.

"All stop, holding at 1,000 meters from intercept," said Jones-Jordan. She looked through the canopy. The dischargers were dead ahead, slightly below. Electrical charges were crawling up and down their metallic frames like sparker hyperactive caterpillars.

Redfire watched the monitors, looking for signs of the energy build-up that would presage the next discharge of power into the atmosphere. The model of the tower he was reading looked something like a radar map of a storm cell. Most of the tower's area showed a lime green energy flow, except for the dischargers themselves, which were emitting a sizzling purple. Rapidly, a volcano-like plume of red began rising through the tower. "Go!" Redfire ordered.

"Moving to intercept point."

Basil flew into position directly above the dischargers as a giant surge of energy spilled into the atmosphere.

"You better know what you're doing this time," Jones-Jordan purred.

Redfire reached over his station and made a last adjustment. “Shields at maximum! Brace yourselves, this is going to be a big one!”

The first pulse of energy hit, felt like nothing, but then was followed by a surge much larger than Redfire had anticipated. The ship was slammed with a force of energy like all the power of hurricane, focused and released in a single second. *Basil* acted like a lightning rod, making a circuit that directed Gigawatts of energy that should have vented into the atmosphere back into the tower.

While the shields were more than equal to the task of protecting the ship from the energy, they did nothing to hold it steady in the exploding air.

“Whoa, baby!” Redfire yelled, reaching for an Oh-Shit handle as the ship pitched violently. “I like it like that.”

“Stabilizers at maximum,” Jones-Jordan reported.

Redfire watched his VDR. The energy patterns had gone from red to orange and were shooting back into the tower.

It was too much feedback for the dischargers to handle. They exploded spectacularly, sending an eruption of burning metal shards raining down the tower. The upper levels of the tower also exploded, blowing walls into dust and leaving behind a blackened forest of structural supports. Most of the energy was spent in the uppermost floors. Lower down, the structure was strong enough to contain its share of the energy feeding back into it, but the entire power distribution network was overwhelmed, burned out and collapsed.

“Move in and prepare for landing,” he ordered Jones-Jordan. “Marines, stand by to deploy as soon as we are within jump distance of the tower.”

He checked the scanners. Lear’s bio-chip displayed her location. He also noted she was in fine physical shape, although her elevated heart rate and adrenaline secretions indicated that the destruction of the arco-tower’s power system had surprised her as much as the Merids. He had the ship’s scanners map out the interior of the building and fed a schematic diagram of the internal structure to the Marines.

Basil was descending to land on what was left of the roof of the arco-tower. “There’s no clear place to set down,” Jone reported. “I’m going to engage the counter-gravity and let us hover above the debris.”

“Close enough for a jump?”

She did not respond verbally, but shot him a quick “of course, close enough for a jump” look.

A few seconds later, the rear hatch opened and Marines began jumping through in twos and threes. Redfire looked at Ng and was about to ask if she felt up to going, but she was already charging the open hatch. Redfire ran after her and leaped into space.

The roof of the tower came up surprisingly fast. Redfire’s legs and knees stung with the sudden impact. He looked up to see half the Marines already deployed in a protective perimeter. Two of them were working on gaining access to some kind of panel that led into the arco-tower. In their direction, Redfire moved, with Ng at his side.

The electro-static discharge had left the air crackling dry with a reeking stench of ozone which stung Redfire’s nostrils as he paused to survey the damage he had done. The dischargers were scorched, melted and blackened, like the twisted skeletal hands of a hideously burned monster, reaching desperately toward the sky.

Nicely done, he thought to himself. *I’m a killer when the muse is upon me.*

The panel swung open with a loud groan and three Marines trained their weapons into the darkness within. They looked back toward Lt. Redfire who gave them a sharp nod. They dropped a stun grenade into the hole. There was a flash from below, and then the Marines headed down.

Redfire and Ng slipped on their Low-Light Environment Enhancement Visors and went in after the Marines. Two more followed them. The remainder of the company stood guard outside.

They climbed down until they reached the highest intact level of the Arco-tower. The visors made the damaged interior of the upper arco-tower even more surreal as they made their way along. It was actually brighter than he had expected. The Merids were masterful in the use of light-transmitting crystal. The inside of the arco-tower had a dim, crepuscular glow. He saw the illogical angles describing the walls of the corridor through which they were traveling. The patterns of power conduits burned out by the energy feedback scrawled across the walls like robot hieroglyphics.

“Exec. Commander Lear is four levels below us, 120 meters southeast,” Ng reported.

“Got it,” Redfire confirmed. Led by the Marines, they pushed their way further into the tower.

“Look for a way to get down to her.”

“There’s some kind of maintenance access shaft about fifty meters ahead,” one of the Marines reported.

“Looking for it,” Ng confirmed. She pointed to a wall panel. Not pausing for niceties, the forward charge of Marines ripped it from the wall, revealing a space behind, the head of a shaft leading downward.

The shaft was about two meters wide, circular, with hand-grips running along two sides. One of the lead Marines was already dropping into it by the time Redfire and Ng reached the entrance. Two went down while one remained behind to guard their backs. Ng climbed into the shaft and Redfire followed.

Before they had made it down very far, they heard two sharp *shpip-shpip* sounds; the sounds made by shoulder-cannons in non-lethal firing mode.

“What’s happening?” Redfire hissed into his mouthpiece.

“Two unfriendlies encountered us at the shaft exit. They were dispatched using non-lethal force. Status: Unconscious.”

“Acknowledged.” So, the Merids had responded a little more quickly than Redfire had expected.

Suddenly, there was a snap loud enough to be heard without auditory enhancers as Ng’s foot failed to connect completely with one of the footholds in the shaft. The knee she had earlier injured falling into a paranet was wrenched in a direction it had never been meant to go. She clamped her jaw shut tight to keep from shouting out in pain and slid the remaining few meters to the bottom of the shaft.

“Ng!” Redfire called in a shouted hiss.

Ng didn’t answer. She was still clamping her jaw shut against the pain. Redfire double-timed the remaining length of the shaft.

The first Marine had pulled Ng away from the shaft and was pulling a pain-suppression ampoule out of a sleeve-pocket in his battle-jacket. Redfire leaned over to Ng.

“I knew this was a stupid idea,” she growled through clenched teeth.

The first Marine squeezed the ampoule against her neck.

“We should get her back to the ship,” Redfire said.

“Help me get her leg splinted up.”

Redfire checked his chronometer. The missiles were due in forty-two minutes. He bent over Ng as the Marine popped her knee joint back where it belonged and began wrapping an immobilizing bandage around the leg.

Neither Redfire nor the Marine saw the Merid shock troopers approaching from behind their backs. Ng had been squeezing her eyes shut to block the pain, but as the ampoule released its warm, sweet load into her bloodstream, she relaxed just enough to open them, and just in time to see the Merids raise their weapons.

Reacting as her training dictated, Ng reached up and grabbed Redfire’s arm and twisted it around backward, pointing his hand cannon at the Merids. She wrapped her hand around his wrist and squeezed. The pulses took out the shock troops in three neat shots.

Redfire wrenched his arm away from her, turned and saw what had happened. “Damb, but you are good.”

“There’s a lot more going for me besides unbelievable beauty,” Ng purred, wincing at the same time. “Now, get my leg bandaged up and keep moving.”

Redfire checked his Tracker. Exec. Cmdr. Lear was on the next level below. “Get Ng back to the ship. I’ll get Ex. Cmdr. Lear.”

“I would not advise going in alone, Lieutenant,” said the Marine.

“Specialist Ng is going to need both of you guys to make it back to the ship. No sense in all of us turning into crispy critters when those Big Dams hit.”

The three of them looked at him dubiously. He tried the comlink. “Redfire to Lear, please respond. Exec. Cmdr. Lear, if you can respond, please do so.”

Nothing.

“With all due respect, commander, the situation sounds pretty troublesome.”

“All the more reason to risk only one of our precious selves. Look, I’m going, I’m going by myself. No argument. Once Ng is safe, you can drop down and bail me out, but I have no more time to argue with you.”

He turned in the direction his Tracker indicated he would find Ex. Cmdr. Lear. The Marines, being Marines, raised no more argument.

Keeping both hands in front of him, Redfire made his way down the corridor. His right hand provided him with a constant sensor sweep of his path, his left wielded a hand cannon. He closed in on Lear’s position.

The Tracker indicated Lear was directly below a large octagonal chamber on his level, and that the chamber in question was occupied by eight Merids. Maintaining his defensive crouch, he skirted the perimeter of the chamber. It was open, without doors, and he was able to peek inside one of the openings. He saw the Merids standing around a viewport built into the floor, from where they could observe whatever she was doing below. He reached into the front of his battle-jacket and withdrew a smart grenade. He raised the small sphere to his lips and whispered instructions. “Eight life-forms in the next room. Take them out.” He opened his palm and the grenade drifted away, describing a course into the next chamber, where the Merids were waiting.

The grenade drifted over the Merids’ heads and detonated with a bright flash, an intense energy burst that disrupted the synaptic pathways in the brain. When the flash cleared, the Merids were down, but even before then, the grenade had punched a large hole in the center of the portal.

Redfire rushed in a second later. He looked through the open portal and saw Ex. Cmdr Lear glaring up at him through the hole. She was wearing the same gray robes as the Merids. “Just what do you think you are doing, Redfire?” she demanded.

Redfire leaped, made a smooth arc through the middle of the hole and landed in a crouch, his boots and the supports at his knees taking the force of the landing. He stood and extended his hand to Lear.

“We have to go.”

“Go? Go? Go where, Lieutenant Commande? I have the situation under control.”

“There’s an Aves on the roof standing by to Evac us, but we have to go, now. There are two Nemesis Missiles en route from *Pegasus*. This whole planet is about to be destroyed, with or without us on it. I would prefer to be off it when that happens.”

She hissed. “Keeler is behind this... an unprovoked attack on a newly contacted planet.”

Redfire gestured. “Evacuation now. Explanation later.”

Her voice dropped to a malevolent hiss. “When we get back to *Pegasus*, I will have you both frozen and sent back to Republic for trial.”

Redfire stared her down. “You were collaborating with the rulers of this world to help them take over Republic.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You were going to transmit the Regulators to Republic.”

She growled. “Do you know very much about interstellar tachyon-pulse communications, or is that outside your area of interest, lieutenant? The antenna assemblies that serve the Republic system are designed with huge information buffers. These hold incoming messages in order to protect our planetary communication system from contamination, cyber-warfare, spaceborne computer viruses and anything else that could be transmitted through space.

“With advance warning, we could hold the Regulators in an isolated facility, study them, learn their weaknesses. When the Phase II ships arrive in the system, they would know how to defeat them without destroying the inhabitants. And we would know, too, should we encounter their kind again.”

Redfire tightened his landing pack. “There will be time to sort through your lies late, Ex-Commander Lear. The missiles are coming and we have to get out of here.”

CH-20

Prudence emerged from Meridian's atmosphere and the planet became a curve, then a sphere, then a spot behind them. Matthew Driver could not have been more relieved. On the ground, *Prudence* was vulnerable, in space, she was a strong and fearsome bird of prey. Like his ship, he only felt himself in his element when he was in flight, when he had taken wing and broken away from gravity's selfish hold.

Driver pushed the thrusters to full power. "I have never been trained in defeating a Nemesis missile. No one ever thought we would be fighting against our own weapon systems."

Roebuck thought about this. "They don't know how to fight us either."

Driver thought about this, and then nodded. "Good point."

"It is?" Roebuck was shocked. No one ever had told him he had a good point.

He set some switches on his command console. "I'm going to reset *Prudence's* transponder to Battle Damage Assessment mode. If we come up from behind the missiles, they'll be programmed to think we're a BDA recon ship. We could take out both of them at point blank range."

Half a million kilometers below, Lear and Redfire were picking their way through the dark upper floors of the arco-tower. "Redfire to Jones-Jordan," Redfire said into his comlink. "Ex. Cmdr. Lear and I have exited the science chamber and are proceeding upward. Try to keep Marines close at hand. How long do we have?"

"Seventeen minutes. Any longer, and we won't be able to get *Basil* to minimum safe distance."

"Acknowledged, Redfire out."

Driver had managed to pull within 12,000 meters of the missile he had been pursuing. Through the enhanced head's-up display, the missile seemed to loom directly above him.

Driver was determined to splash the missile before it reached that little green planet in the corner of his. With a delicate push of the thrusters he moved in still closer.

“Standing by to lock weapons,” Driver whispered.

His free left hand, which had been hanging lightly in the air above the weapons panel, descended gingerly. A moment later, his right hand pulled back on the thruster bank.

Prudence closed the distance in the time between seconds, giving the missiles no time to evade. There were eight bright flashes from the forward dorsal weapons brace as *Prudence* let loose her fury on the missile, then flipped backwards and peeled away. Two weapons tore holes in the missile’s shielding, two more tore holes in its armor plating, and the four remaining weapons buried themselves in its belly, then detonated.

The missile exploded amidships, and space was rendered with an explosion that tore molecules apart.

“Crude!” Eddie Roebuck said. “Whoa!”

“Proceeding to next intercept.” Driver said. He sent out a broad scan, and detected the other missile, a few thousand miles away. He opened communications to the other ship. “*Prudence* here, one inbound missile destroyed, tracking second target.”

The voice of Flight Lieutenant Eureka, on *Desmond*, answered him. “*Prudence*, from your position, it is not possible for you to intercept the missile. *Desmond* advises you to return to *Pegasus*.”

Driver favored the comlink with an irritated look. “*Desmond*, we have no bearing on *Pegasus*.”

“*Prudence*, scan along heading 182 by 020.”

Driver oriented the sensors for those coordinates. Some identity codes began flashing in the corner, and soon, the image of *Pegasus* was displayed.

“There she is.”

Driver frowned. “Acknowledged, *Desmond*.”

“Are we going back to *Pegasus*?”

“I am sending a message to *Pegasus*, but we are going back to Meridian.”

“Why?”

“Because *Desmond* can’t intercept that missile.”

“How do you know that?”

“These are smart missiles, Eddie. The other one will spot *Desmond*, it will recognize a point defense and launch its warheads before making orbit.” He pushed his thrusters forward, and drove his ship toward the planet. “I’ll take *Prudence* into the atmosphere on the night-side, come out on the dayside and knock out as many of the warheads as I can when they enter the atmosphere.” He paused, as though having to admit something difficult. “I won’t be able to take out all of them, but we might be able to save some of the cities. At least one of the one where we left Exec. Cmdr. Lear and Tactical Commander Redfire.”

The remaining missile approached Meridian. Its brother, in the last nanoseconds before it was destroyed, transmitted a report as to what had happened. This missile knew it must now finish its mission alone. Far ahead, it detected another ship of the kind that had destroyed its brother missile, lying in wait, preparing to attack and defend.

The missile slowed to give itself additional time to calculate a strategy. It searched its memory banks and found a solution devised by a military tactician on Republic. The missile calculated the odds and was satisfied it would work.

The three rows of hatches opened rapidly across the front and middle two-thirds of the craft. It monitored the approach of an Aves closing in on it and knew it would have to work quickly, but it would not be concerned. Nothing would stop it from finishing its prerogative. It released the warheads from their bays.

The Aves was closing, still, but now the Nemesis Missile was an empty vessel. It activated its holoflage shields, broke away from its swarm, and bore down on the Aves.

“Target has gone dark,” reported the weapons officer on *Desmond*.

Eureka, Desmond's pilot, was a thin, wiry-haired man from City of Unity. "Switching to holoflage detection mode."

"Target re-acquired," reported the Weapons Officer.

Eureka looked at the readings. The *Nemesis* was bearing down right on them. He instinctively began evasive maneuvers, when suddenly, the *Nemesis* dropped out of holoflage dead ahead of them and fired its pulse cannons across their wings.

"Sh---" Eureka began, as he took *Desmond* into a steep, evasive turn. The *Nemesis* bore down and underneath him, then roared back into space, knocking *Desmond* to the side with a full burn of its thrusters.

"Fire all weapons!"

"No weapons lock, target reversing course," the weapons officer called.

Eureka shook his head. "Engaging in pursuit."

That was when the ship's sensors intercepted a command being sent from the missile to ten of the warheads it had left in space, just outside of the range of *Desmond's* sensors. Now, the ten warheads, shielded behind their tiny holoflage cloaks, fired their thrusters to rain down on the unprotected planet.

The weapons officer realized it first. "I'm reading ten objects bearing down on the planet. Weapons computer identifies them as warheads from the *Nemesis*."

Eureka stammered, "The missile lured us out of range. It had already launched the warheads and it used itself as a decoy." He tightened his grip on the controls. "We have to take them out."

Eureka watched the formation of warheads break and scatter, still high above the planet's surface. Without another word, he pressed the thrusters forward and went after the nearest warhead.

CH-21

The hundreds of hatches within the long struts that ran down the sides of the towers throughout the cities burst open, and out of them shot small silver and black spheres. They were about six meters in diameter; vicious-looking things, with thick spiked bands along their equatorial lines. The air above the city shortly became filled with them, and the sun was blotted out as their small, powerful, intensely radioactive engines burned trails into the sky. The radiation would kill a lot of people outside the arco-tower, but this was no concern to the Regulators.

“ETA to Meridian,” Commander Keeler demanded.

“Ship Time, twenty-seven minutes,” reported Specialist American.

Eliza Jane Change looked at a model of *Pegasus*'s braking maneuver. Based on the most recent set of calculations, it showed *Pegasus* swinging around the planet at a distance of 14,000 km, at which distance the trailing edge of her propulsion field would tear a nice piece out of the atmosphere in the planet's southern hemisphere.

“Commander Keeler,” came the annoyingly enthusiastic voice of Specialist David Alkema. “I've accessed the datalinks to our orbital probes via link-up from *Yorick*.”

“Forward display.”

In the forepart of the outer bridge, a turning three-dimensional projection of Meridian appeared. Alkema tightened the view further to a close-up of one of the arcologies, from which a swarm of metallic objects was arising.

“What is that?” Keeler asked.

“Probes detected a massive launch of them from every city just as the warheads from the Nemesis missile deployed. Probably some kind of planetary defense.”

“Alert all stations. Go to Battle Situation Two, repeat, BS2,” Keeler ordered. He found himself leaning over Alkema once again. “What's the status of our defense systems.”

“All of our defensive shields are operating. The pulse cannons are operational.”

“Good.”

“... but there’s no central control to link them to sensors. The pulse cannons can’t lock onto a target except the ones with direct links to independent sensors.”

“How many of those do we have?”

“Not many ... only about half. I think it should be enough.”

Keeler turned. “Specialist American, order Flight Core to get as many Accipiters ready for launch as they can.”

Redfire and Lear were making their way up the shaft, climbing partly with the aid of the rappelling, and partly on the abundance of handholds the collapse of the structure had created.

Their progress was not as fast as they would have liked. They were watching the countdown on Redfire’s chronometer. They had twenty-one minutes to reach *Basil* and escape.

Redfire was attempting to haul his weight up on a seemingly solid length of pipe or structural frame, only to have it break free of its surrounding material and nearly send him tumbling back into the shaft. He caught himself by reaching out to a broken beam of honeycombed metal when he felt a kind of vibration. He was shaking, and his trembling seemed to be spreading through the structure of the building. He soon realized that the shaking was not coming from him, but from some source outside the tower, which grew in a matter of seconds to a great, constant, thundering roar.

Suddenly, there were no handholds. The uppermost levels had already been structurally damaged by the backflow of energy from the electrostatic dischargers. This new energy, feeling for all the world like an attack, was too much for the damaged building to sustain.

Redfire was holding fast to the rail when it gave way, and he and Lear fell to the level below, landing in a heap beneath a rain of building materials. Sure that something heavy was just about to land on top of them, Redfire pulled Lear away from the shaft.

“Are you all right?”

“What was that?” Lear demanded, helping herself up.

“Redfire to Jones-Jordan, come in.” He received only static in response. He tried again, and then examined his tracker.

“What’s going on?” Lear demanded.

“I can’t reach Jones-Jordan.” His tracker showed a massive EM field slowly beginning to dissipate. The intensity would have been enough to interrupt short-range communication.

“I think we’ve just been attacked.”

“By whom?”

“I’m changing transmission modes. Hopefully, Jones-Jordan can tell us.” He thought of *Basil*, on the outside of the tower. Whatever had hit, had hit them first. “Redfire to Jones-Jordan.”

“Jones-Jordan, here.”

“Jones-Jordan, what the hell just happened out there?”

“We just witnessed a massive launch of... of some kind of airborne vehicle. The whole exterior of the tower has been irradiated.”

“Casualties?” Redfire and Lear said in unison.

“All of our people not in the tower made it into *Basil*. Our MedTech is checking them out now, but we think they made it in time.”

“What about you?”

“We in the building have received a major radiation exposure, non-lethal, but we need to evacuate at once... you two as well, lieutenant.”

Redfire checked his Tracker. “Any word from *Prudence*.”

“*Prudence* splashed one *Nemesis*. The other launched warheads before it could be engaged. *Desmond* is attempting to intercept the warheads inside the atmosphere.”

Redfire looked at Lear. Lear looked at Redfire. It was she who spoke, but he would have said the same. “Captain Jones-Jordan, take your company back to *Basil*. We will attempt to make the ship, but if we don’t.... good luck to you.”

For a moment, they continued to look at each other, perhaps realizing it was the first time they had ever been in complete agreement.

Redfire looked up the shaft again. How they were going to climb out now, he did not know. He couldn’t see the top, except for a murky spot of daylight, but he perceived a falling object, and he moved aside, shielding Lear.

The object fell with a thud, sending another dustburst into the air. Driver pulled it over and saw that it was Captain Jones-Jordan' landing pack, from the back flap of which, two sturdy, well-anchored rappelling lines reached up to the top level.

Prudence roared above the surface of Meridian, heading across the planet's nightside into the dawn, passing over the moonless expanse of a great, evergreen ocean; its course converging with the course of a warhead bearing down on the city where *Basil* still sat on the ground.

He checked with *Prudence*, who told him he would be within weapons range in four minutes, thirty-six seconds. There were quite a few things he had time to do.

Four minutes passed, and *Prudence* announced that the warhead was within visual range. A targeting reticle appeared on the head's up display.

"I don't see it," Roebuck said.

"The warhead may be running with holoflage shields up. Activate polarity filter."

Where there had been just a turbulent dawn sky a moment before, the warhead resolved until it appeared clearly, a flying gold delta with strakes along either edge. It had detected *Prudence* and was maneuvering desperately, veering in and out of the target lock.

All four forward cannons on *Prudence* blazed. The warhead was protected with a small energy-deflecting shield that was quickly overwhelmed by the onslaught. *Prudence* continued firing until a small explosion burst inside the warhead, and *Prudence's* instruments showed it was dead.

Leaving the warhead in a tumbling, uncontrolled descent behind him, Driver altered *Prudence's* course and angled her nose toward the southeastern horizon, passing over the terminator into Meridian's afterdawn. The enormous city made a bulge on the horizon.

Driver was hung between an honest answer and a polite one, when *Prudence* drew his attention to the airspace over the city.

Between *Prudence* and the city, three enormous silvery clouds, looking for all the world like enormous flocks of migrating birds, glittering in the sunlight, heading straight on toward *Prudence*.

"What is that?" Roebuck asked.

Driver did not answer, but increased Longview Magnification. Now, the objects appeared, less atmospheric distortion, to be right on top of them.

“Are those what I think they are?”

Driver nodded quickly and armed all his weapons. “Those probes we encountered on our initial descent.”

Roebuck knew what he meant. “Sinister Buckyballs of Doom.”

Over Meridian’s northern pole, one of the two warheads on the second string received the information that one of the weapons had been destroyed before reaching its target. It promptly launched itself toward the city.

The other would wait until it had determined that it would not be needed. Then, it would fire its ion engines, and headed back toward the missile that would carry it back to *Pegasus*.

As *Prudence*, approached from the west, *Desmond* bore down from the north.

The tactical specialist in the right-hand seat conveyed the news to the pilot. “*Prudence* reports splashing the targeted aimed at this city.”

Flt. Lt. Eureka nodded slightly. As much as he hated that another pilot had to clean up after his mistake, at least Driver would never give him grief about it, like a lot of the other pilots in Flight Core. Driver was too much of a good scout to do that.

Eureka squinted, at the edge of his vision, some kind of shimmering, light-dappling cloud was beginning to appear. *Desmond* tracked his vision, and magnified the point on which he was focused.

“What is that, Specialist Rutkowski?”

The tactical specialist looked over his displays. “It’s a large mass of the kind of spherical flying probe that *Prudence* encountered on her landing cycle.”

He turned to another set of displays that conveyed information from the orbiting probes.

“Apparently, those are being launched from every city on the planet... thousands of them.”

“What is our ETA to intercept?”

“Eight seconds.”

“Arm all weapons, all shields.”

“Shields going up.”

A moment later, *Desmond* was passing to the heart of the cloud. The spheres scarcely paid it any attention, battering against it, knocking it back and forth, up and down. *Desmond's* weapons flashed, clearing as many from the way as they could. There were just too many, and they were too close together. Every one that battered one of *Desmond's* shields weakened the ship just a little bit.

A sphere connected in a head-on collision with the *Aves*, imploding its plasma engine in the process. A tear of light and heat opened a large hole in the midst of the swarm as the explosion immolated the sphere, hundreds of its own kind, and the *Aves*.

The Meridian spheres whirled around *Prudence*, dancing on the fire of small plasma fusion pulses, deflecting off her shields. The spheres had no defense against *Prudence's* pulse-cannons and self-guided missiles. One, two,... five... sixteen were shattered in the first few seconds of combat.

“Setting Weapons Systems to full autonomous mode,” Driver announced, reaching over Roebuck's head to flip a line of switches.

One buckyball got out ahead of the *Aves*, then aimed itself for a head-on collision. It blew apart against the forward shield of the craft, but weakened the shield in the process.

“Evasive maneuvers,” Driver tried to dive below the cloud. The spheres continued to glance off its shields. There were too many. Driver could only think of avalanches, while Roebuck was reminded of an educational program of Borealean salmon, and how the rivers of Sapphire's northernmost continent turned into churning streams of silvery fish stampeding toward the open sea at the end of their winter hibernation.

“Analysis,” Driver asked. He read off. “Hydrogen fusion weaponry. 25 to 50 megaton yield.” He wondered if any of the warheads in his swarm were close to detonation, and before he had begun to wonder put *Prudence* into a power-dive to get as far below the swarm as he could.

“The warheads just blew through them,” Eddie said. “Look!”

“Longview, warhead,” Driver ordered.

The screen pulled back to the Meridian city, this one occupied a vast plain astride a major river. Other than that, it was almost undifferentiated from the city they had been in. Displayed on the canopy came a live-action shot of one of the Nemesis warheads, burning white at its tip, tore through the attacking buckyballs and roared down toward its city.

Driver addressed *Prudence*. “ETA to detonation?”

Prudence answered him. “Detonation in eleven seconds ... ten ... nine ... eight ...”

“... four ... three ... two ... one... detonation.”

They saw, on their screen the detonation of the warhead. It had obviously been set for an extreme yield, as an enormous ball of white-blue light, even larger than the city itself, burst over the scene. Before it had reached its full extent, the viewer failed and returned to green sky.

For a moment, no one said anything. Then, an alarm began to sound.

“Distress call from *Desmond*..”

“Longview, *Desmond*.”

They were shown the swarm of sinister buckyballs of doom they had just passed through, in which there had just been an explosion. Another detonated. Then another, and another.... airbursts in the 50 megaton range.

“By all that’s holy...” Driver said.

From the fireball emerged the burnt-out black shell of the *Aves* that had been *Desmond*. It trailed smoke and black bits of debris that fell like cinders from a fire. *Desmond*’s flight deck looked the blackened skull of a bird; her blasted canopy was destroyed except for the structural supports, conveying the impression empty eye-sockets.

Then, *Prudence* recorded another airburst over a distant Meridian city.

“If the defenses are ignoring the warheads,” Roebuck asked, “Then what the slag are they doing?”

Prudence, track all swarms of hostiles and determine a heading for all.”

Prudence had to display the whole planet. The swarms were converging at a common point in the atmosphere, where they regrouped, and headed into space. A few seconds more of calculation showed their intended destination.

“They’re going to attack *Pegasus*,” Driver said.

Redfire and Lear could see clearly now the daylight coming through the hole in the roof, now probably just three or four meters overhead.

Lear’s head hurt. Her muscles ached and she felt weak. She knew it was the radiation, more than the strain. She was finding it hard to concentrate.

There was the roof, just a meter above them, he lunged for it. His gloves enhanced his grip on the rough surface and he pulled himself up. Lear was just behind him. He reached into the hole, offering his arm, and pulled her beside him.

“Thank you, lieutenant...”

“Don't thank me yet... look...”

He pointed to the side, just in time to see *Basil* taking off at maximum thrust and fly away until it disappeared over the horizon. Redfire looked around to see if he could spot the warhead. It did not take long. There was a long contrail arcing toward the city from the northeast.

Redfire turned to Lear. “So, this is it, we’re going to die.”

Lear stared at the approaching missile. “Trajan... Marcus,” she whispered, by way of a prayer.

“Raise shields to maximum,” Jones-Jordan ordered.

Marine Specialist Molto did as ordered, then asked grimly. “Will it be enough?”

“If the warhead is set for maximum yield, neg. If it isn’t....”

“If it isn’t?”

“I’d say we have a fifty to seventy percent chance of surviving.”

Molto looked through the viewport. The city was far below and behind them. An instant later, there was a flash. The flash grew to a huge blue-white ball of light that filled the horizon and obliterated the whole of the ground below.”

The view was equally impressive from the ground.

CH-22

Pegasus was on approach for the braking maneuver — a long swoop around the planet, using the gravity of Meridian to slow them down and bring them into orbit. This was the most critical one of all the maneuvers, but the only person on the bridge who was following it was Eliza Jane Change. Everyone else was watching in fascination as the sensors displayed more data on the swarm of Meridian Attack spheres just a few million kilometers ahead.

“Our sensors now show approximately 12,000 spherical objects approaching on vector zero-eight-two. We will intercept them in four minutes,” Alkema reported from the Tactical Station.

“Show me,” Keeler ordered. A holographic display appeared in the middle of the command center. The swarm of metal spheres was poised to engulf *Pegasus*. “Analysis?”

Specialist American brought up a schematic. “Each of those is powered by a plasma-fueled kinetic ion fusion engine. No offensive weapons, detected. However, the powerplant is set-up for rapid implosion. Estimated yield, 50-60 megatons. Our orbital probes indicate several already have, attempting to destroy our incoming warheads.”

Keeler stole a glance at the display of *Pegasus*, bearing down directly into the heart of the swarm.

“Bring us to a stop,” he ordered.

“I can’t,” Change told him. “We still have no direct control to...”

“All right, all right,” Keeler waved her off and turned back to American. “Status of Defensive Systems.”

“Shields at maximum, available point defenses at ready, Accipiters ready to launch for long intercept,” Alkema reported.

“Ready the Accipiters for immediate launch. Stand by on the Aves, Very good.” He turned to the Operations Officer. “Status of non-essential personnel?”

“All non-essential personnel have been evacuated to Battle-Shielded Areas,” she answered him.

Keeler nodded. “We’re going to Battle Situation 1. All personnel to battle stations.”

“Aye, commander.” American touched his head set. The light in the bridge changed, The accent lighting that outlined the bridge went from amber to red. A pair of “oh-shit” handles deployed from every station. A holographic tactical VDR appeared on the front left side of the bridge; a scale representation of *Pegasus* surrounded by a translucent bubble of deflective shielding. Other VDR’s showed the status of all weapons and firing solutions on the Meridian targets.

So, this was battle. Keeler had tried it in the simulator once or twice, and he had been the Reserve Grand Champion in the Battle Command Interactive Gaming Competition while an undergraduate at USNC. (Would have been Grand Champion, too, if he hadn’t been distracted by butt-cramps in hour thirteen, he thought to himself.) Neither had been quite like this. Nothing had ever been like this.

“Three minutes to intercept,” American announced.

“Launch all Accipiters.” Keeler ordered calmly.

Accipiters, the graceful fighting wings of the Pathfinder ships, enjoyed their own dedicated launch systems, capable of putting one hundred and forty-four into space within two minutes of the order. Forty-four of these had pilots, and one hundred were capable of autonomous flight beyond a certain range, or control by pilots in simulators in the Flight Battle section.

“You realize of course,” said American, “that each Accipiter will have to take out over a hundred of those spheres.”

“Then, help them out,” he ordered.

Specialist American brought up her battle console. The display showed an array of missiles activating in *Pegsaus*’s foredeck. “Arming two braces of Hammerhead missiles. Maximum speed. Maximum yield. Launch enable at your order, commander.”

“Launch Hammerheads.”

“Launching brace one.”

Ten hatches opened, and ten bright and dangerous streaks of light shot through space.

“Launching brace two.”

The hatches had opened and closed in less time than the human eye could register any movement. The Hammerheads shot past the Accipiters and struck deep into the heart of the swarm, detonating into concentric circles of blue-white light. The first brace blew enormous dark holes in the swarm. A few seconds later, the second brace reduced the number of attackers still further.

“How many did we take out?” Keeler asked.

“I can’t be certain,” American answered. “But based on the reduction and dispersion of mass, it looks like kills were in the 65% range. Ready to launch another brace at your command.”

“Stand by,” Alkema suggested. “The Accipiters are moving into intercept range.”

American answered him, “Acknowledged. Point defense weaponry only. Phalanx guns at ready.”

“Thirty seconds to intercept.” Alkema reported.

“Beginning final braking maneuver,” Change announced.

For thirty seconds, Keeler and the command center watched the Accipiters tear forward, seeming to converge at a point directly in *Pegasus’s* flight path. Ahead came bursts of red and yellow light. The Accipiters had engaged their targets and were inflicting damage.

“Twenty seconds,” Alkema reported.

The swarm began to resolve from points of light into tooth-belted metallic spheres. The light came from the firings of their thrusters as they pitched and yawed, positioning themselves for their suicidal attack on *Pegasus*.

“Ten Seconds to intercept.”

Keeler turned away from the screen long enough to ask Shayne American. “What happens when we intercept them.”

“You’ll find out in less time than it would take to tell you, commander.”

When *Pegasus* blew through the cloud of Meridian spheres, she was still traveling in excess of one-eighth the speed of light. She only spent a few seconds in the crowd, but they were very busy seconds.

The front line of the spheres slammed into *Pegasus's* forward shields like a swarm of Sellassian gnats on the windshield of a ground transport. There was a chaos of a thousand small explosions. The smallest were simply the impact annihilation of the spheres, the larger ones were attempts by the spheres to detonate and disable their quarry. None of the explosions was great, compared with the bulk of the ship, but together, they transmitted enough energy through the shielding to send a shudder through the command tower.

Keeler found himself grabbing with white knuckles onto a handle that hung over Eliza Jane Change's Navigation Station. As he watched the spheres explode and burn over his ship's shielding, all he could think of was how much better the battle effects had been in his games of "Battle Command."

He tried to remember what to do next, but the battle seemed to be happening with no help from him. Now, the spheres were bursting and also deflecting off the shields at oblique angles. He watched, incredulously, as one attacker skipped across the shields and then slammed into another sphere. It seemed to happen so slowly, he could see their metal bodies merge and swell before they exploded.

He shook himself hard to try to bring himself back into a proper time-frame. He looked around the bridge. His crew (*His crew?* Had he ever thought about them that way before?) held fast to their stations, doing their jobs, maintaining his ship.

He felt such pride that it took an effort of will to jerk himself back into command mode. "Damage report?" he asked David Alkema.

Alkema gestured in the air, bringing up three red displays. "Shields are holding, Probability of minimal damage to some vulnerable sections. All weapons systems appear to be intact.

"Good... Battle Status?"

Alkema pointed to the schematic of *Pegasus*. The spheres were regrouping, turning back to attack the ship.

"How can they keep up with us?" Keeler asked.

"Some of them are caught in our gravity wake." Change told them, then turned back to her navigation screen.

Of course, that was it. The spheres were now being carried in *Pegasus* own gravitational field. Accipiters were chasing them across the face of the ship.

“Engaging phalanx guns,” Change announced. The phalanx guns were the *Pegasus*’s most deadly close-in weaponry; filling a target area with so much energy that accurate targeting was not necessary to destroy an aggressor. Across the ship, the powerful guns were now tracking the spheres, locking onto them, and destroying them with deadly bolts of force.

However, a few pockets had become apparent in *Pegasus*’s active defenses. A few of the spheres were hovering in these quiet zones. The spheres reached out with arcs of what looked like blue lightning, feeling for weaknesses in *Pegasus*’s shielding. Specialist American brought up an analysis.

“They’re probing the ship with some kind electromagnetic pulse field. I think,” said American.

“That they are trying to disable our outer defenses by scrambling their communication links and internal programming.”

“Can they do that?” Keeler asked.

“Not with their current energy levels, but they are constantly adjusting power and frequency, looking for a vulnerability. I think they want to disable *Pegasus* without destroying us.”

Suddenly, one of the spheres detonated near the stern. The explosion was silent, but the energy briefly overwhelmed the defensive shields and sent a backwash through the system. Two shield grids overloaded and burst, this explosion was carried through the structure of the ship, and came to the bridge as a rattle and rumble.

“Shields down in Area 43 A, 42 A. Secondary shields damaged. Shield Grids 40 A, 29 A, 35 A and 27 A extending to compensate,” Alkema reported.

“Are datalinks established to the shields?” Keeler wanted to know.

“Nay, sir. The shields are programmed to compensate when they detect a loss.”

“We need more active defenses,” Keeler said. “We can only take so many hits like that.”

Another sphere began moving in, this one directly forward of the command tower. It disappeared in a burst of light and an Accipiter flew through the debris.

Now that was a pretty good battle effect, Keeler thought.

Four of the spheres detonated simultaneously against the forward shields in enormous, light-shattering explosions. The shields held, but the energy fed back into the *Pegasus* systems, overloading the most vulnerable junctures. Some of the energy was absorbed and redirected out into space, wiping out a few more of the sinister buckyballs of doom.

“Damage report,” Keeler demanded in the command center.

Alkema answered. “Damage to forward shield grid. Estimating time to regeneration. Back-up shields undamaged and standing by to replace damaged shields.”

“Can we sustain another barrage without them?”

“Affirmative.”

“Save them until we need them.”

“Aye, commander.”

“How are the Accipiters doing?”

Alkema enlarged the VRD holographic battle display. The Accipiters were continuing to decimate the battlespheres. Suddenly, a large, golden-brown object swept into the field of view.

“Hold,... what was that?”

“That was a Nemesis Missile.” American reported. “I’m tracking it now,” Specialist American reported. “Closing on forward Missile hatchery.”

“Is it armed?” Keeler demanded.

“I am scanning one remaining warhead.”

“Target the forward batteries on the Nemesis,” Keeler ordered.

“I have no way of engaging the forward batteries,” she reported. “They’re on automatic... and they recognize the Nemesis as friendly.”

The missile came to the outer margin of the *Pegasus* shielding and sent a disabling code to one of the shield sections. It dropped, opening a small aperture directly forward of the missile hatcheries.

One of the spheres, seeing an open opportunity, dove toward the aperture, and entered immediately behind the missile.

“Oh.... slag,” said Keeler, as he watched it on the bridge.

But the *Nemesis* loosed a pulson bolt from its aft quiver and dispatched the intruder. Before chunks of silver metal had time to touch the hull, the *Nemesis* sent another signal, closing the gap in the shields. The blast-shielded hatches from which the missile had emerged opened, and it settled back into its hangar, as though it had done nothing out of the ordinary.

The weapons specialist charged with monitoring the missile batteries turned and was about to confirm the recovery of the *Nemesis* missile in accordance with procedure, but then, he thought again about it and turned back to his station without saying a word.

Keeler looked at the image of the *Pegasus* projected in the forward part of PC1. There were no explosions, no flashed of light, nothing. “They’ve stopped,” Keeler said.

Alkema shook his head. “Oh, neg.”

“Oh, neg, what?” Keeler asked.

Pegasus final braking maneuver had involved looping around Meridian and establishing a high orbit. It had just completed its turn, and was heading back into the main body of what was left of the Meridian attack spheres.

“The enemy craft are building up to a mass simultaneous detonation,” Alkema said. “And we’re drifting right into the center of it.”

“Problem commander,” Eliza Change told him.

“Don’t tell me, we can not alter our course.”

“Correct.”

“Intercept in eight seconds,” Alkema reported.

“Where are the Accipiters?” Keeler asked.

American answered. “They’re trying to plow the road, commander, but there aren’t enough.”

“Six seconds.”

Keeler barked an order to the wrong person. “Lt. Change, fire a brace of hammerheads.”

“Firing hammerheads.” American reported.

Alkema continued his countdown. “Five seconds.”

The hammerheads streaked toward their target.

“Four seconds.”

As the hammerheads reached the front of the line, battle spheres exploded, destroying scores of the spheres and deflecting others from their courses.

“Three seconds.”

“Hammerheads failed,” American reported.

A second line of spheres filled in the gaps left in the first.

“Two seconds.”

“Can we survive this?” Keeler asked. American didn’t answer.

“...one...” Alkema said.

Suddenly, the external communications array activated. A monopulse signal was sent to the sinister buckyballs of doom.

“0” Alkema said.

The cloud of silver spheres hung inertly in space as *Pegasus* passed through them, her deflector shields making a wake of them in her passing. Alkema checked the VDR’s.

“What... *isn't* happening?” Keeler demanded, removing his fingers from his ears.

“No engine activity, no reactor activity, no sensor activity,” Alkema said. His mouth hung in complete mystification. “They’ve all shut down.”

“Completing orbital insertion,” Eliza Jane Change reported, as though she had ignored the entire battle. *Pegasus*, the Accipiters, and the three Aves swung around Meridian, watching the planet flash by underneath.

The forward monitor activated. The voice returned. The voice of Caliph. It spoke calmly, reassuringly, and perhaps just a little — a little — churlishly.

ALL YOU HAD TO DO WAS TURN THEM OFF.

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For the rest of the story, go to www.worlds-apart.net and order the paperback version, featuring an additional 180 pages of sub-plot and character establishment, or download the complete Book 01 Meridian in eBook format.