



Fiddler's Green

A World's Apart Story

This story takes place almost two years into the journey of the Pegasus, about halfway between Bodicea and Winter.

Part One -- From Queequeg's journal ...

We weren't even sure Fiddler's Green existed. The files recovered from Testament made one oblique, ambiguous reference to a liner visiting there three hundred years before the collapse, and gave the system coordinates as 14 668 Sagitta. The projections gave only a 20-24% probability of finding a colony there, but it was a relatively short deviation off our course from Templar to Independence, which would otherwise have been a long transit. After finding no colony at the system identified for Templar, I think Commander Keeler simply did not want to remain in hyperspace for such a long stretch.

The captain made the decision after we had entered hyperspace. Lieutenant Navigator Change was not pleased at all.

"Do you have any idea what's involved," she asked him in a tone of voice that made me think of severe weather alerts back on the home world. "Exiting hyperspace is difficult, and not completely safe under any circumstances. Then, we'll have to determine our position and chart a completely new course for the new destination." I thought she was going to slap him. I could swear that pony-tail she wears in Primary Command was twitching of its own accord. She's temperamental, and having a boyfriend hasn't helped that.

"We are on a mission of discovery... and exploration," the boss responded, calmly, with a tap of his walking stick against the side of her station. "Take us out of hyperspace and plot a course to ... ?"

"14 668 Sagitta," said Lieutenant David Alkema. Alkema is one of the youngest crewmen on our ship. The command doesn't know exactly how young, and I haven't made any effort to let him know. Alkema's a nice enough guy, I guess, but I suspect that every time the commander sits down his nose hurts.

"14 668 Sagitta. We have to see what's there. We owe to the memory of the Commonwealth. Besides, I like the name. Fiddler's Green. Doesn't that sound ... " he sucked in a deep breath as though taking in warm scented country air. "Ah, pastoral, bucolic, relaxing. Fiddler's Green. I wonder why they called it that, and was there literally a fiddler involved?"

Executive Commander Lear concurred with the decision. “I think a short mission to this world would be valuable as a training exercise even if there is no colony. We’ll plan for a minimal mission, with a longer mission on stand-by in the event we do find a colony.” Lear is elegant, sophisticated, meticulous, one of the many fine products of the proud Republic Space Command bureaucracy. You can’t help but wonder what really goes on underneath that crisp blond coif, behind those pale gray eyes. Whenever she smiles, you can’t help thinking that she’s imagining you lying on the floor at her feet with a knife in your back. Yet, for some reason, I still don’t like her very much, and not just because of her “No cats on the bridge” philosophy.

“Let’s do it,” Tactical Commander Refire said. No one had asked him, but he regards not being asked for his opinion as a mere technicality. Him, I like.

Change didn’t say anything, but just turned to her NavStation and began plotting for a transition out of hyperspace. “It will take Twenty-Seven hours to slow to transition speed.”

“Go to,” said Captain Keeler, settling into his command chair. So, basically, all three of the ship’s command officers agreed that diverting to Fiddler’s Green was a good idea; and the working crew thought it was a bad idea. That alone should have told them this mission was a disaster in the making, but no one asked me.

I, for one, was perfectly happy to get out of hyperspace early. I just don’t sleep well in hyperspace. Granted, I’m nocturnal, for the first part, and a good day’s sleep for me is something like 300 naps of three minutes duration each, for the second part. I always wondered what it would be like to find a warm spot and just spend about three days going in and out of consciousness, but I could never figure out a way to go without eating or “marking my territory” for that long. In hyperspace, I don’t know what it is, but I fall asleep and the next thing I know, it’s like nine hours have gone by. That almost puts me out of my mind! I talked with a tabby who lives with one of the drive engineers, Tybalt, who says the same thing happens to him. He thinks its because in normal space, we’re constantly brushing up against other creatures that live in the same space but in different dimensions and only cats can sense them. In hyperspace, there is no other life, and nothing to draw us out of consciousness. I think Tybalt might have spent a little too much time curled up on the top of the fusion reactor (Not that I blame him. Health risks aside, that’s a damb good place for a nap, always warm, gentle hum like your mother’s purr.)

So, we dropped out of Hyperspace, laid in a course for the star system. It took Astronavigation about a day and a half to lay-in the course (we use Sapphirean days on the ship, because when they were deciding which planet’s standard clock would be used, Sapphire took two out of three falls), five days to ramp up to transition speed, and then a nine-day transit to the 14 668 Sagitta system. We transitioned two light days out from the system, which was extremely good under the circumstances.

Following standard procedures, they launched four probes to the system. 14 668 Sagitta turned to be a trinary system, a red giant sun with a pair of white dwarf stars occupying

the innermost and outermost orbits. There were six planets in all, all terrestrial bodies except for the white dwarves. The probes detected life on the fifth planet. It had a rich oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, and was covered in vegetation. "Green vegetation," the commander pointed out repeatedly. Although the earliest reading detected no signs of human life, he was elated, thinking he had made the right call.

The probes soon revealed that the fifth planet was a curiosity in itself. It was tilted on its rotational axis to 69°, which meant that the poles had warm tropical climates while the equator was belted by a thick ridge of ice. Its thick atmosphere continued highly stratified layers of cloud cover, which obscured the surface most of the time. Hyperspectral terrain mapping indicated the surface was pretty uniform; no mountains, no oceans, all low hills, swampland, and shallow lakes, as though God had run out of landscaping ideas.

By the time Pegasus was making her final orbital corrections, we also knew that the planet contained vegetation on a massive scale. A typical specimen of plant-life (not really trees, so I was told, but massive fern-like structures) could stretch over 3,000 meters in length. They couldn't find solid evidence of human habitation, though. They spotted some geometric shapes that could have been structures, or could have been rocks or fallen vegetation, or anything.

They decided to dispatch two teams to the surface. Miller would lead one team, Lear the other. One team had experience from the Meridian mission, the other had not seen real landing team duty yet. Lear took the first, Miller the second. They chose a landing zone on a relatively large plain, near some of the aforementioned shapes that may, or may not have been, evidence of human habitation.

The instrumentation on the probes was degraded by constant interference from the planet's strong magnetic field, which was active over a large area of the spectrum. That should have been their second clue.

The Aves Quentin and Victor launched on schedule, with Pegasus in orbit 57,000 kilometers above the surface. I found a nice warm spot in one of the citrus gardens where the light from the solar simulators was just perfect, and began the first in a pleasant series of about two hundred and forty naps.

--- Avember 22, 7324 A.S.

Part Two : On Board the Aves Quentin

Pegasus's second officer emerged from the forward head. Lt. Cmdr Philip John Miller Redifre was a tall, lean man who kept his red hair cut tight to the scalp. His cheekbones and chin were just a tad too prominent and, together with his thin frame, always made older women want to feed him. He smacked his half-gloved hands together as he approached the forward sensor and mapping station. "What have we got, anything good?"

Specialist Diaz, a lanky young officer whose narrow and fine dark face was crowned with an incongruous mop of tight blond curls, turned away from his station. "Nothing the probes didn't already tell us, a big expanse of ... swamps, marshes, bayous. It's like the delta of the Sogmush river back on Sapphire, but on a continental scale. It's amazing for a whole planet to have only one uniform topography."

Miller looked over Diaz's shoulder at the topographical display, and pointed to a pattern of lines. "What are those?"

Diaz shrugged. "They could be streambeds."

"Could they be roadways?" Redfire asked.

"They could be sensor distortions. From up here, they could be almost anything." A blinding flash of light filled the cabin.

"Kumba yah!" exclaimed Diaz.

Redfire patted the young specialist's shoulder, reminding himself that it was his first landing mission. "Just upper-stratospheric lightning, common in dense atmospheres."

Diaz was more annoyed than afraid. "Keeps blinding the multi-spectral scanning arrays. I need to re-initialize. Takes 12 seconds every time."

Redfire patted her shoulder again. "Hang in there, I'm going upstairs."

The specialist nodded. Redfire had a feeling Diaz was glad to be rid of the distraction. He by-passed the lift and clambered up the ladder to the command module, where the pilot was. He was feeling curiously ebullient, probably a contact ebullience from the massive forces of energy being released outside the ship.

The canopy that domed the command module showed nothing but opaque banks of dark gray clouds, occasionally lit by enormous flashes of lightning. "How can you see through this?" Redfire asked the pilot.

"I can't," answered Flight Lieutenant Lawless. She was the only other person in his party with real landing team experience, having flown three missions to Meridian and one to Eden. Redfire had not yet had the opportunity to work with her, although she had taught him some techniques with throwing weapons in *Pegasus's* Martial Arts Arena. She was a dark haired, dark-eyed, and honey-skinned with a broad face that still managed to be pretty. "These navigational controls keep giving me impossible readings. I'm using the beacon from *Pegasus*, but it keeps going in and out."

"Is *Victor* having the same problem?"

"I can't get a channel to *Victor*." She pointed to a display. "Look at that, a second ago it said we were at 12,000 meters. Now, it says 4,000. I don't know what's going on, but that is not our rate of descent. Look, now it's 8,000. We should be breaking the final cloud layer in a few seconds."

Redfire strapped himself into the second seat as the last of the clouds flew past the canopy and the ship's terrain warning began sounding.

"More like 800 meters," Lawless called out. "Emergency maneuvers. Hold on!"

She tried to pull *Quentin* up. The ship's attitude changed too abruptly for the compensators to keep up. She struggled to level off, a maneuver that should have been smooth. Lawless sensed it immediately. "Something's wrong."

"What?"

"He's not responding." As she spoke, a lightning bolt lashed out from the underside of the cloud deck and stabbed *Quentin's* starboard wingblade. The ship was enveloped in blue electricity, crackling and sparking around the ship for several seconds.

"Tajbow!" Redfire watched his instruments flickering. This should not be happening. The ship was supposed to be insulated. It had been flight-tested in solar flares and the electrical discharges of gas giants. A mere lightning strike should not have disturbed its systems.

"I can't hold her, Commander," Lawless reported. She touched the emergency beacon. "*Pegasus*, Aves *Quentin* reports an emergency..." before she could finish, the ship bucked violently and all the instruments blanked out.

Quentin slammed into a deep, vegetation-choked swamp and sent a sheet of water, mud, and pulverized plant-life in a huge crashing wave into the sky. The ship bounced back and rode the wave it had created another few hundred meters before slamming into the water again.

The words "Crash Landing" were flashing on every internal station. The ship's crash protections secured the crew, altered the shapes of their couches to minimize injury.

Redfire's seat had grabbed onto him milliseconds before impact, and he felt like he had been tied down to a bed during an earthquake while a building collapsed around him ---- and he was one of the few people who knew just exactly how that felt. He spared a glance to Lawless, who was checking her controls, mostly by pounding on them.

"What were you thinking?" she yelled.

"What?"

"I wasn't talking to you," she snapped.

Redfire checked the ship's sensors. "Only minor injuries among the crew. How's the ship?"

"No structural damage. Most of the systems off-line. I'm guessing damage to the external plating."

"So, where are we? Diaz, please respond."

"I've got you commander. We are at 27° 50' North Latitude and 101° 40' West Longitude."

"Could you give me a more meaningful answer, Diaz?"

"We're in a body of water comprising 200,000 hectares, is sixteen meters deep where we are, and the nearest solid ground is 1,100 meters east-south-east from here."

"That's more useful."

"And we're sinking."

"What?" Redfire checked with Lawless.

She didn't have to answer him. One of the few functioning displays showed the ship beginning to cant, and a waterline steadily advancing aft to forward.

"You said the hull was intact. How can we be sinking?"

"I don't know, but the ship's being dragged under. We've got about ... four minutes to get out."

"Redfire to landing party. Abandon ship. Redfire to *Victor*, please respond. *Quentin* to *Pegasus*.... *Pegasus*, this is Tactical Commander Redfire on board *Quentin*. *Quentin* is down. Our coordinates are being transmitted. Is the Emergency Comm system down?"

"Negative, we are transmitting." She unstrapped herself. "Get to the evacuation rafts. I am going to secure the ship for recovery. Damb! Those systems are off-line."

"Flight Lieutenant..."

"Don't use that tone with me, commander. I've still got three minutes and change to get the system on-line."

Redfire checked the main hatch. It was still above water. "Open main hatch."

No response. "Tajbow!" He opened the manual over-ride panel, which spat at him. There was a lever inside that he pulled to the side. The seals delocked, He grabbed one side, Diaz grabbed the other. He proved remarkably stronger than Redfire would have guessed. The hatch parted, letting in a shaft of dazzling light. Redfire blinked, stepped backwards involuntarily, then stuck his head into the hatch.

From the weather they had experienced on the way down, he had expected a drenched, storm-tossed landscape. Instead, there was a sparkling green-blue sky, streaked with many layers of clouds that somehow managed not to seem overcast.

The light from the primary sun was fragmented into an almost geometrical shape, a green turquoise polygon tinged with a faint dazzling ring of sherbet orange colors. Across the bog into which the ship had landed, he saw a landscape of gentle green hills stretching off into the distance.

"Shall I release the boats, sir?" Diaz called out.

Redfire nodded. Diaz touched the emergency panel on the side of the hatch. He touched the life-raft release, and quickly deployed a catamaran from a compartment underneath the hatch.

"Diaz, Sung, Dornier... Bjorksdottir ... and you two guys, take the first raft. Check your gear. Grab a pack."

While they exited the ship in a calm orderly manner, he went back to the lift to the command module and called up.

"Lawless!"

"I've almost got it."

"Let it go!"

He scanned the cabin with the sensors built into his gloves and landing jacket. The back end of the ship was completely immersed, although there was no water in the cabin, and apparently none in any of the ship's outer chambers. There were no breaches anywhere on the outer fuselage. Strange, the ship's natural buoyancy should have kept it afloat. He scanned for a malfunction in the gravity engine that might be causing the ship's weight to increase, canceling out buoyancy. There was no sign of such a malfunction.

The remaining crew were piling into the second catamaran. "Lawless, let's go. We're out of time."

He heard a curse-word uttered in the cabin above. A moment later, Lawless came sliding down the rails. "All right, all right."

"Get your landing jacket on. You'll need it."

They passed through the cabin. "Did you find any malfunction?"

"Diagnostic systems are still off-line." A blast of air from the hatch almost pushed them back into the cabin. Lawless grabbed her chest. "Sh... I...I...can't breath."

"Atmospheric density is 2x standard. I told you you'd need the jacket. Put it on, put your head gear on until it compensates."

She was already pulling it on. "Right... Right..."

Redfire jumped through the hatch and onto the boat. "Come on."

"Right," Lawless yelled. She paused in the hatchway and patted the side of her ship. "Please don't sink," she whispered, then climbed into the boat. The hatch sealed behind them.

"Check... this ... out," said Specialist Buck, a short, red-headed man, who Miller recognized as part of the ship's wrestling club. He was staring off toward the shoreline.

The stretch that lay between them and solid ground was overhung, actually crossed, by long thin branches, stretching as far as the eye could see. Between them, long thick cables of vines wove and twisted, festooned with leaf-like structures ranging in size from a few centimeters to several meters in length, in a variety of shapes. Some of the larger ones were moving of their own accord, while the smaller leaves merely twitched in the breeze.

The first boat was already passing under them. Its occupants bent lower, as if in fear that the trees would reach down and grab them.

"Comlink to *Pegasus*?" Miller requested.

The answer came back at him, fast, low, distorted by a passage through the thick, heavy air. "Negative."

"Comlink to *Victor*?"

"Negative."

"O.K. People. It looks like we're on our own. Lawless, did you activate the emergency distress beacon?"

Lawless stood up at the back of the boat, extended her right arm toward the ship and jerked her thumb upward.

Redfire checked his tracker. "I'm detecting it. Strong signal across the entire band. Even through the EMI, *Pegasus* should be able to find us."

He adjusted his visual filter. "So, Welcome to Fiddler's Green."

For a few minutes all was quiet, but for the gentle hum of the propulsion systems. Diaz went to the fore of the catamaran, and scanned the shoreline with his tracker."Uh, ... commander... humans."

Not poetic, but it got the point across. Redfire held up his sensor glove and zoomed in on the shoreline.

A loose knot of people had gathered at the water's edge, a half-dozen or more. They wore rough-looking clothes, coarse shirts with brown, white, or of red-and-white checkered pattern. The pants were a faded blue, and extended over the front of the shirts with a bib-like extension, held up by a strap over each of the shoulders.

Two of them, on either side held up a banner, on which was crudely scrawled the words, "WELCUM SPACE PEEPLE!"

Part Three – Fiddler's Green

Redfire stepped forward, and came over suddenly light-headed. Lifting his arm in greeting, he could almost see little whorls in the dense, humid air when his hand passed through it. "Greetings. I am Tactical Commander Redfire of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*." He looked up at the sign. "How did you know...?"

He was answered by a spindly old man, whose skin was as dark and tough as old leather. A stringy beard hung from his lower chin. He looked up at Redfire, for he was a head and a half shorter, and said "You're from space, ain't ya?"

"Za, but how did you know?"

"Well, you ain't from around here."

Diaz squinted at the readings on his tracker. The Lingotron had picked up the language with few irregularities. At least something was working.

Another, heavier man, in slightly finer clothing came forward. "Now, Zeb, that's no way to greet the new colonists."

New colonists? "So this is the colony of Fiddler's Green, then," Redfire asked.

The first man shook his head. "Actually, we ain't called it Fiddler's Green for ages. We just call it Green. It's shorter."

"Of course, if you want to call it Fiddler's Green, go right on ahead." the second man continued, his voice like an out-of-tune woodwind, squeaking, yet somehow ingratiating.

“Fiddler’s Green, the gem of the Outer Commonwealth. Now, the first order of business, with welcoming these new colonists is the landing fee.”

“Landing Fee?” Redfire asked.

“The Fee for landing in our swamp, and disruptin’ the eco-system of that protected wetland environment. Then, of course, you’ll be wanting to set up your homesteads.”

“We didn’t come here to colonize,” Redfire finally said, his voice sounding vaguely rubbery.

“Well, it doesn’t look like you’ll be leaving any time soon.”

Redfire looked back out over the water. *Quentin* was completely submerged, without so much as a bubble to mark its landing. Curiously, there was no damage to the plants that overhung the landing zone, as though they had moved aside to let the ship enter, then closed again.

“We did not come here to colonize,” Redfire repeated. “We come from two of humanity’s other colonies, the worlds of Sapphire and Republic in the constellation of *Pegasus*.”

The crowd began shaking their heads. “Nope,” they said, in a babble of nay-saying. “Never heard of them.”

“Sapphire and Republic are two colonies in a double-star system about 300 light years from here.”

“360,” Diaz corrected.

“360, we have recovered the technology for inter-stellar travel and are trying to seek out the other lost colonies across the galaxy. We’re searching for the human home-world... Earth.”

“Now, that we’ve heard of,” said the reedy-voiced man.

A large woman followed by two others joined the assembly. The people of Sapphire and Republic had developed control over their metabolisms millennia before, and obesity was extremely rare, almost always the result of a physical malady or a fashion statement. This woman was enormous, with rolls and slabs of flesh wrapped in a floral print dress, capped with straw-colored hair knotted into a bun. A pig came trotting along behind her, snorting briskly.

Redfire tried to continue. “Our mission is to make contact with you. We would like the opportunity to study your history, your culture, and any records you might have from the...”

The old scrawny man, Zeb, held up a hand. "Hold on, now. That's the mayor. I think he wants to say a few words."

The pig grunted enthusiastically. Redfire knelt down and addressed the pig. "Greetings, Mr Mayor."

The pig sniffed at him and grunted some more. Redfire turned to the townspeople, "Does he talk?"

"Do pigs talk where you come from?"

"Neg."

"Well, why do you expect he would?"

Was it the heavy air making him feel dizzy, or some subliminal confusion. This whole thing was making Redfire feel uncomfortable, even embarrassed. "Cats and dogs can talk. I just thought... maybe, on this planet, pigs had been enhanced as well. How can he be your leader if he can't even talk?"

"He won the election, fair and square."

The pig snorted urgently.

Zeb rolled his eyes. "Everybody knows it was a landslide. You don't have to remind us every time it's brought up."

Another man spoke up. "Look, the mayor doesn't have to do anything. Nothing's changed around here in the last three thousand years. Might as well give the job to a pig. What else has a pig got to do?"

"That's a good point," said Lawless. She scratched the little porker's chin. "Hey, Little fella, my ship is sunk in that swamp over there. How are we going to get it out?" The pig responded with a series of happy grunts.

The smarmy man with the voice spoke again. "Ma'am, what you need is a spaceship deswampificator."

"A spaceship deswampificator?" Lawless said cautiously.

"You see, your problem is that your spaceship has been swampified. If you want to deswampificate your spaceship, you need a spaceship deswampificator."

"Do you have a spaceship deswampificator?" Diaz asked.

"No, but I can order one and have it here tomorrow for the low price of ..."

He was cut off by the comm unit in Redfire's cuff giving out an attention signal. Redfire responded quickly, as though it were a lifeline to sanity. "Landing Party here, go ahead."

They were answered by a burst of static, punctuated by the distant wail of alarms. A look of concern passed Redfire's face. "*Pegasus*?"

Captain Keeler's voice came back, above a storm of distortion. "Landing party ... *Pegasus* ... We're having some problems up here."

"Explain."

"... unable to maintain orbit. ... since your landing team departed ... descended from 57,000 kilometers to 54,600 kilometers and we are still closing on the planet."

"Cause?"

There was a pause, and then Change answered. "We can not isolate a cause."

"How long?" Redfire asked.

Keeler's voice came back on, stronger now, cutting through the static. "At our current rate of descent, we will impact the surface in less than eleven hours... probably a lot less. If we're lucky, we can bring the ship down more or less intact, but even if we do, it'll never lift-off again." Keeler paused for emphasis. "Our mission would end here."

That had always been Keeler's greatest fear, Redfire thought, that *Pegasus* would fail to find Earth and complete her mission.

"We're standing by to evacuate the ship. If our situation doesn't change in the next eight hours, we'll begin launching Aves in Exodus mode."

Redfire responded. "Captain, we were lucky to get their ship down without cracking it up. If you send down more ships, we can't guarantee their safety. Captain ... Captain ... " He looked up. "I've lost contact."

Everybody was quiet for a moment, and then the reedy man said. "Looks like you're going to need two spaceship deswampificators."

“Okay, let’s take stock of our situation,” Redfire began. “Our ship is in the drink. *Pegasus* is crashing, and all of the people on this planet ...”

“... are trying to be very helpful,” Lawless cut him off. Redfire had ordered the crew to assemble their communications gear and try to gain a clear channel to *Victor*, but their instruments invariably failed as soon as they were engaged. The latest effort, involving a gray box attached to a clear blue cylinder had just erupted in a column of smoke and sparks.

“So much for the neutrino beacon,” said Diaz. He shook his head. “Commander, this is not possible.”

“What isn’t possible, Diaz?”

“It is not possible for that instrument to explode. It doesn’t generate heat. It doesn’t use electricity. How can it be giving off smoke and electrical sparks?”

“Easy Killer,” Redfire said as reassuringly as he could. His real impulse at the moment was to drop kick the malfunctioning instrument into the swamp. His frustration was increased by having to constantly refuse the fat woman’s offer of ham, buttermilk, and other local delicacies.

Diaz was right. All of their equipment was failing in the same way, exploding like an electrical appliance dropped into a bath unit. There was no rhyme or reason to it.

Another man appeared at Redfire’s side. No one had seen him approach. He just sort of appeared. He was a perfectly ordinary looking man, dressed in pale tan clothing. He also wore a hat and a sort of relaxed and dazed expression. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“We have to help these folks find a spaceship deswampificator,” the man with the voice, whose name, they had learned, was Mr. Hanoi, told the new man. “Their spaceship crashed in the swamp out behind Zeb Riffle’s place.”

“Oh, another one,” said the new man.

Redfire turned around. “Another? You mean other ships have crashed into that swamp.”

“Well, yeah, it happens all the time.” A pause. “Well, not all the time. My predecessor’s spaceship crashed there, but that was three thousand years ago. So, I guess it happened a lot three thousand years ago. Well, not a lot, but more often than lately, I guess you’re the only ship that’s crashed there, lately.”

“Who are you,” Redfire asked.

The man stuck out his hand. “Khan Kindle, Commonwealth Development Authority,” he answered with a kind of salute. “I was sent out here to advise this colony and guide it to

self-sufficiency. Well, not me personally, my ancestor. I inherited the job. Well, not really inherited, ... more like..."

"Real helpful," Redfire muttered, as he turned back to Diaz.

Khan Kindle snapped his fingers. "You know who might be able to help them out. The Wilsons?"

"The Wilsons?" Lawless asked.

"Clarence and Eva Wilson. They bought the old the old Hanoi place. Well, they didn't actually buy it, their ancestors bought it. Well, not their actual ancestors."

"Why would they be able to help us?" Redfire asked.

The inhabitants ceased chattering, as though they did not know exactly why, but they knew that the landing party had to meet with the Wilsons, and it was up to them to provide the motivation for that meeting. Finally, one of the older men, bald, with drooping eyes, but a sense of time-washed dignity about him, spoke up. "The Wilsons never really fit in here."

The scraggly man with the beard agreed. "Naw, the Wilsons ... they ain't like us."

"What do you mean?"

"City-folk."

"City-folk," Redfire said. "Do you mean there are cities on this planet?"

"Naw, but if there was cities, that's where the Wilsons would live."

"The wife is real nice," the fat woman put in, "but the man is a hothead."

A bald man with basset hound eyes, who seemed to be the voice of reason around these parts, gestured for the fat woman to hush. "Anyway, they're outsiders, like you are, but they seem to have the lay of the land figured out, and Clarence Wilson is a very smart fellow. Between the two of them, they might be able tell you what's wrong with your ship."

"Where can we find these ... Wilsons..." Redfire asked.

He pointed. "Other side of that hill, and then over the next one, past the one after that, and just before you get to the next one, that's the Old Wilson place."

Part Four – The Old Wilson Place

Despite Redfire's entreaties, the inhabitants thought it best to accompany the travelers on their way to "The Wilson Place." The journey took longer than they would have liked. Some of the hills were overgrown and crossing them took time and depleted energy. Redfire's chronometer had failed, but he was guessing *Pegasus*, if they had not fixed the problem, was only a little more than an hour from being "swampified."

By now, it was night. High up in the sky, Redfire could see the planet's moon, which seemed to have found the only break in the clouds. It was faintly green, and the features visible on its surface formed a face like a fiendish imp, reminding him for a moment of the Festival of Masks with which sub-tropical cities on his homeworld greeted the Vernal Equinox.

"There it is," said Mr. Kindle. "Well, I don't mean it, I mean the Wilson's house. Well, not the Wilson's house, but the house where the Wilsons live. Well, not all the time, I mean they do come out occasionally, but they do sleep and eat there. I suppose they could ..."

Redfire looked down at the homestead, a ramshackle house and a few tumbledown out-buildings. The Wilsons seemed barely able to keep up repairs on their own property. How could they possibly help rescue *Quentin* and keep *Pegasus* from suffering the same fate.

These thoughts still dogged him as he knocked at the rotting wooden door to the Wilson home. Although they knew nothing about fashion standards on Green, but the clothes worn by the man who opened the door and greeted them were far more formal than any they had seen. Redfire greeted him. "Mr. Wilson?"

"I am Clarence Thomas Wilson," the man said. His voice was also dignified. "Please to make your acquaintance, Mr. ...?"

"Tactical Commander Philip John Miller Redfire of the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*."

"Pathfinder Ship ... from the Commonwealth?"

"Not exactly..."

Before he continued, a lilting woman's voice called from the other room. "Darling, is that someone at the door?"

"It's a tactical commander from a starship."

A woman appeared behind him. She was much younger than Mr. Wilson, or at least appeared to be so. Her face was covered with immaculately applied cosmetics. Her hair was yellow-gold, arrayed in precise curls around her head. She wore what looked like lacy satin bedclothes, not the kind young wives wore with no intention of sleeping in them, but the kind older wives wore with no intention of not sleeping in them.

Mr. Wilson introduced her. "This is my wife, Eva."

"Hello, dears," she said in an accent unlike any spoken by the other inhabitants. "Mr. Hanoi, Mr. Kindle, so wonderful of you to drop in. Come in, everyone. Come in."

The interior of the house suffered from the same poor construction and neglect as the outside. However, the furnishings, sofas, chairs, were models of outstanding craftsmanship. The paintings on the walls were clearly originals, and very good originals indeed, but they were mounted on walls whose wallpaper was faded and peeling and where great gaps exposed the construction underneath.

Redfire settled in and explained the situation, beginning with *Pegasus* and concluding with the crash-landing in the swamp, as Clarence Thomas Wilson listened attentively. Eva offered to bring them cups of a local beverage, and they politely accepted. When they saw the beverage was in fact, thick and dark as unrefined hydro-carbons, they demurred, at which point she tossed their cups through an open window, and sat down beside her husband.

"You say this ship of yours, this *Pegasus*, is about to crash into the swamp, too."

Za."

"With how many people on board?"

"Almost seven thousand."

"Don't you have a spaceship deswampificator?" Eva asked.

“Oh, for crying out loud, there is no such thing as a spaceship deswampificator,” Clarence Wilson steamed. He pointed to Mr. Hanoi. “Six thousand years ago, his ancestor tried to sell my ancestor a spaceship deswampificator to get his own ship out of that swamp. He paid six hundred Commonwealth Intercreds for a device that was nothing more than a water pump connected to a waffle iron... and it exploded when he turned it on.”

“Well, sir, I believe that unit is out of warranty,” said Hanoi.

“Get out of my house!” Wilson thundered.

“I told you he was a hothead,” said the fat woman.

Redfire tried to bring the group back on topic. “Mr. Wilson, we were told that you have some special insight into the planet that might help us prevent our ship from crashing here, because you’re something of an outsider.”

"They have treated my family as outsiders ever since we emigrated here from Atlas."

"Atlas...?"

“You’ve never heard of Atlas?”

"Atlas was one of the Old-Line Earth colonies, and one of the greatest, if I remember my colonial history.”

"Atlas was one of the first colonies, the largest and most powerful. Eighty billion people lived there when my ancestor left."

"Eighty billion?" Diaz said incredulously.

"Ten times as many people as lived on Earth at the time. Four billion of them lived in the New Gotham-Saratoga-Empire City megaplex, a huge city that ran over a thousand kilometers down the eastern seaboard of the northern continent and another two hundred kilometers inland. According to my ancestor's journals, he could stand at the window of his inhabitation, on the eighty-fifth floor of his inhabitation complex, and look out across a landscape of skyscrapers and transportation systems stretching from the horizon to the

sea." He pulled out what looked like an ancient photograph, color and depth long-washed out of it, encased in a kind of crystalline frame.

"Did your ancestors also come from Atlas?" Lawless asked Eva.

"Oh, no, dear. My ancestors were BeTrobi. My 543rd great grandfather was a prince of the Betrobi."

"Oh, he was not," Clarence objected.

"He was."

"Who were the BeTrobi," Lawless wanted to know.

"BeTrobi never settled on any planet, at least not for very long. They moved from place to place. They were passing by this planet, when my ancestor's ship broke down, and they couldn't leave because they couldn't get a tow-truck."

Mr. Wilson rolled his eyes. "Oh, Eva, not again with the tow truck."

"This is all very interesting," Redfire put in, "but it isn't helping us keep our ship from crashing into the swamp."

Mr. Wilson sighed. "My ancestor was lured to this planet with the promise of leaving behind the chaos and noise of that urban nightmare for a simple life on an agricultural colony. He just wanted to grow crops, to plant seeds in the ground and nurture them toward the sun, and make a fortune on the Atlas Galactic Commodities Futures Exchange. The ground on this planet is fertile enough. My crops do well, as they have for thousands of years, but no technology works on this planet; nothing more advanced than a few simple tools, or some simple electrical device. No other technology works on this planet."

"Why not?"

"My forebears have always held that it has something to do with the planet's magnetic field, the way the thick atmosphere accelerates the corrosion of electronic instruments."

"Our ship isn't on the planet, though..."

“Not yet,” snorted Mr. Kindle.

“Even if the magnetic field reached that far, *Pegasus* is too heavily shielded for its systems to be effective.”

“Unless some other type of energy is penetrating them,” Diaz suggested.

Eva interrupted. “I think it’s because of the tree-men.”

Clarence Thomas Wilson rolled his eyes. “Eva ...”

“The Tree-men?” Redfire said.

“The little green men who live in the trees.”

“Eva, people have been exploring this planet for thousands of years and no one has ever seen a little green tree-man.”

“That’s because they’re invisible.”

“If they’re invisible, how can they be green?”

“They’re an invisible shade of green.”

“Are you saying aliens?” Redfire asked.

“No, they’re just little men who live on this planet. They like people. They think people are entertaining. That’s why we can’t make any electronics, because then we might have ships that would let us leave. They want to bring your ship down, so they have more people to keep them company.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Mr. Wilson moaned.

“Maybe if you asked them very nicely to let your ship go, they would let it go and not swamificate it.”

There was another knock at the door. “Now, who could that be?” Wilson said irritably.

Eva stood. "It's amazing we get any visitors at all, what with you being such a hothead." She crossed to the door. When she opened it, she exclaimed. "Oh, look, more people from the Findpathers."

Redfire turned to the door to see Executive Commander Lear, the pilot, and two crewmen from the Aves *Victor* standing in the doorway. Redfire was almost happy to see her, which he would have bet real money on never happening.

"Pathfinders," Mr. Wilson corrected.

"How do you do, sir," Lear said, smiling pleasantly. "I am Executive Commander Lear of the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus*."

"Clarence Thomas Wilson and my wife Eva," he shook her hand graciously.

Exec. Commander Lear crossed the room, having to divert behind the fat woman to reach him. "Report, Tactical Commander Redfire."

"*Quentin* crashed in a swamp. *Pegasus* is falling out of orbit."

"I've been advised of that. You disappeared off our sensors just as we broke cloud cover. We landed about four kilometers from here ... on dry land. We homed in on your tracking signal," Lear reported. She brushed the immaculate front of her uniform and addressed the crowd. "Which of you is the leader, here?"

Everyone except Clarence Thomas Wilson pointed at the pig. Lear looked at him. "Oh, ... does he talk?"

"Neg," Redfire answered.

Lear looked perplexed for a moment, then turned back to Redfire. "Very well, then. Have you explained to them the nature of our mission?"

"Excuse me, ma'am," said the squeaky voiced man, doffing his hat. "Did you say your ship set down about two miles in that direction?"

"It did. We had some trouble on descent, but ..."

“Well then, you won’t mind paying the premium de-luxe, solid ground landing fee.”

Another perplexed look crossed her face as she tried to think of a response. Wilson bailed her out. “Mr. Hanoi, would you get out of my house.”

“Not on my account,” Lear chirped. Diplomacy was far firmer ground for her.

“Getting back to the problem at hand... our ship is crashing to the surface.” Redfire turned to Lear. “Have they considered the possibility that some form of energy from the planet is interfering with ship’s system?”

“I’m sure the crew of *Pegasus* is exploring every possibility. Even if there were some form of interference, how could we detect it from here if they can not detect it from there?”

“How are your instruments holding up?”

“Most of the gear we brought to the surface is failing. It was all we could do to keep the beacon locator activated long enough to find you.”

Redfire’s head began to throb. He was surprised the headache had held off this long. “*Pegasus* doesn’t have much time left. Executive Commander Lear, may I borrow your external com-link?”

She graciously handed him the mobile unit from her landing jacket. “What are you going to do?”

“I owe a report to Captain Keeler. I’ll be outside.”

“You’ll have to move to higher ground,” she advised. “Something about the surface polarity of this planet interferes with communication signals. If you can get to the roof, you’ll have clearer communications.”

“Thanks,” he said. “If you folks will excuse me.”

Redfire walked outside. The moon was still protruding through the cloud cover, and it was still leering at him. It was creepy.

He quickly surveyed his surroundings. He would not have bet on the roof of any of the structures on the Wilson place to support his weight. He looked at one of the tree-like things in the yard, but dismissed that idea when he saw one of its branches curl expectantly. Where could he go to get above the ground.

He almost bumped into the pole. It was thick and wooden, with hand-holds in the form of metal rods extending on either side. At the top, wires stretched off toward town. Of course, if you lived in a planet where active electromagnetic energy in the atmosphere made communication difficult, you would use a direct wire arrangement. He mounted the pole, which raised him ten meters or so above the ground. He activated Lear's communicator. "Redfire to *Pegasus*."

Captain Keeler's voice answered. "We receive you clearly Commander Redfire."

"Status?"

"We're about twelve minutes from entering the atmosphere and we can not stop our descent."

"Have you looked for exotic forms of energy that might be pulling you down, or interfering with instruments?"

"Gee, why didn't we think of that. Oh, wait, we did, about ten hours ago." He paused, "Sorry, Ranking Philip, but you have to realize we have pursued every possible lead without success. We are hoping you learned something on the planet that we can use to save us."

Redfire felt acutely embarrassed. Anything he reported to the captain was going to sound trite in view of the circumstances. "I regret to inform you, commander, that I doubt anything we have learned here will be of interest to you."

“Redfire, give me a complete report, anyway. Anything you have learned may help us. We’re almost out of ideas up here.”

Redfire sighed. “The surface looks just as the probes reported from space. There is a colony here, captain. Its leader is apparently a pig.”

“That’s an undiplomatic description,” Keeler responded.

“Neg, a literal pig, a pork-beast.”

“Oh, I get it. Does it talk?”

“Neg.”

“So, they’re led by a non-talking pig.”

“Well, not really led...” Redfire almost bit his tongue. *Now, he was doing it.* “The colonists appear to be agrarian. No advanced technology. All of the technology we brought with us is breaking down as well. *Quentin* sank into a swamp for no logical reason, but *Victor* landed safely.”

Keeler paused a long time before suggesting, “Have you discussed our predicament with the colonists.”

“Za, sir.”

“Have the colonists offered any explanation to you?”

“The closest thing to a logical explanation is that the planet’s electromagnetic field and atmosphere lead to the breakdown of technology.”

“But your communicator is working.”

“Because I’m not standing on the ground. I had to climb a tall pole...” He realized how this must sound. “Anyway, that still doesn’t explain *Pegasus*.”

“Have they offered any non-logical explanations?”

“All they say is that ships always crash into the swamp. That’s why *Pegasus* is coming down, because ships always crash into the swamp.”

“Do you think something in the swamp is pulling the ships in?” Keeler asked

“Neg, neg... I talked to the people here. One lady says its because the invisible green tree men like human beings and so they crash our ships into the swamp so we have to live here and they won’t allow us to develop any technology because then we’d leave... but she seemed even crazier than the rest of them, though.”

“Have you actually seen these little green men?”

“Neg, they’re invisible.”

There was a long silence.

“Captain,” Redfire said. “I know it sounds insane. None of it makes any kind of sense at all. I don’t think there’s any way to save *Pegasus*.”

There was a short pause, then Keeler spoke. “Think hard, Commander. Did the inhabitants give you any advice at all.”

“They tried to get us to buy something called a spaceship deswampificator, but even if there is such a thing, that’s not going to help you.”

"No doubt. Anything else?"

“Well,” he bit his tongue and almost didn’t tell him. “The one lady told us if I asked the Tree-Men very nicely, they would let *Pegasus* go and not crash it into the swamp.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not.”

“Okay,” said Captain Keeler, “I’m going to try to explain this quickly.”

“You think the inhabitants of this world behave irrationally, but their irrationality does follow a pattern, correct?”

“Za?”

“Our expectations of logic are based on the relationships of cause and effect as they exist on our world. We rely on the theory that these laws are the same throughout the universe. However, it is also possible that there are little pockets of the universe where our kind of logic does not prevail.”

“Now, imagine that one of the pockets of the universe where things just don’t make sense is the planet we call Fiddler’s Green. Nothing works the way it should. Logic gets stood on its head. All right, now if you lived on that planet your entire life, you would have to adjust to the way the universe works on that planet. You have to use the logic of cause and effect as it applies on that world.”

So you mean ...”

“Eleven minutes to atmospheric entry,” he heard someone shout.

“Talk to the dambled trees!!” Keeler shouted.

“The Tree-Men,” Redfire corrected softly. “Then, you believe they exist.”

“Of course not, but people on Earth used to believe in fairies sprites and elves, too. They didn’t exist either, but they gave people away of understanding things they couldn’t explain. Those invisible green men may be real, but they are more likely a kind of local mythology the colonists have constructed to explain the disconnect between the normal universe and the reality of life on their world. If asking them to release our ship is the only advice you’ve got, I suggest you follow it.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know that, Ranking Philip, but it fits the only theory I have left, and I have no time to explain it to you, now. Just ask the tree-men to release the ship and keep me on an open com-link.”

“All right, Redfire out.”

“Good luck, Commander, see you soon, but not too soon I hope.”

“Tactical Commander Redfire,” Lear’s voice called. He looked below to see the villagers and the crew had gathered to watch him. Of course, his humiliation would have meant nothing without an audience. “What is happening?”

“I am about to obey a direct order from Captain Keeler,” he answered. He looked off toward the woods and swamp. “I am going to ask any ... any little green tree men who may be listening to please not crash the Pathfinder ship *Pegasus* into the swamp.”

He thought for a moment, coming up with more things to say. “*Pegasus* is on a very important mission. We’re trying to find the lost colonies of the former Galactic Commonwealth, We’ve already visited five worlds, six with this one, that still have people on them. We’re trying to find Earth, the world all humans originally came from. We like your planet, we like it just fine, but we aren’t meant to be here. So, please, please, release our ship and let us continue our journey, peacefully.”

He paused a moment. “We would be eternally grateful. Once again, I implore you, please release our ship and let us be on our way.”

“Atmospheric entry in nine minutes,” came the voice in his communicator.

Redfire shouted louder. “Look, if you won’t release us out of compassion, then consider self-interest. There are a lot of people on board *Pegasus*, but half of them are Republickers, and Republickers are way too uptight to be entertaining. I mean, the typical Republicker’s idea of a good time is spending a night preparing his monthly supply allocation summaries. There are over three thousand of them on our ship, and the first thing they will want to do when they crawl out of the swamp is get this place organized. They’ll start up bureaucracies, filing systems, committees, public hearings on every detail of life. You will find yourselves bored to the extreme.

“You should also know that we have a lot of weapons that, well, if they broke down due to interference from your atmosphere, might accidentally detonate and destroy the entire planet. And, then, there’s Technician Roebuck...”

“In any case, the people of *Pegasus* aren’t like your colonists, and we have no intention of being like your colonists. We will fight you. We will resist you. We have a lot of weapons, and a lot of intelligence between us. Even if we ultimately fail, we can do a lot damage in the process. In the end, it is not going to be worth the trouble.”

An idea blossomed. “In fact, we may not even wait until landing. *Pegasus*, right now, could fire a pulse into your atmosphere that would devastate your magnetic field. *Pegasus* could blow away half the atmosphere of this planet with one shot. If I were the Commander, I’d begin arming the self-destruct sequence right now.”

“And if *Pegasus* goes down, the homeworlds are not going to be very happy. They will send more ships to see what happened to us. Eventually, they will figure out how to rescue us, and how to punish those that trapped us here.”

“Three minutes to atmospheric entry,” came the voice. This wasn’t working and he felt ridiculous, pleading into the night, where no one was listening.

“Look, I’ll make you a deal. All of the people on the planet right now will stay behind if you release *Pegasus*. Let the rest of them go and just keep us.” He waited for a response.

“Two minutes to atmospheric entry.”

“All right,” Redfire called. “You leave me no choice.” He loosed his handhold and jumped to the surface, landing hard. He grabbed a landing pack from one of *Victor’s* crewman and climbed the pole again.

“Eighty seconds to atmospheric entry.”

“I’m sorry I have to do this,” he shouted. Redfire to *Pegasus*. Lt. Navigator Change, I am preparing to engage the swampification evadicator.”

“The what?”

“Hold on tight, this may be an abrupt change.” He opened the landing pack and surveyed its contents; spectrum analyzer, water purifier, first aid kit... finally his eyes lit upon the appropriate instrument. He lifted the beacon locator from the *Victor* above his head.

“Engaging the swampification evadicator in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... Now.”

He pressed the panel on the side. The beacon locator erupted in a fit of smoke and spark and sent a sting of electricity through his arm that almost jerked out of its socket. A blue-green beam shot up and out of the device and into the clouds.

There was a gasp from below. The beacon locator was not designed to emit anything.

”*Pegasus* I have engaged the swampification evadicator. Can you confirm you have returned to your proper orbit.”

There was a long drawn out silence. Redfire looked toward the swamp. If he had failed, in a few moments, the entire ship would crash spectacularly into its vegetation-choked depths.

“Keeler to Redfire,” came a voice.

“Redfire here.”

There was a relief in his voice the Captain was scarcely able to conceal. “*Pegasus* has resumed orbit at 58,000 kilometers, with no sign of decay.”

“Acknowledged, Redfire out,” He breathed a sigh of relief that almost collapsed him to the ground.

They stood on the shore of the swamp where they had first made landfall. “Diaz, bring me the spaceship deswampificator from the *Victor*.”

“The what, sir?”

“The spaceship deswampificator ..., um, that we also as an atmospheric purifier when we don’t have a spaceship to deswampificate.”

Redfire turned toward the swamp. The moon was still protruding through the clouds, making a small pool of light on the surface.

“Activate the deswampificator,” he called out over the water.

There was silence. The world held its heavy breath.

“Please!” Redfire whispered.

A circle of rippling water appeared in the midst of the swamp. All at once, a column of water shot into the sky with the Ave at the top of it, riding the wave like a surfing bird. The ship rose in a high, perfect arch and then, canting toward its left-side wing, it fell to the ground, landing barely twenty meters from where the Tactical Commander was standing. On impact, it kicked up a high-shooting mass of soggy mud and rotted vegetation that rained down over Redfire where he stood, coating him face to toenails with the filthy soggy mess.

Redfire wiped handfuls of foul-smelling rotted gunk from his eyes and mouth. The impact had opened a latitudinal crack across *Quentin's* command module, as though the ship were grinning at him.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Epi l o g u e: Q u e e q u e g ’ s j o u r n a l .

And after that, they returned to the ship without further incidence. The breach on Quentin’s forward hull was serious, but overall the ship was salvageable.

As for further contacts with the inhabitants of Fiddler’s Green, we have left that issue to the home-worlds. Captain Keeler decided not to send a follow-up landing party and we left orbit only a few days after we arrived.

I sat at the Captain’s side while he reviewed the mission reports. At times he became so involved he forgot I was there, and I found it necessary to interpose myself between him and his reader and rub my furry little butt in his face.

“Hey!” said the commander as Queequeg rubbed his furry little butt in his face.

“Starship captain's who ignore their cats do so at their peril,” Queeueqeg said. The cat looked over his notes and, as he had suspected, determined his captain was way off track. “So, what happened down there, boss? I know you have a theory. You always have a theory.”

“Indeed, well, it was obvious from the outset that our problem up here and the problems the landing party were having on the ground were related, it was just a matter of finding the connection. Did you ever consider why *Pegasus* and *Quentin* were attacked, but the probes were left alone?” the Captain asked.

“Because the probes were uninhabited.”

“Exactly, no life forms, no intelligence.”

Keeler tapped the side of his brandy glass thoughtfully. “There is colonial lore about a planet that had actually evolved intelligence, a literally sentient world. Its electromagnetic field formed its cognitive synapses. What if this planet did have some kind of sentience? What if it longed for the company of other sentient beings. *Pegasus* herself is nearly sentient. What if it found a way to draw our ship near to its surface?”

Queequeg would have laughed, but he could only purr, which was just as good. “You think we encountered a planet that thinks?”

“Put it together, Queequeg. The planet had an incredibly active, very strange magnetic field. We could not figure out why we were descending, but suppose the planet was able to put the idea in our heads, or in the brain-core, through some kind of telepathy, that we should crash the ship onto the surface? It is possible, isn’t it?”

Not bloody likely, Queequeg thought. “So, why did it let us go?”

The captain seemed especially proud as he relayed his explanation. “When Redfire addressed the ‘Little Green Men,’ I had Specialist American re-transmit his speech across the same EM spectrum exhibited by the planet’s magnetic field. Perhaps Miller’s threats had some effect. Perhaps, he convince the planet that we would have been bad company. Maybe it was his willingness to play along at the end. In any case, we talked the planet out of stranding us.”

He was almost giddy as he continued. “I have ordered eight probes place in orbit to monitor the planet, focusing on the magnetic fields. By the time the Phase two ships arrive, they will have collected enough data to prove my theory. If it turns out to be right, well, just imagine, a thinking planet. My God, it’s like a whole new field of science --- geo-psychology, perhaps, and I will have been its founder.”

“What about that box of litter you gave Redfire about the rules of logic being different in this part of the universe.”

“I always keep that theory around for circumstances like this. It works more often than you would like to admit.”

Queequeg pushed on. Although Keeler did not yet realize it, Queequeg was playing with him like a doomed mouse. “What about the Little Green Men?”

Keeler sniffed. “Sometimes humans are a little unobservant, but to co-exist with a species for three thousand years, and not notice them, especially a species powerful enough to bring down this ship, seems unlikely.”

“Let me show you something, Boss,” Queequeg brought up three of the images captured from the planet’s surface. The colonists when the landing party first encountered them, the Wilson homestead, and the Aves *Quentin* lying beached on the shoreline.

“What of it?”

“Look close,” Queequeg zoomed in on and enhanced a spot in the trees behind the colonists who had met the landing party. There was a shadowy circle that looked like a face, peaking out from behind the trunks of one of the trees, wearing an expression of devilish amusement.

“And here...” Queequeg targeted a spot at the front of *Quentin’s* fuselage. From the canopy of the command module, one could almost make it out two little faces peering from the inside. Then, Queequeg showed him another face in the shadows behind the Wilson house.

The captain squinted for a long time. “Za... there does appear to be something here, but that could just be a trick of light and shadow. You know, there is a psychological tendency in humans toward anthropomorphism, a bias that makes us see a face in the random arrangement of objects and features.”

“Boss, look at the moon.”

The image of the Wilson’s house had a clear view of the moon through a break in the clouds overhead. Here, the image of a face was even more pronounced, eyes arched and squinted, and a mouth in a leering rictus of a grin. Queequeg put the image of the moon, and the images of the faces lurking in the other scenes side-by-side.

The faces were exactly the same.

--- Avember 23, 7354 AS