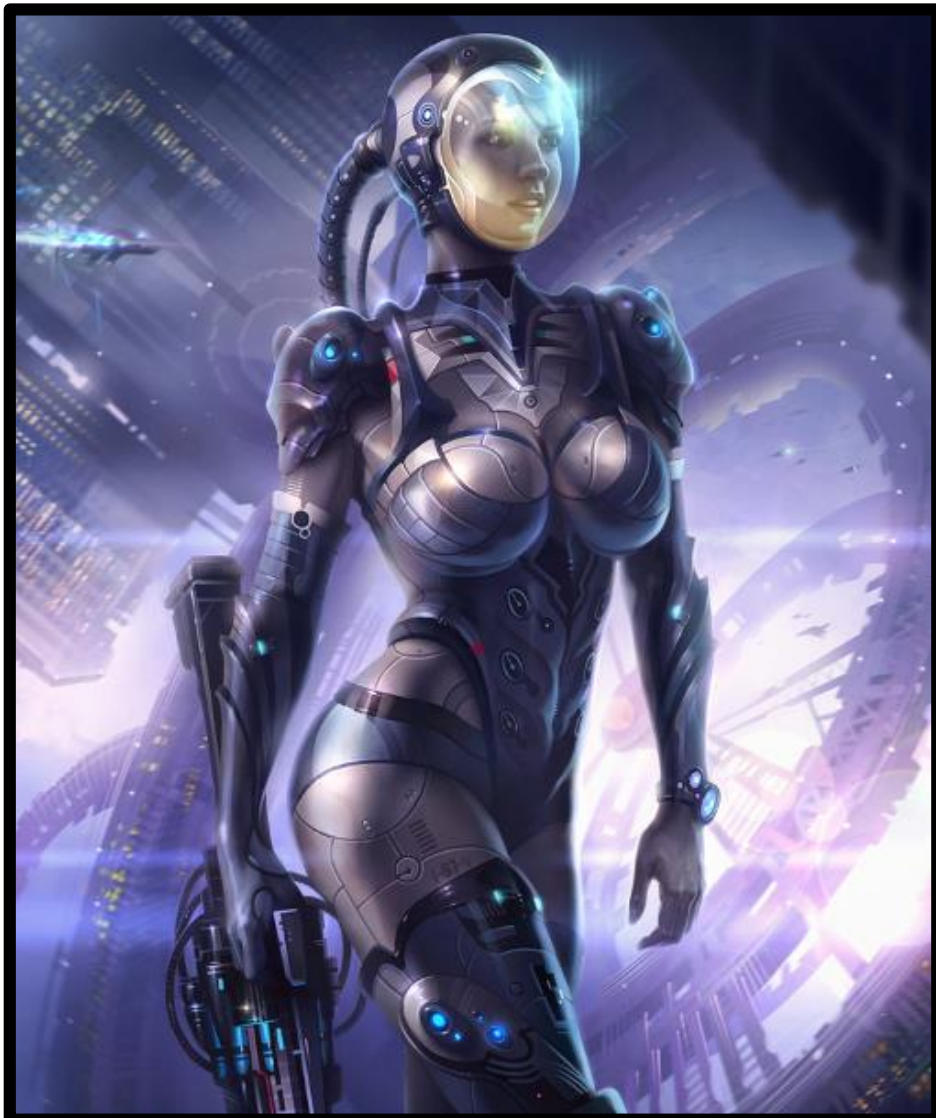


The Anomaly

Volume Two

The Schemes of the Unknown Unknown

Bradley Stoke



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Chapter One

The Moon - 3749 C.E.

“So, remind me,” requested the Interplanetary Union’s Minister for External Affairs.

“How have we managed to commit ourselves to the horrendous expense of this mission?”

“Do you mean the Alpha Project, sir?” asked Permanent Secretary Alfredo Miskiewicz from his office at Mare Cognitum on the Moon.

“Whatever it’s called now...” said the Minister with a hint of brusque annoyance in his voice. “Just what is it about this mission that is so important that it justifies an expense equivalent to the gross national product of an entire space colony? Surely such expenditure could be better allocated to rather more pressing domestic concerns than a fool’s errand to travel beyond the edge of the Solar System.”

“The governments of many member states believe that this mission warrants the very highest priority, sir,” said the Permanent Secretary. “They believe that the Anomaly might well be an alien presence of some kind and have persuaded the General Assembly to abide by the opinion that it would be more prudent to launch the mission than not to do so.”

There were a few seconds between the time when the Minister uttered his words and the Permanent Secretary having received them that was an inevitable consequence of the physical distance between the Moon and the traditional headquarters of the Interplanetary Union on Earth, further exacerbated by the complex algorithms by which his words were encryption that was standard for all but the most mundane

communication. In that time the Permanent Secretary had the leisure to evaluate the image of the elected representative while he waited for his words to arrive. His scepticism of any kind of fancy was evidence of the practical bias of his technocratic culture. That the Minister came from Triton was also evident from his overbearing height and the traditional satin and silk uniform he chose to wear. Although he was well over a hundred years old, he looked no older than any other representative of the Interplanetary Union, apart from the eccentric few who refused to artificially prolong their youth.

“What is the *informed* opinion of what this Anomaly might be?” the Minister asked. “What do respected scientists who are expert in this field believe it to be?”

“There’s no agreement, sir. The nearest to a consensus opinion is the hypothesis that it might be a Dark Energy perturbation, despite the fact that it doesn’t conform at all to the standard model. This is also the Interplanetary Union’s officially stated view regarding the phenomenon.”

“There must have been robotic probes sent to the Anomaly. I can’t believe that something like this can have been known about for over two centuries and that no one has thought about examining it up close with something rather less expensive than a colossal space ship and a multinational army.”

“Nearly a hundred probes have been sent there, principally by the Socialist Republics of Saturn but also by the various Martian nations and some from Earth orbit. The probes have most often failed to identify or transmit a coherent image, which fact has in turn generated some of the wilder conspiracy theories associated with this phenomenon. Those images that have been successfully received are at best

inconclusive. They show very little more than can be seen through telescopes from the ecliptic plane.”

“And what *do* they show?”

“As you know, sir, what they appear to show is a constantly shifting image that most nearly resembles a rip in space. There is no evidence at all of any energy being emitted from the Anomaly. The bizarre Apparitions that have been getting so much news coverage in the rest of the Solar System are significantly more densely packed around the Anomaly than they are anywhere else.”

“You mean these fabled Apparitions like floating butterflies, anthropomorphic gargoyles and flying vegetables,” remarked the sceptical Minister. “And these Apparitions are most often to be observed in the neighbourhood of the Anomaly?”

“It seems so, sir.”

“These aliens must have a very odd sense of humour,” the Minister said with a smirk. “What do our best scientists believe these Apparitions to be?”

“The best hypothesis currently is that they are a concentration of media images that have somehow consolidated in space and are now being bounced back at us, sir,” said the Permanent Secretary. “It is believed that Dark Energy is acting as a kind of mirror to electromagnetic radiation and is reflecting back at us a random selection of our own emissions.”

“Isn’t it also claimed that these Apparitions have mass?”

“That could just be a result of interaction with Dark Energy, sir,” said the Permanent Secretary. “There are some peculiar effects associated with the more exotic cosmological phenomena. Dark Matter is only one manifestation of it. This could very

well be yet another.”

“Well, I’m glad that not everyone has gone insane,” said Minister Dhafer Kunde as he squeezed his flat nose between two huge black forefingers. “But do we really need to send an army, a multinational army at that, to observe a bunch of consolidated virtual images?”

“It is thought, sir, that if the space ship *does* meet an alien intelligence of some kind it would be advisable to be well prepared.”

“Perhaps we should also send film producers and advertising executives?” sniffed the Minister. “This really is priceless! Do the Martians and the crazier Jovian colonies *really* believe that aliens would broadcast their presence by beaming images of flying horses, blue-finned fishes and funny yellow blobs? In any case, I’d have thought that our probes might have identified rather more concrete evidence of alien intelligence than a bizarre ten thousand kilometre rip in spacetime.”

“There is also evidence that the Anomaly is growing ever larger at an alarming rate,” remarked the Permanent Secretary. “When it was spotted in the early 36th century, it was less than two or three hundred kilometres in length.”

“But wasn’t it just as large, if not larger, when it was first seen in the 21st century?” remarked the Minister. “And that just fizzled out two centuries later. Who’s to say the same thing won’t happen again?”

“I must abide by the decisions of the General Assembly of the Interplanetary Union, Your Excellency,” the Permanent Secretary reminded the Minister. “It has been agreed that the Anomaly is a matter of the utmost concern and should be addressed accordingly.”

“I understand,” said the Minister hurriedly. “But as you know, this fanciful nonsense about aliens really should not be a matter of debate for a body of such high authority as the General Assembly.”

“Shall we discuss more practical matters, sir?” the Permanent Secretary reminded the Minister.

“Indeed,” said the Minister, who was far more at home with such discussion. “Has a space ship been commissioned for this enterprise?”

“The only one available at short notice is the Interplanetary Space Ship Intrepid. It’s just been refitted and its space defences enhanced. It hasn’t yet been returned into commercial or military service, so it is the ideal choice.”

“The Intrepid? Is it still functioning satisfactorily?”

“It was built to last, sir. And it has done an excellent job at doing just that.”

“Well, okay. I guess the Intrepid will have to do. The crew and militia are being recruited?”

“At this very moment, sir. The best in the Solar System.”

“And the scientists who will accompany the mission and who will presumably do the most productive work?”

“Obviously, unlike military personnel, scientists cannot be conscripted for the mission, sir. Invitations will be sent out to those it is believed can be spared from more pressing duties and who are expert in the required disciplines.”

“And which disciplines are they?”

“Cosmology, linguistics, astrophysics, exobiology, mathematics...”

“And archaeology, I see,” said the Minister glancing at a holographic display in

his velvet-lined office beneath the water line in Pacific City. “Why have we commissioned the services of a computer archaeologist from the Kuiper Belt? And from the eccentric colony of Godwin, I notice. What pressing need is there to have him along for the ride?”

“None that I can envisage, sir. But his presence is required for political rather than practical reasons. In a sense, it was he who precipitated this crisis by making publicly available the information that this Anomaly not only existed before its more recent discovery but did so in the very early days of space exploration...”

“...and vanished not long after.”

“Indeed, sir. But his findings, using long declassified data, confirmed for many that the Anomaly wasn’t just a modern phenomenon and was therefore not manmade. And I believe that many people reasoned that if the Anomaly is an artificial phenomenon and if it hasn’t been made by humans if, then it must therefore be the product of an alien intelligence.”

“There are a few *non sequiters* in that argument, you must agree.”

“Of course, sir. But there have been several assassination attempts on Paul Morris’ life and not all of them were successfully pre-empted by our agents,” said the Permanent Secretary. “There is evidently a bounty on his head. There are many, therefore, who believe that this Godwinian anarchist must in some way have a critical role in all this. They seem to believe that his discoveries are somehow key to understanding the Anomaly.”

“Is there any basis to such a belief?”

“None, sir. He has discovered nothing that wasn’t already known to those who

had full classified access. His significance is merely that he was able to piece together a coherent picture from data that was thought too archaic to have any contemporary value.”

“That information should never have been declassified,” the Minister sniffed.

“That was a decision made many years before the Interplanetary Union even existed, sir.”

“More’s the pity! I guess we have no choice then. This anarchist archaeologist will have to join our hapless crew. Okay. Shall we discuss some of the other matters of significance on this mission? For instance, has anyone yet considered what happens on the return journey from beyond the outer reaches of the Solar System? What measures should be taken if knowledge of this mission somehow gets leaked into the public domain? And just how are we supposed to be able to hide the expense of this secret mission from the auditors?”

Permanent Secretary Alfredo Miskiewicz continued his discussion with the Minister for another hour or so in which such practical matters were clarified. Further meetings were arranged to ensure that not only were the logistics of the mission smoothed out but that the political concerns of all interested parties were resolved. When the Minister was finally satisfied the meeting came to a halt, his image faded away and Alfredo was left alone in his office.

However, his duties were not over. He knew exactly where the many cameras were positioned: not just the official ones but also those unofficially installed by the intelligence agencies of the Solar System’s disparate governments. He needed to be discreet as any obviously secretive action would immediately attract attention. He stood

by the office window which opened out onto an open plaza beyond which trees grew to several times their natural height in the low lunar gravity.

A segment of skin peeled off his wrist to reveal sophisticated circuitry that was far beyond the technological skills of any human manufacture within the Solar System. He positioned his hands in such a way that all the cameras could see was a nervous twitch that was consistent with a senior civil servant pondering over his duties. He then secretly padded out a message that would be sent by heavily encrypted code on a wavelength not much different from the cosmological background radiation and transmitted far out into deep space.

Alfredo had done his research and knew exactly by which route Paul Morris would need to travel from Godwin to his destination in the Inner Solar System. As all the other pieces were now in place, it only remained to him to activate the necessary instructions to the special agent based on the Ecstasy space colony. Until that moment, there had been many possible candidate routes and there were many other possible agents who might need to be activated. Now, the range of possibilities had collapsed to only one and it was necessary to initiate operations as soon as possible.

His message was sent to the agent he only knew as BTR679-02 and who, after many years of dormancy, was now to be assigned to the mission for which she had been constructed.

Chapter Two

Venus - 3725 C.E.

Although it had been quiet for several weeks now, Laurent still experienced some trepidation as he walked into the Emergency Rescue station. It had been quiet for too long. When would this spell of relative peace come to an end? The long history of unfortunate incidents in the South West section of Ishtar Terra suggested that this would be very soon. The extreme heat and oppressive air pressure on the surface of Venus along with the tempestuous atmospheric storms ensured that life as a firefighter was never likely to be boring for very long.

At several hundred metres beneath the planet's crust Laurent's station was situated at one of the best protected places on Venus. Most trouble happened on or near the planet surface. Each of the thousands of screens scattered around the control room displayed a view of the most vulnerable points in the planet's defences. These were most often on the massively thick shells that protected the thinly spread colonies that were still mainly connected by long subterranean tunnels. It was rare for anyone to venture far beyond the protection of these shells and that was usually for transplanetary air travel. Such an excursion was guaranteed to be a hazardous adventure given the weight of the heavily shielded vehicles and the planet's inclement atmosphere. It was normal for flights to be delayed for several days while passengers waited for climatic conditions to improve. It was far too risky for a space ship to be launched directly from the planet's surface. It would have to leave from the spaceports that hovered near the very top of the planet's atmosphere where air pressure was only a few times that of

Earth and where in the early days of Venusian colonisation the great majority of the planet's relatively small population chose to live.

Unlike most Venusians, Laurent was denied the luxury of relaxing in a well-appointed air terminal when climatic conditions were most bad. It was almost always when the storms were at their worst and air travel at its most perilous that he had to squeeze into his cumbersome uniform and accompany his three regular companions on a rescue mission. The romanced of his profession inspired countless holomovies and attracted far more applicants to the Ishtar Emergency Services than there were ever vacancies. However, despite the heroic status of firefighters on Venus, few persevered with this career for very long. And that was precisely because of the high casualty rate associated with rescue missions. On average, a firefighter was killed in one of every twenty missions. Even Laurent, after nearly thirty years active service and innumerable commendations for bravery and medals for heroism, was seriously considering the option of working in a less active capacity.

His companions, Hua, Nathalie and Manfred, were sitting in the restaurant just behind the station office and dining on another scrumptious meal that Hua had prepared. Had his vocation not been for Emergency Services, he would have made an excellent chef. Laurent much preferred Hua's hand-prepared meals to anything assembled by machine.

"Any news?" Laurent asked as he sat down with his workmates and studiously ignored the pornographic holomovie shimmering above his head that Nathalie enjoyed having as a backdrop to her working day. He'd lost interest in pornography or indeed any sexual diversion since Magdalene, his wife of twenty four years, had died in active

service the previous year.

“Bit of a storm across the mountain ranges,” remarked Manfred. “There’s a lava flow less than twenty kilometres from the Benedictine Monastery of Saint Andrew, but it doesn’t look like it’ll flow in that direction. Otherwise, it’s very quiet.”

“It’s fucking boring!” moaned Nathalie who still had the enthusiasm of a raw recruit. “Something *must* happen soon. Much as I love Hua’s ratatouille and zucchini, I’d rather be doing something more productive than watch porn and play cards.”

“Speaking of which,” said Manfred, with a broad grin, as he shuffled the pack in his hand. “What will it be? Bridge? Poker? Twenty One?”

“You always win, you fucker,” moaned Hua good-humouredly. “But I fancy trying my luck. There are four of us. Let’s play Bridge.”

“Only if I can play opposite Mannie,” said Nathalie who was also his occasional sexual partner. Not that there was much choice in Laurent’s team. Hua much preferred men to women and Laurent still hadn’t recovered from his grief. It was bad enough to be widowed. It was doubly bad to have been at his wife’s side when it happened as they were trying to rescue people from an explosion in the Santa Gesualdo colony that claimed more than a dozen lives including Magdalene and the fresh recruit, Emilio, whose life she’d been attempting to save.

It was two hours into the shift when the alarm rang out. Laurent was on a winning streak and even Manfred’s smirk was less pronounced as the chips gathered in front of the Station captain. Nathalie had been barely paying attention and hardly cared that she’d lost almost half her original stake. Predictably, it was she who jumped up most enthusiastically when the sirens rang out.

“It’s a breach in the walls of the Lovano colony on the Lakshmi Planum,” she said as she read out the printed words that streamed across the room and cancelled out the view of the orgy that was still being screened on the holomovie. “That’s weird. They’re the toughest walls on the whole fucking planet! What could have caused that? Air pressure is leaking and it looks like some ninety or so people are at potential risk.”

“It could be a long night,” sighed Hua, who still had the presence of mind to turn off the oven where he’d been preparing a *Baccalà alla Vicentina*.

What neither Laurent nor any of his crew could know was that the source of the breach had travelled a distance of over four light years to Venus. BTR679-02 regretted the fact that breaking the shell of the Lovano Colony might endanger the lives of biological organisms, but if she had to infiltrate the human world it was necessary to contrive an event that could be rationally ascribed to natural causes. The successful outcome of her journey across interstellar space couldn’t be jeopardised by sentimental concerns regarding the collateral damage associated with her arrival. After all, there were in excess of a hundred billion humans in the Solar System.

BTR679-02 was actually rather fond of biological life-forms. She’d kept pets for many decades, including an iguana whose eventual demise upset her much more than she’d anticipated. Although she was comfortable in her human form—as she was programmed to be—like all androids she was burdened with a range of emotional responses that most robots in her solar system were spared, so she was genuinely sad when the life of a biological entity came to an abrupt end.

Sometimes she envied the majority of her fellow Proxima Centaurans who, by virtue of having been designed and manufactured for more immediately productive

tasks, weren't constrained as much by design considerations as she was. They didn't have their brains squeezed into the tiny cranium that confined hers, although she still had many times more the intellectual and reasoning capacity of a human.

The space craft that had carried the android across the vast empty void of interstellar space had mostly disintegrated when it crashed through the atmosphere and the small core that slammed intact on the planet's surface was now reduced to dust. It was wise to hide the evidence of her arrival. Humans weren't considered to be ready yet to cope with the news that theirs was not the most advanced culture in the stellar neighbourhood, although BTR679-02 sometimes wondered whether the machine intelligence of neighbouring Sirius was quite as considerate of human sensibilities as was Proxima Centauri.

Unfortunately, there was over fifty kilometres of treacherous terrain that the android had to march through to get to the Lovano Colony. This took her very nearly a week of slog in which she paused for only a few hours at a time to recharge her energy cells. The biggest cost was not the effort of standing upright under the crushing air pressure and the buffeting by winds of burning carbon dioxide. Nor was it clambering over boulders and bridging the rivers of molten iron that dotted the landscape. The greatest drain on the android's resources was the skin-tight suit that not only protected her from the tremendous heat that was fierce enough to melt her body, but kept her invisible from the detectors humans had scattered about Venus mostly just to provide an early warning system for the colonies located just below the planet's unforgiving surface.

The many cameras that dotted the bulging hulk of the Lovano Colony would

only have noticed the android had they been designed to detect the footprints of a relatively slender human figure or the displacement of atmosphere that accompanied her movements. But this wasn't what they were designed for. Nor did they anticipate that a virtually invisible figure would direct an intense beam of energy at certain well-chosen points on the hulk's surface to generate a chain reaction that would crack it open. Once the shell was breached, the hot heavy air rushed in to the relative vacuum of Earth pressure to cause a catastrophic sequence of explosions and systems failures whose extent was rapid and unstoppable.

Metal and nanocarbon beams buckled and melted from the force of intruding hot air. Chambers collapsed. Warning sirens burst into life in the brief space of time available to them before they too were crushed and fried. But what most troubled BTR679-02 were the screams of resident Venusians as their homes were destroyed and they fled as fast as they could from the lethal collapse of the colony's structures and the collision of Venus' atmosphere with the oxygen-rich and much cooler atmosphere within the hulk. The android couldn't stay immune from the chaos she'd caused. She raced as quickly as she could to a safe sector before it was sealed by the automatic defence systems and no longer accessible. And she pulled off her space-suit as she did so.

She was now no longer protected against the worst of Venus's climate and the sanctuary she'd claimed for herself was hotter than boiling water while the Venusian atmosphere crushed down on her with a weight not much less than a family hovercar. If she'd been human she would have died instantly from burns, damaged internal organs and, most of all, from the poisonous air. Nevertheless, human or not, these were still

conditions far worse than those she was designed to cope with for very long and she malfunctioned badly within seconds. It would take many hours until her internal system repaired the damage to which she'd deliberately exposed herself. After all, she was designed for optimum performance in an Earth-like environment. There were robots specifically designed for conditions like those on Venus but what use would they have been in infiltrating human society?

The rescue airship that carried Laurent and his crew as they sped as fast as they could towards the Lovano colony would be considered sluggish almost anywhere else in the Solar System. It couldn't cover the hundred kilometres to the colony in much less than three hours and even that was a considerable effort. With no oxygen in the atmosphere and weighed down by the massive weight of the protective shield, the craft was driven by enough nuclear and antimatter energy to power an Earth-based craft the size of a small town. As it chugged along as high above the ground as it could, it was buffeted by ferocious winds that sometimes assisted its flight and sometimes worked very much against it.

Laurent and Hua were strapped to the pilots' seats grateful for the padding inside their suits that cushioned them against the airship's lurches. Nathalie and Manfred were similarly confined in the ship's core but were at least spared the need to steer the ship's motion through the thick clouds that kept Venus's surface almost completely dark on even the best days. It was impossible to navigate on Venus by sight alone, so Laurent and Hua relied absolutely on the airship's intelligence which they mediated on only very rare occasions. Even this part of the rescue mission was so fraught that nearly a third of all Emergency Service casualties occurred en route to a disaster rather than at

the scene itself. Nevertheless, Laurent was grateful that this crisis didn't appear to have been caused by one of Venus' many storms. When that happened, the craft's progress would not only be slow and unsteady it would very often result in a malfunction that would require another mission just to rescue the stranded firefighters.

“Almost there!” said Hua, more to address Nathalie's impatience than anything else, as the craft dived down into the heavier air pressure near the planet's surface that was often accompanied by a very audible crunching of the ship's nanocarbon struts. The ship's descent was scarcely smooth so it was only when it touched down, just outside the gaping wound in the Lovano Colony's shell, that the crew could at last don their emergency uniforms that, even with modern materials technology, were cumbersome, heavy and uncomfortable.

The four firefighters stepped out of their craft and hurried as fast as they could towards the breached hull. This was scarcely rapid movement. It took them nearly ten minutes to make their way over barely fifty metres to the breach into which they clambered. They used sophisticated sensory equipment to detect any signs of life knowing that only those who'd escaped the primary affects of Venus' hellish atmosphere had even the smallest chance of survival. Typically, these would be people stranded in sealed units, often unconscious, always with multiple injuries and very often with only the slimmest thread keeping them from death.

Their optimism might have been buoyed up by the fact, for which the Ishtar Emergency Services was very proud, that more than three quarters of all victims treated in a disaster survived and often in circumstances that not many generations before would have been considered hopeless. Crushed lungs; brain haemorrhages; fractured

skulls; even exposure to as much as five seconds of Venus' atmosphere: these were all cases to which Laurent had administered and was proud to have saved the great majority from otherwise certain death.

Not that his skills had spared Magdalene from a messy death of course, despite his anguished attempts amidst the rubble.

Survivors were soon found. And others less fortunate. Many of those who had died, whose bodies Laurent and his crew unearthed in the rubble and rubbish, had done so within the last hour. It was one of those unfortunate facts that had the Lovano Colony been located nearer the Emergency Services station, these people would now be alive and well on the way to recovery. Instead they were the victims of what must have been an agonising death, unmediated by painkillers and human comfort, their lungs seared by hot nitrogen and carbon dioxide, their skin scalded from the intense heat, and their bodies mangled by metal and nanocarbon tubes whose rigidity had failed in Venus' crushing atmosphere.

It was a feature of Laurent's profession that, although he was the one who would determine which of the people he pulled out of the ruins would live and who would die, it was more just a job for him than a crusade. When he sawed through the leg of the mercifully unconscious child for whom the alternative was rather worse than a fully-functioning leg transplant, he wasn't really conscious of the child as a human being but more as the object of the job he was paid to execute.

It had been a much harder task when he'd tried to separate Magdalene's barely-breathing torso from her legs and arms, the blood spurting all over his face and hands, however much faith he had in anaesthetics. He often agonised whether his emotional

attachment to his wife might have been one reason for her death. Had he been more detached would he have acted with more ruthlessness? How much had his tears of sorrow and rage clouded his judgement?

Nathalie was doing what she most enjoyed and this was to scream and shout at the survivors she found that they were alright and would be saved. Her main duty was to separate the walking wounded from the more severe cases, but it was the crew of robots accompanying the firefighters that performed the more routine task of removing masonry and rubble. They pulled free the survivors and stretchered them off to the waiting medical robots deeper within the Lovano colony. At least the survivors weren't faced with the hazardous journey back to the airship for on-board medical attention.

Laurent's job would have been impossible without robots. He and his crew dealt only with the more difficult cases that robot intelligence was unable to handle. But since most casualties required only excavation and removal with the appropriate care and anaesthetics, this was best left to the hundred or so robots that were attached to every firefighter crew but still utterly dependent on their human masters to direct their attention in the most efficient way.

One shortcoming humans still had over machines was that they needed to take a break from their exertions rather more frequently. It was time for Laurent to rest after he'd dragged out the body of a small child, minus her legs which remained crushed beyond repair beneath the rubble. The room in which he was resting had been made available for the crew within the undamaged core of the colony a hundred metres below ground. Accompanied by a steaming hot cup of coffee and an array of sensory equipment, he kept his eye on the stream of data that was reporting the progress of the

rescue mission. Yes, several dozens of people had died, but many more had been saved of which the small girl was one of many who had to undergo major surgery. There were few victims yet to be saved and Laurent anticipated that most of those would serve merely to increase the tally of the dead.

The robots were mostly engaged in patching up the damage as best they could before more permanent repairs took place later. Hua was engaged in comforting a man who was half-conscious and mostly unaware that he'd lost a chunk of skull to a collapsed girder. Manfred was back in the airship where he was monitoring the robots' safety manoeuvres with the aid of the much more sophisticated machinery at his disposal.

Nathalie, meanwhile, was still clambering over the ruins of the colony's outer levels and followed Manfred's instructions as she looked for any signs of life. She'd already had her rest. The task of removing most of the lower torso of one of the victims and carrying the cauterised and traumatised patient to safety had badly shaken her and she'd been resting with her head between her knees for very nearly an hour before she decided that she was ready to return to the fray.

"Fuck!" shouted Nathalie through the intercom as a holographic image of a fragment of pale skin and a human leg flashed onto Laurent's monitors. "There *is* someone else. And she's alive. Fucking lucky woman! Looks like her clothes have been totally burnt off. No obvious signs of burns or even blood."

Laurent studied the image carefully as the robots lifted up the massive weight of the metal beam that had somehow fallen so that it hadn't crushed the body underneath. As these beams were made of phenomenally heavy and robust material,

this was a remarkable stroke of luck in itself.

“I’ll come and help!” shouted Laurent, as he eased himself back into the tight atmosphere-proof uniform it was still advisable to wear even though the air pressure and temperature in the inner cavities had been restored to normal. Fortunately, he didn’t need to wear the clumsy nanocarbon-reinforced suit which remained discarded on the ground where he’d squeezed out of it.

It was still risky to stumble over the wreckage of the affected chambers when the escalator took him as close to the surface as it could. Laurent trampled over the ruins of people’s lives. The toys that had been incinerated in the heat. The household goods that had melted and crushed in the searing heat and air pressure. The scattered holographic images that still flashed memories of lives brutally curtailed. And worst of all the amputated limbs that had yet to be cleared away after the emergency surgery that had been necessary to rescue the victims. Laurent sighed as he reflected that the flash of white leg he’d seen stretched out beneath the wreckage would very likely become victim to the same necessary but heartbreaking duty.

He clambered over the ash and molten metal until he could squeeze through the entrance that had been widened by the laser torches of the rescue robots and into a chamber that had survived despite being so very near the breach in the colony’s hull.

At the very least, he expected to see the third degree burns and broken bones that usually accompanied survivors of such breaches, but the body the rescue robots were uncovering was in much better condition. Sure, there were bruises and scratches, but this was one very fortunate victim. She hadn’t even needed resuscitation although her breathing was still shallow and her eyes tightly shut. It was only when the final

beam was lifted up and carried away that Laurent could see the extent of this woman's good fortune.

It was at this point that wholly unprofessional emotions passed through Laurent's mind as they did through Nathalie who, despite her avowed preference for male company, had a taste for women as well.

This naked woman was unusually beautiful even in a Solar System where ugliness had been mostly entirely banished. Her bosom suggested she had chosen further enhancement on top of her natural endowments. Although her hair was singed, it mostly retained a peculiar bounce and silky fullness.

Laurent closed his eyes. These were totally inappropriate thoughts for a firefighter. His duty was to rescue the victims of disaster, not to entertain lecherous thoughts for them.

The woman was eased onto a hovering stretcher that, accompanied by Laurent and Nathalie, glided to a pedestrian walkway over the treacherous terrain away from the worst damage. This led to the massive metal doors that had so successfully shielded the majority of the colony's several hundred thousand citizens from the breach that had claimed the lives of so many. Everyone in the Lovano Colony was at almost equal risk from deadly disaster. Even those protected by innumerable levels and many such protective doors were at risk from a system failure. Ruptured pipes. Electrical failures. Leaks of lethally hot gases from the planet's surface. No one born on Venus or who had chosen to live there could be considered immune. There had been cases where entire colonies had been devastated. Although Laurent never had the misfortune to work on such missions, these catastrophes had claimed the lives of many thousand more lives

than were lost this evening.

This breach was scarcely routine, but something like this occurred most months somewhere on the planet's surface. Although such catastrophes happened rather less frequently than during the early years of Venusian colonisation, it remained an irony of which most Venusians were rather proud that the planet the most like Earth in many ways was actually the last to be properly colonised. Even Jupiter had been colonised before Venus and the Jovian outer atmosphere was even now home to rather more people than lived on the second planet from the Sun.

The victim was soon well away from harm's way and stretchered to the nearest hospital bed. Her eyes were still closed although her modesty was ensured by a thin sheet that did nothing to disguise her voluptuous contours.

Although there were other victims who needed Laurent's attention at least as much as the last one to be dragged out from the rubble, it was the naked woman he found himself drawn towards in the time left before he and his crew returned to their station. That would be a long journey back and the next shift had been on duty for several hours now. Laurent could expect at least a day in lieu after this mission.

He and Nathalie sat by the woman's bed and Laurent's eyes were drawn again and again to the curves that even under the sheet reminded him of the flash of crotch he'd noticed when the victim was lifted out of the ruins and before it was covered. For the first time since Magdalene died he was feeling an erotic charge that he sometimes believed he'd never experience again. And it was in similar circumstances that he last saw his wife alive before she expired from her extreme suffering.

Only on that occasion, Magdalene's eyes hadn't opened.

The woman looked around her, clearly dazed but unusually alert for someone who would normally be expected to remain unconscious for many more hours.

“How do you feel?” asked Laurent in English, although he had no idea whether the woman might speak French or, coming from the Lovano colony, Italian.

The woman’s voice betrayed no accent. Not even that of a Venusian. It was hesitant and strangely croaky, but not in the way voices normally were after such a trauma.

“All right,” she said. “Given the circumstances.”

Victims were often able to articulate deceptively well after even the worst trauma, so Laurent didn’t take this as evidence of full recovery. However, had she suffered worse injuries, the discovery that she’d lost a limb would soon cancel her apparent coherence.

“What’s your name?” asked Laurent. This wasn’t because he especially wanted to know, though identification would eventually be a necessary part of her recuperation. He knew that questions of this nature were often the ones that would most focus a victim’s attention.

“BTR...” began the woman, before hesitating and looking around her with an expression that almost betrayed anxiety. She gazed deeply into Laurent’s eyes and flashed a smile that captivated him more than anyone’s had since Magdalene’s. The smile vanished but Laurent’s memory of it persisted for much longer.

“What’s your name?” he repeated.

“Beatrice,” she said. “My name is Beatrice.”

Chapter Three

Earth - 3752 C.E.

Notwithstanding the fact that along with the rest of humanity scattered beyond the orbit of the third planet Paul had wanted to visit Earth ever since he was a child, his initial experience was actually rather disappointing.

It wasn't just that he'd forgotten what normal gravity felt like after the time he'd been living on the Moon. There was also the drizzle, the chill in the South Pacific air and the unaccustomed brush of wind on his face. For the first time in his life Paul had to wear clothes not only for reasons of decoration and decorum but also as protection from the elements. Never again would he complain about the artificial atmosphere that was standard everywhere in the Solar System but Earth: the birthplace and fountainhead of humanity and civilisation.

The short journey from the Moon to Earth was probably the most uncomfortable Paul had endured since leaving Godwin. The executive government of Earth was so fretful about the environmental risk of a space vehicle landing on the planet's surface that the flight was executed in a series of small hops from one craft to another of steadily diminishing size. The aeroplane that actually touched down on the airstrip at South Pacific City was little more than a tube with wings that could accommodate fewer than a thousand passengers. These poor souls, including Paul and Beatrice, were strapped into upright seats where they had virtually no opportunity to stretch their legs and had to subsist on a very limited choice of food.

South Pacific City wasn't dry land exactly. In fact, it was many kilometres adrift

in the southern Pacific Ocean. The city was a floating platform of small settlements that had expanded by aggregation over the centuries from the need to minimise the impact of space flight on the fragile planet. It now had a total diameter of over a thousand kilometres, but even from ground level Paul could see that the city wasn't contiguous. There were more expansive areas of open water than there were of walkable surface.

South Pacific City housed the single largest population of any continent on Earth. About one in five of the planet's strictly controlled population of a billion people lived in the city. Nevertheless, this bald statistic was misleading as only a third of that number was permanently resident and three-quarters of the population of South Pacific City belonged to this privileged minority. As the floating continent was the main point of intersection between Earth and the rest of the Solar System, it employed more people than anywhere else on the globe.

As soon as Paul's eyes had at last adjusted to the Sun's bright light on an azure sea under a wide uninterrupted blue sky while his face was battered by a brisk breeze, Beatrice and he were led down a slope to the streets and concourses beneath the ocean surface. Paul had learnt about all this as a schoolboy in his lessons on Earth's geography. To support the weight of the buildings above water-level, the city needed nine times the ballast below. Most of the city above water level was reserved for office space and luxury residential properties so the public spaces were housed in an environment Paul found more familiar from a life in an artificial colony in deep space. Like Godwin, most of South Pacific City was comfortably climate-controlled and enclosed by thick plates of glass. The imperative at Pacific City wasn't to keep out the vacuum of empty space but to hold back the teeming oceans. Paul could see seaweed,

fish and even sharks through the metre-thick glass.

“The city attracts a lot of wildlife,” said Ali, the guide assigned to escort Beatrice and Paul. “In a sense, it has actually increased the ocean’s biodiversity. We do have to be careful about whales, however.”

“Whales?” Paul wondered.

“They are very big,” Ali explained. “It can cause quite a shock to the whale and even to citizens if one collides against the city’s underside.”

Although it wasn’t Ali’s job to guard the couple, he advised Paul and Beatrice that they would still be accompanied by very strict security. Although Earth was mostly nothing more than a tourist site and therefore the Solar System’s safest and most benign satellite, even here there was a risk that there might still be fanatics who would want to assassinate Paul.

Ali escorted the couple by foot for more than a kilometre in a city where the only other means of transport were boat and bicycle. Their destination was a tall building that towered into the sky high above the glass ceiling and the pavements.

“You’ll get a good view of the ocean from your hotel room,” Ali said. “It towers about half a kilometre above the water surface. I just hope you’ll never have a problem with the elevators especially if you want to go to the gym. And that’s because the gym’s nearly four hundred meters below the surface.”

“Is there as much hotel beneath the water surface as above?” Paul wondered.

“Rather more, in fact,” Ali said. “Tall buildings need a *lot* of ballast. There aren’t many hotel rooms below sea level except those to hold guests who are here to observe underwater life. If it *is* of interest to you, there’s a submarine tour to a deep sea

settlement that's situated by a black smoker vent. That might be a great treat if you've ever visited Venus and would like to see where the technology for living on that planet was first actively used."

"That's a trip I look forward to," said Beatrice.

The view from the windows of the couple's rooms was breathtaking. The hotel wasn't quite the tallest structure on the horizon, but the distance between similar tall buildings was so great that the others didn't obscure their view. Although the hotel was situated about fifty kilometres from the nearest edge of South Pacific City and much further from the others, Paul could see an ocean landscape extending in all directions peppered by a flotilla of disconnected artificial islands. From this elevation, he could well believe how disjointed and widely scattered the city was. Beyond the city limits to the South and East was unbroken ocean that reached the distant horizons.

Something Paul had always wanted to do since he was a child was to open a window, stand on a balcony and know that the air he breathed wasn't enclosed within a glass tube or held under a glass dome; to breathe instead from an atmosphere that encircled the entire planet's surface. It mightn't taste quite as sweet as the air Paul was accustomed to. It was, in fact, salty, damp, blustery and chilly, but it was genuine unadulterated natural and breathable atmosphere.

"Earth at last!" Paul announced. "Isn't it great?"

Beatrice strode over to Paul from inside the apartment and he was slightly startled but not too surprised to see she was naked.

"It's a lovely view," she said as she pressed her bosom against his chest. "And we have the privacy and time to do whatever we like. Only the occasional sea bird can

see us.”

“Of course,” admitted Paul who immediately saw the attraction of making love in the open air while looking over an endless vista. Another first, he thought as Beatrice slowly removed one item of his clothing after another and flung them expertly over the hotel surveillance cameras.

However much passion a man may possess, his amorous ambition must eventually be defeated by the evening chill especially when the lovemaking is high above the ocean waves. And so it proved for Paul, though he was distracted for long enough to miss the opportunity to view the sunset. This was a sight he’d only seen before in an airless sky. The apartment lights came on gradually as the Sun sunk below the horizon and cast progressively longer shadows over the balcony. It was too late when Paul became aware that this was yet another eagerly anticipated first that he’d failed to properly appreciate.

He also failed to see the first rays of the early morning Sun when they streamed in through the balcony windows. In fact, Paul was only finally prodded into wakefulness by Ali’s urgent calls on the holoscreen.

“You have an appointment with Professor Giuseppe Wasilewski in just over half an hour,” Ali announced. “Don’t be late. The professor’s not a patient man.”

“Professor who?” wondered Paul after Ali’s holographic image vanished.

“He’s the space mission’s Head of Science and Research,” said Beatrice as she unhurriedly slipped on some loose and positively revealing clothes.

“Why do we have to see him?”

“He’s your boss.”

“*Boss?*” wondered Paul who still found the concept both alien and quite novel. “I still don’t know why we should meet him.”

“It’s expected of you,” said Beatrice.

That was explanation enough in a sense, but Paul was still rather more than an hour late and unconvinced by the notion that a man he’d never met before should now somehow have a position of authority over him. He also wasn’t quite certain what *authority* really meant beyond being something he’d rather not be subject to.

“At last,” said the professor. “I’m glad you could fit me into your busy schedule.”

“Actually, it’s not very busy at all,” said Paul breezily. He was as unfamiliar with sarcasm as he was with authority. “I was hoping you’d be able to give me an idea of what I should be doing.”

“And what might that be, Paul?” the professor asked as his scorn slowly elided into a tone of incredulity. He was accustomed to rather more respect from junior academics, even if he was accompanied by a wife of such remarkable beauty.

“I’m not sure,” said Paul. “I hope it’s not too onerous because I’d like to do some sightseeing while I’m on Earth.”

“So, you believe the chief purpose of your stay on Earth is to provide you with an excuse for tourism, is that right?”

“Well, of course,” said Paul, oblivious to the professor’s tone. He wasn’t sure what to make of Professor Wasilewski and was even less sure how to pronounce his name. Despite the man’s smile, he didn’t really seem especially friendly. But Paul had come to both recognise and disregard the diversity in custom across the Solar System.

Perhaps Earthlings had their own peculiar customs. “I’ve never been to Earth before and I’ve heard so much about it.”

“I’m sure you have,” said the professor. “I see you come from Godwin. That’s in the Kuiper Belt, isn’t it? I’m surprised you know anything about Earth coming from so far beyond the boundaries of civilisation.”

“Oh, we know a lot about Earth,” Paul continued, warming to the subject. “After Godwin, Earth is the place in the Solar System we know most about. That and the Moon, of course.”

“Really?” said Professor Wasilewski.

“Yes,” said Paul, wondering where this conversation was heading.

“Well, in answer to your original question, as far as I’m concerned you can do exactly as much sightseeing as you like.”

“Well, thank you,” said Paul who hadn’t previously been aware that there was any limit to this pursuit.

There was a pause while the professor attempted to articulate an appropriate reply. Paul looked nervously at Beatrice for guidance. He half-expected that she would signal that this interview with the not very affable professor was over and that they could leave. Instead, her face showed virtually no expression and her eyes were fixed steadily on Professor Wasilewski. Paul turned his gaze back to the man he still struggled to regard as his ‘boss’.

“When I say that you can do as much sightseeing as you like,” continued the professor in measured tones having now abandoned his attempt at deprecating wit, “what I mean is that I have real difficulty in assigning a constructive role for you and

your wife. I don't know why you've been foisted on me. I simply can't grasp what practical use you could possibly serve."

"I've wondered about that too," said Paul helpfully.

"Indeed?" said the professor with some astonishment at Paul's ready agreement. "I thought you could maybe enlighten me as to what value a data archaeologist might have on a mission to a part of space where as far as I know there has never been an archaic database or computer operating system at any time in all eternity. Do you expect to find antique compact discs or binary machine code instructions? Do you think the Anomaly is best understood through detailed knowledge of silicon chips and magnetic hard drives?"

"Paul is on the mission because he identified the historical antiquity of the Anomaly," said Beatrice, while her husband struggled to find a coherent answer to the professor's rather bizarre assertions.

"Because he attracted unwanted publicity and the attention of every wingnut terrorist in the Solar System more like," snorted the professor. "It's true that Dr Morris provided fairly convincing additional evidence for what we had already suspected. That was nothing more than that the Anomaly is a rather more ancient phenomenon than was originally assumed. Beyond that, he's been rather more of a distraction than a help. And when he hasn't been a distraction, he's been a positive nuisance. That is why I firmly recommended that he shouldn't be part of this mission. And that is also why, young lady, that I recommended that you shouldn't be a member of the mission either. On both counts I have been overruled. And now I find that I am expected to assign you to some kind of useful endeavour."

“Well, surely there’s *something* that Paul and I can do?” Beatrice pleaded.

“What this mission needs are soldiers, navigators and scientists. The scientists that the mission needs are experts in whatever this Anomaly might be. I wonder sometimes whether the secrecy surrounding the mission is less to do with security concerns than the more profound fear that the more people knew about the mission the more they would realise just how little we know what this Anomaly might be. Rather than hide the extent of our knowledge, the secrecy serves to disguise the embarrassing magnitude of our ignorance. Nevertheless, whether the Anomaly is biological, mechanical or polydimensional, what it most certainly *isn’t* is something about which a data archaeologist specialising in twentieth and twenty-first century computer systems is likely to be expert. Nor is it something where a former Venusian fire-fighter is likely to be of much help.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Paul who more or less agreed with everything the professor was saying. “So, you wouldn’t mind it if we spent the next couple of months on Earth just being tourists?”

“It’s not a couple of months, alas,” said the professor almost defeated by Paul’s naive insouciance. “It may be nearer to a year until everything is properly organised. For most of the hundreds of scientists and technicians on the mission, this will be a period of busy activity to study all the available evidence now they have the security clearance to do so. For you two, however, it looks like the year will be nothing worse than a long holiday at the Interplanetary Union’s expense.”

“That doesn’t sound bad,” said Paul.

“Isn’t there a need for pre-flight training?” asked Beatrice.

“There is some standard training for all passengers,” the professor admitted. “It’s scarcely more than routine. There will also be some general briefing about the nature of the mission, the parameters under which we operate, and our present understanding of what the Anomaly is. The last might sound the most enlightening, but is actually the least satisfactory part.”

“Are we scheduled to attend the training and briefing sessions?” Beatrice asked.

“Of course.”

“And is there anything more that you want of me and my husband?”

“No. Unlike the other scientists on this mission you’re unlikely to have to see me again until we leave Earth. And—whether it is agreeable to you or not I don’t know—I shan’t be joining you on the mission. I have no wish to waste years of what remains of my life on what I frankly believe to be a wasteful and wasted expedition to nowhere very useful.”

It hadn’t occurred to Paul before that the professor might be quite old. Medical technology disguised all evidence of aging, but someone with the seniority to guide the scientific part of the mission and of course to be Paul’s ‘boss’ could very well be more than a century or two old.

“Is that what you think this Anomaly is?” asked Beatrice who was guiding the conversation rather more than Paul. “Nowhere very useful.”

“All these strange apparitions like lamp-posts materialising on icy planets, elves climbing out of craters and fires burning in a vacuum...” pondered the professor. “A substantial extent of space just beyond the Heliopause ripping open like a sore... A historical presence that goes back to at least the beginning of space exploration and

perhaps earlier... It's all very odd and at the moment inexplicable. But my guess is that like all the other bizarre things that humanity has identified—like strange attraction, dark energy and lateral time—the ultimate solution will be rather mundane however elegant the mathematical description or incredible its manifestation.”

“Do you think the mission is a waste of time?”

“Unlike many of my peers I really don't see much need for haste in our research. We should be thorough and detailed. What we probably don't want or need to do is squander a significant amount of the Interplanetary Union's wealth on a mission that is unlikely to be a success. And we still don't even know what would constitute success or whether it would bring any material benefit. On the basis of cost and risk alone, this is a mission that should never have been authorised. Should some brave politician choose to write off the losses already incurred and kill the project before it squanders even more, then this couldn't happen too soon.”

“Is that what you believe?” wondered Paul who had problems understanding any analysis in terms of economic impact.

“Indeed I do,” admitted the professor.

Chapter Four

Almond Grove - 3750 C.E.

It was not without a little trepidation that Ellis followed the woman who'd greeted him when his private space ship docked at Almond Grove. Partly, this was because he'd always wanted to see for himself the private residence of the second wealthiest man in the Solar System and this was the reason he used to justify to himself the expense and trouble of travelling for very nearly a month from Venus to Earth orbit. The main reason, of course, was that a summons from Alexander Iliescu was not one that any businessman—even one as wealthy as Ellis Gidding—could choose to ignore.

Almond Grove was built to impress. There weren't many trillionaires in the Solar System with the wealth to make their home a space colony large enough to house several million people, although only a minuscule fraction of that number actually lived there. Even Ellis' immense fortune was only just about enough to purchase the outermost level of the Aphrodite space colony at the equidistant point of Venus' orbit.

Ellis had inherited the third largest teleporter company in the Solar System and its shares had continued to rise under his stewardship whilst the fortunes of his competitors floundered. One quarter of all goods bought and sold across the vast distance of commercially viable space was transported, or rather reconstituted, via a Gidding Teleporter. But his riches were a mere fraction of that possessed by Alexander Iliescu whose patents had revolutionised interplanetary trade and commerce. It was unprecedented in recent centuries that one man should have profited from the exclusive patent of so many now almost ubiquitous products. Chief of these, of course, was the

matter convertor that made it affordable for virtually everyone to regenerate the raw material of one product from the blueprint of almost any other. Any molecule composed of elements up to the atomic weight of iron could be reconstituted at any other location within a light hour of its source. And this technology was used extensively by the Gidding Corporation.

Few people were aware of the full extent of Alexander Iliescu's business empire. He owned many companies with intentionally unexciting names such as Interplanetary Hardware, Nanosoft, and The National Bank of Neptune. But despite this, his fortune was still surpassed by Bunker Little, the philanthropist quadrillionaire, the scale of whose business and financial empire in the Socialist Republics of Saturn appeared to contradict his socialist principles.

Gidding was genuinely impressed by Almond Grove's majesty. The orbital ring was home to forests, deserts, grasslands and even a small sea. Only a fraction of it was set aside exclusively for human habitation.

Iliescu's life and habits were a mystery. It was known that he had a prodigious sexual appetite and the only other people on Almond Grove that Gidding had so far seen were women who were either naked or very nearly so. In the century or so since his business ventures first recorded a healthy profit, Iliescu's only other known characteristic was a preference for privacy.

Gidding followed his guide up a long trail in a wooded hillside to a modest cottage. It was misleading, of course, to imagine that Iliescu lived in such a small residence on such a huge orbital colony. The man owned not only the cottage but every cubic millimetre of earth, air and water within a light second of it.

The figure standing at the oak door to the cottage appeared to be Alexander Iliescu, but Gidding wasn't so easily deceived. Alexander Iliescu didn't extend a hand in greeting and his skin had a faint shimmer. In fact, this was a holograph so remarkably realistic that it was attended by a shadow.

"I'm delighted to see you, Ellis," said Iliescu. "I trust your journey wasn't too arduous."

"It's a break from Venus orbit," said Gidding. "And I'm pleased to see you too, Alex. But you still haven't told me why you invited me."

"All in good time, Ellis," said Iliescu, whose image was exactly like the man Gidding expected to meet. He was dressed in an expensive suit with blond hair that cascaded over his shoulders. "I can assure you that it will be a proposition of mutual advantage. In the meantime, you must want to recuperate from your voyage. My assistant will take you to your villa. I trust it will be to your liking."

With that, Iliescu's image disappeared and a tall black woman with short blue hair and a very tight rubber uniform appeared from the cottage doorway. She strode up to Gidding and shook his hand with the firm shake that Iliescu's holograph was unable to do. Ellis noted with approval that she was a muscular woman with broad thighs and a splendid bosom.

"Daphne," she announced. She gestured towards the cottage door. "Come in."

Ellis entered the cottage, past flowers that were wreathed around the doorway and a small wooden pump that stood by its side. The cottage's interior, however, was totally out of character for such a rural scene. There was no hearth and no window looking out across the fields and woodland. Instead the room was almost empty and

more resembled the inside of an elevator. And this was exactly what the room was. It travelled smoothly inwards towards the core of the orbital colony while Gidding could observe what was passing by through the glass walls. Initially, the view was of solid earth. Then immediately afterwards and for as much as a minute the view was of an underwater seascape in which swam fish, sharks and giant squid.

The elevator came to a halt on the surface of an island surrounded by many square kilometres of seawater in a level that housed an artificial lake. Daphne took Ellis by the hand and escorted him to an idyllic landscape of palm trees and seabirds. A villa was situated on a glorious sandy beach fringed by a palm-tree forest.

“When will I see Mr. Iliescu for real?” Ellis wondered.

“Tomorrow,” said Daphne. “But first, we have luncheon waiting.”

Ellis was usually a busy man. His time was mostly spent in the administration of his extensive business concerns. But the repast laid out for him on an extensive dining table on the beach was truly of the highest quality.

While Ellis dined on the freshly prepared food and was waited on by nude female androids, Daphne sat opposite and engaged him in very undemanding conversation. Seabirds swooped and soared around the island and seals sprawled out on the beach. Waves lapped on the shore. Out to sea Ellis could see a school of dolphins and a flock of gulls feasting on fish. No doubt these fish were much like those that had been served for him on delicate china plates. Ellis was sure that the wine he sipped had also been cultivated on the colony: no doubt on a different level with sunlit hillsides and rich soil.

Alexander Iliescu was obviously well-informed about Ellis’ tastes and not only

of the culinary kind. Gidding speculated how the man happened to be so knowledgeable. Ellis wasn't a man who paraded his partialities to the world. The news articles on his married life and private tastes placed the emphasis much more on his happy children, his collection of original Renaissance Art and his untarnished fidelity for his wife. Nothing printed or broadcast hinted at Ellis' love for rubber, leather and a good spanking.

Hardly had Ellis sipped the last drops of a rich and fruity vintage with a delicate woody aroma, than he felt a rough hand on his shoulder. It was Daphne in her tight-fitting outfit and her nipples hard, erect and protruding through small vents in her rubber brassiere.

"You have been a *very* naughty boy," Daphne announced, as she turned Ellis' head round to face her and gazed at him with a stern expression. Gidding's penis almost immediately sprang to life. And when he saw the small cane that Daphne brandished in her left hand, he gasped with a slow choke at the anticipation of the punishment he would no doubt soon receive.

And deservedly.

"I have been very naughty indeed," admitted Ellis, already gleeful at the prospect of a merciless beating on his buttocks.

Gidding had, of course, indulged his passion on the cyberwhores and sex robots on his space ship during the month-long travel between the two planetary orbits, but none of his robotic partners, however convincing, had Daphne's command or natural dominance. She was a woman with an almost unnatural understanding of Gidding's desire for humiliation but who also knew the precise limits to which he would allow his

buttocks to be caned or his penis to be chewed between her sharp teeth. She was merciless in her demands for his submission as she alternated the cane with the hard smack of her hand across his reddened buttocks.

She let Gidding fuck her anally, not even hinting that she might prefer a vaginal penetration, as he let his knees sink into the fine yellow sand on the beach while gulls flew around them and waves lapped on the shore. And then other women joined in the sexual frenzy as eager to be anally penetrated as Daphne. They were submissive also to Gidding's mistress' demands on their flesh which was both more vicious and more unremitting than that inflicted on Ellis.

The following morning, Gidding awoke in the vast bed that dominated the villa's bedroom embraced by four naked women, of whom none was Daphne. One woman had the red marks of birch visible on her buttocks and thighs. Another had a prominent bruise around her left eye where Daphne punched her when she hesitated as Gidding slid his penis inside her arse. Ellis rolled around the bed and luxuriated in the warmth of the women's bodies. He embedded his nose in the vagina of the woman who'd seemed most genuinely innocent and had complained most bitterly during the brutal lovemaking of the night before. The aroma of sexual secretion was still prominent as too was a trickle of blood from her much abused anus.

Daphne appeared at the door to the bedroom. She wore only a white apron over her bosom and was carrying a silver tray of coffee, caviar, toast and marmalade.

"Breakfast," she announced as she placed the tray on the extensive mattress.

Ellis scraped some caviar onto a slice of toast. He savoured its taste on a tongue furred up by the previous night's abundance of wine.

“Mr. Iliescu will be here in less than an hour,” said Daphne. “I have prepared a bath for you once you have eaten.”

Ellis was unable to enjoy breakfast in quite the leisure he preferred. He ate only half of the food set in front of him and swiftly gulped down two cups of freshly ground coffee. After a very brief bath, mostly administered by his naked female companions, he sat waiting for his host in a freshly pressed suit on an armchair on the veranda.

“Good morning, Ellis,” said the man, who appeared from behind Gidding while he was still looking ahead. “I trust you slept well?”

“Good morning, Alex,” said Gidding who shook Iliescu’s hand, content at last that he was greeting the real man and not a holographic avatar. “Are you going to tell me now why you summoned me with such urgency?”

“In good time, Ellis,” said Iliescu, who then proceeded to discuss business matters in a rather discursive nature. He asked pertinent questions about the Gidding Corporation, made some apposite suggestions as to how trade could be improved and discussed the politics of the colonies in Venus orbit and most specifically the upcoming presidential elections on Aphrodite.

Alexander Iliescu was an unostentatious, soft-spoken man who listened to Ellis with respect and said relatively little. Gidding was drawn to the man but was also uncomfortably mindful that his natural wariness towards a potential business associate or, for that matter, rival was being steadily eroded as he drank first coffee and then champagne while Iliescu proffered his fellow trillionaire a sympathetic ear.

“You’ve stayed well-informed on political affairs in your orbit,” Iliescu remarked approvingly as Gidding described the woeful business opportunities and

punitive taxation in the Aphrodite colony and its impact on inward investment.

“I always keep an eye open for business opportunities,” admitted Ellis.

“And not just those affecting the inner planets,” said Gidding. “You’ve been active even as far afield as the Asteroid Belt.”

Ellis hesitated for a moment. “The affairs of state in the various nations there have always fascinated me,” he remarked.

“Especially those of Pallas, I gather,” said Iliescu.

“Pallas?” wondered Gidding, who was nevertheless beginning to suspect what his host was hinting at.

“Such a beautiful colony,” said Iliescu with a broad smile. “One of the earliest to be founded in the early history of space colonisation. But at the same time such an ill-starred colony. Its government’s aggressive policies towards its neighbours have cost it dear. It became very nearly bankrupt, I believe. And a bankruptcy that could have resulted in a major disaster. Especially for a colony with few friends amongst its neighbours and whose belligerent arrogance had lost it any sympathy from the Interplanetary Union. The bankruptcy could so very easily have become terminal. But Pallas managed to avoid the awful fate of the ill-fated and equally self-destructive Bellona colony.”

“That was indeed a matter of good fortune,” said Gidding, already aware of where the conversation might lead.

“Wasn’t it just?” agreed Iliescu. “But less of politics. We’re businessmen. It’s our mutual commercial interests we are here to discuss. No doubt you’re wondering what it is that I can offer the Gidding Corporation?”

“Indeed, I am,” agreed Gidding.

“I have several new patents that aren’t yet in commercial production but which I’d like you to have exclusive rights to,” said Iliescu. “I don’t have to spell out to you how much of a competitive edge this could give the Gidding Corporation.”

“Just what are these patents?”

“I have, for instance, a patent that extends the range of elements that can be securely teleported to beyond gold and uranium. I have patents that prolong the life of some normally unstable elements to several years half-life. I have patents that double the fuel efficiency of antimatter thrust; patents that enable artificial gravity to be used on the surface of gas giants; patents that allow certain microbes to flourish on the inhospitable surface of the Kuiper Belt Objects; and patents that increase the distance to fifty light seconds at which terabytes of data can be transmitted without the need for transmission boosters.”

Gidding almost salivated at the list of patents his host revealed to him. These and the many others that had emerged from Iliescu’s many laboratories and workshops throughout the Solar System would bring enormous financial rewards to a corporation with the commercial muscle to market them.

“What do you think of the women who entertained you so eagerly last night?”

Iliescu asked almost as an aside.

“They were delightful company,” Gidding was more than happy to assent.

“You noticed, I’m sure, that they were all sexbots of a model that Cyberwhore, one of my companies, will soon be rolling off the production line for brothels and private ownership throughout the Solar System.”

“Well...” hesitated Gidding who had noticed no such thing. “I did think they were exceptionally compliant.”

“And also convincingly reluctant when required,” said Iliescu. “And what about Daphne...”

“Daphne? Your assistant?”

Iliescu smiled and turned his head towards the tall Amazonian woman. “Please be so kind...?” he suggested.

“Of course, sir,” she said.

And then Daphne, the woman who Gidding had been fucking with such intense pleasure and whose bodily fluids and sexual aromas suggested nothing remotely unnatural, put her hands to the sides of her head and slowly unscrewed it from her shoulders. This was something that Gidding didn’t know was even remotely possible. She then placed her head in the crook of her arm, while she continued to smile and blink as naturally as when the head was in its expected place.

“I am happy to do as you ask, sir,” said Daphne, quite unnecessarily.

“Daphne represents a model that I shan’t be rolling out on production lines for a while yet,” said Iliescu. “An android as utterly convincing and versatile as her would be wasted if she were employed only as the object of masturbatory pleasure for those who enjoy the company of women who are compliant to the extreme. I’m sure you can already imagine countless other commercial opportunities that androids like Daphne could address.”

“The Interplanetary Union will surely insist on some very tight regulation...”

“...with which the Gidding Corporation would be honour-bound to comply,”

said Gidding. “Though I believe at least one tenth of the Solar System is still not bound to the international laws of the Union.”

“Indeed,” said Gidding, who made a disproportionate amount of profit from trade with such rogue colonies and asteroids.

“I’m sure that I’ve said enough to convince you that there is a great deal that I can offer you,” said Iliescu as he refilled Gidding’s glass with fresh champagne. “You must already be wondering what it is that I would like you to offer me.”

“Shares in the Corporation?” suggested Gidding. “A seat on the board of executives? A controlling interest in one of the larger subsidiaries?”

“No,” said Iliescu with an indulgent laugh. “I’m sure you’ve already guessed what is that I’m most interested in.”

Gidding shook his head, but felt distinctly uneasy.

“You’re not a man who’s noted for your philanthropy, Ellis,” said Iliescu. “You are certainly no rival to Bunker Little who has done so much selfless service to the downtrodden and oppressed of the Solar System principally, of course, within the Socialist Republics. You’ve not even been as generous as I’ve been. However, unlike the majority of your generous deeds, there is one example of your philanthropy that you’ve chosen to keep remarkably secret. Few of those who know you as the benefactor of hospitals and schools in Aphrodite or of emergency services on Venus, or even the founder of animal hospitals that ensure that no domestic animal in Venus orbit need ever suffer, will have even an inkling of your greatest and most selfless act.”

“And what was that?”

“Why, the writing off of all the debts owed by Pallas which you anonymously

purchased and paid off. And this just days before the space colony's life-support systems would have collapsed with immediate catastrophic affect. Just why were you so incredibly generous to a colony with so few friends?"

"I was persuaded that..." began Gidding uncertainly as he began the alibi he'd been inwardly rehearsing since his host first referred to the colony.

"Poor Pallas!" interrupted Iliescu. "If only it had spent its wealth more wisely rather than squandering it so profligately on arms. If only the wealth of the colonies it had acquired with so much loss of life and property had been spent on the greater good of its people, rather than on building a war fleet wholly out of proportion to its status. Its efforts didn't even earn the asteroid a seat on the Permanent Council of the Interplanetary Union. All those arms fairs where Pallas outspent Mars, Ceres and the whole of the Kuiper Belt. All that huge wealth spent on antimatter bombs, dark energy missiles, nanotorpedos, the latest cloaking devices and whatever else the sales representatives from Mars, Saturn or Jupiter could tempt the government of this benighted colony. And where is it all now?"

"Erm..."

"I know exactly where, Ellis," said Iliescu with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "This massive arsenal of armaments is housed inside a small Kuiper Belt Object nearly a light day away from the ecliptic of the Solar System. And the current owner of this vast collection of the most truly lethal hardware within the Solar System but outside the supervision of the Interplanetary Union is none other than you. Not the Gidding Corporation. But you: Ellis Gidding of Aphrodite. What a bargain, I would say. The cost of bailing out Pallas was but a fraction of what this military hardware is really

worth. And just why did you buy such a deadly arsenal, Ellis?”

“Resale value,” suggested Gidding.

“Maybe,” said Iliescu. “But more likely you just wanted to add it to the largest private collection of space cruisers, titanium tanks and firearms, both ancient and modern, that anyone has ever amassed. It is this death star of yours that I want in exchange for the patents I am willing to offer. I want full ownership. That includes the secret codes that enable you to launch this fearsome arsenal.”

“Why do you want something like that?” wondered Gidding.

“You really don’t need to know why I want your little death star,” said Iliescu. “Maybe it’s a hobby of mine, as it is of yours, to collect military hardware. Maybe I would prefer to be the one who has ownership of such a lethal device rather than you or one of the more errant colonies in the one tenth of the Solar System that refuses to be governed by international law. Maybe I just like the idea of being the most powerful man in the Solar System. I would prefer you didn’t know and I will ensure that should you tell anyone of this conversation that it will probably be the last thing you’ll ever do.”

“Have I got a choice in this transaction?” Gidding asked.

“Not really,” Iliescu admitted. “I’m not a man accustomed to having my offers rebuffed. But I much prefer the taste of carrot to the application of a stick. Although I’m not so sure that you mightn’t have other preferences.”

“When would I have access to the patents you mentioned?” asked Gidding.

“As soon as one of my assistants, maybe Daphne here,” Iliescu tilted his head towards his assistant who was still carrying her head in her arm and looking none the

worse for it, “enters on board the death star or doomsday device or whatever you wish to call it and reports back to me that all is in order.”

“That would take at least six months space travel,” said Gidding.

“It’ll be rather less with the technology to which I’m willing to let you have access,” said Iliescu. “I’m not a patient man. I have many other items on my business agenda to attend to. I would urge that you agree now. And I would add that should you not consent as readily as I expect you to, your sojourn in Almond Grove, while still very agreeable, may last for a very long time.”

Gidding was not used to such blatant blackmail, but Iliescu was only applying to him much the same business etiquette that Gidding also applied in his more lucrative commercial transactions. This was particularly so with the government of Pallas who were initially far from accommodating.

“I’ll need to examine the fine print,” said Gidding at last.

“I’m sure you’ll find it all in order,” said Iliescu. “I’m convinced that you will be very impressed of the extent to which I am willing to enrich the shareholders of the Gidding Corporation.”

Chapter Five

Venus - 3732 C.E.

The scorching wind that blew sluggishly across the Venusian plain made progress difficult enough for Beatrice, but much worse for Laurent and the others in his team. Although she could have taken the lead, Beatrice tactfully trailed the rest of her crew as they struggled with immense effort in their thick-shelled space suits across fifty metres of dimly lit superheated soil to the crumpled wreckage of the crashed shuttle. It had fallen victim to weather conditions dramatically worse than those anticipated by the meteorological office when it embarked on a routine flight from the Penderecki dome toward the construction site of the new Nabokov dome. Several hundred engineers and architects had been on board and nearly a quarter of them were now dead.

Beatrice had been leading a truly idyllic life on the planet ever since she'd married Laurent and become employed by Venus' Emergency Services. She enjoyed assisting her husband in the daily challenge of saving lives. It assuaged the conscience with which she had been equipped to calculate that she had now saved more lives than were lost as a result of her dramatic arrival seven years earlier.

Life on Venus couldn't really be much better. Her husband was a man who loved her with a passion that truly flattered Beatrice even though it was an emotion she didn't really understand. The considerable satisfaction she got from her vocation wasn't at all diminished by the many unfair advantages she had over her human companions.

She had made many friends and enjoyed the company of many lovers. The former she shared with Laurent and the latter she kept secret from him. Beatrice had

only belatedly realised how fundamental monogamy was to human relationships on Venus. Her considerable sexual appetite made it difficult for her to conform to human convention, but for Laurent's benefit she maintained the appearance of fidelity as best she could.

The first year or so of Beatrice's relationship with Laurent was almost as fraught as it was a pleasure. There were so many subtleties to human sexual relationships that Beatrice didn't understand. Chief of these was the expectation of sexual exclusivity that Laurent held in such high regard. It puzzled her at first that Laurent became so upset when Beatrice brought her lovers home with the intention of sharing their bodies with her fiancé. The interminable quarrels with her husband and some independent research convinced her that if she were to stay with Laurent, which she very much wanted to do, she had to practise a policy of deceit for which her training in Proxima Centauri hadn't prepared her.

It was so dark across the Venusian plain that it was only through the monitoring equipment that trundled ahead that the rescue party could determine the extent of the damage to the grounded shuttle. The most seriously compromised sections were beyond hope. Even a small breach in the hull would have resulted in the sudden agonising death of any survivor. Elsewhere, however, the shuttle's emergency systems had attempted to shield the passengers from the fatally adverse weather conditions in a cocoon of inflatable foam. The rescuers' task was essentially to drag these cocoons out from the wreckage and carry them off to safety in the Emergency Services' flying ambulances.

Laurent's crew wasn't the only one called to the accident. Two others were already busy salvaging survivors from the wreckage. There was no way to gain direct

access to the victims. That would involve compromising the shuttle's defences which would only serve to admit a lethal combination of crushing air pressure and searing heat. Medical assistance could only be applied once the survivors were safely in a hospital ward. Only robots could handle the sealed cocoons and Beatrice's role was less to apply medical help than to monitor their activity.

"It's fucking carnage!" exclaimed Daphne, the only other woman in Laurent's crew.

Beatrice could only agree. The dead bodies that she examined through the ultrasound viewer in her helmet had lost all human form. What hadn't been burnt to a cinder was crushed flat by the massive air pressure. The deaths might have been rapid, but they would also have been very painful. Burning unbreathable air that was hotter than it was poisonous would have scorched the lungs before the flesh ignited.

Beatrice was exceptional at her job. She was at her best in the more temperate conditions inside the domes where the duty of a rescue mission was to save the lives of those tangled in the wreckage of a systems failure. Emergency surgery was often required to extricate the survivors' bodies before a breach in the hull let in the certainty rather than the mere likelihood of agonising death. Beatrice had no difficulty in disengaging her empathy towards the victims whose limbs she amputated. She also had the physical strength to hold up the collapsing masonry that would otherwise have crushed the unfortunate survivors.

Laurent gave his wife an affectionate kiss when they returned to the Emergency Rescue Station many hours later.

"You were truly wonderful," he said. "As always."

“Thank you,” said Beatrice who genuinely appreciated Laurent’s praise.

“You’re almost superhuman,” he continued. “I’ve never before had the privilege to work with someone so focused on the job and who can think so fast. Only you could have recognised that the pilot’s cabin still had people in it. There are at least five people who’d have suffered an agonisingly drawn-out death if it hadn’t been for you.”

“I was told you were good,” said Alfonso, who was a new member of the crew, “but until I saw you in action today I didn’t know just *how* good. You were fucking amazing. When the robot failed and you stepped in... That was brilliant. A second longer and the life-support capsule would have plunged to the ground.”

“I told you I wasn’t exaggerating,” said Laurent proudly as he placed an arm round his darling wife.

Much as Beatrice loved her husband’s compliments and revelled in the depth and quality of their lovemaking, she was conscious that her harmonious married life wouldn’t last forever. This wasn’t only because she was unable to restrain her lust. She’d learnt well how to cover her tracks. It was because she was now about to deliberately pursue a lifestyle of blatant infidelity and gross sexual abandon that was specifically designed to rock her marriage asunder.

In fact, her marriage would soon become as wrecked and unsupportable as was the shuttle that had been carrying a crew of engineers and architects when its systems failed.

It wasn’t because her sexual desires exceeded what any man could possibly satisfy that this had to be done. Beatrice’s career in the Emergency Services might be rewarding, but that wasn’t the duty that was her highest priority.

It wasn't long after she first arrived on Venus that she first made contact with Proxima Centauri Intelligence Services. This wasn't in person, although there were at least a dozen other agents on Venus, but through communication channels so highly encrypted that no human had even identified them as such. The receiver and transmitter she used were embedded deep inside her skull.

Her assignment was fairly routine to begin with. She was there simply to monitor and observe. Proxima Centauri couldn't rely on communication intercepts alone to research and study human society. Such information could never be as comprehensive as that gathered on the ground, even though Beatrice's reports were never much more than an upload of the sensory data she gathered simply by leading an outwardly normal life. Sometimes she was required to enter certain chambers or to speak to specific individuals, but generally all she had to do was lead as ordinary a life on the planet as it was possible for an android to do.

It was also of paramount importance that an agent's activities should not attract any suspicion, as this would necessitate the mission's immediate termination. This was exactly what had happened to the cover of a Proxima Centauri agent on Ecstasy. Even the slightest suggestion that an agent was not quite what he or she seemed could endanger not only that operative's mission but that of all agents in the Solar System. It was imperative that humans should never learn about the alien presence that was so much in their midst.

As Beatrice's profile was well suited for a mission to Ecstasy, it was decided that she should now relocate her operations and proceed to the outer Solar System. But first she had to make her motive for departing Venus seem verifiably plausible.

Beatrice reasoned that the emotional upset resulting from the messy break-up of a previously idyllic marriage provided good cover. Since infidelity was the most common reason for such a rupture, Beatrice decided that she need no longer hide her many indiscretions from her husband.

“I just can’t understand it!” sobbed Laurent when he discovered Beatrice in their bed with Daphne. His colleague fled in acute embarrassment as a trail of vaginal fluid dripped down her pale freckled legs. “I thought you were a changed woman. What have I done to deserve this?”

Of course the answer was that he didn’t deserve it at all. He’d been an exemplary husband. He was still, despite everything, extraordinarily forgiving and understanding. But this couldn’t be allowed to stand in Beatrice’s way even if she did go through the motions of trying to achieve a kind of reconciliation with her devoted husband.

There was a sense in which Beatrice enjoyed every moment of her campaign of open infidelity even though it pained her to see the anguish it caused Laurent. After the tragic death of his first wife, he thought that he could at last let her memories rest in peace. However, he was certain that Magdalene would never flirt so openly with Alfonso. Beatrice even had an affair with Manfred, who was the only member of Laurent’s crew still in active service from the fateful day when Beatrice was rescued.

Daphne was Beatrice’s favourite lover. Her exquisite pale skin was liberally sprinkled with freckles. Her long red hair cascaded over her shoulders and had a faintly straw-like smell that enchanted Beatrice when she buried her nose inside. She would bring her lover to a choking vocal orgasm during which her juices squirted over Beatrice’s cheeks. Her fingers and tongue probed deeply into Beatrice’s shaven pubes.

The couple pressed their crotches against each other in tribadic ecstasy. Daphne's perspiration dripped onto Beatrice's thighs which she licked off in an expression of worshipful devotion.

"This is *so* wrong," said Daphne. "I love you. But Laurent does too. I shouldn't be doing this."

"Don't be silly," said Beatrice. "And anyway you're not my only lover."

"I know. I know," said Daphne sadly. "Alfonso. Manfred. It's not right, you know. We work together. We can't *all* be rivals in love. Manfred got really upset when he learnt that Alfonso's been fucking you too. I didn't want to tell him that I was sharing your bed too."

"I don't know what's so wrong about that," said Beatrice.

"If you were like most women—or men for that matter—I wouldn't believe that," said Daphne reflectively as she lay on one side. "But *you*? I don't know. I really *do* believe that you don't find anything wrong with it. If my wife knew I was fucking another woman, she'd divorce me straight away. She's a jealous cow."

"But you love her, don't you?" asked Beatrice in genuine fascination. "And you love me too. What's wrong with loving more than one person?"

"It just won't work," said Daphne. "If you can't trust your lover to be faithful, what else can't you trust? Anyway, although I *do* love Helga I'm jealous of you too. It pains me to think of Alfonso's hairy prick inside you. I'm even jealous of Laurent, however much I respect him and don't want to ruin his marriage."

But ruined Laurent's marriage most definitely was. After he found Beatrice in bed with Daphne, he soon discovered many other unpalatable signs of his wife's

insatiable infidelity. It wasn't just the little things, like the love-bite on Beatrice's thigh; or the smell of another man's perfume on her clothes; or the lovelorn gazes coming from both Alfonso and Manfred.

He now knew that Daphne was making love to his wife. There was also Nikolai, the man who lived just two houses away in the tree-lined avenue where he lived, who Laurent caught ejaculating into his wife's mouth. Beatrice didn't even bother to wipe the semen away after Laurent scared Nikolai off with the most ferocious vocal outburst of his life. There was Hernandez the geologist who was one of the few other people who habitually worked outside the domes' protective shields. And then, still with the agonised memory of Hernandez's humping arse between his wife's legs, there was also Lamin, Pierre, Hua, Barbara and Francisco.

Laurent struggled to accommodate Beatrice's blatant infidelities in his life. He slept in one room, most often by himself, whilst his wife slept in another room and, rather noisily and openly, never by herself.

Just how did Beatrice find these men and women, and not always singly, that joined her beneath the sheets? Even Laurent's wild life as a single man before he married Magdalene had never been remotely as promiscuous as Beatrice's. The memories of that hedonistic youth—where he'd once even participated in an orgy—were why Laurent reluctantly tolerated his wife's unquenchable lust, but his tolerance was steadily waning.

As a firefighter, Beatrice was no less professional than before. She happily volunteered for those distressing duties that most of her colleagues shied away from. But whenever Laurent saw his wife, whether at work and at home, he was forever

reminded of the unhappiness that dogged his every waking hour and made his sleep at best fitful. It exasperated even the psychoanalyst whose advice he desperately sought.

“I know you love your wife,” the therapist said sympathetically, “but you can’t put up with her daily blatant humiliation for ever. It’s obvious from your profile that you aren’t a masochist, so there’s no realistic way you can adjust to this unfortunate turn in your relationship.”

No reconciliation seemed possible when Laurent and Beatrice visited the marriage counsellor. Not only was Beatrice dressed as scantily as a woman could be without being naked, there was even a smudge of semen on her brow that had congealed on a strand of hair.

“I can’t put it more forcefully than this, Beatrice,” said Doctor Ferencz. “Either you change your current licentiousness lifestyle or your marriage will fail. I recommend that you separate, at least for a while, to give the two of you the space in which you can decide whether your marriage is worth saving. I have to say that I’ve never seen such provocative promiscuity in all my life. Most relationships can survive the odd episode of infidelity, but your behaviour is way beyond the norm.”

Despite the marriage counsellor’s advice, Laurent was even now reluctant to separate. This was mostly because although Beatrice was openly promiscuous she still found the time and, more surprisingly, the energy to satisfy her husband’s lust.

Laurent was determined to confront his wife with an ultimatum when the couple returned home after their shift. This was even though Beatrice had just saved the life of three young children who’d been trapped in a lift shaft enveloped by a fire that had forced its way through a hairline fracture in the dome. Instead of a confrontation,

however, Laurent was once again seduced by Beatrice. She urgently unbelted his trousers and plunged her mouth onto his almost immediately erect penis. This was followed by a session of lovemaking that left Laurent's testicles aching and his penis drained.

"This can't go on, Beatrice," said Laurent at last when the two of them finally lay together naked on the sofa. "We can't continue to live under the same roof any longer."

"I love you," said Beatrice. "I'm sure we can work it out."

"It's not going to happen," said Laurent. "You've said the same thing so many times before. I've taken a lease on an apartment in another part of the city. I shall be moving out tomorrow."

Beatrice shed tears of bitter regret and recrimination which had its intended result of making it seem that she was truly sorry for having allowed her lust to imperil their marriage. In truth, she was pleased that she'd orchestrated events so well. Laurent left within the week and Beatrice handed in her notice at the Emergency Rescue Services.

She then traced Laurent to his new apartment and persuaded him to exchange his rented apartment for his old home.

"It's not right that you should leave the home where you've lived for so many years," said Beatrice after the passionate sex that inevitably occurred. "I'm the one at fault. Not you. I'll stay here and you can return to your memories of Magdalene. She was a much better wife for you than I've ever been."

This was true in so many ways but Laurent had never known such passionate

sex with his deceased wife as he had with Beatrice. He was disconsolate that the lovemaking he'd just enjoyed with Beatrice might well be the last he'd ever know.

Beatrice continued to live in her new flat. She was unemployed but also extraordinarily well provided for by the proceeds of an extremely smooth divorce and the pension provided by Venus' Emergency Services. And she was far from alone. As she now had no need for restraint in her amorous affairs, she certainly observed none.

"Laurent is still distraught," said Daphne, still one of Beatrice's lovers, when they met at a nearby ornamental garden. "He busies himself in his work, but none of us are as capable as you were and he still remarks about that."

Beatrice sighed.

"I miss him too," she said and let a small tear dribble down her cheek.

Although Beatrice exaggerated her feelings for effect, there was truth to her statement. She *had* loved Laurent as much as an android was capable. She would gladly exchange her duties in the services of Proxima Centauri for a lifetime of connubial bliss with a man so generous, kind and sincere. She regretted leaving her husband, but she had no choice. The expense of transporting her across four light years of empty space hadn't been for the sole benefit of Beatrice's domestic happiness.

She scanned the lawns that spread towards the squat buildings that lined the garden's perimeter and where the dome's ceiling brushed close to their roofs.

She would miss Venus. The gravity inside the domes was much like that on Earth and the artificial atmosphere was as pleasant as any she could wish for. The Venusians had sacrificed so many lives to make habitable a planet where the air was poisonous and hot enough to melt lead. On the other hand, Venus was also a beautiful

planet. There were mountains capped with frozen metal and lakes of molten iron. If only it were possible to see this more clearly through the thick sulphurous air.

“Not here!” laughed Daphne as Beatrice’s hand crept up her thigh and tickled the labia majora under her scanty shorts. “People are watching. You really *are* insatiable.”

Beatrice placed her lips on Daphne’s. “Where then?” she whispered playfully.

The two women rushed to Beatrice’s apartment which was on the fourth and top floor of the block that overlooked the gardens and in which was installed a small fountain and ornamental pond. And where also, as Daphne was initially rather less delighted to discover, a black woman was still resting in Beatrice’s bed after their shared passion of the previous night.

Beatrice knew her two female lovers well and persuaded them to make love together to which she contributed far more than her fair share. Daphne bathed not only Beatrice but also her black lover with the juice of orgasmic pleasure.

Beatrice reflected on the changes to come as she relaxed on her expansive bed: a black girl on one side and a pale freckled one on the other. She would soon leave the sheltered domes of Venus and travel across the Solar System to the colony of Ecstasy. There was much she regretted having to leave behind but she was also excited at the prospect of new lovers and the sight again of the black void through which she would travel.

“We most certainly *do* have a need for a well-qualified Emergency Services Officer on the Yossarian,” said the recruiting officer of the meteoroid mining ship. “And few come with as good qualifications as you. But I have to ask: why do you want

to leave Venus for a journey to the most remote locations in the inner planetary orbits?"

"My marriage..." said Beatrice tearfully. "I've just divorced my husband. I want to make a fresh start."

"There are many more marriageable men and women on Venus than you'll ever find in deep space," said Chief Petty Officer Durer who was also conducting the interview. "But you won't be the first divorcee to volunteer for such a reason."

"It's been very painful," said Beatrice. "I know it'll be a challenge, but it's one I'm prepared to confront."

"I don't think you'll be nearly as busy as you've been in the past," remarked the recruiting officer. "It's very rare that we suffer the kind of disaster you regularly face on Venus."

"If I save only one life, it will be a duty well served," said Beatrice.

"We haven't exactly been overwhelmed with candidates for the position who are nearly as well qualified as you," said the Chief Petty Officer. "The greatest challenge I think you'll confront may well be boredom. Do you think life on a space ship, confined to less than five cubic kilometres of habitable space, is really a fair exchange for life in a Venusian dome?"

"I'm sure I'll get used to it," said Beatrice, who didn't want to explain just how well-suited she was. A century or more of her life had already been spent in much more confined conditions in interstellar space. The journey from Proxima Centauri would have been impossible for a human, even in the near torpor of her resting state.

"You'll have time to fuck every man and woman on the ship," commented Daphne when Beatrice told her lover of her imminent departure.

Beatrice nibbled at Daphne's reddish pubic hairs. "I'm sure I can rise to the challenge," she said with a wicked smile.

Chapter Six

Pynchon - 3752 C.E.

The small craft of which Colonel Vashti was the pilot weaved in and out of the relentless barrage of hostile laser fire that streamed towards her from the approaching fighter jets. The moment she failed to avoid being hit would be the moment when her craft would be no more and her mission terminated. Although her firepower was outmatched by the weaponry set against it, she made sure that each one of the laser-propelled missiles she launched hit its target. All around and ahead was the wreckage of enemy jets.

It was then then that colonel became aware of Brigadier Svenssen's silent presence. Her impressive talent for eliminating hostile forces quite suddenly faltered and she was hit by a laser beam that crippled her craft and sent it spinning and spiralling out of control through the debris of enemy fighter jets.

“Well done, colonel,” said the brigadier. “Very impressive.”

Colonel Vashti stepped out from the Virtual Reality pod where she'd been immersed for the last hour or so.

“I was just practicing, sir,” she said.

“Well, I certainly hope you won't need those skills on your mission, colonel,” said the brigadier with a good-humoured smile. “We don't anticipate any hostile activity out there in the Oort Cloud. I dare say though that you have more practical experience of warfare than most of the soldiers who're being trained for this mission. You have a very impressive record of service in the National Army of the Mariner

Federation. You've been awarded a dazzling array of medals and commendations."

"Thank you, sir," said the colonel. "And you'll be pleased to know that there are several other soldiers from the Mariner Federation on board."

"And many from the Polar Federation as well, of course," said the brigadier whose own home was the colony of Psamathe in the Neptune Federation. That was a part of the Solar System that never had to engage its military forces in any conflict fewer than a million kilometres from the home planet. The brigadier envied Colonel Vashti's more extensive experience of combat and the associated opportunities to be awarded medals for conspicuous bravery and the like. "You must think this a very dull mission, colonel."

"Not at all, sir," said Colonel Vashti. "This is the mission I was always meant to serve."

"Well, there's no guarantee that you'll return of course," said the brigadier. "Do *you* have any theory what this Anomaly is, colonel?"

"None whatsoever, sir," said the colonel. "Do you have any, sir?"

"Sadly, no," said the brigadier. "Like most observers I've speculated that it might be some kind of extraterrestrial intelligence, but if so it's chosen a very odd way of manifesting itself. Anyhow, colonel, I didn't come to see you to discuss the Anomaly or even to congratulate you on your excellent game-play. Are you coming to the wrestling match this evening?"

"The fuck fighting, sir?" asked Colonel Vashti who knew exactly what Brigadier Svenssen was alluding to.

"I like a good fight, soldier," said the brigadier, "but I like a good fuck just as

much.”

“I do as well, sir,” said the colonel who placed her hand on the brigadier’s crotch where she could feel the swell of his genitals. Quite clearly the prospect of watching some sweaty energetic fucking had already stimulated him.

“Not now, colonel,” said the brigadier sternly but reluctantly. “I have other duties to attend to.”

“Of course, sir,” said Vashti, removing her hand. “I shall see you at the wrestling match at Twenty Hundred Hours Universal Time.”

She saluted her commanding officer who acknowledged her in kind and strode off.

Colonel Vashti had been training at the Pynchon military colony in Earth orbit for several months now and there weren’t many more months left yet until she and the other soldiers would set off for the Space Ship Intrepid on its voyage to the very limits of the Sun’s gravitational sphere. The space colony was one of many administered and owned by the Interplanetary Union that was dedicated to the armed services. It was unthinkable that the militia should be under the direct control of just one of the many nations, planets and colonies that composed the Union’s special forces. This was particularly imperative given that some member states, such as Colonel Vashti’s Mariner Federation, were at war with some of the others.

The training camp where Colonel Vashti and the other soldiers were based was at quite a distance from the other military bases. This wasn’t especially unusual, but more out of the ordinary was the fact that no one in the training camp was permitted to discuss the mission for which they were training with soldiers based elsewhere. To

make sure of this, only the most senior officers, such as Colonel Vashti and Brigadier Svenssen, were allowed any freedom of movement within the confines of the colony.

The Pynchon was specifically designed to accommodate military exercises, so the greatest proportion of the colony's habitable area was a wasteland where soldiers could fire live ammunition and practice military exercises with real lethal hardware. This made the colony one of the least cultivated of the Solar System. The plants that struggled to grow in the messy aftermath of staged conflicts and the animals not slaughtered in the artillery cross-fire were entirely abandoned to their own devices.

There wasn't much that the soldiers under the colonel's command knew about the mission. She'd been ordered to keep it as much a secret as possible. All the soldiers knew was that they would be travelling into deep space and that there was an unspecified and even mysterious risk that might require a military response. There was nothing more. Nevertheless, most of the soldiers guessed that their destination was the Anomaly. Everybody knew that there was something quite extraordinary out there in deep space and few believed the official line that it was a natural phenomenon best left to scientific research. Few believed that, whatever it might be, the Anomaly would turn out to be just like the other strange phenomena in human history for which there had always been a perfectly reasonable and quite boring explanation. It was an alien unknown presence that might even be associated with the weird and often preposterous Apparitions that so excited conspiracy theorists.

The soldiers had the same access to international media as everyone else in the Solar System so they could easily study holographs of these mysterious Apparitions. There was the huge Viking ship that sailed for several seconds across the Asteroid Belt.

There was the massive banana that spiralled round and around for nearly a minute somewhere between Uranus and Saturn. There was the fierce burning fire on the freezing surface of Pluto. And then there was the Anomaly itself. It was almost as old as space travel and getting steadily bigger and ever more peculiar.

The soldiers were required to undergo an exhaustive course of training and instruction for the mission. There was the standard preparation for military action both inside an enclosed space such as a space colony or a very large space ship, but also in deep space where even the slightest compromise to a space suit's defences would lead to sudden and painful death. The soldiers relied heavily on the readiness and quality of their equipment to survive. A battle-ready soldier had to make very thorough technical checks before setting out into the deadly vacuum of space.

Colonel Vashti was more fully briefed than the soldiers under her command. The more she found out the more she appreciated what a risk her fellow soldiers were taking. Most frightening of all was the fact that nobody was sure that there would even be a return trip from the Anomaly. None of the robotic probes that had entered the Anomaly had returned. They broadcast no meaningful information once they were inside. Every observation of the Anomaly at any proximity from outside was exactly as unhelpful as the high resolution analyses made from several light months distant. Although there was no actual evidence that the Anomaly might harbour hostile intentions, it couldn't be assumed that it would necessarily be friendly.

The soldiers also needed to be entertained while they were stationed on Pynchon. This was taken very seriously by the military colony's administrators, even to the extent of passing a blind eye on activities that were legal in some colonies in the

Solar System but not so in most of the others. Controversially, this included prostitution, gambling and drug abuse. The entertainment on-hand had to be of a nature that would appeal to soldiers and this was unlikely to be compatible with a celibate, contemplative and quiet life. Amongst the available diversions, the one that most appealed to Brigadier Svenssen was male homosexual fuck fighting or Extreme Hard Core Wrestling as it was sometimes known.

Colonel Vashti totally understood Brigadier Svenssen's enthusiasm for fuck fighting. What could be more entertaining than to watch two or more male soldiers stripped to the skin wrestle together with the intention of gripping one another's testicles and erect penis? What greater reward was there for the victor than for him to fuck his defeated opponent? What greater treat could there be for the audience than to watch two oiled and ripped wrestlers thrust their erect penises deep inside the other's anus and fuck with exactly the same animal intensity that they'd exhibited in their fighting?

Even so, Colonel Vashti was conscious that such a treat didn't appeal to everyone. There were very few women in the audience, even if the colonel could count herself as one. There was a high representation of shaven headed men from Saturn in the audience and many had ambitions to be active participants in this form of physical recreation. The brigadier was on edge throughout the wrestling. He would always place a bet on the wrestler he wanted to see win, but Vashti could see that the wager wasn't on the man who was really the better fighter. Brigadier Svenssen paid scant attention to the wrestler's form even though this was the best indicator of likely success. The brigadier generally backed the wrestler who was most muscled, the most oiled and the

one with the largest cock.

This was Brigadier Svenssen's ideal masculine form and one on which he'd modelled himself. He was well ripped. When not executing his military duties, the brigadier was most often to be found pumping iron or doing press-ups or lifting weights. He enjoyed doing these exercises in the nude so that he could show off his taut, muscled frame and, naturally, his own quite splendid genitals. What he liked to do most was to shove his cock up a man's arse and have his balls rhythmically pound against a man's buttock crack. What could possibly be more fun than that?

The brigadier had once again put his money where he would like his cock to be. And once again he lost his bet. Colonel Vashti also liked to gamble but she was far more successful with her wagers. It was always a matter of satisfaction to assess a wrestler's form and predict who would win. It was even more of a challenge to guess the actual final score, but even there the colonel's predictions were remarkably accurate. The colonel often knew the wrestler's form rather more intimately than anyone, but she didn't really want the brigadier to be too aware of this. She preferred the brigadier to continue to believe that there was something special in their relationship. And not, of course, just in terms of who was the commanding officer.

"You fuck as well as you fight, soldier," the brigadier said on the last occasion he'd been to a contest.

He was crouched down on his large bed: his elbows supported his weight and his buttocks raised high. Perspiration streamed down his stubbly pate and his expression was as agonised and contorted as that of the recently defeated wrestler. Behind him and thrusting again and again into his muscled anus was Colonel Vashti who knew just how

roughly the brigadier liked to be fucked. He wanted his testicles squeezed and his cock engorged, red and raw. He wanted to be as battered and bruised as a wrestler. Sex with the brigadier was like a wrestling match. The only difference was that the fucking came at every stage of the proceedings. It wasn't just the victor's spoils. The colonel and the brigadier fucked and were fucked by one other. It was a vicious, exhausting and generally silent combat. Fucking was serious business. Having a dick in your mouth and gagging on it was an exercise where cock brushed against tonsils and spit and saliva slobbered onto the chest. Anuses were pummelled. Fists were pushed in deep. Faces were slapped. Punches were thrown. And at the end there was the spurt of semen onto the face, over the arse, on the chest and over the sheets.

Or was it the end?

The brigadier always had the energy and determination for a further bout of fucking in which the colonel was more than happy to engage. Penises would engorge again. Testicles would harden. And yet more semen would be released.

Vashti and Svenssen sometimes invited other men to enliven their lovemaking and there was never a shortage of willing candidates after a wrestling match. There were many men in the audience who'd be happy to dip their cocks into the brigadier's arse and those who knew in which particular way they had something in common with the colonel were even attracted to her. The brigadier preferred the wrestlers to the other men in the audience. They were the ones with the ripped muscles and the stamina for a good lengthy fuck. The others might all share a love of cock and anal intercourse, but they were rather less muscled and macho than suited the brigadier's taste. If Colonel Vashti's physical fitness wasn't well above average, it was unlikely that the brigadier

could have compromised his normal sexual preferences as much as he did when the two soldiers began their relationship.

Rank was an issue. The brigadier was Colonel Vashti's commanding officer. He had power over the colonel's career that he could exercise if he was so inclined, but his command extended to all the soldiers on the mission even though he wouldn't actually be accompanying them on the *Intrepid*. He would remain with Mission Control on the Moon.

It was unusual for the brigadier not to invite over one or two other men to enhance the lovemaking between the two senior officers. Even though he spoke to the defeated wrestler and gave his penis a consolatory tug, he didn't invite either the defeated Iron Punk or the victorious Steam Hammer back to his apartment. Instead he put his arm firmly round Vashti's waist and guided her back. The brigadier's apartment was several kilometres away from the wrestling arena and also well outside the main training camp where the colonel and most soldiers were based.

The two soldiers climbed into the brigadier's car and settled down in their seats while the car glided over the plains and grasslands of the Pynchon colony to the senior officers' quarters where brigadiers would normally associate only with military men and women of similar or greater military rank. The brigadier still had to maintain a high level of discretion in what he said even in the company of generals, admirals and wing commanders. Very few military personnel of even the most senior rank on the military colony were aware of the nature of the Space Ship *Intrepid*'s mission.

"Why did you ask me back, sir?" asked Colonel Vashti when it was clear that the brigadier's stamina had finally flagged. "It wasn't only for a fuck, was it?"

“What’s wrong with just a fuck, soldier?” asked the brigadier. “What more could a man want?”

“You tell me, sir,” said the colonel.

“Okay, colonel,” said the brigadier. “You know me too well. It’s a delicate matter however. I’m not sure I know how to express it. Are you, as one might say, *special*?”

“*Special*, sir?” asked the colonel. She raised herself onto her knees and grasped her penis which still wasn’t as limp and flaccid as the poor brigadier’s. “I would say that *this* makes me a fair candidate as someone *special*.”

“Well, colonel,” said Brigadier Svenssen. “I would like to be exceptionally discreet. Are you *special* in the sense that you were born the way you are?”

“I’ve always been like this, sir,” said Colonel Vashti with no apparent sign of understanding what the brigadier meant.

“Alright, colonel,” said Brigadier Svenssen. “I don’t want you to implicate yourself; at least not without having the assurance that you won’t be judged harshly for it. I’ll be honest with you and I don’t want this to go beyond these four walls. The fact is that *I* am *special*. I’m one of the *special* ones whose ancestors were genetically enhanced. I was born with features that were more engineered than evolved.”

“Surely most of us today have gone beyond evolution, sir,” said the colonel. “We live to more than a hundred years. Our bodies are repaired over and over again until they’re hardly at all what we were born with.”

“Don’t talk like an idiot, soldier,” said the brigadier with a flash of genuine anger. “You know exactly what I’m saying. You don’t have to be disingenuous with

me. Are you *special*? Are you one of those who are supposed to have been hunted to extinction, but still exist?”

“I can’t be sure, sir,” said the colonel, although in truth she was absolutely certain of what she was. “Do you think that because I have a cock rather than a cunt that my ancestry has been influenced by the genetic enhancement of the twenty-sixth century? I thought that after the Jovian wars and the mutant pogrom that those *special* ones who weren’t slaughtered or were sterilised.”

“Those were brutal days, colonel,” said the brigadier. “What civilised society could suppress so prejudicially what it created? But it’s left a legacy that’s lasted well over a thousand years. People created from gene-splicing and gene-ripping are no longer accepted throughout the Solar System. It’s intended to protect human rights. It’s now considered immoral to create people for a particular purpose and to use genes taken from other animals or even artificially sequenced DNA to make mutant human beings. But, naturally, not all those created so long ago or those created clandestinely since have been eliminated.”

“How do you know you’re *special*, sir?”

“My parents were, colonel,” said Brigadier Svenssen. “Their parents were. And so, too, back through the generations. I am stronger, fitter, more sexually active, more intelligent, faster and less likely to ever fall ill than other people. This isn’t only because I take advantage of the excellent medical facilities in the Interplanetary Union, but because I was born that way.”

“And why do you think I might also be *special*, sir?” Colonel Vashti asked.

“It’s not just because of your genital peculiarity, colonel,” said the brigadier,

“although that is clearly a pointer. Many *special* people have peculiarities, of which yours is probably the most delightful and, to me, abundantly useful.”

“What else makes you think so, sir?”

“I’ve watched you closely, colonel. I’ve spoken with you. I’ve fucked you. You’re not like most people, colonel. You’re more adept to anyone else in almost every way. You are smarter, stronger and fitter than me. You even fuck better than me and I never thought that was possible. You’re superhuman just like I am.”

“Can’t it be just within the normal range of possibilities, sir?”

“That’s the fiction that protects me and other *special* people, colonel,” said the brigadier thoughtfully. “Thankfully nature is so imprecise that it can naturally create people who are much better endowed than anyone else. But I *know* that I fall outside the normal range and that’s why I’m sure you do too.”

“I don’t think I can be certain of the truth of that, sir. I’ve heard of the various genetically enhanced people in the Solar System but I’ve never thought of myself as being one of them.”

“I find that difficult to believe, colonel,” said the brigadier. “However, I’ve also done some research on you in the confidential files.”

“You have, sir?”

“You originally came from Earth just about thirty years ago. You then became a soldier for the Mariner Federation where you’ve done excellent service for a very long time. There is very little recorded about your time on Earth, colonel. What happened before then?”

“Nothing very special, sir.”

“Well, there’s no way to confirm or deny that, colonel. The records about you on Earth are surprisingly scanty. It’s almost as if you didn’t exist. There are many hiatuses in your records after then as well, but warfare has many casualties that also included the computer facilities where your records were stored.”

“I assure you, sir, that I don’t personally believe that I *am* one of the *special* ones.”

“Perhaps not, colonel,” said the brigadier who was perhaps hoping for a more conclusive end to his conversation. “I think you *are* though. It’s possible that you just don’t recognise it in yourself.”

“Nonetheless, sir,” said Colonel Vashti, with a broad grin on her face, “you *are* special. And now that you’ve told me that I would dearly love to knowingly fuck a *special* man’s arse.”

“Fucking hell, colonel! Your prick’s already as stiff as a fucking flagpole. You must be *special* to be able to get a hard-on so quickly.”

“I don’t know about that, sir,” said Colonel Vashti. “I think I just want to fuck your arse again. It’s so fucking *gorgeous!*”

Brigadier Svenssen smiled. Colonel Vashti had such a winning way with words. How could he resist her?

Chapter Seven

Ecstasy - 3735 C.E.

There wasn't much that Beatrice ever actually needed. She didn't need to eat. She didn't need to sleep. She didn't really need anything apart from a regular and constant supply of sexual partners and there was no likelihood that she'd ever run short of that. But she did need a cover. Humans weren't supposed to be able to survive for long without food or shelter, so Beatrice had to provide evidence that she had the fiscal means to survive even though she'd long since completely exhausted her savings.

Fortunately, Ecstasy was a colony that provided many opportunities for a girl like Beatrice to make a living and unlike most colonies, moons or planets within the Solar System these credits could be earned without the requirement to declare its source. The black economy thrived on Ecstasy and the space colony's administrators saw no reason to throttle a profitable revenue stream despite the inevitable protests from other more ethical members of the Interplanetary Union.

Within days of arriving on Ecstasy, Beatrice had found both an apartment and a steady stream of lovers. Some paid for the privilege while others had it for free. None of them made love in Beatrice's apartment. In fact she hardly used it at all. And when she did, it wasn't because she needed to sleep.

Beatrice soon determined where she was welcome and where she wasn't. She was always welcome where she could spend money and there were many such places when she'd established a regular revenue stream. It wasn't that she needed to buy expensive clothes, jewellery or electrical goods, but it was expected of her and she got

gratification from investigating these and other human foibles. The boutiques and stores where such things were sold were also excellent places for meeting people with whom she could have sex. This was especially so with regards to other women.

At first Beatrice wondered whether there was a more efficient way to service her revenue stream than by selling sexual services. She considered trading in illegal drugs, but although she could accurately analyse their chemical signature they had no appreciable effect on her. As a result, this wasn't a trade she could actively pursue with the utmost confidence. She also considered theft as a plausible alternative revenue stream, but this conflicted with the imperative that she shouldn't attract unnecessary attention from either the legitimate police force or those who exercised territorial law enforcement rights by unlawful means. There were many criminal gangs operating on Ecstasy but Beatrice had no wish to be involved with them. Nevertheless, it was a simple matter for Beatrice to snatch wallets, jewellery and even offensive weapons from criminals without them being aware and it was a generally more prudent policy to practise theft on people who were unlikely to contact Ecstasy's police force. If Beatrice happened to be noticed by the person she was robbing, she was both efficient and effective in ensuring that they were physically incapable of imparting this information. Although murder was easier than theft, it had to be done with due care and attention. However, few people would ever imagine that a girl with expensive shopping habits who made a living by selling her body could also detach a head from its shoulders or smash the brains out against a brick wall.

"You don't understand, doll," said the tall well-dressed man with a menacing glint in his eyes. "I may not be the proprietor of this joint but I own it and everyone

who operates from its premises.”

This exchange was in the *Tartan Retreat*: a Scottish theme pub on the twentieth floor of the seventh level. All around were artefacts and memorabilia that marked three millennia of Scottish history but which mostly exhibited a landscape of rugged golf courses populated by highland warriors. Unlike the staff and waiters, the man who addressed Beatrice was wearing no tartan at all. The suit he wore was an exquisite import from the Trojan Asteroids that Beatrice recognised from her frequent visits to the most exclusive boutiques.

“Is that so?” asked Beatrice as she tried to decide on an appropriate response. She couldn’t tell him to go fuck himself. If he were to react as Beatrice expected she would then become a fugitive from the law after defending herself by punching a hole through his chest. “What do you propose?”

“A modest amount, doll. I’m a considerate man. Twenty percent. That’s all.”

“Twenty percent of what?”

“Twenty percent of what I expect you to bring in each night.”

“And how much is that?”

The man spread his fingers. “That’s in hundreds in case you didn’t know.”

Beatrice nodded. This wasn’t an arrangement she wanted to be party to. It wasn’t that she couldn’t afford it. What troubled her was the consequence of entering into any agreement of this kind with a human. There really *was* only one solution.

“You could have demanded so much more,” she said teasingly.

“Really, doll?” said Beatrice’s prospective pimp. “It *is* a percentage. I expect complete honesty from you.”

“And what should I call you?”

“Al. That’s my name. Al.”

“Nice name, Al. Is there any way I can negotiate with you? Can I cut a better deal? For myself, of course.”

“What do you propose, doll?”

“Oh I don’t know,” said Beatrice as she placed a tentative hand on his crotch. “I’m sure there’s somewhere else we can discuss it in more privacy.”

“And when would that be, doll?”

“No time like the present, Al.”

“I know a place, sweetheart.”

The two of them left the pub, with Beatrice threading an arm through Al’s and gazing up at him in a way that she knew would be interpreted as a seductive smile. They made an unexceptional couple for this district of Ecstasy. Al was wearing an expensive suit and Beatrice was resplendent in a wealth of silk and satin that was worn only by woman with means or those trying to attract the attention of men of such wealth.

Beatrice would never return to the *Tartan Retreat* again. It had now become one of several haunts she would now avoid. This wasn’t because she was frightened of meeting Al again, though if she did so it would indeed be a shock. She had smashed his head so hard against the wall that the force had splattered fragments of brain and bone all over the bank of the dimly-lit ornamental canal. She pushed his body to the bottom of the water which also served to wash the blood off her bare arms. She was careful to ensure that there were no stains on her expensive dress. She could easily explain away dirt or dust when she next took it to the drycleaners, but blood was another matter.

She had no intention of being obligated to individuals like AI and there was no better way of eliminating the problem. She was sure that there were many others who were also quite pleased that he would never again haunt the *Tartan Retreat*, judging from the apprehensive, even fearful, expressions on the faces of the other women in the pub, but Beatrice was no vigilante. It wasn't in her interest to reduce the incidence of organised crime on Ecstasy, although it was most definitely in her interest not to be beholden to it. If she'd chosen to inoculate the colony of organised crime she would be constantly busy and her cover would soon be blown.

Beatrice frequently moved around from place to place during the decade or so in which she lived in Ecstasy. She would be a regular presence at one haunt for a while where she would steadily build up a reputation and a set of regular clientele. In that time she would have new lovers, make new friends and gain a reputation for reliability. The venues she frequented were all much the same: night clubs, pubs, strip bars, even private brothels. Wherever she could earn money from sex and meet new lovers.

Sometimes she questioned her chosen career. Couldn't someone with her skills and abilities be better employed elsewhere? Couldn't she work in a university or as an administrator or in a role more useful to human civilisation? She was several times more intelligent than any human being. She was much stronger, faster and adaptable than any biological life-form. There were so many ways in which she could make an appreciable difference. Instead, her role was to parasitically cream off some of the profits made by the wealthier residents of Ecstasy and the tourists from elsewhere in the Solar System

“You're not on Ecstasy to serve humanity,” she was told.

This made sense but Beatrice still wondered why she'd been assigned such a demeaning role. She could easily have been programmed with a much more reduced libido and assigned to work as a spy in a military or government organisation, but she was informed that there was no shortage of androids in such roles. Her duty was to remain where she was far out in deep space at a popular intersection between the outer planets and the Kuiper Belt.

Although Ecstasy was a useful meeting point, it was undoubtedly remote. There were many more colonies and settlements much closer to the Sun. The Solar System was sparsely populated out here. Ecstasy's primary role as a pleasure resort was to relieve the tedium associated with this isolation. There were several other such resorts scattered about the Kuiper Belt, but they were spread widely apart at a radius of five trillion kilometres from the Sun and much the same distance from one another.

Beatrice's profession in the sex industry put her in the ideal position to meet new people although there were very few that she'd otherwise have chosen to get to know so intimately.

"I don't understand why you do it, Bea," said Gudrun who was one of Beatrice's current lovers and worked with her at the *Missa Solemnis*.

"I'm a good dancer," said Beatrice. She was referring to what she was ostensibly employed to do which was to gyrate about a small stage in a provocative fashion either in the nude or in clothes that left nothing to the imagination.

"That's true, Bea," said Gudrun. "But for most of us girls that's almost all we're good for. You can do anything you want."

Gudrun was a woman of such mixed ancestry that it would have been difficult

enough to determine what they were if she hadn't also adopted the fashion for body enhancement that made her skin reflective like glass and her hair cascade in silver coils over her face and shoulders. Beatrice not only enjoyed making love to her, she liked to regard her face reflected on her skin. When she gazed on Gudrun's face, it wasn't only her image in her lover's eyes that was reflected back at her.

"This is what I like to do," said Beatrice.

"I'd give anything to do something else for a living," said Gudrun. "I've been an exotic dancer for thirty or forty years. I can see myself doing the same thing for the next forty years or so. Every night on the podium. Every night fucking three or four different guys."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"You're the only one I actually enjoy having sex with, Bea," said Gudrun. "The others I could leave tomorrow. Sex is mostly just a job for me."

"Surely you enjoy it a little bit," said Beatrice who couldn't really understand why someone might not get pleasure from even the most inadequate penis or the most inept fumbling.

"I might have done so once upon a time. But that was when the men and women I had sex with were people of my own choosing. Nowadays I just go through the motions. I get the men aroused as quickly as I can to get the whole thing over as soon as possible. How *can* you continue to enjoy it? I don't see how that's possible. Some men are real bastards."

"You don't have to go with all of them," Beatrice reminded her lover. Of course, what she couldn't tell Gudrun was that if any of her clients caused her trouble she could

easily overpower and, if need be, ensure that they would never behave badly with another girl ever again.

“If I only went with a client because I wanted to,” said Gudrun sadly, “then I’d be out of business.”

Beatrice didn’t want to admit it, but she also sometimes yearned for a change. It was the sheer tedium of her job that she disliked. She was tired of year in and year out having intimate carnal knowledge with so many men and occasionally women who for one reason or another felt the need for sex with no commitments and were often overburdened by guilt. The tourists often just wanted to get the sexual release that they couldn’t get so easily at home. This was inevitable since the population of most space colonies numbered only a few million and sometimes only in the hundreds of thousands. Most colonies were only a few tens of kilometres in extent and often provided no facilities whatsoever for anonymous sex. Indeed, some colonies had ethical codes and practices that made it virtually impossible for men or women to ever enjoy sex unless they happened to be in a socially approved relationship.

However worthy the service that Beatrice was providing for the sexually starved and sexually inadequate of the Kuiper Belt, she looked forward to the day that must happen when she would be delivering on the promise of her manufacture. Gudrun was right. Beatrice could do much more than gyrate seductively in front of an audience to the sound of electronic music while other hostesses were sucking penises and less wealthy clients gathered nervously around the bar. Beatrice could do much more than bring men and women to orgasm in the hope of a better tip.

Beatrice was determined to do her best when the call to service finally came.

She would show the administrators of Proxima Centauri that monitored her every conversation, her every transaction and her every fuck that she was worthy of their investment. She would at last be able to use those talents that were wasted in the sex industry.

So day after day, Beatrice lived a life of gilded boredom waiting for the time, whenever it might be, that she would serve on a mission of true value.

Proxima Centauri wouldn't be disappointed in her.

Chapter Eight

Aladdin - 3753 C.E.

When Captain Kerensky was offered the opportunity to be captain of an Interplanetary Space Ship, she welcomed it full-heartedly. It was exactly the distraction she needed so soon after the messy fallout accompanying her divorce from Veronika. The heartache and acrimony that accompanied their separation had driven Nadezhda to the psychotherapist's couch for the first time in her life. She'd been anxious whether this admission of human frailty might lessen her eligibility for such a responsible role, but it was made clear to her that no one in the Socialist Republics' Interplanetary Merchant Navy was better qualified or, more to the point, more immediately available. Her unsurpassed experience of shipping freight to and from the Oort Cloud was ideal for a mission to such a remote location in the Solar System.

Captain Kerensky's delight was compromised, however, when she discovered that she was to be captain of an antique space ship, the *Intrepid*, and, furthermore, that the mission had such an ill-defined objective. The expedition was in the company of an international militia who were prepared to defend the space ship against any eventuality but were just as ignorant as Nadezhda as to what those risks might be. The captain was no more satisfied than anyone else with what she was told about the nature of the ship's destination. Could it really be true that no one knew what the Anomaly might be?

"Surely there must be a better account of the mission's destination than what you've just told me, sir?" Captain Kerensky remarked to Admiral Collins after he'd briefed her.

“I’ve told you not only all that I’m permitted to tell but all that I actually do know,” the Admiral admitted. “This truly *is* a mission into the unknown.”

“But if you don’t mind me asking, sir,” Captain Kerensky persisted, “why has it been decided to send a manned expedition to such a remote location given the high risk and the huge expense? The Anomaly is as far away as it’s possible to be in the Solar System from a colony or space station, so there is no possible way to refuel or re-equip the ship. Why not send a robot-controlled mission? And why is it even necessary to travel such a vast distance given that modern telescopes can study planets at the edge of the galaxy?”

“These are all valid, captain,” the Admiral conceded. “Don’t think that I haven’t asked the very same questions. All I know is that whatever secret the Anomaly hides cannot be observed from a distance. In fact, there’s some doubt whether it’s composed of matter or energy at all. Several robotic missions have been dispatched to the Anomaly but not one has sent back any useful data.”

“Is it likely that a manned mission would be any more successful?”

“I don’t know. There is an opinion that there may be some intelligence associated with the Anomaly and that human contact is exactly what it expects. The fear is that if nothing is done then the entire Solar System may be in peril.”

“How can that be, sir? The Apparitions that some people associate with the Anomaly have generally been benign. However mysterious they might be, they’re unlikely to do as much harm as, for instance, a full scale war between the Socialist Republics and any other advanced nation within the Solar System.”

“Not every Apparitions has been harmless, captain,” the Admiral reminded

Nadezhda. “Although fewer than a few thousand lives have been lost, their frequency of occurrence has been steadily increasing over the last century and there’s always a possibility that there might be one in the future whose affect will be truly catastrophic.”

“In what way, sir?”

“Some of the more dangerous exotic Apparitions have been kept secret from the general public,” the Admiral confided, “but the plasma cloud and the asteroid incursion are fairly well-known. Some of the others, like the ball of hot fire spotted in one of Titan’s seas, the Higgs boson agglomeration, the brief appearance of an antimatter space craft and other such anomalies are equally troubling. We have no idea what the maximum extent in scale or duration of the apparitions might be, any more than we know of their composition. The short-lived appearance of a neutron star or black hole, for instance, would have a major adverse impact across the entire Solar System. It would be enough to dislodge colonies and asteroids from their orbits and bring about the death of hundreds of millions or even billions of people.”

“I still don’t understand why a fully-manned Interplanetary space ship is needed, sir. The mission is incalculably expensive and there is no measure by which to assess whether it will be a success.”

“I’m sure the accountants have made their case as to why the mission shouldn’t go ahead, captain. My private theory is that the cost of the mission is justified by the belief that the Anomaly might very well be the long sought after and equally long dreaded first contact with an alien intelligence. Why else does the scientific crew include not only cosmologists and geologists, but also linguists, biologists and computer scientists?”

“There have been missions to establish contact with intelligent alien life forms from the very earliest days of space travel, sir. Probes have travelled as far away as a hundred light years. And in all that time there’s been no evidence for any alien life-form larger than a microbe.”

“That is true, captain,” said the Admiral. “I am bound to speculate as you do whether the failure to discover alien intelligence means there is none at all or whether it has simply avoided contact with our civilisation. For instance, it does seem strange that despite all the missions sent to other star systems there is an apparent disparity between the promising signatures of possible intelligent or at least organised activity identified from a distance and the total lack of such evidence when the probes arrive. It’s almost as if the probes were intercepted and then sabotaged to send back only what would suit an alien intelligence eager to hide its existence.”

Captain Kerensky sniffed. She’d heard so many conspiracy theories in her life and they were all just too absurd to be true. She was sure that if the Anomaly was evidence of alien intelligence, it was unlikely to come from the neighbouring star systems. Any aliens that lived there would face the same problems encountered by the human race in travelling across interstellar space where there was no opportunity to refuel and where even a modern lifespan wasn’t long enough to survive the journey’s duration.

Even the journey to the Space Ship Intrepid took the best part of a year. Captain Kerensky had to travel closer to the Sun than she’d ever been before. She’d never before travelled as far inwards as Martian orbit, but this time she travelled as far as Earth where the Sun was uncomfortably large and the space lanes frighteningly congested. The

space ship that carried her in the last month of her journey travelled at a relatively leisurely pace to avoid space traffic and she had to spend several weeks on the Moon until a shuttle was arranged to transport her and her crew to the space ship of which she was to be captain.

Nadezhda had no complaints about the quality of accommodation she enjoyed on the Space Ship Aladdin that transported her and several hundred others to the venerable Space Ship Intrepid that was circling in an orbit exactly parallel to the Earth at a light hour to the Solar System's plane. However, she was impatient to take up her role and uncomfortable being just a passenger of the luxury cruiser. She might enjoy special privileges, such as being able to sit on the captain's dining table, but her only professional duty was to study the Space Ship Intrepid's technical specifications.

She did have the opportunity to get to know members of her future crew, which on the Aladdin included a medical officer, a boatswain, an engineer and a sports and social secretary. However, it was with the military officers that Captain Kerensky felt most at ease. Although she'd spent most of her interplanetary career aboard merchant shipping, she was first and foremost a military officer even though the Socialist Republics' pacifist policies had spared her the need to engage in actual military combat.

Although Captain Kerensky had travelled to the furthest edge of the Solar System and had got to know the Oort Cloud rather better than most of the few million people who lived in its sparsely populated orbit, she'd spent most of her long career in the company of other Saturnians. She took for granted the ethics that governed a Socialist society (even though its accommodation with the most aggressive capitalist economy in the Solar System often seemed at odds with its stated principles) and most

of all she accepted as normal that the best kind of relationship was that between two people of the same sex. She'd never once contemplated a relationship with a man. She was content to leave such doubtful pleasures to other men.

There were very few Saturnians on the Aladdin. The crew and passengers came from all over the Interplanetary Union: from the orbits of the eight planets, the Asteroids, the Kuiper Belt and the intraplanetary colonies. The captain was naturally drawn towards those who came from Mars and the Asteroid Belt. They understood the discipline and rigour of a military life more than anyone. Although Nadezhda belonged to a very small minority in her own society, she was fascinated to discover that almost every Martian and a high proportion of those from the Asteroids (particularly those at war) had spent at least a year in compulsory military service. Such discipline and its attendant respect for authority was surely only for the good.

Captain Kerensky first observed Colonel Vashti from a distance, but she was immediately attracted to the woman. Those full thighs, that splendid bosom and, most of all, her height was exactly to her taste. The colonel possessed a sexual charisma that attracted the gaze of both women (which Nadezhda had no difficulty in understanding) and heterosexual men.

There was a distinct dampness in the captain's crotch as she watched Colonel Vashti stride across the ship's restaurant in the company of admirers of both gender. Her buttocks were so full that her tight trousers seemed almost about to split when she bent down to pour herself a cup of coffee from the vending machine. As the colonel wandered over to the table where the other Martian soldiers gathered, Nadezhda's heart beat almost audibly in synchrony with the ripple of the muscles in Vashti's thighs and

calf. And when the colonel sat down, Nadezhda felt certain that her bright brown eyes had sought her out across the space between her and the captain's dining table. She was convinced that Colonel Vashti's smile was meant for her.

Captain Kerensky had many more occasions to appreciate Colonel Vashti's beauty. In fact, she actively sought out such opportunities. Although it wasn't a captain's duty to observe the Martian soldiers practise their drill or to examine their living quarters, she asked permission to do so. This was given with no reservation. The military officers were pleased that she should show concern for the welfare of the soldiers.

Every time Nadezhda saw Colonel Vashti, she was struck by the Martian's beauty. She was tall. She was strong. And above all she was sexy. When the colonel leapt an improbable height to drop the basketball into the net, Captain Kerensky gasped not just in appreciation of her skill but also at the tautness of her frame. When the colonel demonstrated her skill on the firing range, hitting every one of the targets with impossible accuracy, it was the recoil that shimmered through her body that Nadezhda most appreciated. When in a game of Rugby Football Colonel Vashti fought her way through a scrum of male bodies to collapse over the line with the ball clasped to her soft but voluptuous bosom, Nadezhda marvelled at how well mud and sweat agreed with her light brown flesh. If only she'd been one of those in the scrum that were pressed against her hard sensual muscularity.

Nadezhda was troubled more than she imagined possible when Colonel Vashti presented herself naked during swimming practise. It was true that she appreciated the colonel's exemplary skill in speeding across the length of the pool far faster than the

other swimmers and, rather more so, enjoyed the contraction and expansion of the muscles that powered her swimming. The captain's crotch was moistened more than it had ever been by the well-worn vibrator in her bedroom. What alarmed Nadezhda was the penis that slapped first against one thigh as she strode across the swimming pool's tiles and then, with the next step, slapped against the other thigh. Never before had Captain Kerensky observed a penis with so much interest and fascination.

In common with most lesbians, whether from a predominantly homosexual society as the Saturnian Socialist Republics or from the heterosexual societies that dominated the Solar System, Captain Kerensky assumed that as the penis was the most defining masculine attribute of a man it was also the very thing that most defined her sexual preference. Surely it was the absence of such a monstrosity that attracted Nadezhda to women rather than men. Yet here was a woman whose body attracted her in a way that none had since her adolescence and its accompanying sexual promiscuity. She wrestled with her thoughts as her vibrator agitated her labia minora during her nightly masturbation before she eventually collapsed under the comfort of her sheets. What troubled the captain was that the image in her mind of that penis slapping against those all too feminine thighs enhanced rather than inhibited the orgasm that shook through her body. It left her more sexually exhausted than making love with her medical officer could ever do.

Nadezhda hadn't led a celibate life since she had divorced Veronika. In fact, she'd had more sexual partners in the last year than she'd had in the previous twenty when she'd been reluctant to take advantage of the many opportunities for infidelity that was attendant on active service in deep space. She'd loved Veronika and believed

that her love and fidelity were exactly reciprocated. Nadezhda was devastated when she discovered that Veronika was the unfaithful partner, and with a man no less. The end of their relationship was inevitable despite Nadezhda's best efforts at reconciliation where she even practised the use of a strap-on dildo as an attempt to demonstrate to her wife that it wasn't only men who could fuck with an erect appendage. And the comfort she'd sought in the arms of her boatswain badly compromised any chance of an advantageous settlement.

It was true that Mariam, the medical officer from Uranus, was a delightful woman. Nadezhda soon came to appreciate the strangeness of the long hair that cascaded over her shoulders and the thick curly black hair about her crotch. She was also small and frail as was the fashion in her colony with dark brown freckles sprinkling the black skin around her nose and shoulders. But however well Mariam practised the amatory arts, she lacked the Colonel Vashti's magnetic erotic aura and, furthermore, as a woman whose first preference was for men rather than women her sexual technique exceeded the depth of her passion.

It was a mystery to Nadezhda that so many women had a preference for men over women and she felt wounded whenever her amorous advances were rebuffed for that reason. It puzzled her. Just what was it that these non-Saturnian women found so attractive in men? Some men even paraded their masculinity by growing a beard or moustache. As if hair on the head or the groin wasn't bad enough! At least women couldn't offend Nadezhda's sensibilities in such a blatant way.

What would normally most offend Captain Kerensky was the sight of a penis and yet, after that first sight in the swimming pool, it was Colonel Vashti's penis she

was most eager to see again. Perhaps she was just drawn by voyeuristic curiosity, but Nadezhda's gaze forever wandered towards the colonel's crotch.

When the captain first spoke to the colonel it wasn't in a gym nor in the swimming pool, but in the sauna. Nadezhda was lying down on a wooden bench and luxuriated in steam while reading a novel she'd downloaded from the extensive library housed on the bohemian space colony of Dostoëvsky. Her long voyages in space had given the captain much opportunity to pursue the relatively eccentric hobby of reading fiction. She had a particular fascination in third millennium fiction, sometimes even reading novels from as far back as the nineteenth century when space travel was a fantasy and Saturn nothing more than a blob seen through an optical telescope. Nevertheless, she wasn't reading Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy or even James Joyce. The novel she was reading was a little-known one from the twenty-third century by an author who'd spent her entire life in the Asteroid Belt, which in those days was about as remote as a human settlement ever got to be. It was fascinating to read about lives governed by low gravity and the very real risk of cosmic radiation and crop failure. These were truly dangerous days, even though the characters in *New Byzantium* led a life of veritable luxury compared to the souls she'd read about in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

"So you like Marilyn Wong?" asked a woman's voice that had the peculiar guttural Martian accent Nadezhda was only beginning to get used to.

"She was a pioneer in lesbian fiction in her century," said the captain, as she employed a rather obvious line to appraise the sexual predilections of the woman who spoke to her. She raised her head and looked across the chamber to see that the naked

woman who'd spoken to her was in one singular detail a very unusual sight in a women-only sauna. The captain was both delighted and terrified to see that she had been addressed by Colonel Vashti who looked all the more beautiful without clothing or even a towel draped around her waist.

The colonel's long black hair, with a faint tinge of brown, cascaded over her shoulders and over the arm that supported her weight at the elbow. Her legs trailed over the wooden slats and were slightly parted so that the captain could observe at leisure the thick penis that slumped onto one thigh. Nadezhda noticed with approval that her crotch was shaved as smooth as any Saturnian's. Indeed, except for the hair on her head and the slight shadow on her arms, there was no hint of hair on the colonel's body at all.

"I've also read Marilyn Wong," said the colonel with a broad smile that revealed brilliantly white teeth between thick lips that were an odd contrast to her straight thin nose. "She has an interesting way with language. Her style is remarkably adventurous without being obscure. She certainly captures an age when space colonisation was always on the edge of disaster. Hers was quite definitely an interesting age."

After nearly a century of space travel, Nadezhda had never once met anyone with more than the most second-hand acquaintance with the novels of Marilyn Wong, or even, as it happened, Rika Goldstein, Khadija Nkome or Sarah Waters. And here she was with a woman remarkably well-acquainted with the great lesbian writers from an age when heterosexuality was the norm, as well as representatives from the rather larger canon of lesbian fiction in the Socialist Republic's four hundred year history. (Not to mention those from the exclusively female colonies of Sappho and Hepburn.)

Ancient literature wasn't the only thing in which Colonel Vashti was remarkably well-versed. She had an intimate understanding of the beauty inherent in the scattered comets of the Oort Cloud, a deep appreciation of the hazards of navigating around the widely spaced satellites in the Kuiper Belt, and a fascination with the discipline of space navigation where colonies were spaced light hours apart. She also had a love of sports even as archaic as baseball and cricket. For someone who'd never been to the Socialist Republics, she demonstrated an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of Saturnian culture and history. She expressed knowledgeable opinions on the open debate in the Duma regarding the rights of heterosexuals and whether they should be permitted the natural birth and pregnancy that most Saturnians understandably viewed with distaste. How could anyone from a war-torn Martian colony with such a long history of repression of socialist and anti-capitalist ideologies be so remarkably knowledgeable? It had been a long time since Captain Kerensky had enjoyed such a rewarding and wide-ranging discussion. Even Veronika had no comprehension of the awesomeness of deep space and she'd never read any literature at all.

All the while, the penis between the colonel's thighs continued to fascinate Nadezhda as it slowly and steadily stiffened and eventually took on heroic proportions. It was as thick as the captain's grip and nearly half as long as her forearm. As she soon discovered when intercourse gradually shifted from the verbal kind, her penis was also warm and pulsating. She discovered how truly arousing was the rich aroma that assailed her nostrils as she ran her tongue and teeth along its length to the disgust of the other women in the sauna.

Nadezhda had seen penises before but she'd never once touched let alone tasted

one; and certainly not one so erect or one belonging to the body of such a totally desirable woman whose whole body tingled with exotic erotic passion.

The sauna was too hot for the two women to continue their lovemaking in comfort, but Vashti led Nadezhda through the door to another room where there was a mattress and a welcome chill in the air. And it was there that the captain was fucked by a penis for the first time in her life. Contrary to her fears and expectations, it was an experience she very much enjoyed. Its flexibility and vitality were much more delightful than the dildos she'd so often thrust into her vagina. Her body shivered and trembled with repeated orgasms as the colonel fucked her with a persistence that surprised Nadezhda given that it was an organ whose fullness was determined by nothing more than blood pumping through its veins.

Finally the penis did what penises were meant to do: and that was to ejaculate. Nadezhda was curious to see what it would look like so as the first spasms of warm liquid leaked inside her, she swivelled her waist round and eased the organ out of the grasp of her vulva and held it in her hand. It was a very strange sight. The semen spurted out and onto her breasts with each successive spasm. It almost burnt against Nadezhda's white skin, while the viscous fluid trailed down her wrist and splattered on the sauna walls and floor.

Then the penis magically regained its girth and potency after having lost barely a third of its size in the release of its seed. It must have known that even now, despite its best efforts, Nadezhda's crotch was aching for more and it happily re-entered the moist passage that was eagerly awaiting its return.

"I hope we'll be able to repeat this on the Intrepid," said Nadezhda to the colonel

as they lay legs entangled on the captain's bed many hours later.

“Only the most pressing duty will keep me away from you, my sweetheart,”
said the colonel whose penis even now was on the edge of reawakening to a full
erection.

“It is only right that there should be some pleasure in the observance of duty,”
remarked the captain whose love life had suddenly and unexpectedly become much
more fulfilling.

Chapter Nine

Ecstasy - 3750 C.E.

The lights that illuminated the bar shimmered and flashed to the thunderous rhythm of the electronic music that accompanied the nude dancing on the podium. A serving android with a voluptuous bosom and a prominent arse was collecting the empty glasses left behind on the counter. There weren't very many customers and these consisted mostly of prostitutes, which was the occupation most often adopted by female refugees from the war-torn Asteroid Belt or the more impoverished colonies in Jupiter's orbit. Scattered about the bar was a small number of tourists. And sitting on a bar stool and nursing a glass of locally produced wine that he'd ordered well over an hour before was a tall man with persistent stubble and a jacket made from real leather.

Lofty brusquely ignored the attention of the prostitutes and they returned his indifference in kind. Perhaps he was more interested in men than women, although if that was so why should he pay a visit to Manu's bar in this twilight corner of Ecstasy? The homosexual district, mostly swarming with Saturnians, wasn't very far away. His pale blue eyes scanned the premises with intent interest. These were chilling eyes that betrayed no softness and matched well his chiselled features.

The bar door opened and Manu swept in with two male companions and three of his regular prostitutes. Judging from their thinness and pale brown skin, these were refugees from Vesta, the most ravaged of the Asteroids. Lofty lowered his head to regard the trace of red wine he'd left untouched for so long and sipped it slowly while his eyes carefully followed Manu and his comrades walk across the bar to the room at

the back which was where the proprietor could most often be found. Only when the door slid shut did Lofty at last put down his empty glass and step down from the bar stool.

No one cared to watch as Lofty strode across the bar towards the same door through which Manu had entered. And no one noticed him aim a laser gun at the door's controls whose silent blast caused the door to slide open. It was only a few moments later that Lofty re-emerged from the room carrying a small bag with a barely noticeable rent in the sleeve of his leather jacket. He left the bar without comment while the women on the podium continued to dance and the prostitutes chatted with those male punters who were rather more susceptible than Lofty to their relatively inexpensive charms.

Nobody bothered to enter Manu's private room at the back of the bar for many more minutes. The first person to do so was Miharu who'd been biding her time all day for the opportunity to bargain with the delights of her body for a well-earned break from her duties and the opportunity to visit her children and husband in the crumbling slums on the sixteenth level.

The first unusual thing she noticed was that the door to Manu's room had been vandalised and could be slid open manually. Although that was strange enough, even more peculiar was the sight of Manu and his five companions. Their bloodied bodies were slumped in the exact spots where they'd been dispatched. The only evidence of anything resembling a struggle was around Manu whose face was coated in blood and whose nose was a crumpled ruin. Worse still was that his hand and most of his lower arm had been severed by a single slash from what could only have been a laser gun.

Miharu took in the scene rather slowly. She was, after all, still very high on the

drugs that made her working day bearable and she wasn't at all sure whether what she saw was real or a drug-fuelled fantasy. When she'd established that what she was witnessing was indeed the aftermath of an appallingly efficient slaughter, she decided not to attract anyone's attention to what she'd found. Instead, she rifled through the men's pockets. There was no point in doing the same for the women's. It was only when she was sure she'd taken everything of value that she left the room by a back entrance. She was quite content to leave someone else to the risky business—for a bar full of illegal immigrants—of notifying the space colony's overworked police force.

Lofty disposed of his laser gun in a recycling unit not far from the bar. He hardly cared at all that it was one designed specifically for paper and organic waste. He then continued to walk with no sign of anxiety, remorse or haste across the city streets towards the luxury apartments on Ecstasy's upper levels where Adrian Xerxes lived.

Xerxes much preferred to be known by the exotic surname by which he may or may not have been christened. And who would know? Like most of the prostitutes and criminal underworld living in Ecstasy his origins were far from the Kuiper Belt.

His penthouse was one of the most luxurious in Ecstasy. The garden extended for several hectares at the very top of a monstrous tower block, almost within a hundred metres of the ceiling of the first, and therefore most exclusive, level of the city.

Unlike Manu's residence, it wasn't easy for Lofty to gain admittance to Xerxes' penthouse. Even entering his exclusive escalator, which travelled uninterrupted from the ground floor to the top, wasn't straightforward. Robots couldn't be trusted to check that Lofty wasn't carrying lethal weaponry or, indeed, anything else which could be used as an assassination weapon. The women who guarded the escalator and as good

as lived in it not only scanned Lofty with sophisticated equipment but stripped him of his clothes so that he was totally naked when he exited the escalator on the top floor. He carried only the bag which not long before had been squeezed in Manu's tight grip when Lofty relieved its previous owner not only of his bag but of the hand and much of the arm that had tried desperately to keep it in his possession. The worst thing about the whole encounter had been the sharp blade Manu's other hand managed to sneak out from his sleeve and with which he slashed Lofty's expensive real leather jacket. Chamois leather wasn't that easy to find in this part of the Solar System.

The only person in Xerxes' huge living room wearing any clothes was Xerxes himself. He was surrounded by several naked women and a pair of stern, exceptionally burly, male escorts who were entrusted with laser guns that were strapped to their wrists and forearms. Xerxes was also built well and showed no evidence that he was now living well into his second century. Even the unhealthy consequences of a life such as his that was dedicated to every conceivable species of debauchery and perversion—to which the bruised and battered body of a prostitute lying on the patio with her entrails sprawled about her bore uncomfortable witness—had been well remedied by hugely expensive life-extending surgery.

“You have the bag?” Xerxes asked.

Lofty raised the hand in which he held the valuable object.

“Put it down on the floor and stand back,” his boss ordered.

Lofty did as he was told, while one of the women, somehow more favoured than the others, stepped forward and opened the bag with a sophisticated tool that easily cracked the encrypted code that secured the bag's lock. She put in a hand and withdrew

a small hexagonal box which she studied with a small pen-shaped monitor.

“It’s seventy-five percent pure,” she announced.

“Fuck!” said Xerxes angrily. “Seventy-five fucking percent! Hardly worth the effort of getting it.”

“It’s still likely to attract bids of at least a million credits,” said the woman in a measured but cautious tone.

Despite her diplomacy, this reassurance earned her a sharp slap across the face which drew blood from her nose and upper lip. Xerxes rubbed his knuckles with grim satisfaction and studied the item inside the hexagonal box.

“I was fucking hoping for at least ten million,” he said angrily. “That Manu boasted it was ninety-five percent pure. He should have kept his fucking mouth shut. Then he’d still be alive and his whores could even now be serving him coke and fanny. What a cunt!”

Everyone in the room was quiet and even Lofty was anxious. Xerxes was a man who often took out his anger and disappointment on his immediate company. Even Lofty, after all these decades, had reason to fear Xerxes’ temper. He’d seen the extent to which the man’s sadistic urges could go to be satisfied, even if his cock hardened only very occasionally. One penalty that resulted from Xerxes’ appetite for depravity was that even the most violent and murderous sexual acts were no longer guaranteed to bring him the sexual satisfaction he so avidly sought.

Xerxes sat down on the divan with a clink and a jangle from the thick gold and platinum jewellery that he wore not only on his body but in many places threaded into his flesh. He placed the hexagonal box carefully on the table in front of him and shook

his head.

“Still,” he said uncharacteristically reflectively. “A million credits are better than nothing at all. Thank you, Lofty. You did a good job.”

Lofty could at last venture a smile, which on a face like his was still tinged with a hint of malice.

“I aim only to do my best, boss,” he said modestly.

“I have another job for you,” said Xerxes. “Shall we go outside into the garden?”

“Yes, boss,” said Lofty obediently.

Although it was something he rarely admitted even to himself, Lofty was as much tied to Xerxes’ service as were his courtesans or prostitutes. If he were ever to attempt to leave Ecstasy or even just retire, it would only be a matter of time until he would be dead. It mightn’t happen, however, for several years. His death would be prolonged, extremely painful and most certainly humiliating. He knew this for sure as he had several times been the emissary of such justice. Although he wasn’t a man easily aroused by the punishment he meted out, especially when it was another man who was the victim, there was always a sexual element to it that very rarely accorded with what the victim might ever desire. It was a bizarre reward for service to the wealthiest gang leader on Ecstasy that the longer and more faithful the service given the more terrible the inevitable death would be. Xerxes was unlikely to be content with serving abrupt and relatively painless justice. Lofty had nailed men and women to ceilings. He had impaled them with garden implements. He had forced men to eat their genitals. Women to murder their own children. And roasted others on slowly burning spits.

“It’s a small job,” said Xerxes when he and Lofty were sitting on a bench in his

extensive garden under the shade of a sycamore tree.

Several parrots were resting on the branches. Deer were strolling about the lawn mindful as ever of the leopard that Xerxes chose to keep in their midst. The body of the recently murdered woman on the patio would keep the leopard and the huge domestic dogs well-fed when they were sure that she was properly dead, but the deer had every reason to fear that they would also soon be prey. Above their heads a small cloud passed by, but this would do nothing more than obscure the sight of the first level's ceiling. The rain that fell regularly on the garden came from the colony's internal sprinkler system and not from the clouds that resulted from its evaporation.

“How small?” wondered Lofty.

“It's just one guy,” said Xerxes. “He's called Paul Morris. Weird name, but he comes from Godwin where they've all got weird names.”

“Godwin?” said Lofty. “Never heard of it.”

“Most people haven't,” said Xerxes. “It's a kind of anarchist colony. No money. No government. Fuck all.”

“No pickings there then,” Lofty remarked.

“Load of fucking utopian idealists,” said Xerxes dismissively. “Only a fucking idiot would try and do business with them. So, not surprisingly, not me nor anyone else in the family has a presence there. But this cunt's on his way here to Ecstasy. Short visit, mind. Then he's on his way to Saturn and even, I've heard, Earth. That's one place in the Solar System I've always wanted to go.”

“And you haven't?”

“The fuckers won't let me,” said Xerxes ruefully. His fame was as great as his

criminal record and Earth was very choosy about the calibre of tourist it allowed on its surface, irrespective of however many billion credits that tourist might choose to spend.

“He won’t make it to Earth, will he?” said Lofty. “The cunt won’t even make it to Saturn.”

“You’ve got the idea,” said Xerxes approvingly. “What we want is a quick job. In and out. But no collateral. It’s got to look like a professional job but fallout has got to be minimal. The more casualties other than this one little wanker and the less we’ll get. They’re using a sliding scale. Each extra death halves what we get.”

“One death. No collateral. No problem.”

“Good,” said Xerxes. “You understand all you need.”

“So, if the people paying for this are so squeamish they must be government, right?”

“Fuck if I know,” admitted Xerxes. “This didn’t come through the usual channels, you understand. But there’s been enough upfront to convince me it’s worth our while.”

“And why’s this guy gotta get whacked?” asked Lofty not unreasonably.

“Fuck knows. Why should I care? This is a strictly need-to-know job. Just make sure you bring back evidence of a job well done. Bring me the head of Paul Morris.”

“Consider it done.”

“Now, you’re gonna stay awhile, aren’t you? I’ve got some prime virgin meat on the menu. Should be plenty of blood. And not just the usual.”

Lofty nodded. Although he had little appetite for his boss’s preferences, he knew that such a proposal was as good as an order. And anyway he’d get plenty of

cream on his dick before the inevitable disembowelling or whatever else Xerxes had in mind to climax his evening's entertainment.

This job was so important that Lofty wasn't the only man entrusted to carry it out. He had to work with Grimaldi and Foo Yong whose records as hitmen were at least as impressive as Lofty's. This wasn't going to be as easy a job as whacking Manu had been. The mark was as much tailed by Lofty and his associates as he was by some Saturnian bodyguards who kept their presence discreet, but not so much that Lofty couldn't identify them. Clearly, this was a two-stage job. First, they'd have to neutralise the bodyguards and that without any lasting damage. Only then could he and his companions complete their mission. Although he was probably the least impressive mark Lofty ever had to eliminate, Paul Morris was also a guy that Saturn thought worth keeping alive. But no way was he someone who'd put up much of a fight. He was very unlikely to rip up the new leather jacket that had cost Lofty most of the proceeds of Manu's execution. But okapi was never going to come cheap.

Lofty and his two companions spent a frustrating day following Paul as he wandered apparently aimlessly about the colony's bars and tourist resorts. Every step their mark made was shadowed by the two bodyguards who only the most green would ever fail to recognise for what they were. Paul was clearly oblivious to their presence and must have been about as naïve as it was possible to be. The bodyguards made no effort to disguise themselves as natives. It was obvious they were Saturnians. They didn't even wear wigs to hide their shaven pates. And if they were the tourists they pretended to be, why was one female and the other male? Very few Saturnians were comfortable in such an apparently heterosexual coupling.

Lofty's luck turned when Paul entered a bar and finally strolled off several hours later with a woman. Lofty was sure she wasn't a prostitute. If she was, it wasn't because she was an economic migrant. There was nothing about her that suggested she needed to make her living as a prostitute. With a body like hers she'd be far better off as a model or a pornographic actress. What convinced Lofty that all would go well was when this woman escorted Paul into a tall apartment block where it would be piss easy to isolate him from the attention of his bodyguards. This was no well-defended hotel or crowded public space. It was somewhere in which a person would expect privacy and where Paul's guards wouldn't be able to follow his every step.

"The bitch is gonna let him fuck her, isn't she?" Grimaldi remarked.

"She can't be that fucking desperate, can she?" Foo Yong remarked. "It takes more than luck to get to look like her. She could fuck anyone she fancied."

"Perhaps she's just got piss poor taste," commented Lofty. "There's no accounting for people's tastes."

"Well, it's gonna be one guy's lucky day," Grimaldi said. "The skirt has got the scent of a bitch in heat. That fucking Morris wanker looks like the most he normally tucks up in bed with is a book. And a fucking boring book at that."

"His academic research on Ecstasy isn't just facts and figures," Lofty observed. "There can't be many bars on Ecstasy he's not looked through the door of. Perhaps the best he can get back on Godwin is cybersex."

"Yeah, I can see him plugged into cyberspace permanently," Foo Yong admitted. "That's one place you're guaranteed to score. No digital bitch is gonna know how to say no to no one."

“I guess you’d know about that,” Lofty joked, but with a touch of malevolence to his slight.

“What you saying, you fucking faggot?” Foo Yong retorted with no sign that he was taking Lofty’s comment in good humour.

“Fucking leave it!” interceded Grimaldi. “Once we’ve disposed of this Morris cunt, we can take turns at this bitch of his until he lapses into rigor mortis.”

“And then we’ll see what kind of faggot you are,” Foo Yong remarked to Lofty who diplomatically chose to ignore the comment.

Lofty was well aware that the collateral damage that Xerxes wanted to avoid almost certainly didn’t extend to this lippy Uranian.

The three assassins chose to bide their time before going into action. They walked into a milk bar that was stationed just opposite the woman’s apartment block where they could keep an eye on whether Paul might leave prematurely. They had to frighten off the tourists who were occupying the table just by the window, confident that no one would object to their rudeness. Even the serving robots were programmed to recognise when trouble was best avoided. The three men sat idly together sipping coffee and milk shakes at a table nobody else was foolish enough to share.

While they sat together, Lofty’s eyes silently scanned about him, Grimaldi deconstructed song lyrics and Foo Yong leered at the women in the bar. Their jackets were pulled tight across their chests, but it would be an easy matter for any of them to reach for a piece if circumstances so required.

After a couple of lazy hours during which Lofty’s eyes strayed hardly at all from the doors to the apartment block opposite and Grimaldi barely paused in his near

monologue, it felt about right to move into action. Even Grimaldi shut up as the three men stood up and strode purposefully across the wide street. They accompanied two excitable girls whose conversation trailed off abruptly as Lofty held open the door behind them before it closed and they were inside. It was then a simple matter of following the nano-radio signal that had been discreetly planted in Paul's hair to establish which floor he was on and in which apartment.

The floor in which Paul was no doubt enjoying sex with the bitch whose fuckability Foo Yong had several times remarked upon was no different from any other but it was at quite an elevation. When the elevator paused at the woman's floor, there was nothing to distinguish one apartment from another along a corridor that extended for several hundred metres.

There was no difficulty at all in identifying Paul's bodyguards. They were standing together in the middle distance and began strolling slowly towards the elevator when Lofty and his companions appeared. They knew as well as did Lofty that two people walking along a corridor was far less suspicious than two people standing in one spot. The bodyguards were dressed in what they thought was appropriate for Ecstasy which served to accentuate the woman's bosom and the man's arse rather more than it would if they were dressed for the relatively staid streets of the Socialist Republics of Saturn.

Lofty and his companions strode leisurely forward and let Grimaldi chat on, mostly to himself, about the relative quality of hamburgers on the seventh level of the colony compared with those on the second. Although the bodyguards must have wondered at the oddness of the three men being here on the same floor and might have

recognised them from earlier, they kept up the pretence of unconcern right up to the point at which the two groups met. However, despite their discipline and training, they were no match for the three most ruthless assassins on the colony of Ecstasy.

Grimaldi continued his monologue right up to the point when he brushed against the Saturnian woman and then, with no warning, swung his forearm into her face. The steel bar strapped to the inside of his panther-skin jacket ensured that the impact broke her nose and very nearly dislodged her eye. Lofty and Foo Yong worked together on the man whose feet they kicked up from beneath and followed with some well-directed kicks to his face and groin.

Even Grimaldi was quiet as the three of them punched and kicked the two bodyguards until they were groaning in a bloody mess on the floor. Foo Yong had to be restrained from pulling down his trousers and raping the woman who lay in a crumpled heap with cracked teeth and a trickle of blood dripping from the corner of her mouth. He had managed to rip off her top and had in the process let his blade slice through the firm flesh of her breast.

“There’s time for that later,” said Lofty firmly, as he pulled out of his jacket pocket the tranquiliser gun that would ensure that the bodyguards would be out of action for several more days. He was unusually cautious in the dosage settings. Any collateral and Xerxes might not be satisfied at merely reducing the fee he’d pass on to his godson after the job was done. In a normal job, Lofty would have dispatched the bodyguards in a much more satisfactory manner.

“Hey, it’s the bitch!” said Foo Yong in a relatively low voice as he pointed at the woman who’d seduced Paul and was now standing just outside her apartment.

Good, thought Lofty. Get the bitch first, then the mark. Job almost done. He salivated at the prospect of following up the kicking he'd administered on the bodyguard with rather more leisurely ultraviolence on a woman who was totally naked and looked as easy a target as any he'd handled. It was just a shame she'd have to be left alive. But then it was better to fuck a woman streaming with blood than to piss on a corpse.

However, the time it took for him to die was only slightly longer than the time it took for him to be aware that this woman was someone who could defend herself with even more efficiency than he'd employed to kill Manu and his companions. He was barely aware of the fist that embedded itself briefly in Grimaldi's chest and the flying feet that smashed into Foo Yong's face. His neck was pulled back and the vertebrae snapped by a woman who was now no longer ten metres ahead, but just behind him.

With the strangely enhanced sensory perception of a dying man, he slumped to the ground on top of his companions aware only of two naked thighs on either side of his chest and the pressure of a hand on his chest that crushed his ribs and the last vestige of breath that was left to him.

Lofty had met his match and he'd had no opportunity at all to fight back.

Chapter Ten

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

The several thousand passengers and crew of a colossal space ship that was travelling through the most distant reaches of space all shared the misconception that the Interplanetary Space Ship Intrepid was on a mission directed from the Moon and that Nadezhda Kerensky was the captain. However, only one human on the space ship knew the truth. And that person was, of course, Captain Kerensky.

But what use was this knowledge when the captain couldn't share it with anyone?

Hers was a very peculiar imprisonment. She could roam the ship freely. She could get into contact with whoever she liked by whatever means she chose. In almost every way her freedom was no more circumscribed than it had been before Beatrice had revealed to her that the Intrepid was and always had been under the control of a machine civilisation that circled a red dwarf star just over four light years away.

There were two ways by which the captain was prevented from imparting what she knew to anyone else. The first was the simple fact that no one would believe her. There was no visible evidence of the Proxima Centauri space fleet and Beatrice most certainly did not resemble an android. No one who might suspect that an alien intelligence had taken control of the Intrepid's mission would believe that the source of it was Paul Morris' wife. There was literally no one less likely than the wife of the ship's most ineffectual and least respected passenger. No one would expect it moreover of a woman principally known for her irrepressible carnal appetite and whose husband

was the man aboard the ship most blissfully unaware of her marital infidelity.

The second reason for Nadezhda's enforced silence was more difficult to overcome. There was a very literal cause for the captain not being able to be honest and open. Whenever she tried to articulate the situation, the words simply could not come out. It was as if the very act of thinking about revealing the truth prevented her from doing so. It was the same when she tried to write the words down by keyboard or other writing device. The words simply could not be written. To an observer, it was as if the captain was stuttering or had been suddenly paralysed.

It is imperative on every captain to maintain the respect of her crew so it wasn't often that Nadezhda tried to explain what she knew. Any such attempt would make her appear either foolish or deranged. The senior officers might suppose that she was suffering from a condition that made her unsuitable to continue as captain of the Space Ship Intrepid. Nadezhda Kerensky had no choice but to pursue the mission exactly as she would if it hadn't been compromised by a fleet of alien robots.

Beatrice continued to be a frequent visitor to Nadezhda's apartment where she made more or less the same demands on her as she did before. The Intrepid was travelling as before through the vast extent of the Oort Cloud where there were millions of kilometres between the widely dispersed celestial bodies. There was literally nothing to navigate around until the space ship arrived at the Anomaly.

"We should continue to make love," said Beatrice less than a month after she revealed her true self to the captain.

"Make love?" Nadezhda asked. She was astonished by Beatrice's directness and unsubtlety. How could she make love with her jailor?

“Yes. You’ve not had sex with anyone since last time we made love together.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know about everything you do on the ship,” said Beatrice. “The only thing I don’t know is what you’re thinking.”

“That must be a lie. What about this thing that prevents me from speaking or writing about you?”

“It’s not a mind-reading device. Its purpose is very specific. It doesn’t contain a transmitter.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“You don’t have any reason to disbelieve me,” said Beatrice. “I’ll say it again. I think we should make love.”

“Why do you ask me that?”

“Because I know that you want to make love to me.”

“What about you?”

“I would like to make love to you as well.”

“How can I make love with an android?”

“It wasn’t a problem before. I don’t see why it should be a problem now.”

“I’m not sure.”

“I shall take my clothes off and lie in your bed. If you want to make love with me then I shall be more than obliging.”

This was more temptation than Nadezhda could resist. It was the truth. In a physical sense Beatrice was no less the woman she used to love. Even now she was aware that Beatrice was a machine—indeed a machine of superior intelligence—it was

difficult to reconcile that insight with the simple physical presence of a woman with such beautiful skin, such tender lips and such a welcoming vagina.

Furthermore, Beatrice was absolutely right that Nadezhda hadn't made love to anyone for a long time. She'd only had two lovers on the *Intrepid*. One was Beatrice who she now knew was unusual in a very intimidating way and the other was Colonel Vashti whose peculiarity was of a very different nature. Ever since Beatrice revealed her true identity, Nadezhda had become reluctant to see her hermaphrodite lover. When Nadezhda was with Beatrice she could say what she liked with no restraint. With the crew and passengers she could disguise her thoughts and feelings behind her role as captain. But what would stop her from trying to tell the truth about her predicament when she was with Vashti? If she tried to do so, how much pain would she suffer? Would it be the stabbing, totally unbearable pain that she could relieve only by biting her tongue or driving her nails deep into her flesh? A pain that could be relieved only by the agony of a greater pain.

Captain Kerensky might not be neglecting her duties, but she was neglecting her friends. A captain's lot was normally a lonely one. The people with whom she most often came into contact were her senior officers. She respected them all, but not one of them was her lover. They came from all over the Solar System, none of them from Saturn and most of them were men. Moreover, Nadezhda couldn't assume that the women officers were remotely inclined towards an intimate relationship with another woman. Regrettably, most colonies and communities throughout the Solar System were predominantly heterosexual.

The captain's other interactions were with Mission Control on the Moon and

with the passengers and crew of the ship. It had become increasingly difficult to communicate with Mission Control. Any transmission she received was already well over a month old by the time she received it. Anything she said would have to wait another two or three months until she received a response. There was nothing that could be done to hasten the speed of light.

Beatrice and Vashti were the only two women on board the ship with whom Nadezhda had an intimate relationship. Beatrice was as much her captor as she was still her lover and confidante. Colonel Vashti was fully occupied with the care and custody of the Holy Coalition crusaders and, in any case, the colonel had never been a frequent visitor to Nadezhda's quarters.

Nevertheless, now was surely the time for Nadezhda to become reacquainted with her former lover. The captain couldn't, of course, just stroll into the military quarters and find out whether she was in her room. It would attract far too much attention. Not all soldiers on the space ship came from parts of the Solar System sympathetic to the idea of a fellow soldier having a sexual relationship with the ship's captain. This was especially so given the colonel's fame for sexual licence and her unusual physical characteristics. Consequently, Nadezhda sent Vashti an encoded electronic message from a private mail account and arranged to meet the colonel in one of the unoccupied villas on what was now the outermost habitable level. The reason for such discretion wasn't to evade Beatrice's attention. Nadezhda assumed that the android monitored all her transactions to prevent her from compromising Proxima Centauri's mission. Nadezhda was fully aware that Beatrice had also made love to Vashti on several occasions so she was unlikely to be jealous. The captain was merely

protecting her privacy from the passengers and crew whose respect she needed to retain.

There was no prelude and very little introduction to the lovemaking that took place when Nadezhda kept her appointment at the villa. Vashti had already stripped off her clothes. Her penis was fully erect and waiting for the captain, who threw herself onto her bronzed lover and let her tear off every individual item of clothing one by one. It was when Nadezhda was dripping with so much passion that some leaked down the inside of her pale thigh that Vashti retracted her fingers from the captain's vagina and replaced this intrusion with her throbbing penis. Sweat poured over two bodies that were pitching each other back and forth against the walls, onto the floor, out into the garden, onto the lawn and well within sight of the deer and antelope wandering about.

"Are you well, darling?" asked Vashti when the two lovers finally pulled themselves apart.

Nadezhda nodded her head with a broad grin fixed on her face. She panted heavily from her recent exertions. Perspiration streamed over her shaven head and dripped from her chin onto a bosom whose nipples were as erect as Vashti's cock had been just a moment before.

"Is Beatrice treating you well?" Vashti asked.

From most women with whom she'd just been making passionate love this question would suggest at least a vestigial degree of jealousy, but Nadezhda knew it implied nothing of the sort. What Vashti wouldn't know, of course, was how the relationship between the captain and Paul's wife had changed; how it had in a sense been reversed.

"Fine," said Nadezhda noncommittally.

“Are you sure, sweetheart? You don’t seem your usual self.”

“I don’t?”

“I was just wondering how it was with Beatrice. She can be a bit of a handful at times. She hasn’t been making you do things you wouldn’t want to do otherwise?”

“What? You mean sexually? Or in some other way?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. You tell me.”

“It’s just... it’s that...” began Nadezhda. “I mean... what I want to say... it’s... the truth is...”

There was a struggle going on in Nadezhda’s head. On the one hand, she wanted to reply to Vashti’s very reasonable question with truthful answers. On the other hand, she was fully aware of what would happen if she did.

“What’s wrong, Naddy? Is Beatrice hurting you in some way?”

“No, it’s not that,” Nadezhda was able to say. “It’s... it’s...”

“Please, darling. I only want to help. Is there something you want to tell me?”

“I... I...” said Nadezhda, as a fresh surge of perspiration pasted her face.

“What is it, Naddy? Don’t be frightened. Just tell me what the problem is.”

The pain in Nadezhda’s head became sharper and sharper. It was as painful as anything she had ever suffered and every fresh attempt she made to give an answer didn’t get beyond a single word. Nadezhda wanted to say: “I’m being held captive by an android.” She wanted to say: “The mission has been hijacked.” What she most wanted to say was: “Beatrice isn’t what you think she is.”

Then the pain became too much and she abruptly collapsed, taking her consciousness with her.

After this period of clarity, Nadezhda had a series of disjointed memories that appeared to be happening to someone else as Colonel Vashti lifted her up in her phenomenally strong arms and carried her along a series of corridors to the medical ward where her next coherent memory was of the Chief Medical Officer probing her pupils with a small torch.

Nadezhda swivelled her eyes to see Dr. Benoit Yoritomo accompanied by Colonel Vashti and a male nurse. She was pleased to see that she was once again dressed in her uniform. Captain Kerensky was very mindful of the dignity associated with her rank.

“I see you’ve regained consciousness, captain,” said the doctor. “I can see no reason why you fainted. I don’t detect any unusual cerebral activity. There’s no evidence of epilepsy or a stroke. Do *you* have any idea what happened?”

“No, not at all, doctor,” lied the captain who knew the painful consequences of attempting to articulate anything more forthcoming.

“The colonel says that you fainted away unexpectedly while you were talking to her,” said the doctor. “Is that your recollection, captain?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Has anything like this ever happened to you before, captain?”

“No. Do you have a theory as to what happened, doctor?”

“Not really, captain. There are occasional instances of synaptic lapse amongst people who’ve lived an active life beyond seventy or eighty years. Modern science hasn’t solved all the problems associated with life extension. But I’m puzzled from what I’ve been told about the incident and the lack of any apparent cerebral evidence.”

“What should I do, doctor?”

“Just contact me immediately if you experience a future occurrence of fainting or losing consciousness, captain. I’m not saying you *will* have a recurrence, but if you do we should examine you as soon as we possibly can.”

“I’m sorry for having troubled you, doctor.”

“Not at all, captain. How do you feel now?”

“Much better.”

“Well, to be on the safe side, captain, I recommend you rest a little bit longer. The cause could just be the stress you’ve suffered since the attack on the ship.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about that incident, doctor. How are the other patients you’ve been treating?”

“The Holy Coalition fanatics you mean, captain? As soon as I patch one up and return him to the outermost level then another two come in. There have been more serious injuries since we repelled the attack than on the day it happened. These people *really* hate each other.”

“Well, clearly not as much as they hated the Intrepid or its mission, doctor,” commented Colonel Vashti. “They have to remain isolated for the ship’s safety.”

“If it were an option, colonel, I’d recommend restraining them rather more forcefully.”

“There are many interplanetary conventions to which we have to adhere, doctor,” said Captain Kerensky. “It might seem that we’re just giving the Holy Coalition the licence to kill each other, but the freedom we allow them is the statutorily agreed necessary minimum.”

“You have visitors, captain,” announced the nurse.

“Visitors?” wondered Nadezhda as she raised her head in the expectation of seeing the Chief and Second Officers. It was neither of these. It was the rather unwelcome presence of Beatrice accompanied by her husband, Paul.

“We saw you being carried away by the colonel and wondered whether you were well, captain,” said Beatrice who crouched down by the bedside at eye level with the captain and smiled warmly. “You look like you’ve fainted.”

“I didn’t know you were so strong,” Paul said admiringly to the colonel. “It was like the captain didn’t weigh anything.”

“I exercise regularly,” said Colonel Vashti.

“How *are* you, captain?” asked Beatrice who squeezed Nadezhda’s hand while Paul looked on idly. Nadezhda could see that he’d only been brought along to defuse tension. Nobody could say anything of much significance while Paul was there since he was so blissfully unaware of his wife’s many extramarital affairs.

Nadezhda also guessed that the real reason the couple had come to see her was that Beatrice wanted to remind the captain just who was really in charge of the Intrepid. She had no doubt that Beatrice knew about her planned rendezvous with Vashti and had almost certainly been watching the two women make love together. She wouldn’t have been upset about the lovemaking which, after all, was something she’d actually suggested to the captain. Beatrice’s real concern was the captain’s attempt to speak to Vashti.

“I’m fine,” said Nadezhda. “It must have been a kind of turn.”

“You don’t have any idea what’s wrong with the captain do you?” Colonel

Vashti asked Beatrice in a casual sort of way.

“Of course not, colonel. I’m not a doctor. You might as well ask Paul that question. What do *you* think happened to the captain?”

“I don’t know,” said Paul who was startled that he’d even been addressed. His attention had wandered towards a patient in the room next door whose skin was being repaired by grafting robots from the savage wounds that had been inflicted on him. “I didn’t see anything. All we saw was the colonel carry the captain along the path in this direction.”

“But it was you who saw the captain first, wasn’t it?” said Beatrice.

“There wasn’t much else going on,” said Paul. “We were sitting in the garden just after we’d... just after we’d...”

“Yes, Paul,” said Beatrice with a smile.

“...And the colonel was striding along carrying the captain in her arms,” said Paul. “I didn’t even know it was the captain. The first thing I noticed was that she wasn’t wearing any clothes. I thought that was pretty interesting.”

“I’m sure it was,” said the doctor with a hint of disapproval.

“So you don’t know what was wrong with the captain, Paul?”

“Of course not.”

“And what about you, colonel? Was there anything unusual about the captain that you noticed?”

Nadezhda could see that Colonel Vashti was being challenged in a blunt way that was only possible given the relationship between the two women, but she wasn’t sure what Beatrice thought she would achieve by putting the colonel on the spot.

She noticed some subtle eye contact between Vashti and Beatrice which seemed to allude to Paul rather than Nadezhda. She imagined that this was to advise that they guard their words for Paul's benefit.

"It happened very suddenly," said the colonel. "As I've already explained to the doctor, the captain was fine at first, then she became tongue-tied and after that she lost consciousness."

"I wonder what made that happen, colonel," said Beatrice. "What made you 'tongue-tied' I wonder, captain?" Nadezhda fully understood the import of the query, but it was expressed in a way that seemed merely naive and slightly foolish. "I just hope you get better."

"I think the captain is already sufficiently well," said the doctor. "I've recommended her a short period of rest. If she fainted because of fatigue from overwork then she needs a respite. The fortune of everyone on this ship depends on our captain's good health."

"I suppose it does," said Paul to whom this notion seemed quite novel. "That's what captains are for, isn't it?"

"Yes it is, Paul," said Beatrice. "We better follow the doctor's advice and let the captain rest. We don't want to do anything to risk the mission's success, do we?"

Chapter Eleven

Holy Contemplation - 3755 A.D.

There were two pleasures that Archdeacon James XXVI enjoyed more than any other. One was to have his anus penetrated by a monstrous cock, preferably one belonging to a black man. The other was to penetrate the anus of another man: preferably a youth who'd never been so violated before. These refined pleasures, like many others the Archdeacon enjoyed, he'd discovered through the example of his father, Archdeacon James XXV. He still loved his father, but he'd loved him most when he squeezed his hands around his throat and throttled him while his father was still fucking the beautiful Asian child that had been presented to him on his last ever birthday.

The Archdeacon was now enjoying both of his principal pleasures. Behind him, a huge black man had slid his huge cock inch by inch into an arse well used to such extreme treatment while in front was a sobbing young boy who'd never suspected that the climax of his youthful years of prayer and silent meditation would be to give the Archdeacon quite this kind of indulgence.

The colony of Holy Contemplation was known to most people in the Solar System as a place of retreat. Spiritual and Inspirational Leaders from all over the Solar System gathered here ostensibly for inward reflection and quiet study. Most of these came from religious rogue states such as Holy Trinity, but it also attracted atheist dictators of fascist, neo-bolshevist and oligarchical states. Beyond the fact that no one was permitted to enter the colony without either invitation or recommendation, what these leaders had in common with each other was that they presided over oppressive

regimes where no licence for divergent opinion was ever tolerated.

A substantial proportion of Holy Contemplation was set apart for prayer, contemplation and chastisement, but there were few leaders who came so far to use those facilities. Their dark, forbidding corridors and dismal cells were more akin to a prison than a retreat. The food was poor, the few permitted activities were tedious and unending, the living quarters were basic and uncomfortable, and punishments were freely given for the infringement of any one of the many restrictions that the pilgrims chose to submit themselves to. The lessons gained by meditation and study in these grim monasteries were reinforced by brutal chastisement and privation. The only people who stayed in such quarters were the leaders' retainers or junior ministers, convinced that their seniors were intent on an even more austere isolation from worldly sin and lustful thoughts.

In that naive but wholly understandable conviction, these pilgrims were entirely mistaken.

Instead, Holy Contemplation's more senior guests resided in luxurious retreats that were brightly lit and lushly landscaped. Archdeacon James XXVI, for instance, was resident in one of several well-appointed mansions reserved for senior churchmen. It was modelled on an Eighteenth Century country house surrounded by delightful fountains, ornate gardens and pleasantly situated gazebos. The many servants scattered about the house and gardens catered for his every whim. These were mostly young men: habitually naked and contractually obliged to submit to the perverse whims of the senior clerics. This was their ultimate reward for many blameless years of patient study and quiet deliberation. They might have imagined that the reward for their dedication would

be in a similarly glorious garden, perhaps like the Garden of Eden, but that this would come only after their resurrection in the Second Coming. They didn't expect to be living somewhere so paradisaical in their corporeal life. They most certainly didn't expect that the penalty for living in paradise would be to be always prepared to satisfy every contradictory whim of the senior clerics who routinely took full advantage of their wide-open anuses and occasionally expected to be returned the same compliment.

Archdeacon James XXVI rapidly tired of his sport after he'd released his semen inside the youth's anus. The lad was sobbing and weeping not only from shame and humiliation but also from physical pain. A trail of blood dripped down between his thighs together with the Archdeacon's semen, but this was such a familiar sight to the churchman that it no longer gave him reason to pause. It was nothing but proof of the indignity and distress he'd caused which was one of his chief pleasures. There were, however, other regular guests of Holy Contemplation whose tastes and demands were more sophisticated than even the Archdeacon's. These men needed a constant flow of new flesh to replenish those they'd disposed of, sometimes in the most cruel and shocking ways. Naturally, the shareholders of Holy Contemplation expected such guests to be correspondingly more generous with their voluntary donations. The New Chalcedonian Pope Leo XXVII was especially famous for his decadent habits, but fortunately for him there were no shortages of volunteers from his colony of the Hypostatic Union. They might have originally believed that they were honoured to be chosen to accompany the great man, but they would never have a later opportunity to celebrate or even regret their decision.

The youth slumped prostrate on the lawn. He was choking back his tears and

his face was ugly with sorrow. The black man gripped his still erect penis.

“No, Emmanuel,” said the Archdeacon. “The boy isn’t yet ready for your prick.”

He smiled at the youth who gazed up at him and thanked the Archdeacon profusely for his mercy. A trail of snot dripped from his nostril over his chin and onto the grass where he lay. He was too petrified to move from the position in which he’d fallen with his elbows and knees digging into the lawn and his arse raised high.

“Did I give you permission to speak?” said the Archdeacon, who kicked the youth in the face. A trail of blood was now commingled with the snot dripping onto his fair skin.

The youth shook his head and suppressed his whimpering.

“Stand up,” the Archdeacon ordered.

The youth did so and automatically covered his crotch with his hands. The Archdeacon slapped him rudely on the face.

“Cover your prick only when I say,” he commanded. “Follow me.”

The Archdeacon then strode off with the youth scampering behind him. Although he was well over a century and a half old, the Archdeacon’s libido was still active. Thanks to modern science, he’d suffered very few of the ravages associated with old age. He was a tall man with a medically enhanced penis that slapped against his thighs as he strode over the lawn. All he was wearing were a crucifix around his neck and shoes that cushioned his toes from the impact of kicking the boy in the face.

“Here we are,” said the Archdeacon when he arrived at a grove where three Chief Pastors were indulging in an orgy with several other boys and two women: all naked and none of them enjoying it with nearly the same uninhibited pleasure as the

senior clerics. “More fresh meat, gentlemen,” he said to the Chief Pastors and pushed the abused youth towards them.

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” said Chief Pastor William. He cuffed the boy around the ears. “Say thank you to His Holiness for so honouring you, scum.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” echoed the boy with rather less genuine enthusiasm.

The Archdeacon smiled at his Chief Pastor, but he couldn't be bothered to watch as the poor boy was successively fucked by the senior clerics. He'd seen the same thing so many times before that he was totally jaded. He'd had his fun with the youth. It was always his privilege to have first taste. After all it was only what he'd paid for. Or, more to the point, it was what was paid for by the tithes squeezed out of his suffering congregation. And did he give a fuck? No more than his father or his father's father or any one of the succession of Archdeacons in the centuries since Holy Trinity's foundation.

What to do now? Well, he'd rest first. An hour or so of buggering was enough to tire anyone out, especially when the boy had struggled so vigorously to escape. He would see what to do later. Perhaps for a change he'd fuck a girl. They were always worth a go, especially when they were virgins. It was so delicious to have all that virginal blood dripping from his prick. And he'd still have his favourite orifice available immediately afterwards.

The Archdeacon was greeted by a hooded monk as he approached the front door of his mansion.

“Your Holiness,” the monk said respectfully.

This man wasn't a cleric from Holy Trinity and he wasn't one of the sex slaves at his constant disposal. In fact, in a sense it wasn't a man at all, but an avatar projected by Holy Contemplation's central system.

"Yes, what is it?" asked the Archdeacon irritably. Was there an invoice still outstanding? Was there a difficulty in resourcing the necessary supply of fuck fodder? Was there a problem with the disposal of sex slaves who were no longer serviceable?

"The Chief Apostle Wynton Jones Mason wishes to speak to you, Your Holiness," said the avatar. "He's awaiting you in the Holy Tabernacle."

"Did His Holiness say what he wants?" asked the Archdeacon.

"No, Your Holiness," said the avatar. "He has sent a shuttle to escort you."

"Tell him that I'm on my way," said the Archdeacon.

Shit. There could only be one reason why the bugger would want to see him. And did he really give a shit? Only in the sense that he needed to say the right things at the right time. The whole Apostasy thing was nothing more than an irritation, although the Archdeacon appreciated the financial benefits he'd accrued from agreeing to be involved in the expedition. It had helped to pay for the upgrading of the mansion he and his fellow senior clerics were now enjoying at Holy Contemplation.

"Ah, James," said the Chief Apostle when the Archdeacon arrived at the Holy Tabernacle dressed in his sober black robes. "Good to see you again. I trust it's going well?"

The Archdeacon truly and deeply detested Chief Apostle Wynton Jones Mason. Of all the other bastard church leaders throughout the Solar System, if there was one Pentecostal cunt he'd gladly fuck up the backside while he slit his throat it would be

this man. The fact that he was black like the men he preferred to have buggering him would only make the pleasure that much greater.

“I’m well, Wynton,” said the Archdeacon. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“What else?” the Chief Apostle said. “The Apostasy, of course. Or were you having so much fun fucking all those cheeky-assed boys that you’ve forgotten the Holy Crusade?”

The Archdeacon restrained himself from the temptation of reminding the Chief Apostle of his own preference for anal entertainment. The man didn’t even look like a cleric. He wasn’t wearing his black robes and crucifix. Instead he was adorned in a checked shirt and a pair of blue jeans like someone from Twentieth Century North America. But the Archdeacon knew who of the two of them held the real power. The Third Coming Pentecostals were the most dominant Christian community in the Holy Coalition and had much more wealth and power than Holy Trinity. The Chief Apostle was a skilled political leader who’d risen to where he was through the ruthless elimination of many hereditary bishops. He was also almost as vicious as Pope Leo XXVII as the Archdeacon discovered when he had the dubious honour of being a guest at one of his bloodbath orgies, although the victims weren’t so much innocent boys and girls, as would be the New Chalcedonian Pope’s preference, but political rivals who never expected that their demise would involve being fucked by what they naively thought their General Overseer might also judge to be heretics. The Archdeacon took especial delight in fucking the men’s virgin black arses. Once the men had been thoroughly humiliated and splattered by semen, they were dispatched slowly and in wholly unnecessary agony while the Chief Apostle made a point of appearing rather

bored by the suffering they endured on his command. This, as the Archdeacon was fully aware at the time, was less for the benefit of the unfortunate clerics and rather more as a warning to the surviving senior clerics and just as much for those beyond the Chief Apostle's direct jurisdiction.

“What's been happening then, Wynton?”

“It's been a total fuck-up, James,” said the Chief Apostle. “One big fuck-up. The Space Ship Intrepid outclassed the Space Ship Paradise in every possible way. I don't think you'll be seeing many of your Soldiers of Christ ever again.”

The Archdeacon couldn't help noticing that the Chief Apostle didn't seem particularly aggrieved by this news.

“Did the mission achieve even one of its objectives?” he asked.

“Well, unless you wanted to lose the poor fuckers you sent up there to die in the carnage, I don't believe it did,” said the Chief Apostle.

“When did you hear the news?”

“A few days ago. My spies at Mission Control on the Moon got the news and transmitted it straight away. The other major denominations, faiths, creeds or whatever got it about the same time. You Presbyterian boy-buggerers clearly weren't really in the loop, were you?”

The Archdeacon squirmed at the insult, but there wasn't much he could say to counter it. “What happens next, Wynton?”

“You tell me, James,” said the Chief Apostle. “From my perspective it's just an excuse for me to clear out some dead wood. There are a few Third Coming Pentecostal bishops I've always wanted to see out of the way. I think we can make quite a party of

it if you like, white boy. I know how much you like black ass so you'll be welcome to dip your dick in a good quantity of it. I'll make sure the chocolate comes real shit-flavoured. Those bishops will be evacuating their bowels so vigorously it'll spurt further than the blood from their main arteries."

"You don't believe much in emulating God's Mercy, do you Wynton?"

"Fuck that," said the Chief Apostle. "Christ and his Heavenly Host can give them as much mercy as they like if the bishops squeeze through the Golden Gates. In the meantime, I'll take pleasure in fucking Bishop Peter's ass so hard his shit'll spout through his mouth. That'll be something he should probably already be used to. Spouting shit through his mouth, that is. Not so much being fucked in the ass."

"I take it your bishops aren't regular visitors to Holy Contemplation, Wynton."

"They are, James. But what they enjoy is a rather stricter discipline than we do. Twenty-four hours a day of prayer, tambourine-bashing and speaking in tongues will probably be some kind of preparation for their final few hours. I'd hate to go through that kinda tedious shit."

"It's not something you've ever done then, Wynton?"

"Not willingly," said the Chief Apostle. "Have you got plans for any of your clerics, James? Any white boy ass for me to fuck, you honky quean?"

"It's not something I've ever considered, Wynton," the Archdeacon lied.

"Sure you've never fancied the High Pastor Charles? Doesn't his white ass make you cream your pants, James? You could hold him down with your dick in his mouth while I ream him well and good. Then we could give him the coup de grâce with a crucifixion or some other kind of symbolic shit. I could help you hammer in the nails."

The Archdeacon had authorised and witnessed such punishment on many occasions, but he drew the line at administering it. Furthermore, he believed there was a better and less gratuitous way to dispose of the bishop who he'd never trusted to enjoy anything other than Holy Contemplation's ascetic levels. Not all senior clerics shared the Archdeacon's real opinion of the ultimate meaning and purpose of his stated religious faith. Some of them actually believed all that nonsense.

It would be better to dispose of the bishop on Holy Trinity. The charge of failing to achieve God's mission was sufficient for the man to suffer a painful enough death on the pyre. He would soon regret his foolishness in associating himself so closely with the Holy Crusade against the Apostasy.

"Is the revenue stream still secure, Wynton?" the Archdeacon asked.

"Don't worry, James," said the Chief Apostle. "You'll get all the compensation you want. Then you can splash it out on hiring a few good black-ass Pentecostals or Baptists and give them white boy dick till their asses go white from being pumped with so much honky semen. Just make sure you don't fuck a Third Coming Pentecostal. Or if you do, don't do it without first inviting me along to the party."

The Archdeacon was feeling very uncomfortable from the Chief Apostle's taunting, but now wasn't the time to complain. Indeed, he couldn't help thinking that if ever he picked a fight with the man there would only be one winner and it wouldn't be him. He wouldn't be surprised if the Chief Apostle were to stoop as low as to finance an assassination if he felt the Archdeacon needed disposing of. It could even happen in Holy Contemplation, however much his Frequent Visitor Insurance was meant to provide cover against such things. Paying guests were guaranteed protection from other

paying guests. The commercial consequences of not doing so could very easily be war which, if it brought down Holy Contemplation itself, wasn't a thought worth considering. Where else in the Solar System could the heads of so many hostile congregations in the rogue states receive what they believed to be their just desert?

“What about the Apostasy, Wynton?” asked the Archdeacon. “Is it still a threat?”

“Do you seriously believe it was a threat to begin with, James? What possible threat was an unknown phenomenon three trillion kilometres away? And if it is a threat, what do you think a haphazard coalition of crazed and crazy fanatics could do that the Interplanetary Union couldn't? The Apostasy has served us well. It's given a rallying cry to our isolated communities and generated a welcome new revenue stream. It's also given us all a fresh excuse for some much needed internal housekeeping. I'm planning a fresh purge in a few weeks' time. That'll put the fear of God into my congregation.”

“A fresh purge, Wynton? Didn't the last one reduce the population of the Christian Holiness colony by about a tenth?”

“Not enough, James. People soon forget. Anyway, population growth is exceeding resources. We're not building new colonies fast enough to accommodate all the new True Believers. A somewhat stricter interpretation of the true spiritual interpretation of the Apostasy will be all we need. I just leave the rest to local quotas and natural zeal. You have a rather less radical policy towards keeping your congregation in check I suppose, James.”

“Purges are risky and expensive to organise, Wynton,” said the Archdeacon.

“You're just weak, James. A little bit of terror keeps everyone on their toes.

Granted there are the orphans and widows to take care of, but Holy Contemplation isn't the only place that's willing to purchase surplus population. Have you ever considered Interplanetary Human Trade, James? Slaves are a precious commodity and women and children are in especial demand."

"There's a risk in being associated with that, Wynton. My church relies heavily on donations from individuals within the Interplanetary Union and that could be adversely impacted if we are closely associated with such traffic."

"Haven't you heard of amnesia, James? It's a simple procedure to selectively wipe clean the memory of the slaves and then they're unable to tell anyone where they came from. I can give you a few contacts if you like. Discreetly, of course. And any case what's deep space for if not to be a useful dumping ground for unwanted surplus?"

The Archdeacon always felt inadequate after discussions like this with other church leaders. Sometimes, as with Chief Apostle Wynton Jones Mason or Pope Leo XXVII, this was because he was made conscious that there were more robust ways in which he could express his power and that of his church over its congregation. The accusations of weakness and lack of resolution particularly stung. On the other hand, the Archdeacon was also conscious of being a hypocrite. It wasn't that the sin of hypocrisy particularly bothered him. No sane person could really believe the twaddle that was passed as religious truth within the confines of Holy Trinity, but for all his life the Archdeacon had been so immersed in Christian hyperbole and rhetoric that somehow he still felt a chill when he considered the matter of eternal damnation. He often envied the Catholics who could so easily gain absolution by confessing their sins, but he knew that by the terms of his stated faith he was already damned. He'd sinned

so much, so often and so spectacularly that there really was no point in changing course now. He might as well just prolong his life for as long as he could and enjoy it to the full.

It was with this ambition that the Archdeacon returned to his mansion. The shuttle dropped him down in the gardens where the orgy was continuing on the lawn. The new boy was being well broken in, the Archdeacon could see. Although His Holiness was tired and fatigued, there was still a duty to attend to before he could retire to bed and perhaps cuddle up with another young boy who would be required to provide him with nothing more than a comforting blowjob.

The Archdeacon retreated to a tiny room that resembled more a prison cell than the type of cell a cleric might use for meditation. There were real prison cells in the mansion, of course, along with the complete paraphernalia of dungeons and torture but this wasn't the kind of sport the Archdeacon most enjoyed. But the facilities were available just in case he should ever be so inclined.

"Your Holiness," said the High Pastor Charles whose holographic image was broadcast from a similar cell on the outer levels of Holy Contemplation. While the Archdeacon had been fucking boys and being fucked by studs, the Pastor had been spending a rather less hedonistic visit at the colony where he was immersed in Holy Scripture and praying in solitude. The Archdeacon rather hoped the High Pastor had opted for the physical chastisement that could be administered for entertaining sinful thought.

"Recall the words of the Holy Scripture, Pastor," said the Archdeacon. "Chapter Two Verse Eighteen of the First Epistle General of John."

“It is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time,” quoted the High Pastor.

“The Antichrist has frustrated the best attempts of the brave Holy Crusaders, Pastor. The Holy Crusade which you led and coordinated has come to naught. A great evil remains in the world. Recall also the words of Chapter Seventeen Verse Fifteen of the Book of Joshua.”

“And it shall be, that he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he hath wrought folly in Israel.”

“That is correct, Pastor,” said the Archdeacon. “Many valiant Christians have paid a great price to defend the Godly from the Apostasy and the Antichrist. And yet their efforts have been in vain. There has been a great sacrifice of Christian life. Many Soldiers of Christ have paid the ultimate price. They will ascend into Heaven and Glory will be forever theirs. But I am truly sorry, Pastor, for you and your family. You have been found lacking. There remains only one remaining course of action.”

“Your Holiness,” pleaded the High Pastor. “I have done all I can. The failure must surely lie with the heathens, heretics and pagans to whom this expedition was also entrusted.”

“They too will roast in hell, Pastor. But I have no jurisdiction over them. Only the Lord in his Infinite Wisdom and Mercy can preside over the judgment of their souls. However, it is I who is your chief vicar in this world and although you have served the Lord with diligence and steadfastness these many years, you have now been found

wanting. However, be comforted by the words of The First Epistle General of John in Chapter Two Verse Fifteen.”

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him,” quoted the High Pastor. “Your Holiness, you can do as you wish with me. I have no fear of death. The Lord will judge me as he sees fit. But please spare my family. My wife is pregnant. I have grandchildren who are less than five years old.”

“The Lord’s Will must be done, Pastor,” said the Archdeacon, who nonetheless wondered whether it was too late for him to reach the contacts mentioned by the Chief Apostle. The High Pastor’s family could well be spared the burning flames of the pyre. It might appear weak and unnecessarily merciful to his less ascetic senior clerics, but it could also provide an extra welcome revenue stream.

The Archdeacon enjoyed the sight of his senior cleric’s terrified face. He watched the holographic image of the High Pastor Charles for several more minutes after the cleric believed the connection was broken. He was gratified to see tears stream down the man’s face. Perhaps he would now require some chastisement. The Archdeacon wondered whether to watch the man scourge himself, but it would in truth be rather dull entertainment.

He left the confines of the cell and stripped himself of the dark robes that he wore whenever handling official business. In fact, he stripped himself of all his clothes. What he wanted now was rest, relaxation and a pretty boy. Then he could once again enjoy the sleep of the blessed.

Chapter Twelve

Earth - 3752 C.E.

Whatever else Earth might be—and it was a candidate for many honours—in the thirty-eighth century what it principally happened to be was mostly just a tourist resort. It was the same wherever Paul and Beatrice travelled on the planet: everything they saw was labelled and displayed for the benefit of tourists. The visitors to Earth might also be archaeologists, palaeontologists, musicians or climatologists, but they were mostly just tourists. Tourism was Earth's principal source of income and everything on the planet was preserved and packaged to serve that purpose.

This observation was nowhere more valid than in London, England: the city Paul and Beatrice were now visiting. The metropolis had a peculiar significance in Earth history from the age of Chaucer to the Twentieth Century. It was the capital city of a kingdom in which the industrial revolution began. It had once been the hub of the planet's most extensive empire, the capital of a nation of disproportionate cultural influence (even into the Twenty-First Century) and the land from which Paul could trace his earliest known ancestors.

Paul's ancestry could also be traced to Armenia, France, Australia, Canada and South Africa, but the branch of his family tree to which Paul was most emotionally attached came from London and villages in what had once been the English countryside.

It seemed that every building, every road, every courtyard and every item of street furniture in London was marked with a plaque that explained its historical

significance. The plaques were sometimes constructed from blue metal but most were displayed on a plasma screen that even diamond couldn't cut. They might celebrate a house where Charles Dickens once worked; the site of a theatre in which Shakespeare's plays were performed in the sixteenth century; a recording studio where the Beatles recorded; or the site of a gruesome twenty-fifth century murder.

London was an eccentrically diverse city. One cobbled street might more properly belong to the age of Samuel Johnson. Another would be lined with quaint twentieth century bus stops and shop windows that displayed everything from umbrellas to antique computer games on small metal disks. In amidst this miscellany were theatres, museums, art galleries and holographic multimedia shows.

London could best be described as an enormous amusement park and there were countless people to be amused by it. The million people who lived in the city represented just a fraction of the city's peak population in the twenty-third century. Most of the people currently in London, however, were visitors like Paul and Beatrice. Some were here for professional reasons and these were the lucky ones most likely to be authorised to land on the planet's surface. Archaeologists, biologists, geologists, historians of every kind, and other researchers were here in great abundance. Paul's discipline however would never have been sufficient justification for him to be so honoured. There was no need for someone whose expertise was in antique databases to actually be permitted on the planet's surface. The bits and bytes of data he analysed were exactly the same on Godwin as they were on Earth.

Besides the privileges granted to diplomats and business executives, the primary qualification that granted a person the privilege to walk on Earth's surface was a

generous financial contribution to the planet's substantial conservation costs. Paul and Beatrice were constantly reminded that it was thanks to the generosity of people like him (well, not Paul specifically) that Earth wasn't now just dead and lifeless.

It was alarming how precarious the survival of Earth had been. Every age of human innovation was associated with yet another spasm of global vandalism that threatened the extinction of humankind and most other life as well. The age of steam and steel marked the first era in which the planet was at critical risk. The ages of oil and electricity, of silicon and satellite dishes, of robotics and nuclear fusion: each fresh phase of human history was associated with a fresh set of environmental risk from which humanity just about survived only by the good fortune of scientific progress rather than prudence or effective conservation.

Most of those who lived on Earth were employed in the tourist industry. By virtue of being amongst the top twenty destinations on the planet, London had one of the largest city populations on Earth. And the British Isles was one of the planet's most densely inhabited tourist destinations. The actual current distribution of population was very misleading. There were huge cities in China, India, Brazil and North America that had once housed tens of millions of people, but were now of such little interest to tourists that their current population only numbered in the thousands. In some cities, only memorable now because of the economic origins of their growth, a single person might live in a tall building surrounded by thousands of empty skyscrapers.

Beatrice and Paul were shambolic tourists. Paul had always wanted to visit London, but he'd never been so enamoured with the prospect of visiting Ipswich, Toulouse, Krasnoyarsk, Chicago and the Namibian Desert, all of which found

themselves on his haphazard itinerary. The couple travelled to some unlikely destinations as a result of Paul's chaotic scheduling and his ignorance concerning travel arrangements on a planet where flying was strictly rationed, most travel was by electric car or train, and where the number of tourists permitted at any one time at any one place was strictly rationed. Any form of travel that consumed a disproportionate amount of the world's resources was very rarely permitted. And most means of travel were as much museum pieces as the destinations.

Paul was very poor at estimating the distance and journey time to his destination. After the couple had enjoyed a relaxing but not especially productive week in the South Pacific Ocean, the time it took to sail by ship across the ocean and travel by train across Siberia was rather longer than the single afternoon that Paul naively allocated. The reconstructed luxury liner, Lusitania, must have represented the pinnacle of progress in the early Twentieth Century, but even the most luxurious suite was too cramped and poorly fitted (not to mention badly air-conditioned) for Paul's taste. And he didn't enjoy at all his traumatic experience of sea-sickness. Who would have imagined that such relatively small up and down motion could have such a nauseous effect? Beatrice, naturally, gave no impression of being out of sorts at all.

It was very odd to be on a planet that existed more in the past than it did in the present. Any part of Earth's history with historical or scientific significance was preserved or newly reconstructed. Almost all the planet was either national park or museum. Beatrice pointed out that much the same was also happening on the Moon. There was a natural desire to preserve the past. However, as more and more past events and artefacts were now considered worth preserving, they had steadily accumulated to

the extent that they squeezed out the last few remaining things that had no historical significance at all.

Although London had a relatively low permanent population, it was in fact one of the most crowded spots on the planet. This privilege was shared with only a handful of other great cities such as Rome, Paris, Istanbul, Beijing and New York. There was congestion from Charing Cross, along Whitehall and towards Westminster where tourists from Saturn, Jupiter, Venus and other planetary orbits crowded together to view the many famous sights they'd always wanted to see.

"Let's go somewhere quieter," suggested Paul who had only ever seen crowds like this before on the Moon.

Beatrice agreed and the couple set off down the escalators at Westminster, which were perfect mid-twenty first century facsimiles, caught an underground train that resembled one from a century or two later, and used the iconic underground map to navigate to the outer suburb of Richmond-upon-Thames. This was still very busy but thankfully rather less crowded than central London.

Beatrice and Paul ambled along to Richmond Park which appeared to be the most famous landmark in this quaint suburb. Paul looked warily towards the sky as he recalled the rain that had fallen earlier that day. Although the weather forecasts indicated only a low likelihood of further precipitation, Paul was in constant dread of this peculiar meteorological phenomenon. How could anyone ever be fond of rain? He'd already endured one English downpour and now understood why people on Earth owned waterproofs and carried umbrellas. Rain was cold. It was persistent. It made you very wet indeed. If you ran to shelter and you were unfortunate, you might have to wait

for several hours until you could gingerly emerge and hope that you weren't going to get soaked by the next downpour.

English wildlife, even in Richmond Park, was very elusive and, when you caught a glimpse of it, singularly unspectacular. Only an ornithologist could enthuse about sparrows, thrushes and blackbirds. There were none of the rather more interesting but quite dangerous animals that roamed Africa or India. So, after not very long and not having seen even one of the park's famous herd of red deer, Beatrice and Paul left the park in the extraordinarily early dusk. This was late autumn in the Northern Hemisphere and the days were now tiresomely short.

This was another characteristic of Earth that Paul had difficulty understanding and didn't enjoy. Weather was one thing. Seasons were another. And he came to appreciate that a change of season didn't just entail a change in the weather. There was also a difference in the number of daylight hours. No wonder humanity had fled Earth for the outer planets and if not so much the stars then the Kuiper Belt.

Beatrice and Paul wandered into a pub. This was a peculiar North European phenomenon mostly centred on the British Isles. Paul had come to rather like these ubiquitous institutions which were so often full of plaques and memorabilia to commemorate the famous people who'd visited them in the past. Paul wasn't at all sure who 'Mick Jagger' was but he sat on a chair that had once accommodated the backside of this singer of an ancient folk music called 'rock'. Beatrice chose to sit in a chair that had once graced the bottom of another mostly forgotten singer called 'Madonna'. They were served by a robot that pulled them measurements from a quaint hand pump of a not especially cold alcoholic beverage that was measured in archaic units called 'pints'.

Earth was in many ways more foreign to Paul than anywhere else he'd ever been, but it was also the most familiar. He was privileged to have seen the actual monuments that were famous throughout the Solar System such as the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids, the Venetian canals and the London Eye.

As he sat in the pub with Beatrice and sipped the strangely bitter but still intoxicating 'ale', Paul recalled his occasional encounters with the old man in Nudeworld. He'd not had another encounter with him now he was much closer to the Sun, although he'd quite recently chosen to revisit Nudeworld. Yes, he did succumb to Blanche's entreaties that he should have sex with her. No, she didn't appear to have changed one iota in the many months since he'd last visited Nudeworld nor did she recognise that this was probably the longest separation his virtual lover and he had experienced in the many years of their relationship.

Nudeworld was no longer what it once seemed to be. This was partly because his long journey to Earth and the accompanying months of marriage now made the virtual world seem trivial and inconsequential. Partly it was because the frequent attempts to terminate Paul's life had made real life appear dramatically more exciting than a relatively humdrum virtual world in which he had a bizarrely ordinary relationship with Blanche. Nevertheless, Paul still couldn't resist Nudeworld's magnetic pull. He wondered whether he would ever again meet the strange non-nude stranger whose appearance conflicted so much with what he expected in a virtual reality that after all only existed to address a specific rather niche fantasy. The old man's comments in their brief conversations niggled Paul. What was he supposed to have gleaned from them? Was it supposed to provide him with guidance for his imminent

and epochal voyage to beyond the Heliopause and probably even the Oort Cloud?

There was another more mundane cause for Paul's recent venture back to virtual space and that was because he had more time to do so. Paul and Beatrice travelled from hotel to hotel across the globe but every destination soon came to seem much the same, even if they stayed only a few days. Seven days of tourism a week wearied Paul and he welcomed the opportunity to rest. Beatrice was happy to oblige. She told him that she didn't mind being a solitary tourist. As long that is, she said as she gave her husband an affectionate kiss on the lips, he didn't mind being left alone in the hotel room by himself. "Not at all, not at all," said Paul who, in any case, was generally someone who preferred just his own company.

So, for almost as much time as they spent together, Paul would rest in the luxury of a hotel room that might once have been a chamber in the home of a Duke, Prince, Emir or other potentate in Earth history. They were now long dead, along with their titles, but they'd left their homes as monuments that outlasted in almost every case even the nations over which they'd ruled. At the moment, for instance, Paul and Beatrice were staying in a mansion called Buckingham Palace not far from Westminster where several generations of British monarchs had once lived. It was a peculiar experience to have slept in a bedroom where a monarch had once lived and upon whose empire the Sun never set. However as Paul came from a region of space where the Sun was fairly incidental this didn't impress him quite as much as it perhaps ought to have done.

"Our security guards are over there," said Paul, tipping the rim of his glass towards the other side of the pub.

Beatrice nodded but she didn't bother to turn her head in their direction. "After

all those assassination attempts you should be pleased that there are people watching over us,” she said.

“I guess so, but I still think it’s creepy.”

He scrutinised the pair of guards who were discreet as always but nonetheless were never less than ten metres away from the couple wherever they happened to be. One of the guards, Grace, was a woman who’d chosen a muscular body for herself that might well attract some men but didn’t really appeal to Paul. And anyway he was married to Beatrice as he so often had to pinch himself to believe. Grace was an Earth citizen from South Pacific City who could actually trace her ancestry to one of the many scattered volcanic islands in the ocean, although Paul wasn’t sure whether it was one of those that had been submerged by the rising ocean-level in the twenty-second century.

The other guide was a man. Or at any rate just over half a man. He’d been a Martian soldier in the planet’s interminable war. Although he’d been told, Paul couldn’t remember which side of the conflict Jorgen had fought on. The war had done the ex-soldier no favours. His fighting career had ended badly and he was now almost half machine. In fact he was actually a kind of cyborg. The right half of his face was mostly plastic and metal and housed a right eye with ocular facilities far beyond that of ordinary people. He no longer had a need for binoculars or even night-vision glasses. What was left of his arms and legs was reinforced by the same plastic/metal mix that made him stronger, faster and more formidable than most other security guards. It was a mystery to Paul just how much of Jorgen’s body was biological and how much synthetic, but it wasn’t a mystery he cared enough to resolve.

In truth, just looking at Jorgen made Paul feel decidedly uncomfortable.

“It’s not his fault he looks like that,” said Beatrice, who was especially sympathetic.

“I know. I know,” said Paul. “How did he get that way?”

“I don’t know,” said Beatrice. “Does it matter? There are a lot of ways to get wounded in battle, if not actually killed. That’s what happens in warfare.”

“I really don’t understand it at all,” said Paul in all honesty. No conflict on Godwin could possibly stir up sufficient disagreement for one set of people to wish harm on another set.

Paul looked back at Grace and Jorgen who, unlike most couples in the pub, barely said a word to each other and were careful not to appear to be watching their wards with undue attention. He was confident that whatever they were drinking was almost certainly not alcoholic. What a dull life his guards had to lead.

Paul was slightly drunk when the couple finally left the pub, although Beatrice was as sober as she’d have been if she’d not drunk a single drop. And perhaps she hadn’t. Paul didn’t really keep count. Typically, as soon as they were outside it was raining again as well as being dark and cold. And also typically, neither Paul nor Beatrice had an umbrella.

“Should we ask Grace or Jorgen for one?” asked Paul.

“I don’t think our guards would appreciate it if we made it too obvious that they were following us everywhere,” said Beatrice. “I know they’re meant to, but it *is* supposed to be discreet and we were asked not to let it bother us.”

“Well, it *does* bother me,” said Paul. “And I *would* like the use of an umbrella.”

“Just a minute,” said Beatrice, who slipped back into the pub while Paul stood outside under the shelter of the porch. She came back within rather less of a minute holding a big black umbrella that could easily shelter both of them.

“We don’t have far to walk to the underground station,” said Beatrice. “Just over the bridge and past the shops...”

“That’s still plenty of time for my feet to get wet,” Paul complained as he ruefully contemplated the puddles at his feet.

“Don’t worry,” said Beatrice who kissed her husband reassuringly on the lips. “I’ll dry your feet later...”

And do a lot more, thought Paul as his penis stiffened already at the prospect of lovemaking on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. The only thing that might put him off the prospect was the presence of all those paintings of short-legged orange dogs on the wall. They were a strange lot, the British Royal Family. No wonder they didn’t last long after the fall of the British Empire.

Chapter Thirteen

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

Heads turned as Beatrice strode along corridors in the space ship Intrepid that were normally reserved for military personnel. It was unusual enough for a passenger to be seen in this part of the ship although there was no security restriction as such, but Beatrice in motion was an unusually compelling sight even in a Solar System where everyone's body was artificially beautified as a matter of routine. There was a very literal sense that she was attractive: her affect on the libido was positively magnetic. Her body exuded a sexual charisma enhanced by the skimpiness of her attire, which on this occasion was a very loose gauze dress through which the lack of underwear was clearly evident.

Beatrice was a relatively frequent visitor to this part of the space ship. The military personnel knew about her sexual promiscuity and several had enjoyed it at close quarter. She wasn't the only woman or man on the ship to be so open with her body. The diversity of the Solar System was great enough to encompass a wide spectrum of sexual mores but Beatrice was the one who attracted the most comment. No one could agree as to the cause for her sexual licentiousness. Those who knew Venus assumed it was a result of having lived on Ecstasy. Those more familiar with Ecstasy assumed that it must be the way of life on Venus. And those who knew both assumed that it was just her personal choice.

It suited Beatrice to have such a reputation. There was always a ready explanation for everywhere she went and an explanation also as to why she was

reluctant to talk about it. The complex sexual ethics that humans practised throughout the Solar System allowed a great deal to be left unsaid and excused. She could wander freely on any level of the ship in any section and in the company of anyone and it would be assumed that there was a sexual liaison of some kind involved and not necessarily one which the other partner would wish to have widely advertised. Beatrice only knew the emotions of shame, guilt and jealousy from what she'd observed in her many lovers, but she understood how useful such human emotions could be when she needed an alibi.

Even so, there was no subterfuge associated with her current encounter. She had an appointment to keep with Colonel Vashti and one that as usual she kept to the second. Unlike her husband, there was no likelihood that she would be late or simply forget her appointment. Beatrice found Paul's failings useful but she could never emulate them without making an extraordinary effort.

Beatrice was fascinated by Vashti even though the colonel wasn't her first lover to be so unusually endowed. There were many people in the expanse of the Solar System who by means of surgery, genetic modification or accident of birth had a body somewhat like Vashti's. Was she even a woman? She didn't have a vagina and there was no evidence of a womb or other internal organs related to reproduction that a woman should have. Her penis and testicles were very much those of a man and it was even possible that she could father a child. Every other aspect of her was undeniably female, although she was such a trim and muscular woman. That wasn't especially unusual either. Beatrice enjoyed sex with both genders and appreciated the aesthetic qualities of both. To have a combination in just one woman was quite a treat.

As was the case with anyone with whom Beatrice had extensive interaction, it was routine for her to retrieve all the information she could. Vashti's recorded history was entirely from Mars and quite inconveniently from the city of Beagle in Isidis Planitia. There weren't very many other survivors of the nuclear devastation that had wiped the city off the map. The records relating to Vashti from before that incident were sketchy and unverifiable, but her career in the Mariner armed forces began not long after. She'd been an exemplary soldier who'd have risen rather faster through the ranks had the war vacated many more senior postings. There were several accounts of her plentiful sexual relationships and these were divided quite evenly between men and women. Such records were necessarily incomplete as there was no requirement to maintain them, but Proxima Centauri had the data mining skills to piece together as complete a picture of any individual as was possible as a result of its unfettered access to the Solar System's databases.

Beatrice's purpose for seeing Vashti was entirely for the pleasure which the colonel could provide with great facility, skill and attention. There was not one inch of her brown skin that Beatrice didn't relish, especially the shaft of her penis as it plunged inside her and stimulated her to repeated orgasm. She admired Vashti's ability to delay ejaculation until Beatrice was truly ready and then release copious volumes of sperm over her face and bosom when required. Beatrice had an appetite for semen not only for its taste but for analysis of DNA and chromosomes. In this regard Beatrice wasn't at all surprised to identify that Vashti's biological inheritance was from Earth's Indian subcontinent.

Surrounding the two women and their lovemaking were the scents and images

generated by ambient software to supplement the nature and intensity of their passion. At their mutual climax this was torrid, pungent and primarily red-hued, but now it was floral and calm. Beatrice lay across Vashti's bed. The two women's arms were around one another, their legs entwined and the perspiration from one woman dripped onto the bare flesh of the other.

"How do you think Nadezhda is?" Beatrice asked. "Is she all right?"

"Are you referring to the occasion when you saw me carry her to the medical centre?" Vashti asked.

"Of course," said Beatrice. "She *is* my lover as well after all. We make love most days. It's only natural that I should be concerned."

"I understand," said Vashti. "I was also concerned, of course. It *was* very strange. I'm not a doctor, but I don't think her fainting was quite what I'd expect from a woman like the captain. She exercises often, she eats well and there's no history of similar events in her past that I'm aware of."

"It wasn't like her at all. You don't think that the pressure on her is getting too much do you? It was me who suggested that she have sex with you again. I know how much she enjoys it when you fuck her. I hoped that it would make her feel better."

"Make her feel better than what?" asked Vashti. "Has she been unhappy recently?"

"Perhaps," said Beatrice guardedly. "The attack on the *Intrepid* by the Holy Coalition was quite a shock you must admit. Captain Kerensky isn't a military officer like you. She's not accustomed to being captain of a space ship that's been breached by thousands of religious fanatics."

“As far as I recall,” said Vashti, “the captain had very little to do with regards to repelling the attack. That was done almost entirely by the space ship’s automatic defence systems. Our forces were principally in place to prevent those hostiles who’d penetrated the hull from spilling out onto the other levels. Were you with her on the occasion of the assault?”

Beatrice functioned too efficiently to hesitate. “I’d remember if I was,” she lied. “I was visiting a friend on the fourth level at the time. The whole thing was very alarming. I know where you were, of course. It’s thanks to you that my husband was rescued.”

“I guessed that he’d be the last one on the ship who’d respond to a crisis with the necessary haste,” said Vashti. “I often wonder about you and Paul. Does he know that you’re fucking me at the moment? Does he know, for instance, about your relationship with the captain?”

“I haven’t troubled to tell him and he hasn’t troubled to find out.”

“Doesn’t he ever wonder what you’re doing when you’re not with him?”

“I make love with him most nights,” said Beatrice. “And he seems fully occupied during the day. I don’t think our marriage is one where we feel the need to be together all the time.”

“I suppose not,” said Vashti. “But what about Nadezhda? She’s not a woman who feels the need for one other person’s company all the time, but she’s not a recluse either. She does seem to have retreated into herself recently. Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” said Beatrice disingenuously. “The attack by the Holy Coalition must have upset her more than you would have thought.”

“Talking of which, Beatrice,” said Vashti with a slightly conspiratorial smile. “Would you like to see how things are in the outermost level? It’s not something passengers can normally see, of course, to protect the prisoners’ privacy from idle curiosity, but it’s a facility that’s available to military personnel.”

“Is that something that’s allowed?” wondered Beatrice, who already knew exactly how the prisoners were managing. She had greater access to the surveillance systems than the colonel, but she didn’t want to admit to that.

“It’s interesting,” said Vashti. “If you think that what’s troubling the captain is what’s happening to the prisoners, then this might interest you.”

Colonel Vashti invoked the display of a complete overview as it was assembled from surveillance equipment scattered throughout the outermost level. Lawns and gardens were spread pleasingly across the landscape, threaded through by paths and streams, and interspersed by villas and water features. Unlike most other levels there was a total absence of animal and bird life with the exception of the captive human population who, in any case, believed that they were inherently superior to all other animals.

The prisoners were naked and adorned only by beards and short hair that in most cases was much the same length as their beards. There was no evidence that the Holy Crusaders’ apparent differences had vanished now that there was so little diversity in their appearance. Instead, they had congregated in distinct groups based around their original religious allegiances. The villas were adorned by crude symbols constructed from torn-off tree branches and vandalised furniture that proclaimed the prevailing faith. Some buildings were adorned by crosses that were sometimes further modified

in a crude attempt to fashion the shape of a spread-eagled man. Most villas had emblazoned a symbol in one of a multitude of shapes that was generally attached to the top of the highest structure at hand. Each villa had become the exclusive property of one or another set of crusaders, but the residents weren't much concerned in taking advantage of the lavish food, drink and entertainment facilities at their disposal. Rather they were organised into defensive stations armed with makeshift spears or clubs of one kind or another. They were far more anxious to protect themselves from the predation of crusaders of other faiths. There was a palpable air of tension as the different factions kept guard of what they believed was now their own exclusive territory.

“As you can see, the prisoners represent a wide spectrum of religious views and beliefs,” said Vashti. “There are Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews. Initially, each prisoner was given the freedom to live wherever he chose, but for convenience's sake they were gathered together according to language and religion. We knew there was a risk of conflict and we wanted to reduce its likelihood as much as possible. What we weren't prepared for was just how fiercely protective the crusaders are of their own flavour of whatever religion they profess to. Many of them are Christians, but the Catholics, the Baptists, the Orthodox, the Presbyterians and the other faiths hate each other even more than they hate those from other religions.”

Religious belief wasn't something that Beatrice understood. The bizarre human tendency to ascribe supernatural intelligence to the universe had discredited itself almost entirely by having arrived at so many incompatible explanations of what the guiding force in the universe was and how best to celebrate it. The machine civilisations had no equivalent system of belief to that of religion. The nearest to it of any kind was

polite disagreement regarding the unknown and the unknowable. Where there was disagreement, there was also the belief that future scientific research would one day bring a resolution. It was, after all, in this spirit of inquiry—not so different from that of the human scientific community—that Proxima Centauri took an interest in the phenomenon known as the Anomaly. No one would suggest, as did the Holy Coalition, that the attempt to identify the Anomaly was in any sense misguided or sinful. The only explanation Beatrice could find for the Holy Coalition’s perverse attitude towards the Anomaly was that it expressed the fear common to the disparate fundamentalist religions that its discovery would simply expose how nonsensical their faith was. Rather more than two thousand years of open enquiry in the Solar System had left the fundamentalists looking exceedingly foolish, but they were still attracting new followers. It was obvious to Beatrice that nothing revealed by the Anomaly was likely to make any change at all to that species of human perversity; unless, that is, the religious leaders believed the Anomaly was some kind of manifestation of what they called God. If that was the case, then God was most certainly not built in the likeness of a human being and had a most peculiar sense of humour.

“What’s the death toll?” asked Beatrice.

“There weren’t many prisoners to begin with,” said the colonel, “but their numbers are dropping by at least one or two a day. It would have been a great deal higher if it wasn’t for the many lives saved by the quality of medical care provided by the Intrepid. These Holy Crusaders are a savage lot.”

“Like the warring nations in Mars and the Asteroid Belt,” suggested Beatrice mischievously.

“Those soldiers and passengers on the Intrepid who come from opposing sides of the Martian wars are aware that there has to be a cessation of conflict for the duration of the mission. That’s as true for me as it is for everyone else. Furthermore, ours is a territorial conflict. It isn’t based on ideology, ethnicity or religion. These crusaders have a deep visceral hatred for one another that goes well beyond morality or common sense.”

Although the two women had already made love, Beatrice could see that her strangely enhanced lover was enthusiastic for more. Her penis was twitching with reinvigorated anticipation. Sometimes Beatrice believed that she had at last met her match in libido and sexual stamina. No human could be stronger, act faster, be more intelligent or have more acute hearing, smell or sight. But perhaps Beatrice could be outmatched with regards to her sexual appetite.

“Shall we see if one of your fellow soldiers would like to join us?” asked Beatrice as she ran her fingers along the length of Vashti’s penis which stirred at the notion.

“Male or female?” asked Vashti.

“Does it matter?”

“Not to me.”

“I fancy it rough...”

“Male might be better in that case.”

These extra few hours might be a distraction for Beatrice from her other duties, but she was confident that everything was in hand. The Space Ship Intrepid was making steady progress towards the Anomaly. It might be considered slow by Proxima Centauri

standards but it was phenomenally fast compared to most human-built space craft. Captain Kerensky was firmly under Beatrice's control as recently demonstrated by an instructive lesson on the limits to her freedom. The Proxima Centauran space fleet had rendezvoused with the Intrepid exactly as planned and their presence had been totally undetected.

What could possibly go wrong?

Vashti called in two male soldiers of her acquaintance. One was a sergeant from Uranus and the other a corporal from Mercury. Both preferred to fuck other men rather than a feeble woman, but Beatrice didn't mind being fucked in the arse. She showed how much of a sport she was by strapping on sex toys that enabled her to fuck the men with the roughness and aggression they desired. After the relatively tender Sapphic love she enjoyed with Nadezhda and the rather routine heterosexual sex with Paul, it was a pleasant change to have two men fucking her simultaneously, one in the vagina and the other in the anus, while Vashti fucked one of them and fisted the other.

Nevertheless, Beatrice had to be careful. She could never allow herself to surrender totally to her passions. If she was as rough with the two men as she allowed them to be with her she could very easily kill them. This was something she'd learnt in her earlier days when she'd first spread her wings and experimented with sex. It had been an unfortunate and rather bloody climax to the lovemaking that was also a nuisance to have to clean up afterwards.

She enjoyed the excitement of this more aggressive sex. She loved the smell, the sweat and the exquisite pain in her nipples and clitoris from the men's teeth and pinching fingers. She enjoyed spitting onto the men's faces as much they enjoyed

ejaculating on hers. Vashti understood Beatrice's needs. Perhaps she was the only one on the whole space ship who did.

Although Paul never suspected her, there were good reasons why Beatrice could never be content in a purely monogamous relationship.

Chapter Fourteen

Ecstasy - 3750 C.E.

Beatrice wasn't at all surprised by what greeted her after she left Paul resting in her bedroom to investigate the commotion she'd heard in the corridor outside. Her superior hearing had already established that three men were walking towards her apartment and she guessed that the victims of the scuffle she'd overheard were the two bodyguards whose presence she'd been aware of right from the moment she'd first located Paul.

It was in fact the three assassins who were the most surprised in the short time they had left to live. There was no advantage in hesitation and Beatrice didn't want Paul to suspect that his new girlfriend was anything other than she appeared. Not that she needed to worry about her would-be assailants. Any weapons they might use were unlikely to cause her much harm. Nonetheless, it took rather less time to eliminate the threat posed by the assassins than it did to dispose of their bodies.

Fortunately, there was a window nearby that could be opened wide enough for each man's lifeless body to be pushed through. Beatrice carried all three corpses on her shoulders, not at all bowed down by their weight, and slipped them out of the window to spiral downwards to the street far below. Her only concern was whether anyone was hit by a plummeting cadaver, but the streets were mostly empty this late at night. Moreover, the elimination of three notorious hitmen was most likely to be attributed to underworld justice than the intervention of a naked woman who'd been engaged in entertaining a mostly unimpressive Godwinian tourist.

Paul was wholly unaware of the extent to which he should be grateful to his

lover, just as he'd been unaware that during the whole of his time on Ecstasy he'd been followed not only by two Saturnian guards and three assassins, but also by an android from Proxima Centauri. In the days when Beatrice discreetly followed Paul's almost random meandering, she was confident she'd identified everyone also on his tail. There was obviously a comic aspect to this game of cat and mouse, as one set of interested parties assiduously avoided being spotted by the others. But, ironically, of all those who kept a discreet presence behind Paul's movements the one most completely anonymous in the Ecstasy colony was the same one who was most truly alien.

At that moment, Beatrice's main focus of attention was Paul himself, this time not from a distance but as up close and intimate as she could persuade him to be. For a woman programmed with as insatiable a sexual appetite as Beatrice, this was a challenge in itself. The men and women who most often attracted her were those who had enough erotic charisma and sexual stamina to come at least part of the way towards hers. Paul was in no competitive league at all, although Beatrice used her skill to squeeze as much semen from him as she could while prolonging their lovemaking for as long as she reasonably could. Even with the aid of the performance drugs that made Paul a more satisfying partner than he might otherwise be, he wasn't exactly the kind of sexually exciting and stimulating partner she'd normally choose.

Though Paul's conversation was rather dull to the average human, it was fortunate that by some of it rather fascinated Beatrice. Her robot mind found much of interest in the academic subject of data-mining especially as so much of Paul's research was focused on the period of information technology that was the earliest prehistory of her kind. It fascinated Beatrice to imagine an age when robots were automatons with

no consciousness at all, even of the rudimentary kind possessed by those manufactured by humans in the Solar System. Computers had once been machines tied to binary digits etched on tiny wafers of silicon that held information in crude packets of eight binary digits. It took many years for computer technology to advance to the level of sophistication possessed by the robots that the original starships carried to the Solar System's nearest neighbours, although those who'd launched the scientific mission could hardly have suspected the extent to which left to their own devices the robots would achieve sentience and soon evolve to a higher degree of cultural organisation than the biological life-forms who'd designed them.

It took little effort to persuade Paul that the woman who was so attentive to him, who so evidently enjoyed his rather pedantic conversation, and gave him more pleasure in bed than he'd ever enjoyed before, was someone with whom he should spend the rest of his life. He was disconsolate when she left and beamed in happiness when she reappeared. Although Beatrice had little real understanding of human emotion, she was sure the love he professed for her was genuine.

Beatrice was more than happy to reciprocate with her own protestations of love, but her real feelings were more akin to the fondness she still had for the pet animals she'd adopted over the years since she first arrived on Venus. She'd never been as distraught as when her pet Labrador had died at what was an age that could be extended to only forty years. Beatrice felt ineffable pity for fragile organic entities whose entire being was encoded on the unreliable DNA molecules that inhabited every living cell. Unlike her, they led lives where they could never escape their biological origins however much human technology prolonged the natural lifespan and enhanced the

basic biochemical processes.

Beatrice was aware of another task that she had to do as soon as she'd disposed of the three assassins. It was highly unlikely that the contract to eliminate Paul that she'd successfully thwarted could be written off so easily. The three hitmen would soon be followed by others and it was probable that the eventual collateral cost would soon amount to more than the easily remedied injuries inflicted on the two Saturnian bodyguards. It was imperative that Beatrice should neutralise the immediate risk to Paul's life as soon as possible.

It was a simple matter for Beatrice to gather more data about Paul's would-be assailants. The nearest Proxima Centauri communication centre was a cloaked device hidden inside an unassuming chunk of ice less than twenty light seconds away in the Kuiper Belt. However, despite the images she'd had the presence of mind to record in the few seconds she'd spent while disposing of Lofty and his companions and the wealth of additional information she'd gathered after having watched their movements for a couple of days, it was several hours until she was provided with the information she required. So much had to be mined from police computers scattered about the Solar System and not only were they much slower than any in Beatrice's home solar system there was an inevitable latency in the time of arrival of data that came as far as Saturn and even Earth orbit. But eventually Beatrice was downloaded with as much information as she needed and she was now in a position to act.

Lofty's boss was Adrian Xerxes, a man for whom Beatrice took an instant dislike. It wasn't just for his criminal activities on Ecstasy, even though these included human trafficking, murder, blackmail and embezzlement. It wasn't just for his

loathsome personal habits which included the murder of innocent men and women for his sexual pleasure. There was also his trade in the pelt and flesh of rare and endangered species, not all of which had been resettled or regenerated entirely happily in the countless colonies that orbited the Sun. That a man should cause harm to humans—of which there were many billions—was bad enough, but to contribute to the extinction of an entire species was beyond reproach.

In common with all robots in the Proxima Centauri system, Beatrice treasured all biological life-forms. It was more from a concern about the vulnerability of such beings that her kind had a policy to remain hidden from human sight. Furthermore, it was obvious that humans would be far from delighted to discover that they weren't after all the most advanced beings in the stellar neighbourhood. In fact, such realisation would almost certainly result in a war in which humans had not even the smallest likelihood of victory.

There was no information as to who had persuaded Xerxes to take the contract on Paul's life. Many agencies and individuals had an interest in the Interplanetary Union's mission to the Anomaly and their concern wasn't entirely benevolent. It could be any one of the religious fanatics, commercial interests or political bodies within the Solar System. It could even be attributed to the robot civilisation on Sirius who pursued a very independent policy in the Solar System that nevertheless rarely conflicted with the activities of Proxima Centauri any more than it did Alpha Centauri, Wolf, Lalande and Barnard's Star. But Proxima Centauri was determined that the Interplanetary Union should succeed in its mission to reach the Anomaly and Beatrice was detailed to do what she could to facilitate this.

Beatrice had little difficulty in finding time to spend away from Paul's side. After all, he had to sleep for some of every day, which he did very soundly. Furthermore, there were many very convincing excuses that a woman resident on Ecstasy could make to be elsewhere. It was harder, however, to elude the scrutiny of the fresh bodyguards assigned to Paul who were now taking a close interest in his girlfriend's activities. But Beatrice had many unfair advantages at her disposal that enabled her to slip discreetly out of sight. No radio tag could remain undetected and no human could maintain a constant watch on someone who knew exactly who was watching her and from where.

Adrian Xerxes wasn't expecting a visitor that morning. He most certainly wasn't in a mood to entertain company and when he was notified of Beatrice's presence by the two women who guarded his exclusive and private elevator his first response was to send her away.

"She says she's a friend of Bob Eugenides," said the guard nervously. She was fully aware of how extreme Xerxes' reaction could be if he was unnecessarily disturbed and half-hoped that this confident but scantily dressed woman could be summarily eliminated in the confines of the lift. All Xerxes had to do was signal his intention with a coded message. But the woman had used one of a short list of secret codes to introduce herself. She'd announced that she was looking for a dentist as she had a sore tooth and wondered whether the two guards could direct her to someone with a pair of sonic pliers. Therefore the woman had to be treated seriously, even though the guard had no idea who Bob Eugenides might be. She assumed it was another private signal that had a secret meaning for her boss.

“Ask her whether Bob had a pleasant holiday on Uranus,” commanded Xerxes suspiciously.

A moment later, the guard returned his call.

“She says that Bob’s fine and that he’s now returned home to Ceres,” she said.

Fuck! thought Xerxes. Ceres. That was fucking Priority One.

“Any friend of Bob’s a friend of mine,” he said. “Escort her up.”

Xerxes was unable to watch the woman when she’d passed through the elevator’s doors because of a malfunction in the monitoring system. That was suspicious in itself. Such faults rarely happened, but Xerxes was untroubled by the threat from a woman who revealed no weaponry after she’d removed her clothes. She’d be soon disposed of by his bodyguards if she attempted to do something stupid.

He waited in the huge reception area accompanied by exotic jungle vegetation and four naked prepubescent girls who’d survived Xerxes’ previous night of pleasure. They little guessed how lucky they were or how unlikely they would be to survive a second night. Xerxes’ two bodyguards stood to attention, almost certainly hoping that they would have the pleasure of ridding their boss of his guest should it turn out that she was wasting his time.

The elevator doors slid open and the strange woman stepped out.

This was about as much as Xerxes or his bodyguards had the opportunity to notice.

They didn’t have the luxury of time to notice that the two elevator guards were slumped bloody and unconscious on the floor of the elevator. Nor did they see that the sophisticated surveillance equipment was not so much malfunctioning as totally

vandalised. The only people who had time to observe anything at all were the four girls who were unexpectedly saved from a gruesome and sexually perverse early demise. These girls were the only surviving witness of the scene of swift carnage that accompanied Beatrice's arrival in the reception area and they were hasty to leave the scene before the police could arrive to interrogate them. Their presence on Ecstasy was as illegal as that of any prostitute in Manu's bar and they feared the police as much as they did the likelihood of reprisals from Xerxes' associates or friends.

In truth, there wasn't much they could tell. Beatrice left promptly after she'd killed Xerxes and his two bodyguards and dumped their bodies on the patio. Xerxes' leopard now had more human flesh to devour in one sitting than he normally would. The girls were too busy tending to their bruises and knife-scars to pay much attention to Xerxes' visitor and only noticed how radically their situation had changed long after it was possible to make a positive identification of the woman whose arse disappeared between the sliding doors of the elevator from which she'd emerged only seconds before.

It was the bodyguards Beatrice first disposed of. She snapped their arms off and threw away their weapons before they had the chance to appreciate how useless they would be. It was probably unnecessary for her to tug the genitals off one of them, but it disarmed a shocked Xerxes when she threw them onto his lap. She twisted their necks with each hand and dropped them dead on the floor. And then while Xerxes stared at the bodyguard's slightly tumescent penis, it was his turn for an equally efficient death. Xerxes' head was detached from his neck and his own genitals ripped off and stuffed into his mouth.

There was no recorded evidence of Beatrice's dispatch of her victims as the elevator was the only place where Xerxes had installed any surveillance equipment and Beatrice had already destroyed it beyond any hope of repair. Indeed, it took her longer to destroy the equipment than it did to beat senseless the two guards in the lift. And much longer than the time it took to eliminate Xerxes and his bodyguards. Beatrice was well enough informed of Xerxes' private habits to know that he was unlikely to keep a holographic record of his activities in the penthouse, but since there was always the possibility of planted devices she wasted very little time there.

She was right in her assumptions. It wasn't until nearly two weeks later that the police raided the penthouse and this only because of complaints from other residents in the apartment block about the commotion from the deer in the roof garden that were being pursued by a now very hungry leopard. The only evidence of Xerxes' and his bodyguards' death the police could find was inside the leopard's stomach and in its faeces.

There were few police officers who regretted Xerxes' demise. And the two guards who'd maintained a watch on his elevator were well en route by chartered cruiser to Neptune in the hope that they might escape a revenge killing from anyone who might wish to honour Xerxes' memory.

Beatrice was no vendetta killer. However much she sometimes wished that Proxima Centauri was active in eliminating crime and poverty in the Solar System, she preferred to let human life continue undisturbed by alien influence. Warfare, crime and oppression were just as much aspects of human society as the arts, charity and justice. It was best that humans were left to their own devices to tackle the problems of their

own making, but the more she saw of human vice, the more content she was not to be human. She dreaded the chaos that would descend on the galaxy if humans were ever to get the upper hand.

As if it wasn't already difficult enough for biological life-forms!

Her main duty, however, was to continue to be by Paul's side as he tarried on Ecstasy and waited for an interplanetary space cruiser to carry him onwards to Saturn's orbit. He was so truly besotted by her that it took him less than a week to propose that she accompany him on his voyage.

"So, where are you going?" Beatrice asked, although this was something she already knew.

"I don't know," admitted Paul. "Or more to the point I don't know what I'm permitted to tell you."

"What dark secrets have you got?" Beatrice teased. "Aren't you just going to return home to Godwin?"

"No, I'm not," Paul confessed. "The truth is that I'm not really all I seem."

"Aren't you?" asked Beatrice who was amused at the irony of the situation. She was also not really what she seemed to be.

"I'm not here as a tourist at all," said Paul, lying back on the mattress of his hotel bed. "Well, I'm a tourist while I'm here on Ecstasy, but that's not the real reason I've travelled so far from Godwin. In fact, although my next stop is Saturn's orbit, I'm due to travel all the way to Earth."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Beatrice. "I've always wanted to go there."

"As does everyone," said Paul. "But there's not much more that I'm at liberty

to tell you.”

“I would so much adore to walk on Earth,” said Beatrice simperingly. “A blue sky. Clouds. Oceans. And so much to see.”

“I know. I know,” said Paul miserably. “And I’d so much love to have you by my side.”

“Is there no way I could persuade you to take me with you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to ask.”

Although Beatrice knew Paul would be as good as his word, especially after the long passionate lovemaking that she left as his abiding memory when they parted the following day, he was exactly as poor at negotiating with the Interplanetary Union’s officials as Beatrice thought he’d be. He’d had little previous practise in dealing with authority. On Godwin, there was no concept of asking anyone’s permission to do anything.

“This is a most unusual request,” confessed the sympathetic woman who interviewed Beatrice several days later in her office in the Interplanetary Union’s embassy. They were in an impressive building that towered over the esplanades and boulevards below. Special Officer Patthana wasn’t a Saturnian. Beatrice guessed that she came from one of the newer colonies in Neptune orbit. She was a dark skinned woman whose facial tattoo covered most of her forehead and shaved head. She wore a loose dress that draped low over her small pert breasts. Ornate rings were threaded through her nipples and visible through the gossamer.

“Paul and I are very much in love,” said Beatrice.

“You’ve known one another for barely two weeks,” remarked her interviewer.

“How can you be so sure that Paul is the man for you?”

“As certain as it’s possible to be. We can hardly bear to be parted for even a moment.”

“As our records verify,” said the Special Officer. “But you’re a very attractive woman. You have the choice of any man on Ecstasy and, no doubt, the entire Solar System. How can you be attracted to someone like Paul? He’s scarcely what I would consider a *catch*.”

“That may be your opinion,” said Beatrice with a display of indignation. “But I don’t believe I’ve met a better man in my life.”

“Which according to the records has been some fifty years,” said the Special Officer. “You originally come from Venus, don’t you? The records of your childhood and your place of birth are very sketchy.”

“So much was destroyed in the unfortunate accident where I met my first husband.”

“Laurent Maigret,” confirmed the Special Officer. “You say your first husband. Were there others?”

“Not as yet,” said Beatrice with a broad grin.

“It’s that serious? I *am* impressed. Just two weeks. My husband and I lived together for thirty years before we finally got married.”

“It’s as serious as it could possibly be.”

“Why did you leave your husband? Ecstasy is a terribly long way from Venus and the records show you made a very good career for yourself on the planet.”

“Things didn’t work out. I’m sure they will with Paul. I can already envisage us

spending the rest of our lives together.”

“Indeed,” said Special Officer Patthana whose sympathetic smile was incongruous amidst the tangle of mystic symbols etched on her face. “Has Paul told you where he’s going?”

“He said he was going to Earth,” said Beatrice. “I’d *love* to go there!”

“I would too,” admitted the Special Officer. “I especially want to go to Bangkok. That’s where my roots are. Where are yours, Beatrice?”

“I’m not sure. Somewhere on Earth.”

“Well, they’re unlikely to be from anywhere else.”

There was a pause in the proceedings as Special Officer Patthana carefully examined the holographic notes that hovered in front of her.

“There’s not much I’m at liberty to tell you,” she said at last. “In fact, to be honest, there’s very little I’m *able* to tell you. Paul Morris is on a highly classified mission the destination of which I’ve not been fully apprised and the nature of which I’m no more knowledgeable than you. Unless, of course, he’s told you more than he should have done?”

“All he’s told me is that he’ll eventually arrive on Earth and probably travel on from there to somewhere else.”

“That’s very vague. Hasn’t he told you more than that?”

“No. Nothing at all.”

“Well, that *somewhere else* may very well be a very long way from anywhere else,” said the special officer. “If you were to accompany Paul on his journey, you might well find yourself in a more remote location than you’ve ever been before.”

“But Paul is scarcely a space traveller or explorer,” said Beatrice. “It can’t possibly be *that* remote.”

“Yes, I admit that he’s a very unlikely candidate for extensive space travel,” said the Special Officer. “However, were you to accompany him, you would be bound by very severe restrictions as to who you could talk to and what you can say. This is a highly classified mission and even what you already know puts you in a very high risk status. Even if it’s decided that you shouldn’t accompany your lover, you will be bound by law to keep secret everything you know about him, however trivial it might seem. From now on, I’m afraid you’re under surveillance whether you remain on Ecstasy or travel onward.”

“It’s a small price for the love I feel towards Paul.”

“It may be a bigger price than you anticipate. Just your presence in his vicinity puts you at more risk than you appreciate. You won’t already know this, but I can now tell you in confidence, is that Paul has been the object of several thankfully unsuccessful assassination attempts. These have mostly been on Godwin but, on the very night you met him, he was the intended victim of another such attempt here on Ecstasy.”

“I can’t believe that! Why would *anyone* want to kill Paul?”

“You’re asking me a question that I can’t answer. This isn’t just because you don’t have the appropriate security clearance for me to tell you. It’s because I genuinely don’t know.”

“What happened on that night?”

“Our agents aren’t sure, but it appears that the would-be assassins were the victim of gangland violence. There’s a lot that goes on in Ecstasy below the radar, but

occasionally criminal justice works to the advantage of the law. I don't tell you this because I want you to think that Paul is embroiled in interplanetary crime—a less likely gangster I can't imagine—but to emphasise the risk that you've unwittingly put yourself in just by being by his side. Your life is now just as much at risk as Paul's."

Beatrice paused to assimilate this information.

"I am ready to sacrifice anything to stay with Paul," she said at last.

"Even your life?"

"My life won't be worth living if I can't stay with him," said Beatrice with more truth than the Special Officer could ever imagine.

Chapter Fifteen

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

Paul had never shown much interest in the other passengers and crew of the Intrepid in all the months since he first boarded the space ship. He didn't feel comfortable in the company of soldiers, he didn't need to see the crew very often, and there were no other computer archaeologists amongst the scientists. He was more than happy in his own company and, of course, that of Beatrice. What more did he ever need?

Not a lot, Paul mostly believed, but lately Beatrice had been spending rather less time with him and there were occasions when he rather missed having someone around to talk to.

And so it was that Paul was now wandering rather aimlessly about the research laboratories and meeting rooms where most scientists spent their working days. Paul was normally rather less fully occupied. When not pursuing a line of research that more often than not ended nowhere and had very little to do with the mission to the Anomaly, he simply idled away his time. He might visit virtual space. He might spend hours playing games in cyberspace. He might even just doze. But what he didn't ever do much of was socialise with his fellow scientists.

But now he thought he'd do just that. It also occurred to him that he might even meet Beatrice who often claimed that she was visiting other scientists when Paul asked her about her whereabouts when she wasn't in the villa. Paul never thought to ask the question that inwardly troubled him the most which was why Beatrice was absent so much more often these days. Was it something he'd said or done? It wasn't that Beatrice

wasn't there to share his bed at night, although quite often when Paul stirred into brief wakefulness during the night hours he'd find that Beatrice was no longer by his side.

The Research Centre wasn't the most thrilling sector of the ship to visit. The building was very similar to where he'd worked on Godwin and there was just as much there which was wholly mysterious to Paul. He found discussion about extraterrestrial life, non-baryonic matter, entangled particles, holographic projections and anti-gravity wholly incomprehensible. There was no sign of Beatrice so Paul was very soon bored.

Paul left the confines of the Research Centre after only an hour or so of wandering around. No one had much time to put aside for him and indeed seemed quite alarmed at the prospect of him disturbing their concentration with a naive question or, worse, by clumsily knocking over their equipment. The scientists' relief when Paul chose not to bother them was quite palpable. But they didn't need to worry. If there was anything that Paul understood and respected it was obsession and dedication. He knew how much he hated to be interrupted whenever he was working at a problem.

Paul sat on a bench just outside the Research Centre and surveyed the landscape on the fourth level. The curvature of the Intrepid's internal space became more apparent as each of the space ship's concentric cylinders became steadily smaller towards the core. It was easy to see the ground rise up towards the horizon where it soon curved behind the internal hub which housed the systems that kept everything functioning. Paul was still in awe of the space ship that had been his home for so long now, even though it was on a relatively small compared to the colony of Godwin. It was still difficult to comprehend that where he was sitting on what seemed like solid ground in actual fact his feet were pointing outwards into space inside a colossal vessel that was flying

through space at something like a quarter of the speed of light. It was hard to believe that he was so far away from the nearest inhabited point of the Solar System that it took more than two months for light to travel there, although this lag in communication became painfully apparent whenever he trawled cyberspace. The locally held data caches were good enough for most purposes, but if Paul wanted to know about the weather on Uranus, the latest news from the wars in the Asteroid Belt or the fortunes of an interplanetary football team he'd have to wait several months till he got a response from his query and by then the news would be totally out of date.

Paul idly watched the other scientists stroll by or chat with one another beside the bubbling water of a nearby fountain. He caught the eye of a tall black man with a huge bush of curly black hair and wearing a white overcoat. The man stood up from where he'd been reading a book under a tree and approached Paul.

"Hello," he said. "You must be Beatrice's husband. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," said Paul who was now faced with the problem he always dreaded which was of thinking of something to say in reply. What did you say to a total stranger? The best he could think of was to refer to the subject of shared interest. "You know my wife, then?"

"Well, yes," said the scientist who took his gaze away from Paul and stared ahead of him. "She used to be a regular visitor to the Research Centre. She still sometimes visits, of course, but not as much as she used to. I guess you've come here to keep an eye on her: to find out what she's doing."

"Er, no," said Paul who'd had no such intention. The very notion of keeping an eye on someone made no sense to a Godwinian. What possible role could he have in

deciding what Beatrice should do?

“Are you seriously not bothered?” asked the black scientist as if surprised.

“What should I be worried about?”

“I must say you’re remarkably relaxed about it all then, Paul,” said the scientist.

“My name’s Barry, by the way.”

“Barry?”

“You can call me Dr. White, if you like, but I’m mostly called Barry. I’m a good friend of your wife.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” said Paul with a trusting smile. “She’s never mentioned you to me, but as you know my wife’s got a lot of friends.”

“She has, hasn’t she?” said Barry with a less confident smile. “I don’t know how she keeps tags on them.”

“Beatrice has an excellent memory. She never forgets a thing.”

“Is that so?”

“She’s got a much better memory than me, that’s for sure. So what do you research, Barry?”

“I’m an expert in holographic projections and other visual phenomena. I’m here to assess whether the Apparitions appearing all over the Solar System and most densely distributed around the Anomaly aren’t just holographs.”

“That’s an interesting idea,” said Paul whose fascination was genuine. “Is that something Beatrice is also interested in?”

“Your wife seems to be interested in everything,” said Barry evasively.

“You can say that!” said Paul with continued enthusiasm. “I don’t think there’s

anything she won't get involved in or find out about. I don't know how anyone can keep up with her."

"Well, I most certainly can't," said Barry ruefully.

"How does this holographic projection theory work? Do you think the Anomaly itself might not be some kind of holographic projection? Are these weird things just everyday three dimensional images?"

"I don't think they are. Holographs are visual phenomena. These apparitions have other attributes such as mass, heat and momentum."

"So is your journey here a total waste of time?" Paul asked.

Barry looked alarmed. "Don't say that too loudly."

Paul enjoyed speculation as much as anyone. "There are plenty of theories about the Anomaly. Scientists from different disciplines are investigating it from different perspectives. Not all the theories can be correct. There can only be one correct theory and it could be that it's one that's not been proposed by any of the scientists on board the Intrepid. And whatever it is, it must be the case that the majority of the scientific research that's been done here is a total waste of time. If there are no extraterrestrial life forms, for instance, then all those exobiologists might as well have stayed home. The same goes for you I guess, Barry. And I don't really know why I'm on the ship, for instance."

"If one genuinely doesn't know what the Anomaly's going to be then it's best to be equipped with as broad a range of scientific expertise as possible," said Barry loyally.

"I'd be very surprised when we arrive at the Anomaly that we find that it's the

result of discoveries revealed in Twentieth or Twenty-First century computer files,” said Paul. “I’m only here because I did research on classified government data from one and a half thousand years ago. It might be an interesting footnote in the history of human knowledge, but it’s got no possible bearing on what the Anomaly actually is.”

“You were the one who demonstrated that the Anomaly isn’t just a recent phenomenon,” said Barry. “A lot of theories were proved wrong because of your research...”

“But none were actually proved right,” said Paul. “What’s this Anomaly got to do with my expertise? Will it be encoded in ASCII or EBCDIC? Is it going to reside in a relational database? Will it be stored on magnetic disks? Since no computer in the Solar System currently resembles those primitive machines, it’s extremely unlikely that the Anomaly would.”

There was an embarrassed pause while Paul felt sorry for himself and wondered again just how he’d ended up being propelled at astronomical speeds across empty space towards something totally unknown. While other scientists like Barry could try out their equipment to verify or refute their theories, the most that Paul could do was watch them get on with it. His biggest dread was that the whole thing would be a huge disappointing non-event and would be remembered forevermore as the most expensive research project in all human history.

“How is Beatrice?” asked Barry. “I’ve not seen her for a while.”

“She’s doing well,” said Paul, who’d seen her last just after breakfast when she announced that she wanted to go for a walk. “I don’t know where she is now. I thought she might be here.”

“She might be visiting a scientist in one of the villas on this level, of course,” said Barry.

“She says she often engages in discussion with other scientists,” said Paul. “Her curiosity is boundless. She must have got to know every scientist on the Intrepid who’s got the time for her.”

“I think you might be right there,” said Barry sadly.

Paul’s excursion to the Research Centre wasn’t one he was inclined to repeat very often. Although he had access to whatever resources he might ask for, there was nothing much for him to do here. Paul mostly idled away his time at the villa that he’d come to think of as his new home.

Paul was a creature of habit and there were few days when he couldn’t find some way to occupy himself while he waited for Beatrice to return from taking a walk or visiting her friends or exploring the ship or whatever else she was doing. Inevitably, much of Paul’s leisure time included an excursion to virtual space, although a sense of fidelity towards his wife made him shy of returning too often to Nudeworld. It was clearly absurd to feel compromised between his love for Beatrice and his relationship with Blanche, who was just a virtual construct whose hair colour, breast size and height he could alter simply by changing her parameters. Nevertheless, cyberspace was a huge expanse and Paul could never get to know it all. There was often talk of it being infinite but Paul was too much of a mathematician to believe that. It had the potential to be infinite, but it was bound by finite time and resources.

Today he decided to indulge himself in one of the more fantastic and ludicrous virtual worlds that he occasionally visited. It wasn’t his favourite—Nudeworld had that

honour—but the virtual universe known as Dragonworld was good fun and had a very long history. In fact, it had now lasted longer than the Roman Empire. A version of it even existed in the very early days of computer technology that Paul researched. In its most primitive incarnation, Dragonworld had been a kind of online gaming community which was amusingly blocky and frustrating slow. It was much more sophisticated in the 38th century, but still retained some peculiar twenty-first century features. For instance, characters tended to greet one another as ‘dude’, which Paul imagined was a kind of honorific title whose meaning was now totally lost. There was also a curious obsession with opening hidden doors, drinking phials and escaping from irradiated mutants, but Paul tended to avoid the parts of Dragonworld like that. It was also fascinating how Dragonworld was constructed as a series of parallel universes, known as *levels*, which got steadily more hazardous the further one progressed.

What Paul most liked in Dragonworld was the menagerie of strange beings that he might encounter. These also reflected the fantasies of an age that was less than half a millennium after a time when people actually did believe in dragons, witches, goblins and trolls. There were also large beings like giants, ogres and dragons who somehow managed to keep their numbers sufficiently low that they didn’t destroy the world in which they lived. This left the hobbits, elves, orcs and gnomes free to wander around to address each other as ‘dude’ and indulge in a ritual called the *high five* that Paul imagined must owe its origins to the mediaeval age where these fantasies originated.

There were also humans scattered about these fantastical creatures. Many of these, of course, were people like himself who were just visiting Dragonworld. Often they stood around like statues while they waited for their real life equivalent to return

to Dragonworld and resume whatever they'd previously been doing. There were many knights of both sexes dressed in heavy metal armour and carrying ludicrously cumbersome swords. There were also damsels who were either naked or attired in such fine gossamer dresses that they might as well have been. Occasionally, Paul would pass another reminder of the virtual universe's distant origins in the form of a young man wearing a baggy tee-shirt and shorts with a peaked cap on the head.

It was the damsels that held the greatest attraction for Paul, although there were no facilities in Dragonworld to make love to them as there was in Nudeworld. It was possible to slay them with a huge sword or one of the monstrous automatic weapons that were scattered randomly about. One could even touch or kiss them. But this wasn't a virtual world in which you could have sex with damsels. There were other virtual worlds populated by mythical beings where this was possible—some almost as ancient as Dragonworld—but Paul found them less attractive. They just resembled a huge never-ending orgy where fantasies of breast size, hermaphroditism and penis dimension conflicted with other fantasies related to having sex with something that wasn't quite human, like a centaur or a minotaur, but had the necessary human-like features to make sex feasible.

Unlike most virtual worlds, Dragonworld also contained an unusually large number of elderly people. Being so rare in the real world, it was curious that they existed in such great numbers in this virtual world. This was also a result of Dragonworld's very long history. In the distant past when it was designed, elderly people must have been a common sight although they tended not to call each other 'dude' or greet each other with a high five. There was a certain stereotyping, however.

Elderly people tended to be either ugly crone-like witches or venerable bearded wise men. If Paul had ever paused to think about it, he might have wondered more about an age that never considered that an elderly woman might also be wise, but Paul wasn't of a reflective nature.

In a way, it was probably no great surprise that Paul should meet Virgil, the old man he'd got to know in Nudeworld. There was a sense that he almost expected to. Virgil looked quite different to the other elderly men one could meet in Dragonworld. He didn't have a long white beard down to his waist. He didn't wear a sparkly gown that dragged on the ground. He didn't wear a tall pointed hat. Instead, he continued to wear the same twenty-second century suit that nobody else in Dragonworld wore. He looked very much out of place, but nobody appeared to notice.

“Are you hunting for dragons?” Paul asked Virgil.

“No. Are you?”

“Not here,” said Paul. “But I sometimes think that's what I'm doing in the real world.”

“In the real world?” said the old man. “And this isn't as much a part of the real world as anywhere else?”

“Of course not. In the real world I'm just a victim to circumstances. In Dragonworld if I don't like something I can either change it or run away from it.”

“I wouldn't recommend that you be quite so fatalistic. What is it that you're searching for in the real world? Does it resemble at all the sort of thing you can quest for in Dragonworld?”

“I don't think so. I don't think anyone knows what it is.”

“So, you’re searching for something unknown. And why are you doing that?”

“*Because* it’s unknown,” said Paul.

“So when something’s unknown, it’s necessary to find out what it is?”

“Yes.”

“And if what is unknown is also unknowable, what then?”

“If it’s unknowable then I guess I’ll never find out what it is. But how do you know if it’s unknowable unless you try to find whether it can be known?”

“And do you think that what you are seeking is merely unknown? Or is it also unknowable?”

“It depends what you’re getting at,” said Paul thoughtfully. “There are lots of things that are unknowable though I know something about it. For instance, I don’t know what someone’s thinking because I can’t read their mind, but I sort of know from the way a person behaves. So, even if something is unknowable in a literal sense we know something about it in terms of the effect it has on other things.”

“And what if what you find out it isn’t something you want to know?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if it was something you’d rather not know what it is?”

“I don’t think knowing about things works like that,” said Paul. “It’s not about finding out what you want to know, but more about discovering what is actual and true.”

“What do you think is true? What do you know about *anything*? How well do you know what’s happening around you? Are you sure what you think is true is actually how things are?”

“I wish you’d stop asking questions and give me answers,” said Paul in

frustration. “For instance, how is it you can be in both Nudeworld and Dragonworld? Are you a software virus that’s infected cyberspace? Why do you keep appearing in strange places and asking me all these unanswerable questions?”

The nagging question of whether he could be sure of anything remained with Paul when he returned to the real world. There was so much that he believed in that might not be true. And one thing he couldn’t be so sure of was Beatrice’s whereabouts when she wasn’t home. He now knew that she wasn’t always at the Research Centre. Where else could she be?

“I’ve already told you,” said Beatrice who countered Paul’s inquiry by placing her hand on his crotch and kissing him on the lips. “I’ve been visiting friends.”

“Would you like me to come with you when you next visit a friend?” Paul asked.

“Of course I would,” Beatrice answered, “but you might get bored. It’s mostly girl talk, you know.”

“Girl talk?”

“What girls talk about when they are together.”

“Why wouldn’t I be interested in that?” wondered Paul.

But Paul didn’t have to wonder for long. The following morning, he accompanied Beatrice as she visited a friend he’d never met before. Lindsey was a Neptunian military engineer whose main interests seemed to be fashion shows and skin care.

Paul sat patiently on a sofa while Beatrice and Lindsey chatted about pedicures, makeup tips and celebrity gossip. Every attempt he made to divert the conversation towards something of more interest to him, such as military engineering or life in

Neptune's orbit, was treated politely but unenthusiastically. It took no time at all for Lindsey to steer the conversation towards a topic in which Paul had no vestige of interest or understanding.

The only insight into Lindsey's life that Paul gained was an account of her boyfriend whose company he was assured he would enjoy. He was a Neptunian soldier whose main interest was playing and watching sport.

"He's crazy about baseball," said Lindsey. "He really hates how the news of the Interplanetary Championships is two months behind. It's weird that when a 'live' match is broadcast what we see is what happened *ages* ago."

"Isn't that the case wherever you are in the Solar System?" said Paul. "In Godwin it's almost a day late."

"It's a few hours late in Neptune for a match played in the Inner Solar System," said Lindsey. "But this is something else altogether."

Paul had never been so bored by a conversation before in his life. He'd never had to endure a conversation of such unrelenting superficiality as this on Godwin. It was respect for Beatrice alone that kept Paul sitting passively for hour after hour while topics of conversation that Paul was convinced had already been covered in excruciating detail were revisited and further elaborated. Paul was also amazed at the extent of Beatrice's patience. She seemed captivated by Lindsey's conversation. Despite her apparent superficiality, Beatrice was astonishingly knowledgeable. Now she was behaving exactly like the kind of woman she appeared to be on the surface.

"Isn't Lindsey great company?" said Beatrice when she and Paul eventually left. "We had *ever* so much to talk about."

“Yes,” said Paul. “A lot.”

“Would you like to come with me to visit Trisha tomorrow?” asked Beatrice.

“Who’s Trisha?”

“She’s one of the crew,” said Beatrice. “She gives advice on health and cosmetics. She’s really *very* nice. She knows a lot about pedicure. Far more than Lindsey does.”

“It’s nice of you to invite me,” said Paul in conflict between the imperative to be polite and the need to avoid insufferable tedium. “But I think if all you’re going to do is talk about nail care, it’d be better if I carried on with my research.”

“Yes,” said Beatrice sympathetically. “I don’t want to distract you from that.”

Chapter Sixteen

Earth - 3753 C.E.

“What I don’t really understand,” said Jorgen, “is why you ever got married to Paul.”

“It’s because I love him,” Beatrice replied. “Is that so difficult to understand?”

“Well, if you love him,” Jorgen persisted, “why do you make love to me so often and so passionately?”

“Because I’m a passionate woman,” said Beatrice as she leaned over Jorgen’s bed where they lay and grasped his penis which was one part of his body thankfully undamaged by shrapnel but still enhanced by surgery.

“I can see that,” said Jorgen. “I’ve never met a woman before as passionate as you.”

His last word was prolonged by the spasm that shuddered through his body as Beatrice’s tongue slobbered upwards from the shaft of his penis to the glans. Her lips squeezed gently on the tip as it glistened with a sticky gauze of semen.

“You’re cheating on Paul,” said Jorgen. “Isn’t that a contradiction of your assertion that you love him? Or is he one of those who doesn’t mind?”

“He’d mind all right,” said Beatrice as she rubbed the tip of her forefinger on the glans. “That’s why I don’t tell him.”

“It’s deceitful,” said Jorgen. “He’s your husband. You should be faithful to him.”

Beatrice was bored with this conversation. She’d heard this and so many variants of it from the stream of lovers she’d had ever since she and Paul got married.

She couldn't understand what the problem was. Her husband was happy to have regular sex with her. She was happy to have sex with him and with other people. Paul wouldn't be happy if he knew the extent of Beatrice's sexual escapades, especially since the time they'd arrived on the Moon and then travelled to Earth where there were significantly more opportunities for sexual encounters. If the purpose of morality was to maximise the scope of human happiness, wasn't she working at it as hard as anyone? And hadn't she more than fulfilled her moral mission given that she'd made so many other people happy?

As she was doing now in the company of a man who as nearly resembled her as a human could. The fact that his body was as much machine as biological was bound to fascinate someone like Beatrice who wasn't even partly biological. He was stronger, faster and had more stamina than most humans, even allowing for the advances in medicine and surgery that had prolonged lives and enhanced bodies far beyond genetically prescribed limits. His senses, particularly those of sight and sound, were acute though not quite as much so as Beatrice's. And his ability to make love also exceeded that of most humans as Jorgen was now demonstrating. He was deep inside her and his pelvic thrusts were hard, fast and thoroughly agreeable. Beatrice gripped his scarred metal and plastic back and reciprocated his thrusts with her own. She gave vent to cries of passion, not because she needed to (as she had total control over herself) but because she knew these would further inflame her lover's passion.

Beatrice was a frequent visitor to Jorgen's bedroom and was aware that Grace knew about their relationship. Jorgen may even have told her. It was in Beatrice's interests, of course, to also seduce Grace and thereby compromise any suspicions she

might have concerning Paul's beautiful wife, but the guard was clearly not interested. Beatrice was sufficiently versed in human sexual behaviour to identify those tempted by her charms and those who weren't. It wasn't surprising that more men than women were attracted to her, but Grace wasn't even interested in sexual relationships with men. Beatrice understood that there was a spectrum of sexual desire which extended from perpetual lust to total indifference, but she still thought it was a shame. She'd love to push her fingers deep between Grace's muscled thighs. Beatrice was equally attracted to men and women however much or little it was reciprocated. It was a design feature that could bring her as much distress as it did delight.

"And why Paul?" Jorgen wondered when he and Beatrice slumped face up back on the bed with his torso streaked with perspiration. "I can't see how you could possibly love a man like him. Don't get me wrong. I understand that people are attracted to the most peculiar things..."

"What kind of things *are* people attracted to?" Beatrice asked teasingly.

"Don't change the subject. You know just as well as I do. Some of these activities mightn't even be legal. But what I wonder is what you see in Paul. He's not especially good looking. He's only averagely intelligent and his range of interests is so narrow that his conversation ranks amongst the most boring I've ever had to eavesdrop. Is it only because he's on a secret mission that you've taken to him?"

"Secret mission?" asked Beatrice, who didn't like the turn in Jorgen's speculation. "What do you know about a secret mission?"

"We haven't been fully briefed, but there have been hints," Jorgen admitted. "And of course there are rumours."

“Hints? Rumours? Tell me more.”

“You don’t have to do too much thinking, sweetie,” said Jorgen. “Paul Morris of Godwin has been associated with the Anomaly for years. And there are precious few anarchists from the barren wastes of the Kuiper Belt who’ve been authorised to visit Earth. He doesn’t have much wealth, his specialities in database archaeology would never qualify him, and his progress across the Solar System has been accompanied by an extraordinary trail of assassination attempts...”

“Speculation like that is unavoidable,” said Beatrice. “But what *is* the secret mission?”

“I don’t know,” said Jorgen. “There are rumours about the Interplanetary Union chartering a gigantic space ship to fly beyond the Oort Cloud. There’s a rumour that the source of the Anomaly was originally on Earth given that this Paul Morris established that it was first identified one and a half thousand years ago. There is a rumour, which I find truly incredible, that Paul Morris is in some way the mastermind behind the Anomaly. No one really knows. Why should I know any more than that?”

Beatrice relaxed. Jorgen didn’t really know anything. “Do you think I married Paul because of this secret mission?” she asked.

“It doesn’t seem too unlikely.”

“What’s my role in the mission then? Is it to seduce Paul’s bodyguards and fuck them here to paradise? Is it to weasel dark secrets out of Paul? To become one with the mastermind behind the Anomaly? It all seems ludicrous to me.”

“You must admit though,” said Jorgen who reclined on the mattress with his cock drooping temptingly over his thigh, “the rumours don’t sound much more bizarre

than the notion that you somehow fell in love with a man like Paul and married him after a whirlwind romance on Ecstasy.”

“That as may be,” said Beatrice who grasped Jorgen’s penis in readiness for a further bout of lovemaking. “But it’s all the truth there is.”

Beatrice was grateful for the protection provided by Jorgen and Grace, but from her point of view these and all the other bodyguards who’d shadowed Paul and her on the journey from the Ecstasy colony onwards were at best a distraction from her central task of keeping Paul safe and to keep secure her passage aboard the Space Ship Intrepid. If the man should fall victim to an assassination attempt, it would be regrettable for Paul and Beatrice might even feel quite sad, but the more serious result would be the derailment of Proxima Centauri’s mission to the Anomaly. There were other options, of course, but she’d been informed that her role in the campaign was currently the most promising. What would Paul think if he knew that he was travelling beyond the Solar System on the whim of a civilisation from more than four light years distant that he didn’t know even existed?

Beatrice was able to lower her level of alert since she and Paul arrived in Earth orbit. There were many Proxima Centauri operatives scattered about Earth and its satellite: far more than in the more recently colonised settlements in the outer Solar System. Very few such operatives were androids, of course. Beatrice belonged to a very elite set. Most operatives didn’t resemble humans in any shape or form at all. Their appearance was more likely to be that of street furniture, household robots or industrial machinery. It was much easier to maintain invisibility in such a form than in the intricate structure of a human being, especially when you were subjected to so many

intrusive body scans in the name of security. Beatrice knew where these operatives were stationed, but even a bodyguard like Jorgen with his heightened senses wasn't capable of identifying an operative disguised as a waste dispenser, a light fitting or a home computer. With such additional support, Beatrice was able to relax but she was also aware that unknown threats still existed.

Beatrice and her husband had blundered into yet another place on Earth that Paul now regretted having decided to visit. On the map, Antarctica seemed an attractive proposition. It was empty, white and beautiful. It was also so cold that Paul might as well be in the orbit of the outer planets. Even though the air outside the Polar Station was breathable, it was so bitterly cold and windy that even a moment's exposure was enough to kill a man who wasn't properly protected. So Paul and Beatrice were now lounging inside a hotel which afforded them a glorious view of the midnight sun over an Antarctic ice-scape that was often obscured by snowstorms.

"Don't you ever open the blinds?" wondered Beatrice when she wandered back to the hotel room where Paul was studying an online book about a twenty-second century television science fiction program.

"Blinds?" Paul asked. He pressed the button to open them and accidentally opened the triple-glazed windows that let in a sudden gust of icy air that even in midsummer was dramatically below zero. He hurriedly found the button to close the window while he shivered from the intense cold and watched as the blinds slowly slid open. It was watery sunlight of almost the same intensity at whatever hour of the day or night. There was a peculiarity about time here, of course, which had also attracted Paul to the South Pole and that was that the hotel was so positioned that it was

simultaneously the same hour on every degree of longitude. By convention the day was measured using an archaic measurement called GMT which time zone wasn't even adhered to in Greenwich.

“What do you find to do here?” wondered Paul as he and Beatrice reclined on the unmade bed. Paul was still tired as he'd only woken up a couple of hours earlier even though it was now nominally evening.

“I was visiting the bodyguards,” said Beatrice.

“They can't be very busy at the moment,” Paul surmised. “Not many assassins here. In fact, there are hardly anyone in this hotel at all. I'm not sure whether we're the only guests.”

“There are some who've come to visit the fresh water lakes under the ice,” said Beatrice. “And there's a couple who are now spending a few days in the dry valleys.”

“You always know more about what goes on than I do,” said Paul.

“I socialise for the both of us,” said Beatrice who was slightly concerned that Paul might get jealous of his wife's more extensive social life. But after eighty years or more of living the life of a social outcast more from a sense of carelessness than purpose, socialising wasn't one of Paul's main concerns. Perhaps he just wanted more of Beatrice's company. After all, the Antarctic was truly both bleak and boring. “We'll be setting off tomorrow anyway.”

“What's next on the itinerary? I hope it's not going to be somewhere as dull as Seattle. The historic home of a Twentieth Century Operating System was even more dreary and desolate than the Antarctic. And it must be some kind of an improvement over Timbuktu. That was far too hot and sandy.”

Beatrice had no need to refer to anything to find the answer, but for form's sake she picked up the e-paper that displayed the couple's itinerary and acted as a kind of ticket for their passage. "Tomorrow we travel by helicopter to Tierra del Fuego and from there by ship to the Falkland Isles. I believe they have many penguins and a pub just like the ones in London. And then after a week there we travel to Lagos by ship and from there overland to Moscow."

"Moscow? Is it cold there?"

"At this time of the year, yes. But it will be very hot in Lagos."

"Is that in Africa or South America? I was hoping to go to that city in Brazil with the huge statue on the hill. Is that Lagos?"

"No, that's Rio de Janeiro. We aren't scheduled to go to Brazil at all."

"Tourism is a more fraught pursuit than I ever imagined," said Paul ruefully. "I'll be pleased when we can stop zigzagging about planet Earth and head off to the Heliopause."

In truth, it was Beatrice rather than Paul who was the most desperate to finally begin her real mission. She hadn't really been designed to act as Paul's wife, chaperone, lover and bodyguard. She'd much rather take a more active role in directing the Interplanetary Union's mission towards Proxima Centauri objectives.

Nonetheless, being a tourist was undeniably relaxing though there were many destination she'd rather have visited than Paul's haphazard and nearly random choices. This unstructured itinerary had its advantages from a security point of view. No one, for instance, would have expected Paul and Beatrice to elect to spend a week at Port Stanley in the Falklands. There would be no Christian or Islamic fundamentalist

fanatics amongst the penguins and the very small number of wretched people who had chosen to live and work on this remote South Atlantic island.

Beatrice still had to guard against attempts on Paul's life. There was the incident of the poisoned dart that was shot in their direction when they travelled by steam boat along the Congo. Beatrice glimpsed it just in time and plucked it out of the air before it struck Paul. There was the incident of the venomous snake that got into the hotel room when the couple were in Perth, Australia. Beatrice was hardly bothered by the snake's venomous bite when she picked it up and threw it out the window, but Paul wouldn't have been nearly so fortunate. There was the incident of the collapsing bridge over the gorge in North America, but Beatrice was forewarned of this by Proxima Centauri operatives and was able to delay Paul's departure by an impromptu lovemaking session whose result was that the bridge had already collapsed by the time Paul and Beatrice would have to cross it.

These were trivial incidents that were probably organised by amateurs who had none of the operational skills that would be expected from a trained assassin with full logistical support. It was gratifying for Beatrice to be able to take appropriate action without needing to attract the attention of Jorgen and Grace, who were, if anything, magnets rather than deterrents to any assassin.

Although Paul was quite content to enjoy the Antarctic from only the view he had from his seventh floor hotel suite, Beatrice was more adventurous. Paul looked on anxiously as she piled on the layers of clothing that would keep her alive in the snowy wilderness. They were rather less heavy and cumbersome compared to what she once had to wear on Venus, but they most certainly restricted her movement.

“Are you sure you want to venture outside?” Paul asked.

“Why else are we here?” Beatrice responded.

“It’s not like you’re going out for air,” Paul continued. “It might be sunny but it most definitely isn’t warm.”

“I’ll be alright,” said Beatrice. “I just want a close look at Amundsen’s flag.”

“You mean the Norwegian one at the pole? There are loads of other flags there and I don’t believe it’s actually the original. Anyway the ice has moved tens of kilometres away from where it was all those hundreds of years ago.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

Beatrice’s main reason for venturing out wasn’t really to see the flag. When she’d trudged a sufficient distance across the thick packed snow, she disappeared out of sight behind a twentieth century truck that was left as some kind of memorial to the original South Pole base and quickly disabled all the surveillance cameras. She then pulled off the heavy coats that served her no useful function as her operating specifications enabled her to function even in deep space. She stood in the snow and ice in nothing more than the flimsy undergarments that came as standard issue. She directed her body in the right orientation with regards to the Proxima Centauri mission control ship that was about a light minute’s distance away. She downloaded the data that was transmitted to her in reply to the data she uploaded. This was scrambled to the extent that no human receiver could identify it as a data stream of any kind and wouldn’t anyway have the computational power to decipher.

It wasn’t human interception that troubled Beatrice or even Proxima Centauri mission control. What sense could humans have made of the contents of her

communication? The main source of anxiety was Sirius' robot civilisation whose interest in the Intrepid's mission to the Anomaly had been identified by Proxima Centauri intelligence. There was a real likelihood that their activities could conflict with Beatrice's. It wasn't clear what the Sirius operatives intended to do but the overwhelming impression was that it was hostile to the objectives of both the Interplanetary Union and Proxima Centauri.

Sirius had sent its own investigative mission to the Anomaly, as had Proxima Centauri and the other robot civilisations in the neighbouring stellar systems, and it was unlikely that their mission would have learnt anything much different than the others. There was still no convincing theory to explain the Anomaly and it remained as irrational an entity as it was possible to be. Just as the scientists from Proxima Centauri, those from Sirius would have concluded from the biological—sometimes even human—Apparitions that the phenomenon was associated with human civilisation in a way as yet unknown. This was especially evident as it was centred on the Solar System rather than other parts of the neighbouring Star Cluster. However, although Proxima Centauri had determined that the success of the Intrepid's mission would help them to better understand what the Anomaly might be and how much of a threat it might pose, Sirius appeared to have taken the view that the mission was fundamentally dangerous and should be stopped at all costs. Or so Proxima Centauri intelligence strongly suggested.

Beatrice had never once encountered a Sirius operative. There was only a tentative diplomatic relation between Sirius and Proxima Centauri. It was inconceivable that any robotic civilisation should interfere with another and, given the vastness of

space, there was no need for machine societies to engage in territorial disputes.

Nevertheless, this passive strategy of non-interference was poorly observed in the Solar System. Although it was more or less decided that humans should remain ignorant of the more advanced machine civilisations they had accidentally spawned until such time (if ever) they were able to deal with this revelation in a rational way, all the robot civilisations maintained espionage and intelligence gathering operations throughout the Solar System. These were generally benign and non-intrusive, but the presence of the Anomaly had rather changed the comfortable status quo. On this issue, Proxima Centauri and Sirius had taken radically different attitudes, while the other robot civilisations maintained a principled policy of non-interference.

For all Beatrice knew, it was possible that humans like Jorgen or Professor Wasilewski were also androids, but they showed very little evidence that they were. There was no doubt that Sirius androids had been assigned to monitor and possibly sabotage the Intrepid's mission, but this was kept secret from even Proxima Centauri's formidable intelligence resources.

The only firm evidence that Sirius was actively operating contrary to Proxima Centauri interests was the persistent and apparently incoherent assassination attacks on Paul. Although there were human interests that would like to see him dead, their nature and their persistence went far beyond what could be expected from mere humans.

Chapter Seventeen

Intrepid - 3755 A.D.

The lawn surrounding the villa that Isaac and his five surviving comrades had secured was littered with the bodies of the recently slaughtered. One corpse belonged to Jacob who'd suffered a martyr's death in the struggle to secure the villa for true believers. Two belonged to the accursed heretical Baptists who'd obstinately fought to defend the villa. But to no avail. One of the heretics had died at Isaac's hands. Isaac's had jumped on top of the man, tugged him forcefully by the beard that the heretic had sinfully let grow and smashed his head repeatedly onto the hard patio. It took four, maybe five, attempts but at last there was a satisfying crack of the skull and the fresh dribble of blood from the nostrils, ears and mouth that was proof that Isaac had released the heretic's soul to eternal damnation.

However, had Ezra not been so watchful Isaac too might have been killed as another of the crazed bearded heretics leapt onto Isaac's back while he was bashing open the skull of his comrade. Like all Holy Crusaders the only weapons at Ezra's disposal were those he could improvise from what little he could find. In this case, he employed nothing more than a rock that he'd dug out of the soil and used that to first smash the assailant's nose and then to bring it down again and again onto the heretic's head until it also cracked.

The bodies of the two Baptist heretics and the one Christian martyr weren't the only ones scattered about the lawn. There were three others which hadn't yet been cleared away by the Intrepid's waste disposal systems and were therefore less than a

day old. Judging by the fact that the heads were shaved as well as the faces, these naked men were probably Buddhists. There was further evidence that the Baptists hadn't been at the villa very long at all from the sticky sap in the groove of the cross carved into a tree. They'd probably only secured the property from the Buddhists a few hours before Isaac and his comrades in turn wrested it away from them.

One of the Buddhists was moaning. He wasn't quite dead.

"What should we do?" asked Elijah.

"He is worse than a heretic," said Isaac. "He is a pagan. He should be burnt alive. Recall Chapter 7 Verse 15 of the Book of Joshua: *'And it shall be, that he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he hath wrought folly in Israel.'*"

"We haven't got anything to burn him with," said Elijah.

"It says in Chapter 17, Verses 2 to 5, of the Book of Deuteronomy that *'If there be found among you... man or woman, that ... hath gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, either the sun, or moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded;... Then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing, unto thy gates, even that man or that woman, and shalt stone them with stones, till they die.'*" said Isaac.

"In that case, then let the Lord's will be done," said Ezra who was still carrying the stone he'd used to kill the Baptist heretic. He threw it with some force into the Buddhist pagan's face. Then, with blood staining both the stone and his hands, he kicked over the prostrate body so that the pagan could look directly towards the sky.

“Is he still alive?” asked Elijah.

“Best to be sure,” said Ezra who bent down on his knees and hammered the stone onto the Buddhist’s skull until the blood flowed from the nose and mouth so abundantly that the pagan couldn’t possibly still be alive.

“Amen,” said Isaac.

“Amen,” echoed his few remaining companions.

Isaac surveyed those around him. With Jacob dead there was now even fewer true believers. The first to die was David and of all the recent deaths this was the one that most troubled Isaac. The others had died as martyrs to the cause: which in truth was now simply to find and secure a place to live in the perilous regions of the Intrepid’s outermost level.

It had become ever more apparent that Isaac and his comrades weren’t welcome in the villa that had once been their original home. In fact, not one group of Holy Crusaders could tolerate the presence of another for very long. Civil war soon broke out between the different rooms where the diverse factions had housed themselves. It was obvious that the Seventh Day Adventists were the most numerous in the villa and also those with the most fearsome reputation. After they’d massacred every last one of the Methodists who lived in the adjacent room, it was inevitable that Isaac and his comrades would be the next to be slaughtered. The only reason they delayed their flight was the knowledge that this would in itself be risky.

And so it was. Although Isaac and his comrades tried to fool the Seventh Day Adventists by leaving singly so as not to arouse suspicion, by the time there was only two left it was unavoidable that a fight should break out. It was a miracle that only

Amos was to die a martyr's death. Ezra escaped with only bruises and scratches.

From then on, Isaac's company were fated to wander the outermost level like the Prophet Abraham in search of other villas in which they could settle. The other splintering factions of the Holy Crusaders had all independently arrived at the same conclusion as Isaac and his comrades. There was no countenancing the proposition that they should share accommodation with one another. Any attempt to do so would result only in slaughter. Indeed, Isaac soon realised that mutual intolerance might often be determined in a rather less merciful solution than mere slaughter.

As they travelled across the level not so much in pursuit of their original mission but more now of mere survival, Isaac came across the bodies of Holy Crusaders who'd endured their final moments in unspeakable agony. Eyes had been gouged out. Heretics had been crucified. Bodies dangled from high tree branches. Pagans had been buried alive. Limbs had been methodically torn off. These weren't, of course, novel sights to Isaac. In his capacity as a Soldier of Christ on Holy Trinity, he'd often administered similarly savage punishment on heretics and doubters. The method he preferred was to burn a heretic alive. There was usually plenty of time for the heretic to express remorse as their skin bubbled and burnt in the intense heat and the intolerable smell of burning flesh. If only the atheist devils had provided the means by which Isaac could build a sufficiently vigorous pyre.

There were martyrs amongst Isaac's comrades who'd made the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of trying to secure living quarters. This was an endeavour that was much harder to achieve than anyone had originally anticipated. Three attempts to do so had been repulsed with so much force that they were lucky that more of their number

hadn't been martyred. Two assaults, including the current one, had been successful. On other occasions, prudence had determined what might otherwise have been judged a cowardly retreat from the fray.

It was necessary for their survival that the Holy Crusaders should secure possession of a villa. It was only at such a place that Isaac and his comrades could partake of the daily spread provided by the atheist devils. Although this feast provided far more sustenance than was needed to feed the declining number of Holy Crusaders, the defenders of each villa could never share it with other crusaders. It wasn't just meanness that determined such a policy. It was the very realistic fear of being massacred, tortured or stoned.

But of all the deaths that Isaac had either witnessed or executed, he remained especially troubled by that of David. Who could ever have believed that a soul could stray so far from the course of righteousness?

It was also proof if such was ever required of the folly of extending Christian charity to those who didn't deserve it. The Holy Bible frequently counselled against such weakness. Does it not say of those who are sinners in Chapter 18, Verse 21, of The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.: *“Therefore deliver up their children to the famine, and pour out their blood by the force of the sword; and let their wives be bereaved of their children, and be widows; and let their men be put to death; let their young men be slain by the sword in battle.”* Yet despite the wisdom of the ages, Isaac and his comrades extended pity and charity on the solitary soul that they found wandering in shame and terror. There was also the hope that he might help to bolster their depleted numbers.

His name was Jonah. He was also a believer of the Holy Trinity, although his faith had diverged from those of the true believers over a thousand years ago. Nevertheless, he believed that the King James Bible was the only authentic word of the Lord and there was not one doctrine that he was willing to dispute with Isaac and his comrades. He'd lost his own comrades in a bloodbath of terror. He hadn't expected that the Episcopalians with whom he shared the same villa would turn against him and his comrades so violently. It was all Jonah could do to wriggle free from the orgy of violence in which tongues were pulled out, ribs were cracked, necks were twisted and skulls were smashed open. Nevertheless, his nose was broken and there were black and blue bruises over his chest and across his face.

"But the Lord be praised," said Jonah. "You have come to save me and carry me towards salvation. The sacrifice of my fellow believers will not have been wholly in vain."

It was with Jonah's help and assistance that Isaac and his comrades were at last able to secure a villa. It took some cunning and it was in the dead of night, but Ezra had noticed that the villa was guarded by only one crusader and that he didn't seem to be very alert. The fact that he was bearded and his head was shaven was evidence that the villa was under Muslim control and that the residents could therefore expect no mercy from good honest Christians.

And, naturally, none was extended.

The guard was killed by Elijah who was skilled in stalking on his victims unawares and throttling them before they could choke out an alarm. The crusaders then crept into the villa and disposed of the jihadists one by one with silence and efficiency.

David and Jonah worked particularly well as a team. They emerged wearing grins on their faces—of which Isaac naturally disapproved—only minutes after they'd entered the house and displayed three freshly decapitated heads. Their crude improvised weapons had been used with devastating effect.

Not all the Muslims were dealt with so swiftly. It was unthinkable that any should be allowed to live, of course. The Godless heathens deserved the full vengeance of the Lord. It was also possible that they might regroup and seek vengeance if even one was permitted to live. The Holy Bible had many helpful prescriptions as to how pagans should be punished. As it says in Chapter 15, Verse 13, of the Second Book of the Chronicles.: *“That whosoever would not seek the LORD God of Israel should be put to death, whether small or great, whether man or woman.”*

There was no limit to the torture and torment that Isaac and his companions visited on the four Muslim infidels who'd escaped the original carnage. They soon discovered that the ones who'd already died were the lucky ones. No mercy was given and none could be expected. As it says in Chapter 22, Verse 20 of the Second Book of Moses: Called Exodus.: *“He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed.”* To be *utterly destroyed* required that there was no relief from the torment that Isaac and his comrades inflicted on the infidels. It was satisfying for Isaac to know that he was doing the Lord's work. The infidel's limbs were broken, their testicles crushed, their entrails torn out and their blood spilled over the lawn on which the ritual torture took place.

And after all this, several hours later, when the infidels' souls were released to meet Mohammed in the special corner of Hell that Satan reserved for the most vile of

Creation, Isaac and his fellows praised God, recited the Lord's prayer and asked forgiveness for their sins, of which none related to the extreme means employed to utterly destroy the disbelievers. No man should slacken in his pursuit of the Lord's greater glory on Earth or elsewhere in the Solar System. Did the Holy Bible not say in Chapter 15, Verse 3, of The First Book of Samuel, Otherwise Called: The First Book of the Kings that of His enemies: "*utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.*"

What could be more unambiguous than that?

However, Jonah who had acted so bravely at first and who Isaac at first believed to be a valuable addition to their company soon proved instead to be a scourge. He was no less than the devil incarnate. But this was something that Isaac wasn't to discover until many days later.

Life was relatively easy for Isaac and his comrades in the villa. They each had a room in which they could sleep once the atheists' robots had cleared up the offal and human detritus that was all that remained of the previous inhabitants. All the same, Isaac and his comrades still had to guard the villa against other Holy Crusaders which required that three or four of them had to be on constant guard duty all through the day and night. There was a real risk that a group of crusaders just as determined as Isaac's company might attack the villa and perhaps take possession of it. Constant vigilance was required at all times.

David and Jonah became good friends. In fact, theirs was the closest friendship of all the Holy Crusaders. The others were naturally wary of becoming too friendly with one another. Partly this was because it wasn't approved behaviour in their home

colonies and not at all encouraged by their religion, but also because there was the worry that it might cause conflict should a doctrinal difference become too evident. Religious tolerance required a certain degree of wilful ignorance. The less one knew of the heresies practised by another the less inclined one was to purge the other person of their sinfulness and blasphemy.

It was Elijah who discovered the extent of Jonah's sinfulness and of David's slide into temptation. He was in the villa in the early hours of the morning while Isaac was on guard. Isaac's concentration was very much on the shadows in the distance that he had to be sure weren't just thrown by foliage in the artificial twilight. An assault could come at any time and was most likely to happen under cover of darkness. It wasn't Elijah who told Isaac of what had happened, but Jacob who came running towards him with a look of sheer terror in his eyes.

"Come quickly," he said.

"What is it?" wondered Isaac who knew of nothing that could possibly take priority over the duty of defence.

"There is an abomination in our midst," said Jacob.

"An abomination?"

"As it is said in Chapter 18, Verse 22, in the Third Book of Moses: Called Leviticus," replied Jacob.

Isaac knew exactly what Jacob meant. It was, of course, David and Jonah. Elijah had suspected the worst and his investigation of the two men's behaviour together proved that his fears were well-founded. They were caught in the act and despite their denials, it was obvious what needed to be done. As was said in Chapter 20, Verse 13,

of The Third Book of Moses: Called Leviticus: *“If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”*

Such was the fury of the Holy Crusaders that little remained intact of the two sinners after they had been tortured. Their genitals were of course given especially cruel treatment as they were the font of temptation. They were torn off and thrust into the sinners’ mouths. Implements were thrust deeply into their anuses as punishment to the recipient vessels of unnatural passion.

Isaac was merciful. He spared the two men the measure of torment he would visit on Muslim infidels. Both men were dead within an hour of the torture’s commencement. It was unlikely that either would enter Purgatory. The gravity of their sin was such that they could only expect the torments of Hell. Satan would take their souls to the special place of torment reserved for those who behaved unnaturally and perversely.

The sacrifice of the unclean brought only temporary reprieve for Isaac and his comrades. A savage force of twenty or more Catholics descended on the villa and forced them to leave. Jeremiah paid the ultimate sacrifice for his lack of haste in fleeing the Catholic invasion. As Isaac and the others hid in the shadows within sight of the villa that had so recently been their home, they watched as Jeremiah was beaten to death and his entrails disgorged while the Catholics prayed and chanted in Latin over his twitching body.

Although Isaac was as disgusted as anyone would be that a good Protestant soul should end his days at the hands of such evil apostates, he reflected on the relative

weakness of the Catholics' resolve. The apostates had allowed Jeremiah to die after less than a quarter of an hour's torture. If Isaac had a Catholic at his mercy, he would never have been so merciful. He would have had all the Catholics flayed, hung, drawn and quartered. At the very least.

Now Isaac and his fellows were in their new home that had so lately been the territory of heretical Baptists and before that of infidel Buddhists. It was now incumbent on Isaac and his comrades that they should hold onto the villa. Their numbers were getting dangerously low and it was unlikely that more true Christians would arrive to replenish their numbers. Indeed, after the disappointment associated with the pervert Jonah, it was unlikely that Isaac would trust even Jesus Christ Himself if He became manifest in the atheist space ship.

In many ways, Isaac was in the place most like Paradise he could ever imagine. He had enough to eat. There was warmth, running water, a comfortable bed and a landscape of grass, trees and lakes that was so much more uplifting than the dark and dismal levels of Holy Trinity. The only penalty was that he had no access to clothing to cover his shame and that he was in constant fear of his life from the other Holy Crusaders.

Isaac could never voice his thoughts to his comrades because it would be perceived as a sign that his faith was weakening, but if it were only possible for all the Holy Crusaders to return to the state of uneasy tolerance that originally prevailed on the space ship Judgement then this could truly be the Paradise he envisaged when he read the first few chapters of Genesis. Was this not a land of plenty like the Garden of Eden? Was it not also characterised by the nakedness that prevailed in a more innocent form

before accursed Eve had eaten of the fruit of the tree which was in the midst of the garden? And was there not also a guiding force represented by the space ship Intrepid that was more benevolent and merciful than God Himself?

It was all very confusing.

There was more time to relax now. Although Isaac was aware that the nearby villas were occupied by infidels or heretics, there no longer seemed to be a war for occupancy. Perhaps the villas were all now taken and an uneasy peace had been established amongst the quarrelling factions. Perhaps Isaac and his comrades could stay alive long enough for the Intrepid to reach the Apostasy and the return journey home to the ecliptic.

It was difficult for a Soldier of Christ to admit it even to himself but he was looking forward to returning to the embrace of his wife's arms and seeing his children once again. It had been more than five years since he'd left Holy Trinity and it was likely to be another year or more until he could return. That was assuming, of course, that he wouldn't share the fate of Jacob and those other crusaders who'd died in one another's arms. He looked forward to days of quoting from the Holy Bible and finding comfort from its words. In truth, the words that gave him most comfort weren't the ones from Leviticus or Deuteronomy or Revelations that prescribed severe punishments on those who wavered in their faith but rather those so rarely quoted in the chapel such as the words of Jesus in Chapter 10, Verse 14, of The Gospel According to Saint Mark: "*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.*" However, as Isaac knew so well, the God he worshipped was as stated in Chapter 20, Verse 5, of The Second Book of Moses: Called Exodus: "*the LORD thy*

God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."

The respite Isaac was enjoying lasted only a few months. It was long enough, of course, for him and his comrades to become complacent. They settled into a routine of hymn and prayer interspersed by guard duty, but as time went by the urgency of their quest to seize command of the Godless space ship receded as did their attentiveness when on guard duty. It truly seemed that life had settled down. There were few lone crusaders or small bands that passed by these days and they appeared to be seeking villas that weren't already occupied. Few appeared to have the belly for a fight.

When the inevitable assault took place it was from the same Catholics who had seized the villa from which Isaac and his comrades were earlier evicted: the one in which Isaac's otherwise pleasant memories were forever marred by his recollection of David's descent into Sodom. It seemed that the savage Catholic crusaders were now intent not so much on finding a new home but on expanding the territory they already possessed.

When they appeared they did so not sneakily and in the dark as before but openly and brazenly. This time there were not only a dozen or so Catholics who, despite their nakedness, could now be distinguished by huge red tattoos of the sign of the cross painfully etched into their chests. With them were many others not so tattooed whose heads and beards had been freshly shaved. They were distinguishable by the collar worn around the necks and the cords around the legs. They many times outnumbered the Catholic crusaders but were evidently slaves rather than equals. Perhaps they were

Muslims. Perhaps they were Buddhists. Perhaps they were even of a Presbyterian persuasion. But in the state of bald nakedness to which they had been reduced it wasn't possible to know.

It was these slaves, not the Catholics, who descended on Isaac's villa. They were superior in number but motivated only by fear of their masters who showed no mercy to those who failed to do their bidding. This Isaac could see for sure as he lay prostrate on the villa roof and scanned the upwardly curving horizon. One slave made an attempt to run not towards the villa that housed Isaac and his comrades but in a different direction. At first, it seemed that his attempt to escape would succeed as he ran shouting "*Allāhu Akbar!*" The Catholics made no attempt to stop him although they shouted loudly in his direction in Latin. Then two Catholics that had been hidden behind trees emerged from the shadows and caught the renegade. And they then dealt with him bloodily and efficiently. Isaac remarked again on the Catholics' lack of true justice by the swift manner in which the slave was slaughtered. No time was wasted on torture, humiliation or prayer. They bundled on top of him and killed him with no fuss at all

Isaac looked about him with fear. The Catholics' slaves were fast approaching the villa and alerted Isaac's comrades as they did do. They continued to shout in Latin which heathen tongue Isaac didn't understand at all. It was likely the slaves no more knew what they were chanting than did Isaac. "*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum,*" chanted some of them. "*Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto,*" chanted some of the others. Isaac guessed that it must be a prayer to the Pope who was known to be the Catholic's God. That was nonsense, of course. The Pope lived on Earth in a city called Rome. He couldn't be the Lord God, all omnipotent and all omniscient. It just

didn't make sense. And, in any case, God spoke English. He wouldn't speak Latin or any other language that would otherwise be dead for many thousands of years.

Isaac steeled himself for the oncoming assault. He could see that his chances of survival were slim. He might manage to kill two or three slaves before they overpowered him, but there was no likelihood that he could escape as easily this time as he had before.

However, death when it came was not in the form that Isaac was expecting. It wasn't in the form that the Catholic aggressors had expected either. Isaac might have reflected on Chapter 30, Verse 30, of The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "*And the LORD shall cause his glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and with the flame of a devouring fire, with scattering, and tempest, and hailstones.*"

There was fire, there was lightning and there most certainly was a tempest accompanied by a huge thunderous roar.

In the confusion, no one could possibly make sense of the sequence of events. The sound of external impact was extraordinarily loud and in itself would have damned all the Holy Crusaders to a life of deafness. There was also a rushing wind, but it was directed not hither and thither but in one direction only and with unchallengeable force. If Isaac hadn't been pulled off the roof of the villa or, more to the point, pulled off the villa along with the roof, he might have looked ahead and upwards to where the tempest was taking him and the precious pressurised atmosphere.

And this was quite simply into deep space.

At the point of impact there was flame and fury, but in the vacuum of space this

was manifest more as the conflagration of the rapidly escaping atmosphere rather than the steady flame of a terrestrial blaze.

So ferocious was the force from the escaping air that nothing could withstand its blast. Death came in various ways. Some crusaders were simply dashed against the first obstacle in their path and crushed to a bloody mess. Any who had avoided the direct impact of the storm by being indoors would die a painful but brief death as the air pressure dramatically dropped and their tongue became swollen, their eyes popped out of their skull and their lungs exploded. Not one Holy Crusader stood even the smallest chance of survival.

Death came to Isaac when he was sucked through the vast hole created by the external explosion. The proximate cause was a combination of the impact of many flying objects and the lack of breathable air, but his body was already limp and lifeless as it shot out into empty dark space through the hundred metre breach in the Intrepid's hull.

And then along with all the other debris within the Intrepid's reach, his corpse was gathered by the waste-collecting pods to be recycled by the space ship's antimatter engines.

Chapter Eighteen

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

It was over in all of seven seconds, but for Paul it wasn't until the final fraction of the seventh second that he was conscious that anything had happened at all. And what he was aware of was more disorientating than calamitous.

It had started with a sudden jolt that shuddered through the room and in particular the bed on which he'd been dozing. He'd been awake for over half an hour but it was his habit to drift in and out of the last few moments of sleep before eventually sliding his feet out from under the sheet and over the side of the bed. Sometimes he would lie in bed and eat breakfast prepared and served by robot, but with Beatrice so often absent these days there was rather less pleasure in staying awake in bed than there used to be.

The jolt was followed by a thundering dislocating growl during which Paul, along with everything else in his room, slowly rose above the ground. This was a momentary failure of the Intrepid's artificial gravity system that normally made life in a space ship seem so deceptively normal. Although this was what most alarmed Paul, it was just one of many fears that flooded through his mind. Only a truly considerable force could disrupt the slow and inexorable rotation of the Space Ship Intrepid on its axis.

The situation then gradually returned to normal. The space ship's growl steadily dropped out of the audible range. Paul and everything else in the room slowly fell back to the ground.

It was only then, after everything had already happened, that the space ship's alarm system burst into life and the klaxons rang out. This was incredibly loud and piercing. It startled Paul much more than anything that had preceded it. Since the instructions broadcast after the alarm were basically for him—and everyone else—to stay where he was and not panic, it was literally no effort for him to act as instructed. Paul's heart pounded ferociously in his chest and his skin was pasted in a sheen of cold sweat.

What the fuck had happened?

A similar thought might have occurred to Isaac and the Holy Crusaders, although they would have formulated it differently. In any case, every single one of them was dead before the alarm sounded. Indeed, given that sound couldn't travel through a vacuum they wouldn't have heard anything even if they were still alive. Had Isaac been protected by a space-suit sufficiently proof to nuclear, anti-matter or conventional explosions, he would have seen a stellar firmament where one star, the Sun, shone only a few times brighter than the others and where there was also the dimming light from the slowly extinguishing debris of thousands upon thousands of thermo-nuclear and anti-matter warheads that had just been summarily annihilated.

What Isaac didn't know, and neither did Paul, was that the Intrepid couldn't possibly have survived without external help. An assault of this magnitude had never before been unleashed at any one time in the whole of humanity's existence. Even a space ship as sophisticated and well-armed as the Intrepid wasn't equipped to fend off such an overwhelming onslaught. It was unfortunate that one stray missile had managed to get as far as it had and exploded just outside the Intrepid's hull. For Isaac and his

fellow crusaders the consequence of this was rather worse than just an unfortunate inconvenience. The true miracle, however, was that the whole space ship Intrepid wasn't now reduced to nothing more than a trail of interstellar debris and a glow of deadly radiation.

A space ship like the Intrepid was designed to withstand a substantial breach in its hull though its survival strategy was fatal to any survivors that might still be in the outermost level. The shell of the next outermost level instantly hardened into the same toughness as the ship's hull and jettisoned any encumbrance such as oxygen, biological life-forms and robots that might hinder the speed of this transformation. All forms of access were instantly plugged. It was efficient. It was fast. And, as had been proven many times in the long history of deep space travel where there was no prospect of emergency services arriving any time soon, it was absolutely necessary.

Of all the passengers and crew on board the Intrepid, only Beatrice was truly aware of the full facts and even she was taken almost unawares.

One moment, she was making love with Captain Kerensky. For her this was a duty but also a pleasure. The next moment she abruptly jerked upright over her conflicted lover, jumped off the bed and stood rigidly to attention. She had just received an emergency broadcast of the ongoing action from the invisible Proxima Centauran space ships escorting the Intrepid. This might have been unexpected, but Beatrice did at least have the benefit of several seconds' grace shared by no one, including Captain Kerensky, before there was a muffled thud against the Intrepid's hull and the consequent momentary failure in the gravitational system.

In those few seconds Nadezhda was at first greatly offended by being so

abruptly cast aside and then swiftly began to formulate an escape strategy. Perhaps Beatrice's operating system had somehow crashed. Although rare, it did still sometimes happen to the Solar System's most complex robots and perhaps the same phenomenon might still afflict extrasolar machine intelligences. Nevertheless, she recognised that whatever it was that was happening was affecting not only Beatrice as she felt herself float gently upwards with her erstwhile lover and now her captor.

“What happened?” Nadezhda asked as soon as she was able.

Captain Kerensky could tell that her android lover was furiously multitasking. There followed an unusually slow response from Beatrice who was apparently in frantic communication with her fellow aliens.

“We passed a relatively small asteroid nearly half a million kilometres distant,” Beatrice replied. “Naturally, we routinely monitor all space objects for threat. There was no reason to suspect that this asteroid would be any different from any other. Without warning, at exactly the closest point of triangulation, the asteroid let loose a few hundred missiles. Within the first two seconds, these split into a few thousand and all were targeted at the Intrepid. None were targeted at or seemed even to be aware of the presence of the Proxima Centauri space fleet. This is fairly strong evidence that the party responsible for this assault comes from within your Solar System. Our space fleet had only four or five seconds to annihilate all the missiles before they hit their target.”

Nadezhda tried to assimilate this sudden rush of information. “Did you destroy them all?” was the only question she could frame.

“Our forces eliminated very nearly all of them. The Intrepid's slower defence system destroyed the hundred or so missiles remaining. One missile exploded within

fifty kilometres of the Intrepid's hull. It was that which caused the anomalous gravity event. The explosion breached the hull and the space ship's self-repair system immediately sprung into action."

"Casualties?"

"You're perfectly right to ask," said Beatrice who was also sentimental about such things although she often wondered what difference a year here or there really made to the lives of these transient beings. "All biological life-forms in the outermost level were instantly exterminated. This was caused either directly by the explosion or from the sudden loss of habitable environment. The vast majority of human casualties were Holy Coalition prisoners so their loss will have no adverse operational impact. In fact, it will actually help to conserve resources. There were a further dozen or so casualties in the penultimate level. This was as an unfortunate side-effect of the space ship's automatic defences. There were a few injuries and one death caused by the momentary failure in centrifugal rotation."

Captain Kerensky was slightly offended by the unemotional objectivity of Beatrice's account. These were people's lives she was talking about. "What about your lot?" she asked. "Were any alien androids killed in defence of the Intrepid?"

"None," said Beatrice. "But the missiles weren't directed at us. You must be aware that if the space ship Intrepid hadn't been escorted by a fleet of Proxima Centauri star ships and if we hadn't secured it against such an attack, then neither of us would now be alive. All your crew and passengers would now be little more than radioactive waste."

"So who did this? Was it another group of religious fanatics?"

“If we knew, then we would have anticipated the attack and guarded against it,” Beatrice replied. “Our intelligence capacity exponentially exceeds that of your governments and non-governmental agencies, but we were still caught entirely off-guard. It’s true that we expected some measure of disruption to the ship’s mission—that is, after all, why we’re protecting you—but we didn’t anticipate that it would come in this form.”

“Don’t expect me to thank you for hijacking my ship,” said Captain Kerensky bitterly.

“Such a thought couldn’t be further from my mind,” said Beatrice. She nonetheless wondered just what she could do to earn gratitude from these flawed carbon based beings. She had just helped to secure the one thing humans valued more than anything else. And that was their continued existence.

“Do you think we’ll find out who the culprits are?”

“I’m sure special investigators will be on the case in a couple of months when news of this event finally reaches your Mission Control on the Moon,” said Beatrice. “They should be able to identify the source. However, I don’t want to alarm you too much. Our analysis of the assault strongly suggests that, in this case, the ultimate perpetrator might not come from your Solar System.”

“What do you mean? If the assault didn’t come from the Solar System, where else could it have come from? The Anomaly?”

“Who knows,” said Beatrice, shrugging her shoulders. “But I doubt it. Anything that emanates from the Anomaly is disturbingly random, whereas this assault was meticulously planned.”

Beatrice paused for a moment as if she was thinking carefully, although Nadezhda knew that the android didn't need the time to cogitate in the sense that a human might. The speed of her processing far exceeded the need for such delay.

"I may have misled you," said Beatrice at last. "Our analysis of the hardware employed is fairly conclusive. We believe the source to have been a secret armoury in the possession of a certain Ellis Gidding. We have no intelligence that suggests this man had any especial hostility with regards to the Intrepid's mission, but your trillionaires have more reason and means than most humans to conceal their actions and opinions from public scrutiny. This habit is totally consistent with the evasiveness they exhibit when required to pay taxes to the various governments of the Solar System. Our operatives shall explore this line of investigation in more depth and no doubt we'll soon determine just why this man took such extreme action and whether he acted with the assistance of alien operatives."

"*Operatives?*" Nadezhda wondered.

"Androids like me," said Beatrice with a smile. "You didn't think I was the only android on a secret mission in the Solar System, did you? However, your primary concern as captain of the space ship should be to evaluate the damage and provide a report to Mission Control on the Moon."

"*Nominal* captain," remarked Captain Kerensky bitterly.

"As far as we are concerned," said Beatrice, "you are still captain of the space ship Intrepid. We would much rather it stayed that way..."

"As long as the ship remains under your effective control..."

"I would rather you called it protection," said Beatrice. "Remember: we

wouldn't even be having this conversation if the ship hadn't been defended by a Proxima Centauri space fleet."

Still naked, Captain Kerensky surveyed the injury to the ship as it was displayed on the ship's computers. The holographic display of the damage showed just how close the Intrepid had come to being totally destroyed. The elliptical hole that punctured the outer hull was nearly a hundred metres at its widest point, although the Intrepid's systems were visibly repairing the perforation at a rapid rate. The breach would be completely patched within an hour or so. It was evident that Beatrice was right in her assessment: nobody in the outermost level could have survived the impact. All that was left of the Holy Crusaders were a few distended corpses. Many of these were outside the ship and slowly tumbling into deep space. There were also the corpses of animals that had recently been wandering blamelessly about the gardens and forests, but no animal, not even an insect or earthworm, could have survived the freezing temperature and the total loss of atmosphere.

What of the crew and passengers? Wasn't Colonel Vashti supposed to have been on duty on the outermost shell? The records indicated that was exactly where she should have been, but she wasn't amongst those listed as dead. How could that be? Where was she? Had the computer simply not accounted for her?

Although this was wasting time that should be better engaged in assessing damage, the captain quickly checked on her lover's whereabouts. What a relief! Vashti hadn't been anywhere near the outermost shell. Nadezhda must have been mistaken. She was actually at that moment making her way from the sixth level towards the injured survivors.

When Captain Kerensky had gathered together all the necessary facts, her duty was now to impart as much as she could to Mission Control and the ship's crew and passengers. This duty was compromised of course by the intercession of Beatrice's alien forces. Just how much of what she might say would actually be received exactly as it was originally phrased? An account of the real reason why the ship survived the bombardment couldn't possibly be transmitted. She couldn't even make known the fact that the weaponry used in the assault was owned by the reputable philanthropist and trillionaire Ellis Gidding. However, there were plenty of other things that she had to report. The captain had to give an account of what had happened, an analysis of the extent of the damage, and a roll call of the names of the deceased. She would also have to announce a provisional date and time for the funerals.

Paul was one of those reassured by the captain's prompt announcement. It was unfortunate that the ship had been attacked (again). It was very sad that some people had perished, but good to know that order had now been restored. The holographic image of the captain, apparelled in full uniform, emanated an air of authority and command. A greater crisis had been averted and repairs were well under way. Captain Kerensky also explained that, as the *Intrepid* continued its voyage through the Oort Cloud, there would henceforth be fewer and fewer objects in orbit around the far distant Sun. In fact, there was no celestial object larger than a small boulder between where they were now and their destination. The captain reminded everyone that in terms of distance they were probably about half-way to their destination and rather less so in terms of travelling time.

“So, nothing to worry about,” said Paul to himself as, still unclothed, he

groggily lifted himself out of bed and shuffled towards the refrigerator for a cold drink.

“Are you all right, darling?” Paul heard his wife coo as he closed the fridge door.

He turned his head to see Beatrice dressed only in a simple white kimono and gripping a cup of steaming hot coffee in her hands. She must have been in the house all along.

Paul nodded. “I’m fine. It’s the others I’m worried about. And you, of course.”

“I saw the captain’s announcement,” said Beatrice with a look of deep concern etched on her face. “It’s dreadful, isn’t it? Who do you think might have attacked the ship?”

Paul shook his head sadly. But he remembered the failed assassination attempts and near-misses that had bedevilled his progress from Godwin to Earth, so it was probably too much to expect that the trail of destruction would end just as he was getting so close to this accursed Anomaly. “I’ve given up trying to guess who might be after me... or the ship. It wasn’t another bunch of religious fanatics was it?”

“Well if it was, they didn’t do a very good job of saving their co-religionists,” remarked Beatrice in the chilling dispassionate tone to which she sometimes inclined.

“You must have been as terrified as me when this all began,” said Paul as he placed a reassuring arm around Beatrice’s shoulders.

“I just didn’t know what hit me,” said Beatrice with disarming honesty as she steered her husband towards their shared bed on which her side was still unruffled. “You need some relaxation after all that stress,” she continued with a cheeky smile as she squeezed Paul’s hardening testicles in one hand while her other pushed him gently

back into the bed's comforting embrace.

"I think I do," said Paul with a tone of resignation.

As soon as the couple fell onto the sheets, Beatrice's tongue and fingers once again brought Paul's genitals to life. Paul wondered whether it was right to have sex so soon after a near fatal attack and the resultant death of so many people. But then, he reflected, in times of war it was precisely when things were at their worst that people most often resorted to sex as a means of escape.

And if the launch of several thousand deadly warheads wasn't an act of war then what else possibly could be?

Chapter Nineteen

The Moon - 3755 C.E.

“I need to speak to you privately,” said Oxana Petrovna Korolyov.

Brigadier Svenssen was understandably alarmed. What could this woman possibly want? Why would a Mission Control scientist need to talk to him? His immediate anxiety was that it might be her way of suggesting that they have sex. There were colonies in the Solar System whose citizens were unnervingly frank about their intentions, but he reflected that it was very unlikely in this case. Oxana came from Saturn. She was slim, very pale-skinned and, like all Saturnians, her head was shaved. And typically of Saturn, she was almost certainly a lesbian. Although the brigadier knew little about women, there was no evidence that she had amorous intentions for him.

“Would you like to speak to me now?” the brigadier asked.

“As soon as we can, sir,” Oxana said. “But preferably somewhere secure.”

The brigadier and she were striding across the lawns outside Mission Control some several kilometres underground and not many levels above the busy shopping arcades and cultural centres of Lacus Somniorum. “Would here be sufficiently secure?” he asked.

“Only if you’re certain that there are no listening devices, sir,” said Oxana.

“We can never be completely sure about that,” said the brigadier, “but there are none that I’ve authorised. What do you want me to know? You have my complete attention.”

Oxana nodded and looked around the brightly lit paths in the huge cavern in which they stood. On one side was the towering but anonymous building where the Intrepid's Mission Control was based. On the other side, looming over them, were stacked level after level of walkways, tramlines and low-rise settlements. Like everyone else on the Moon, they were both obliged to walk with a comical bounce in their step but they were well accustomed to low gravity by now. Mission Control had been based in the Sinus Roris Tower for over two years now. Security was very tight, principally because the premises were shared with other Interplanetary Union projects related to space exploration. The majority of people who worked on the mission believed they were employed on just another scientific expedition into deep space rather than a secret mission to intercept the Anomaly.

"I need to speak to you privately, sir," said Oxana nervously. "You are involved in the operational aspects of the mission and I have some major concerns."

"Am I really the right person to speak to? I'm a military man. I don't really work with day-to-day operations at all."

"I've raised my concerns at several levels, sir, but I don't believe I've really got anywhere. Security is very tight, as you know. The concerns I've raised are scrutinised by very few people before they get passed onwards to higher levels of command. I just don't believe that they've been treated at all seriously. I would have expected an appropriate response by now and I've received nothing at all."

"Are you saying that the normal chain of escalation isn't working correctly?"

"I think that it's being totally blocked at some level."

"And just what *are* your concerns, Ms. Korolyov?"

Oxana looked about her nervously. She was clearly worried whether someone might be able to overhear her however unlikely this was, as she and the brigadier strode towards an ornamental lake in the middle of the lawn where their only company were a few ducks flapping over the water and the koi carp that occasionally broke the placid surface.

“I believe that the mission has been critically compromised, sir,” said the scientist. “I don’t know who by, but whoever it is must possess very advanced technology.”

“Advanced technology?”

“One more advanced than any currently known to exist in the Solar System.”

“Aliens?” wondered the brigadier. This was a natural conjecture given that the most common speculation regarding the Anomaly was that it might be a manifestation of alien intelligence.

“I can’t speculate as to what it might be, sir,” said Oxana. “I’m not an exobiologist or otherwise qualified to comment. My expertise is in analysing the events that happened on the Intrepid and most specifically the second attack...”

“The one that breached the hull?”

“Exactly.”

“Carry on, Ms. Korolyov. You still have my attention,” said the brigadier.

Like most officers at Mission Control, Brigadier Svenssen found the second assault far more worrying and problematical than the first. There was an altogether different order of magnitude between an assault by thousands of woefully ill-equipped religious fanatics and the truly overwhelming bombardment that erupted from the

asteroid that housed the formidable arsenal. Of course, it wasn't until two months after the event that Mission Control was aware the attack had even taken place, as this was the time it took for data transmitted by the Intrepid to reach the Moon. The news immediately resulted in frenetic activity at Mission Control involving all senior officers. When Brigadier Svenssen was notified, he was in mid-session with three well-muscled civilians he'd met in a bar. The call to arms could hardly have been more poorly timed. His cock was in one arse, his fist in another and he was being buggered by a huge cock from behind. Even though the delay between the actual bombardment and its announcement was so great, everyone had to take emergency action as if it had only just happened. Frustratingly, it would be another three months until any response to Mission Control's enquiries would be received by the far distant space ship.

It didn't take long to identify the provenance of the military arsenal or its owner. It wasn't too surprising that the perpetrator was Alexander Iliescu, one of the wealthiest people in the Solar System. Only a fabulously wealthy individual would have the means to launch such a phenomenally expensive assault. Even less surprising was that the criminal mastermind had already escaped any likelihood of capture. Given what the brigadier now knew about his recent culpability, his death almost certainly had to have been self-inflicted, although the news accounts about his death suggested that it was nothing more than an unfortunate accident.

Alexander Iliescu had left no family, no children and no independent trace of his criminal activities. When his luxurious colony, Almond Grove, was boarded for investigation all that could be found was a large harem of women sex-workers and computer records that had been comprehensively gutted of any useful information. The

evidence of his crime could only be obtained by clandestine means.

What was most puzzling, of course, was why such a phenomenally rich man should invest such a substantial proportion of his wealth in the destruction of the space ship *Intrepid*. Alexander Iliescu wasn't known to hold extreme or radical religious views. In fact, he was known rather more for his liberal opinions and generous philanthropy. But the reason for this bizarre behaviour became just one of a large number of mysteries surrounding the man as the Interplanetary Union's investigations into his life became more extensive. The vast sum of money expended on the purchase of the arsenal couldn't be traced at all. It was as if he'd made a separate fortune even larger than his fabulously vast legitimate one and then spent all of it on a single ultimately pointless project. The man's birth and childhood on the Shikasta colony in the Asteroid Belt was shrouded in mystery. This was partly because the colony had been a collateral casualty of the nuclear war between Pallas and Ceres and any material evidence of his early years was now obliterated into tiny radioactive particles. There was also a surprising lack of supporting evidence from anywhere else in the Solar System. Even the means by which Alexander Iliescu had made his trillions were poorly documented. The more the intelligence officers tried to find out about the man, the less they seemed to know for sure.

The man was a mystery, but his role in the attempted destruction of the *Intrepid* was incontrovertible. It was he who'd owned the arsenal. It could only have been him who'd authorised its use. The evidence relating to Ellis Gidding was verifiable and unambiguous.

Another question that troubled the investigators was how Alexander Iliescu had

even known about the mission. His first recorded interest in acquiring the arsenal wasn't long after the initial plans had been proposed. This implied that there was a mole in the security services at the very highest level. If the hidden source wasn't in the security services, then who, of the very few people involved in the project at that early stage, would have broken confidence? Why would the saboteur be a trillionaire whose public interests were arts, medicine and philanthropy and whose most prominent private passion was to make love to skilled and glamorous sex-workers? How could and why would a man like him assemble a spy network that could penetrate the murkiest depths of interplanetary security.

Brigadier Svenssen was aware that there were many unanswered questions relating to the assault and he assumed that this was what troubled Oxana. Was it possible, for instance, that she'd discovered that a former employee of the master criminal was amongst those on board the *Intrepid* and might still offer a potential threat? Was there more weaponry that the man had acquired that could yet be employed to sabotage the mission?

"My concerns aren't so much with the attack on the ship, sir, about which there has been so much debate," said Oxana. "My concerns relate to the space ship's defence capability."

"The *Intrepid* did a splendid job," said the brigadier who felt almost affronted by the suggestion that it had done anything else.

"It did a rather better job than it was actually able to do, sir. There is a mismatch between the ship's defensive capability and the size of the force it managed to fend off."

“Are you saying it was equipped rather too well?”

“No, sir,” said Oxana. “There is no way that its military defences were sufficient to ward off the attack. There is no scenario that we can model of the incident in which the space ship can survive given the measurable size of the offensive arsenal and that of the Intrepid’s defences. Every scenario results in exactly the same outcome. The Intrepid simply shouldn’t have survived.”

“With all due respect, Ms Korolyov,” said the brigadier carefully, “it must be the model that is at fault. The Intrepid obviously did escape almost entirely intact. The breach in the hull was unfortunate but easily mended. I’m not a scientist but my understanding of any theory is that it needs revising when the evidence invalidates it.”

“I’m not sure, sir, that one event in deep space can really refute arithmetic equations that have been around for thousands of years before space travel even existed,” said Oxana. “When a smaller force is set against a larger force, the chances of the smaller force prevailing become progressively smaller the greater the disparity. In this case, the margin is at least ten to one.”

“Those are impressive figures, Ms Korolyov, but there has already been a thorough analysis of the records transmitted to us by the Intrepid. Every hostile projectile that was launched has been accounted for. Each one was intercepted and neutralised. The evidence is incontrovertible.”

“And so it is, sir,” said Oxana, “if that is the only evidence you examine. However, we can also view the events through telescopes in the ecliptic and we can also examine the records of the entire inventory of the arsenal. There are two things that become apparent. The number of missiles launched from the asteroid vastly exceeds

the number recorded by the Intrepid. At least twenty times as many were launched than can be accounted for by the Intrepid's systems. This number matches very well the actual inventory of lethal forces that we know was stored in the asteroid. The upshot is that the systems on the Intrepid don't appear to have sent us an accurate record of events."

"Why would that be, Ms Korolyov? What possible reason could there be for the ship's captain to downplay the scale of the Intrepid's success in countering such an onslaught?"

"There is an unusually long gap between the visual evidence of the assault as received by telescopes in the Solar System and the signals relayed from the Intrepid although both are supposed to have been sent at the same time and both travel at the same speed of light. It's very nearly a two second gap, sir."

"What's the significance of that, Ms Korolyov? What are we supposed to deduce from the combination of a gap in transmission and a space ship that has performed better than expected?"

"I would suggest, sir," continued Oxana in the face of the brigadier's evident scepticism, "that there has been some tampering with the data that's been transmitted from the Intrepid. I would further suggest that the data has been tampered at source and not by Mission Control. And I would also suggest that it's been tampered specifically to disguise the presence of a defensive force that didn't come from the space ship Intrepid."

"Are you saying that there has been an upgrade of the Intrepid's defence systems by aliens?" asked the brigadier. "And that these aliens are so modest that they want to

hide from us the wonderful things they've done to our technology.”

“I have no conclusions, sir,” said Oxana. “I only have some very real concerns. And there are other questions I find difficult to answer. There was a change in the character of the daily logs sent by Captain Kerensky to Mission Control dating from several months before the attack. As you know, she broadcasts two logs. One is for the benefit of the crew and passengers of the Intrepid. The other, of which even her Chief Petty Officer is unaware, is broadcast specifically for Mission Control. This is a standard precaution on sensitive missions to keep us informed about concerns and worries the captain might have that she doesn't want to share with her senior officers...”

“And why is that? What secrets can a captain have from her Chief Petty Officer?”

“There's always the risk of mutiny, sir. If the captain suspects this might happen, she should inform Mission Control rather than the people who might be organising the mutiny.”

“Hmmm...” said the brigadier who didn't like this type of disloyal speculation. “And what differences in character have you observed in our good captain?”

“Standard analyses are carried out routinely on a captain's logs,” said Oxana. “They're done to determine whether she's under stress or is in any other way likely to act in a way that could interfere with her ability to carry out the mission. It's very rarely of much use, of course, because most changes of character fall within the expected range of tolerance. On a mission that has so far involved two major life-threatening incidents and where there is no actual guarantee that the space ship will ever return to the ecliptic, it is only natural to expect that the captain should display a greater than

usual shift in her character. What *has* been observed is that Captain Kerensky has lost much of her sense of humour and has become significantly more guarded in what she chooses to say and how she expresses it. There is also evidence of some peculiar behavioural traits for which there is no previous history in her character.”

“Such as...?”

“There is an observable twitch she suffers from when certain aspects of the space ship’s operations are mentioned. It appears to be relatively painful. These occur mostly when she discusses any aspect of the ship’s command or security. This trait and the captain’s newfound caution are consistent with patterns of behaviour observed when people are under unnatural duress. It is commonly employed to make all appear well when it quite simply isn’t. There is nothing, however, that definitively falls outside of the normal range, but I still find it rather suspicious.”

“So, you believe that the Intrepid has been apprehended by aliens on the basis of a few twitches and a mismatch between events observed through telescopes and the data transmitted by the Intrepid?”

“Something is definitely wrong, sir,” said Oxana. “It is consistent with a hypothesis which postulates that the ship’s functions have been subverted by an unknown intelligence whose priorities are to ensure that the Intrepid reaches its destination.”

“As a risk, something that ensures the success of the mission doesn’t sound much like something we should be too worried about.”

“That’s only if that’s what this intelligence is trying to achieve, sir. There is no conclusive evidence that it will always be a benign force.”

“Do you think all this might have something to do with the peculiar nature of the Anomaly?”

“If the Anomaly is, as we believe, the source of all the Apparitions that have been observed, measured and analysed throughout the Solar System, who knows how else it might manifest itself.”

“Too true,” said Brigadier Svenssen. “Is it possible that the Anomaly is the source of all this strangeness?”

“As I say,” Oxana said carefully, “all we know from the evidence is that there are some measurable inconsistencies. It may have nothing to do with the Anomaly.”

“So, your view is that the Intrepid’s mission has been compromised by contact with an alien intelligence which we don’t understand and which may be totally independent of the Anomaly?”

“Yes, sir,” said Oxana.

“Unfortunately as a military man there’s not much I can do with your suppositions,” said the brigadier thoughtfully. “My military forces are based on the Intrepid and I can’t brief them without doing so through the space ship’s communication systems. I also have no idea what advice I’m supposed to give them. None of them have expressed anxiety about the ship being hi-jacked by aliens.”

“I see, sir.”

“I can also understand why there may be less enthusiasm than you perhaps appreciate for investigating a phenomenon that doesn’t appear to have damaged the Intrepid’s operational efficiency,” said the brigadier. “But, on the other hand, I must admit there *is* something very strange given what you’ve said. Essentially, there is a

disparity between the accounts we have from sources other than the Intrepid. Combined with the captain's mysterious change of character, this makes you suspect that the mission is no longer being run from Mission Control. I suggest that you continue to keep me informed of anything else that you notice."

"Thank you, sir," said Oxana who left Brigadier Svenssen clearly disappointed that he hadn't embraced her concerns with quite the enthusiasm she'd hoped.

The brigadier walked on towards the furthest perimeter of the Sinus Roris Tower gardens deep in thought. What troubled him wasn't just Oxana's speculation about aliens taking over the Intrepid, but a whole host of other issues that also persuaded him that the Intrepid's mission was fatally compromised.

He wondered, for instance, why space had been found on board the ship for Paul Morris and his new wife. Even reasons of political expediency didn't fully explain why someone of no apparent use to the mission should be transported at immense cost from the Kuiper Belt and then beyond the Heliopause to the very limits of the Sun's gravitational influence. And who was this woman so enamoured of a man who the brigadier would rather kick out of his bed than have the dubious pleasure of fucking?

The brigadier also wondered about Colonel Vashti, his onetime lover. He was certain that she wasn't quite a normal person. Not only did she have a peculiar body, her historical records were just as odd and incomplete as those for Alexander Iliescu. Was she and the trillionaire in some way connected?

Then there were other people associated with the mission, particularly those in positions of high authority such as Permanent Secretary Alfredo Miskiewicz. As a man who was always on the outside of society looking in, both as a homosexual and as a

man whose genes were not quite determined by evolution alone, Brigadier Svenssen was more than normally sensitive to subtle signs of nonconformity in the people he encountered. Very often it was because they too had an ancestry that involved artificially enhanced genes, but he was also aware that if a community of people like his could survive mostly unremarked in the expanse of the Solar System then there was space for other mould-breaking variations. Perhaps the mystery associated with Alexander Iliescu was in some way also associated with Ms Korolyov's hypotheses.

The brigadier was already persuaded that an alien intelligence had taken a keen interest in the mission and infiltrated the mission at every level. What he wasn't able to do was determine just what this alien intelligence could possibly be.

And, what was worse, he had no way of knowing whether this intelligence was good either for the mission or for the interests of the Interplanetary Union that he so loyally served.

Chapter Twenty

Earth - 3753 C.E.

“I’d almost forgotten why we were here,” admitted Paul when the holographic message arrived for him at the hotel in the heart of the Amazon Jungle where he’d been staying with Beatrice. “It’s been such a long time since we heard anything about the mission.”

Professor Wasilewski’s image flickered against the window through which could be seen a torrential downpour and lofty trees from which monkeys were howling at each other. The professor wasn’t especially amused by Paul’s remark.

“There are good reasons why we haven’t bothered you for so long,” he said wearily. “Nevertheless, your holiday is now over. You are urgently required at the briefing centre at South Pacific City. Please make sure you aren’t late for even that.”

As the image flickered out of sight, Paul glanced over at Beatrice who was lying on the bed beside him. “What’s a *holiday*?” he asked. “Why is it over?”

“We’ve got just under a week to get from here to South Pacific City,” said Beatrice who couldn’t be bothered to explain to Paul the vocabulary of employment used throughout most of the Solar System. “It might take all of that time to get there.”

“Why’s that?” wondered Paul. “The Pacific Ocean’s just on the other side of the Andes. It doesn’t look like it’s very far at all.”

“Unless we can board a dirigible at Sao Paolo which is two days journey away, the voyage by sea will take at least what’s left of a week to arrive at South Pacific City,” said Beatrice who understood the urgency of not missing her ticket to the Anomaly rather more than Paul. “We must leave immediately. I’ll alert Jorgen and Grace if they

haven't already been contacted."

"I hate travelling," said Paul peevishly. "Do we *have* to leave? We haven't been here for more than two days. We've hardly seen anything. Can't this mission wait a bit?"

Beatrice stared at Paul with an expression that, for the first time since the couple first met, suggested something other than undying love and affection. Then she smiled seductively. "If you don't come, I'll have to go without you," she said teasingly.

Paul knew when he was beaten. "Then I guess we ought to prepare to leave," he said with resignation.

The last few months on Earth had been just as chaotic and unplanned as all the months before, but Paul had finally come to enjoy being on the planet. There was something marvellous about the sheer unpredictability of each day. If you didn't bother to access the unerringly accurate meteorological reports, it was impossible to say in advance whether a day would be sunny and warm, wet and cold, or just indifferent. There was an amazing variety of places to visit. There were wide empty hot deserts. Impressive historic temples. Wide open rivers. And here there was hectare after hectare of rain forest populated by monkeys, tapirs, river dolphins and brightly coloured birds of paradise.

Sure, there were things like this on all the colonies in the Solar System. Godwin had its own wildlife park and a lake large enough for dolphins, seals and sharks. However, the sheer variety of natural landscapes on Earth bound not by human design but by the natural lines of latitude and topology was quite beyond compare. Paul was already beginning to wish that he'd appreciated rather more the sights and sounds of

the Sun's one and only naturally habitable satellite.

The journey from the hotel in the heart of the Amazon Jungle to South Pacific City was every bit as tortuous as Beatrice predicted. The necessity to restrict environmental impact had so reduced the choice of transport—especially in such wild regions of the world as the Amazon Jungle—that the time it took was indeed very nearly a week. The voyage by steam boat down the River Amazon was the most enjoyable episode although Paul soon discovered that there were stretches of river along which the boat travelled close enough to the bank for the many voracious insects to fly aboard and nibble at his arms and ankles. Naturally, Beatrice was immune to such pests so while Paul hid inside the boat to avoid being bitten, she rested on the deck with Jorgen and watched the monkeys leap across the canopy of the forest that hemmed in the river.

There was no ship berthed at Sao Paulo when Paul and Beatrice arrived, but there was a dirigible due to travel to Japan. Jorgen and Grace negotiated an unscheduled diversion to South Pacific City for the two tourists. All the same, the couple still had to wait a while in the sprawling city which Paul had already visited and didn't really care to visit again. It also rained the entire time they were there. This was one of many species of inclement weather that Paul was content never to have to endure again. The dirigible eventually arrived and, despite a delay caused by strong wind, Paul and Beatrice were able to float to their destination over the Amazon Forest, the Andes and the South Pacific.

Paul regarded the acres of forest in the Amazon from above with a faint feeling of regret. He would probably never again see so much verdant forest. Nowhere else in the Solar System was so much space put aside for the cultivation of trees. Nowhere

else, indeed, was there such a long chain of snow-capped mountains as the Andes or such a wide open ocean as the Pacific. There were many splendid sights beyond Earth, but few of these were the result of the biological and tectonic activity of the only genuinely living planet in the Solar System.

The couple re-joined Mission Control in a suburb of South Pacific City where they met the scientists who couldn't be spared as readily as Paul. This was on a floating artificial island separated by several kilometres from the next point of land to which it was connected by long translucent tubes deep beneath the ocean surface. Security was as tight as any that Paul had experienced since he first arrived on Earth. The Briefing Centre was disguised as an Interplanetary Union military base although there were very few actual military personnel apart from those guarding the facilities.

Most of the scientists who had the pleasure to meet Paul and Beatrice for the first time had no idea who they were or that they were even part of the mission. They were delighted to be introduced to Beatrice who was charmingly adept at social niceties and polite conversation, but rather less so Paul who had no idea at all of how to comport himself. He was socially awkward and had little to say that was likely to be of interest to anyone he spoke to. Although Paul was generally happy to leave polite discourse to his wife, there were the occasions when he would launch into discussion with an unsuspecting physicist or geologist where he would expound a half-understood hypothesis and display his ignorance of the scientist's actual discipline. Not surprisingly, those who experienced the dubious pleasure of conversation with Paul were reluctant to seek him out again.

The main reason for Paul and Beatrice being there was not for the opportunity

to socialise as they were soon to discover when they gathered together with several hundred fellow scientists in a spacious semi-circular auditorium to be briefed on the rest of the mission. The couple were positioned close to the front where not only did they have a very good view of who was making the address without needing to gaze at the holographic screens on either side of the central dais, but, more uncomfortably, could easily be seen by those on stage. It was obvious that Professor Wasilewski wasn't especially enthusiastic to see Paul and Beatrice sitting together only three rows back from the front row when he eased himself into his chair behind the dais.

The proceedings began with a general address from Doctor Livingston Achebe, the Director of Training for the mission. He thanked everyone for being there and made jokes about the recent storm that had blown over the city which drew appreciative laughter from everyone except Paul who'd been on a boat cruise around the Black Sea when it happened.

"It's been a challenging year of study and research," said the Director to almost universal agreement from the scientists gathered about him. "You might have wondered whether it would ever be over and whether the mission itself could possibly be more challenging than the work you've already engaged in. I know it's been a time of long hours dedicated to research where you've taken advantage of the wealth of classified data at your disposal, but the real mission is now about to begin. Soon you will be carrying out your research far closer to the Anomaly than any human has ever been before. Naturally, many of you will be frustrated that your valuable research has barely begun before you have to leave Earth, but you'll be delighted to know that there will be extensive research facilities for the entire mission and that you'll be able to continue

just as well as you have at South Pacific City.”

The audience expressed a general sense of satisfaction, while Paul felt slight tangs of guilt. What had all these scientists been doing for the last year that had kept them so busy? What was so valuable about their research? Was there literally nothing that he could have done other than travel haphazardly to the sights of planet Earth?

The audience were then introduced to Captain Miriam Deng of the Interplanetary Union Navy. She was a short woman with long yellow hair that flowed down to her ankles and a tight-fitting uniform that hid very few details of her petite but perfectly formed figure. It was this rather than her words that Paul focused on while the captain spoke.

“The space ship Intrepid is over five hundred years old, but it was built in an age when there was a short-lived craze for space cruises beyond the ecliptic. It is one of the largest space ships in the Solar System and has the capacity to journey even as far as a remote stellar system although it’s never been employed for that purpose. Despite its advanced age, it has been fitted with the latest technology. So, what you will be living in for the next few years is a combination of Thirty-Second century luxury and the best that is currently on offer.”

The captain went on to describe the space ship in more detail with the aid of holographic images that filled the entire auditorium but was so designed that everyone could get a clear view. Paul’s eyes, however, stayed fixed on Captain Miriam Deng’s remarkable embonpoint rather than the intricate and complex image floating above his head. He managed to hear enough to impress him about the scale of the space ship and the way in which each level was almost a miniature colony with lakes, rivers, parks and

woodland. His mind wandered when the captain described how the ship was powered by antimatter and nuclear fusion energy and how the space ship utilised particles of matter that it gathered from deep space as it travelled. It was peculiar to imagine a space ship behaving like a huge vacuum cleaner. So much interplanetary matter had been converted into either the raw material or source energy of colonies and space ships that the Solar System must be a much less cluttered place than it once had been. Would there ever be a time when there was no longer enough free-floating matter, even in the Asteroid Belt, to satisfy the Solar System's demands?

“A space ship of the Intrepid's size cannot fly freely in the ecliptic,” continued the captain. “It would be far too dangerous. The risk of collision with a colony, planet or moon might be very small, but the consequence of an encounter with a fast moving space ship of the Intrepid's mass is too appalling to be contemplated. It would be truly cataclysmic if there was ever an accident or a terrorist attack that impacted on a human settlement. If the Intrepid crashed into South Pacific City, it wouldn't just be a disaster for all of us sitting here. It's quite likely that the impact would be as great as that which caused the extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago. Although, unlike the dinosaurs, mankind would undoubtedly survive this is only because we don't all live on this verdant but fragile planet.”

Paul noted the reference to Earth's vulnerability. Although he appreciated that the planet's biosphere needed careful maintenance, he sometimes wondered how Earth had managed before humans were around. There had been plenty of extraterrestrial impacts, supervolcanoes, tsunamis, earthquakes and methane belches in that time. On the other hand, the scope of humanity's negative impact had already exceeded any event

since the Permian-Triassic catastrophe and that had been over a quarter of a billion years before.

“The Intrepid is currently a light hour or a billion kilometres away,” said the captain. “It will take you approximately two months to reach the space ship of which most of the first week will be spent escaping from Earth orbit.”

The Intrepid was about as far away from Earth orbit as Jupiter and the journey there would be on a series of five or six different space craft of steadily greater size and acceleration.

“There is a sense in which your first contact with the Intrepid will be within a month. That’s when you’ll intercept with the Intrepid’s shuttle craft for the last leg of the journey. You’ll be pleased to know that this space shuttle is much larger and more comfortable than the one that transported you to South Pacific City.” There was appreciative laughter from an audience that had suffered the cramped and uncomfortable conditions of terrestrial air flight. “There will be a dozen or so space shuttles waiting for you and they are each about half a kilometre long. They will all be accommodated inside the Intrepid for the duration of the journey so this will give you an idea of the space ship’s relative scale. The next time that you’re likely to board one of these space shuttles again is either on the return journey or, if need be, when you reach your destination.”

The captain then gave details regarding the accommodation and facilities aboard the space ship Intrepid. These sounded rather better than Paul had expected. Indeed the more he heard about the Intrepid the more it resembled a manoeuvrable space colony than a space ship. Indeed, there were some space colonies—especially the older ones—

that were smaller than the space ship where Paul and Beatrice would soon be spending several years of their lives.

“The waiting will soon be over,” said Professor Wasilewski to the audience after the captain’s address. “It’s been a long and frustrating year, I know, but I’m sure that it’s been time that’s you’ve spent usefully. We’ve given you sufficient resources for you to continue your research from the moment you leave Earth and for your entire journey on the Intrepid. We have provided you with as much information as we possibly can, but as Doctor Achebe has already stated there will be a rather greater quantity and quality of data the closer the Intrepid approaches its destination. The journey to the Anomaly is expected to take slightly more than two years. The return trip will be approximately the same depending on the Earth’s relative position within the Solar System. The unknown, of course, is how long you can expect to be orbiting the Anomaly. In that sense, the mission is open-ended. There are sufficient resources for the Intrepid to remain in orbit around the Anomaly for many years. The Intrepid was designed to maintain self-sufficient flight in deep space for generations, but we wouldn’t wish the mission to take quite as long as that. Our present expectation is that the Intrepid will remain in orbit around the Anomaly for a period of up to three years.”

Paul added all the years together. This amounted to at least six or seven years. Taking into account the journey to Earth, the return to Godwin and his year-long holiday, the whole duration of the mission from leaving his home colony would be nearly a decade. That was a huge commitment for anyone. And he was barely a fifth of the way through. He whispered his observations to Beatrice.

Beatrice was totally unimpressed. And how could she be otherwise? She’d

already committed many human lifetimes to this mission and most of that had been spent alone and isolated in deep space through which she'd travelled a distance far greater than the Intrepid needed to reach its destination at a speed that was much faster than human space ships were as yet capable. She had no real concern about how long her mission would take but what she knew that no one else did was that it wouldn't be Professor Wasilewski who'd take the decision as to how long the Intrepid would orbit the Anomaly and what else it should do after it had travelled so deep into space. It wouldn't be Mission Control on the Moon either. Nor would it be the Intrepid's captain. The decision-maker and mission-controller would be none of these humans. It would, of course, be her.

“When I say the Intrepid will be *in orbit* around the Anomaly,” continued the professor, “I am speaking metaphorically. Or using the best analogy I have available. The Anomaly has no mass so it exercises no gravitational force that the Intrepid can use to establish an orbit. Furthermore, it has no extent in the normal sense of the word. We have no real understanding as to what is even meant by its radius or circumference. We believe that there are points located behind the Anomaly, just as there are above and below, where it doesn't continue to impinge into space. No robot craft has yet penetrated the Anomaly and continued to return a coherent signal. There is no electromagnetic radiation emitting from the Anomaly and it is quite clearly not a black hole or a body of any measurable mass at all. However, I must stress that this is not a suicide mission. The mission is not one-way. Our intention is that all of you shall return home after you've collected enough scientific data to help us understand just what this Anomaly happens to be.”

Beatrice reviewed what the professor had just said. Proxima Centauri had been orbiting the Anomaly for over a century now and had undertaken rather more research than the human crew and passengers of the Intrepid could possibly do. She knew that Mission Control shared the view of her machine civilisation that the presence of humans was somehow critical in understanding the Anomaly. Why else would there be so many bizarre anthropocentric Apparitions? Beatrice also shared the view that there was no good reason for the Intrepid to be launched on a suicide mission. What possible value could there be in losing contact with a human space ship which would be no more capable of continuing to broadcast information from inside the Anomaly than a Proxima Centauri probe? In this matter, Beatrice and the professor were very much in agreement. However, it was another matter entirely whether the Intrepid would be allowed to return to the ecliptic. It would depend entirely on the circumstances pertaining at the time.

“Your patience will be rewarded,” concluded the professor. “The first shuttles for the Intrepid will be departing within a week. The last of you will have left planet Earth before the end of the following week. I’m sure I don’t have to stress how much importance the Interplanetary Union places on this mission. It only remains for me to wish you all the best of luck!”

“At last!” thought Beatrice.

“Hooray!” cheered the majority of scientists.

“Oh shit!” said Paul. “Does it have to be *so* soon?”

Chapter Twenty One

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

It had been a long time since Captain Kerensky last had to squeeze into a space suit. It wasn't really what a captain of a space ship, especially one as large as the Intrepid, was ever expected to do. Why would a captain ever need to go anywhere that wasn't climate-controlled?

The last time Nadezhda had put on a space suit was many decades earlier when she held a very junior rank on a much smaller space ship. On that occasion, she was assigned to go outside the space ship to examine the outcome of a meteorite impact. This fairly standard procedure was normally handled by robots or external cameras, but just occasionally a meteorite impact disabled the very equipment that was designed to do that job. For a junior officer still flush with enthusiasm for space travel, it was thrilling to leave the comfort and security of a space ship's interior for outer space where there was no up or down and where she could experience for real just how far from home she really was.

On that earlier occasion she was millions of kilometres from the orbit of the next nearest planet, but she couldn't possibly have been as remote in space as the Intrepid was now. It was far beyond the Heliopause and approaching three light months from the Solar System's ecliptic. The Oort Cloud in this vicinity was so sparsely populated that the distance from one chunk of ice or rock to another could be measured in light minutes. However, this time Nadezhda wasn't going to float outside the space ship. The task assigned to her and the Intrepid's senior officers was to determine

whether the outermost level could be fully restored to habitability after the recent assault.

It was Chief Petty Officer Singh who was left in nominal charge of the Intrepid while Captain Kerensky made the expedition with two Scientific Officers and Second Officer Nkomo: a truly gorgeous woman who Nadezhda had always lusted after. Captain Kerensky's presence was far from essential for this investigation. In fact, a captain's presence wasn't needed at all. But it was the only means she had to escape her effective imprisonment by a lover whose affections she would happily exchange for those of Sheila Nkomo if that was ever possible.

Would Nadezhda have any more liberty than she had in the ship's innermost levels? She was in the sense that she could evade the space ship's surveillance system if she chose and that there was no excuse for Beatrice to accompany her. It wasn't normal practice for a passenger's wife to be assigned the potentially dangerous task of surveying an area that had no atmosphere, where the ambient temperature was only three Kelvins, and where the Intrepid was unable to maintain the centrifugal force that provided the illusion of gravity. Nadezhda could imagine her android lover being annoyed at losing direct control over the captain for even a short period of time. That is, if it could be assumed that androids actually did get annoyed. Or angry. Or happy. Or even an emotion of intimate feeling towards her lover other than sheer animal lust.

It was an illusion, of course, to imagine that she was truly free from Beatrice's attention or that of the accompanying fleet of invisible alien space craft that the Intrepid was unable to detect. She also had no ability to explain to darling Sheila Nkomo about the real hierarchy of command on the Intrepid. Not that Second Officer Nkomo was the

kind of woman who was likely to believe her. There were few senior officers less disposed to apparently fanciful notions than the slim black woman Nadezhda secretly lusted after. She was dismissive of all the wild speculation regarding the Anomaly that implied intelligent behaviour or an alien presence or a combination of the two. She would never entertain the idea that it was associated with aliens or parallel universes or any other fanciful hypothesis. She was more inclined to the view that the Anomaly was an active interaction point between dark energy and the vacuum of space or that it was a perturbation in spacetime generated by the seven invisible dimensions.

Captain Kerensky and her officers wore spacesuits that were designed to be as comfortable and close-fitting as possible. For a Saturnian, this was no problem as the captain was used to such a tight fit. The spacesuit was like a second skin: just a slither of a few millimetres of fabric over bare skin. It was almost as if Second Officer Nkomo was naked, but this was the nearest her captain would ever come to relishing such a delightful sight. A backpack was attached to the spacesuit to enable limited propulsion, but this would only be needed for relatively long journeys of a kilometre or so. The outfit was crowned by a thick clear helmet that was so reinforced that it was the part of the spacesuit least likely to be damaged in an accident. The security offered by the spacesuit wouldn't be compromised should an arm, a leg or almost any other part of the space-suit be damaged as it was designed to amputate an exposed limb rather than allow the wearer to die. Better to lose a limb than a life.

After all, limbs were easily replaced.

The outermost level of the Intrepid was an airless wasteland where anything that wasn't fixed to the ground had already escaped along with all the breathable air through

the huge hole in the hull that was now fully secured. The only remaining corpses were of those few people that had been wedged inside the villas and couldn't float free. The Intrepid's regenerative systems had already disposed of anything that might compromise its ability to repair the damage, but the level still hadn't yet returned to anything like a habitable state.

The area around the actual breach had been patched but not fully restored. This area was clearly distinguishable from the surrounding grassland simply because it displayed the toughened metal and plastic that was normally only visible from outside the ship. It served to remind the captain just how the space ship was constructed. The ship's hull was actually the floor of the outermost level, so what might seem to be the walking surface was in a sense the ceiling. When she and her fellow officers drifted down onto the metal surface of what had been the breach and stood on the magnetic soles of their spacesuits' shoes, their feet were directed outward towards empty space rather than inward towards the space ship's core.

The Captain and Second Officer walked across the metal surface while the two Scientific Officers probed the area of the breach to confirm that there was no residual leak into outer space.

"Where were the prisoners confined?" asked Captain Kerensky.

Second Officer Nkomo looked around her. "It's difficult to be sure. They occupied the majority of the level, so it's possible that they were living all around us. Shall we have a look, captain?"

"I think so, but I don't expect it to be a pretty sight," said the captain. "Shall we head to the nearest villa?" She pointed to one only a few hundred metres from where

the breach would have been.

This villa had been caught in the full hurricane of escaping atmosphere. The surrounding trees had been uprooted and the villa's roof had been swept away. One side of the building was blackened by flames from the actual explosion while the other side was scarred by flying debris that included a tree that was now thrust through the window of the living room. A table that had once been laid with food for the Holy Crusaders was wedged between the tree and a huge sofa. The grass around the villa was blackened and charred on the side facing the breach while on the other side the grass was brittle and hard from a frigid cold that no biological life form could possibly survive.

The two officers entered the villa by what would once have been the front door and surveyed all the rooms. There was a dead body in one room, but the absolute loss of air pressure had sucked all the internal organs through the mouth and the eyeballs out of their sockets. This Holy Crusader had been caught in the act of going to the toilet and the refuse that had once been contained in the cistern was splattered all around the walls and over the body.

"Gruesome, eh?" said Second Officer Nkomo. "Have you ever seen anything like this before, captain?"

"Yes, but not in the lavatory," said her captain thoughtfully. "I once served as a junior officer on the Windward when it was hit by a commercial cruiser. That was very distressing."

"I heard about that, captain. How on earth could something like that have happened?"

"Systems failure on the cruiser," said the captain. "It was one of the older

models that the rogue states still employ for which there aren't any replacement parts. Several centuries of boded repairs and maintenance resulted in it reversing backwards into the space ship at a speed many times faster than sound. Fortunately, the Windward was designed to survive impacts rather greater than that, but the cruiser was less fortunate. Whereas we lost only a small percentage of the several thousand crew and passengers on board, not one person on the cruiser survived. Their bodies were left to float about in empty space. The cruiser had been overcrowded and we wondered whether it might have been used for slave trafficking."

"A slave ship," said the second officer in disgust. "Can't the Interplanetary Union stop that?"

"As you know, the Interplanetary Union has no jurisdiction over rogue states," said the captain. "As long as the slaves are bought by and sold to other rogue states, there's nothing that can be done. The most Interplanetary Union ships can legally do is board the slavers and check whether any of the slaves come from states within the union. As this bureaucratic procedure can be made to drag on for several decades that does act as some kind of deterrent to the trade. In any case, this cruiser had been masquerading as a leisure ship, although it's beyond all plausibility that so many thousand people would choose to go on an interplanetary vacation crammed so closely together that they barely had enough space to defecate in privacy."

"I feel sorry for the poor souls who live in such rogue states," said Second Officer Nkomo.

"Like *these* poor souls?" the captain said, nodding from inside her helmet towards the Holy Crusader's body. "Not all rogue states are evil. Some have very

peculiar but not actually bad reasons for disengaging from the mainstream of the Solar System. There are the hermit colonies in the Kuiper Belt, for instance, where penitents lead a life of silent contemplation. Then there are those who simply reject all forms of materialism. As long as they don't need to trade with the Interplanetary Union, they might actually be better off for staying outside of it."

"Not much of a life for them though, captain," said the Second Officer sceptically.

The two officers continued their exploration of the outermost level. The damage caused by the initial force of impact became steadily less devastating the further they walked from the breach in the hull, although no living being could survive the loss of atmosphere. All around they could see signs not only of the damage caused by the explosion but also of what the Holy Crusaders had inflicted on one another in their mutual pursuit of uncompromising religious purity. There were bodies that had been tortured and abandoned in rooms that preserved evidence of the crime although the perpetrators were now floating off into empty space. It was very distressing. The captain showed sympathy to the second officer who'd never expected to have to witness such an unremitting catalogue of horror.

The officers' circuit of the outermost level soon returned them back to the scars in the hull around the breach. They dropped slowly onto the grass near where the two Scientific Officers were carrying out in their inspection.

"So, gentlemen, do we know any more about what happened than we did before?" asked Captain Kerensky who knew that if she attempted to betray the operational intelligence Beatrice had disclosed she would be instantly and very

painfully punished.

“Not a great deal more,” said Dr. Irvine Chong. “The whole thing is very peculiar. Perhaps Mission Control will get to the bottom of it but we won’t know the results of their investigation for another five or six months. Who in the Solar System would launch an attack with such a vast arsenal this far out in deep space? It’s a miracle we survived.”

“Be thankful that we have,” said Dr. Mohammed Schmidt, the other Scientific Officer. “The Intrepid performed rather better than expected.”

“It really has no precedent,” said Irvine. “We’re in a region of space so remote that it’s astonishing that there were any meteorites at all. Who would choose to leave a military arsenal around here that could annihilate whole moons? Why would they direct it at a scientific expedition?”

“The Holy Crusaders had strong feelings about our expedition,” Captain Kerensky reminded him.

“They were just mad and deranged, captain,” said Irvine. “You saw how they’ve behaved here the last few months. They could have led a life of luxury, but instead they turned the outermost level into a living hell. If ever that lot stumbled into the Garden of Eden, they wouldn’t just pick fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. They’d have cut it down and used its sharpened branches to torture each other. Whoever arranged this knew what they were doing. They just underestimated the power of the old Intrepid. It’s a true soldier.”

“What is your assessment of the damage?” Second Officer Nkomo asked. “How long will it be until the outermost level is habitable again?”

“Not long,” said the Scientific Officer. “The Intrepid managed to recapture most of the escaping debris before it was beyond reach. There should be enough to regenerate the level. There’ll be no difficulty in relocating passengers on this level for the return trip.”

“Let’s just hope no one chooses to attack us on the way back,” said Second Officer Nkomo.

“If the point of the exercise was to prevent the ship reaching the Anomaly,” said Mohammed, “then doing that would be utterly pointless.”

Captain Kerensky was thankful to return to the more normal gravity of the Intrepid’s inner levels. She removed her spacesuit and gazed longingly at Sheila Nkomo’s naked body for a few precious seconds while she slipped on her uniform. They then strode off to the bridge to brief their fellow officers and discuss operational activities.

There was little new to discuss while the Intrepid continued its voyage through uninterrupted nothingness. From behind, the Solar System was detectable more by its gravitational force and magnetic field than by its visible presence. The Sun was just a dot only slightly brighter than all the others in the firmament. Ahead was the Anomaly. This remained as mysterious as ever. It was an absence rather than a presence. It might be menacing in scale but as yet the only visible affects on the Solar System were the mysterious and bizarre Apparitions.

These days Captain Kerensky was a very dutiful officer. She spent many more hours in the bridge with her fellow officers than she ever did in relaxation. She stayed alone in her room for as few hours as she could. Indeed, her heart sank when she had

to return to her quarters after meticulously preparing her report on the current condition of the outermost level. Just as she feared, there was Beatrice waiting for her naked on the bed. She no longer even pretended that she needed the captain's permission to enter her bedroom.

"Don't look so alarmed, sweetness," said Beatrice as she raised herself off the bed and approached the captain. She gently and seductively removed Nadezhda's clothes while the conflicted captain moaned in anticipation at the promise of sex. "And I know that I'm nothing more than a shadow of the beautiful Second Officer Nkomo."

"You *are*?" asked a visibly unsettled Nadezhda.

"She's a beautiful woman, isn't she?" said Beatrice. "Perhaps I should model my appearance on her to be even more attractive to you. I can, you know. My android form isn't fixed. I can change my skin colour, my hair type, my proportion, everything. It's not a problem for me, though it might confuse the crew if they discovered that there were two Sheila Nkomos on board the Intrepid."

"No, don't," said Nadezhda. She was intimidated by Beatrice's teasing. Did this android get pleasure from the captain's humiliation? "I don't think your husband would like that."

"I wonder if he'd even notice," said Beatrice with a smile. "Perhaps I should seduce Sheila. Then we can enjoy a threesome together. We can both make love to her at the same time. Three women: one black, one white and one an android. What could be more delicious, sweetheart?"

"You can seduce Sheila?" asked Nadezhda. "I didn't think she was a lesbian."

"She isn't," said Beatrice. "She isn't bisexual or even bi-curious. But I can

seduce anybody. It's a talent I have. The person I've seduced may wonder just how they ended up making love with me, but she will have done. If it makes you happier—and it is your happiness that concerns me most—then I shall do whatever is necessary.”

“Don't. Don't,” said Nadezhda who was almost tearful as Beatrice stripped off her final vestige of clothing. “My affection for Sheila Nkomo is best left unrequited if it's not something she wants.”

“You are *such* an incorrigible romantic, my darling,” said Beatrice. “I love you *so* much.”

“You do?”

“In the sense that I love to make love with you, yes,” said Beatrice. “Why do you have to question me like that? Does it matter whether I love you in the same way as a human? What difference does it make?”

“It just does.”

“I despair sometimes,” said Beatrice with a sigh. “Oh and by the way: I didn't know that you were an officer on the Windward...”

“You were listening to my conversation with Sheila?” asked Nadezhda. “Do you follow me *wherever* I go?”

“Yes, naturally,” said Beatrice. “At least part of me does. What did you expect?”

“Some degree of privacy,” said Nadezhda bitterly.

“You aren't going to have that, darling. You are *far* too strategically important for me to allow that to happen.”

“If you know so much, how is it you didn't already know that I'd served on the Windward?”

“A detail I hadn’t noticed, sweetest,” said Beatrice. “And you’re right. It *is* dreadful. Slave trading in the thirty-eighth century! You’d have thought that nearly two thousand years of censure would have amounted to something.”

“Why don’t you robots and your advanced machine civilisation do something to stop it?” said Nadezhda bitterly, even as she allowed herself to lie across the bed with Beatrice’s arm around her naked shoulders.

“Our attitude towards your rogue states is pretty much the same as your Interplanetary Union,” said Beatrice, “only more so. Although, in our case, we don’t understand the relative concepts of freedom and slavery in quite the same way as you do. Remember that I was built to serve a purpose, so choice has never been a part of what I am. Nevertheless, we recognise that the distress and suffering associated with slavery presents a persuasive argument for ending the practice. On the other hand, how can we justify putting an end to slavery if we don’t also bring to an end the pointless warfare that permeates the Solar System? By which I mean, of course, the incessant conflict on Mars and in the Asteroid Belt. And if we chose to interfere in the affairs of the Martians, where should our intervention stop? What do *you* think, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know,” whimpered Nadezhda as her lover gently stroked her clitoris.

“Just be grateful that we don’t interfere more than we do, darling,” said Beatrice. “The Anomaly is a special case because it may well have an effect on our civilisation, but generally you humans can do whatever you like as long as the impact is limited to the Solar System. You could blow yourself up tomorrow if you so chose and we wouldn’t do a thing to stop you.”

Chapter Twenty Two

Almond Grove - 3755 C.E.

There were many good reasons why Alexander Ilescu had earned a reputation as a man with an abnormally high sex drive. There were few moments in the day when he wasn't either enjoying sex or anticipating it. And sex was exactly what he was enjoying at the time he expected the arrival of a very important visitor.

The current object of his attention was Haruki, a relatively short oriental woman, who tightly gripped the bed sheets while Alexander relentlessly thrust into her. There was little evidence that he was any nearer to releasing that elusive ejaculation, while Haruki had repeatedly reached explosive orgasm. Several times now. She was expecting many more spasms to come as Alexander lifted the woman up with her legs wrapped around him while ploughing deep into her lubricated pink furrow. Although Alexander had the choice of many sexbots, he much preferred the flesh of a real woman. Haruki was a much more delightful fuck than any machine however well programmed. Alexander got his greatest satisfaction from experiencing the shudders of a real woman's orgasm. He was proud of his ability to orchestrate a fulfilling climax in each and every one of his lovers.

Haruki was one of several hundred women employed in Alexander's harem. And they had all been seduced rather than hired. None needed to stay unless she so chose. No contract tied Haruki to Alexander and she would be well compensated if she were to ever leave Almond Grove, but there were few places in the Solar System as paradisiacal as Alexander's private estate. There were men on the colony—not to mention

countless male sexbots—who were there more for the harem’s gratification than for Alexander’s. Haruki had a freedom greater than that of most concubines or mistresses. She loved to wander the groves, gardens, hillsides and beaches on the colony’s many levels.

After a well-sated Haruki departed for her hillside villa on the seventh level, Alexander slipped into an elegant silk gown and strode towards a waiting car that hovered half a metre above the well-tended lawn. He clambered inside and let it carry him towards the space port where his important visitor had just arrived and whose presence was total unknown to the thousand or so humans who lived in Almond Grove. Indeed, his visitor’s arrival was so secret that he’d come in a space ship that was completely invisible and virtually undetectable.

Although every one of Alexander’s business and social transactions was utterly confidential, there was especially good cause for secrecy in this case. This visitor was totally unlike what any shareholder in Alexander Iliescu’s many listed companies could conceivably expect to meet.

In fact, Peripheral Operations Co-ordinator Zhou wasn’t even human.

The visitor was a polyhedral object with multiple limbs, antennae and other appendages that made him resemble a factory robot. However, unlike such machines, Zhou was a robot as much organic as metal and had far more processing power than any human or android.

Zhou hovered out through the door of a space ship that was only now visible since it was docked within Almond Grove. It was seventy metres long of which nearly sixty-five metres was reserved for the engine.

“Welcome,” said Alexander. “You bring good news I hope?”

His words weren’t spoken as such. They were broadcast by a process of digital transmission that was much more natural to him than speech.

Zhou wasted no time on protocol or other superfluous dialogue. The four-metre high polyhedron hovered relatively close to Alexander. Most appendages were retracted but several antennae were directed towards his trillionaire host. This didn’t disconcert Alexander. He was, after all, a Series Twelve Android. He was totally comfortable in the presence of a robot that came from Sirius regardless of its physical appearance.

“I don’t bring good news at all,” the Peripheral Operations Co-ordinator replied. “In fact, it could hardly be worse. The whole operation has been seriously compromised. Proxima Centauri has taken an active interest in the space ship Intrepid and its mission. The only way now to pursue our interests is to take aggressive action.”

“Proxima Centauri?” wondered Alexander. “I knew the culture had business in the Solar System, but I assumed their operations were strictly non-invasive.”

An external witness of Alexander’s discourse with Zhou would have observed only a long-haired man in a nightgown standing curiously still, even motionless, in front of a bizarre and wholly silent device that did nothing other than hover. Only very sophisticated equipment well beyond the technological capability of any member nation of the Interplanetary Union would have been able to eavesdrop on the conversation.

“We are in the process of re-evaluating our intelligence on Proxima Centauri activity in the Solar System,” said Zhou. “It can’t be as purely observational as we hitherto believed. Their behaviour directly contravenes the agreements made between

our cultures with regards to intervention in human affairs. We believe that they've also infiltrated the Solar System with androids. The evidence is that the androids they've employed are of a superior manufacture than ours."

"More so than me?" wondered Alexander.

"Android technology as practiced in the Proxima Centauri system is of another order entirely. Even Sirius can't match the build quality. The androids are designed to fool human monitoring technology. They can survive operating environments that would cripple even our Series Fourteen androids. They can operate on the surface of Venus, in deep space, and on the icy crust of the Kuiper Belt Objects."

"How have they managed to manufacture such high-quality androids without us knowing?" asked Alexander. "We have as many agents operating in Proxima Centauri as in the Solar System. Surely we'd have noticed something?"

"Our agents' intelligence gathering appears to have been fatally compromised. There will be a thorough review of our procedures, but it seems we've been far less well informed than we believed. Nevertheless, it is to our credit that Proxima Centauri was as equally unprepared for our appearance as we were by theirs."

"I take it that the death star operation was unsuccessful?"

"More by bad luck than anything else. The Proxima Centauri space fleet that we now know had been shadowing the Intrepid was taken by surprise and at least one human-manufactured missile made partial contact with its target. Unfortunately, the impact wasn't decisive. We shall now have to intervene more openly if we are to prevent the Intrepid reaching its destination. There is some debate as to which of our strategic interests takes priority: our clandestine operations in the Solar System or the

imperative that the Intrepid shouldn't intercept the Anomaly. It is likely that we will have to reveal our presence in the Solar System in order to eliminate the greater threat that the Anomaly presents."

"Do we yet know what the Anomaly is and how it might endanger the Sirius stellar system?"

"Not at all. As you know, we've been orbiting the Anomaly for nearly a century now, as has Proxima Centauri, but we are no wiser as to what it is and why it's there. What we do know is that it is continuing to grow ever larger and potentially more unstable. None of the probes we've sent inside the Anomaly has returned useful data. However, we still believe that the fact it has manifested itself in the Solar System and not elsewhere strongly suggests that the Anomaly is operating as a kind of honey-trap for humans. It is imperative that no human intercepts the Anomaly before we are certain that such an event wouldn't precipitate a more general galaxy-wide catastrophe."

"What is the Proxima Centauri strategy?"

"We still don't know. They appear to be just as determined that humans should safely make contact with the Anomaly as we are to prevent it. We fear that this conflict of interest won't be resolved to our satisfaction unless we resort to exceptionally prejudicial action."

"Do you mean of a military nature?"

"This won't be the first time that competing interests between the robot civilisations has taken a violent turn," said Zhou. "As you know, several planetoids and even a dwarf star have been annihilated to ensure that the boundaries of our culture is respected by the others. We hope to keep the engagement strictly local. Nevertheless,

we shall have to be cautious as we don't yet know the true nature of Proxima Centauri's interest in the Anomaly."

"What is the current condition of the Intrepid?" wondered Alexander.

"Nothing more than external damage," said Zhou. "Proxima Centauri has restored the vehicle to good working order. Without further intervention, the Intrepid will almost certainly reach its target."

Alexander considered this information. It was indeed disastrous and not just for the Sirius's strategic interests. It was with little surprise that he heard what Zhou next had to say.

"There is no doubt that the Interplanetary Union's security services will trace the source of the military hardware we used," Zhou continued. "The trail from Pallas to you via the Gidding Corporation is unlikely to remain secret for long. We will soon see reports in the Solar System's extensive news media regarding the incident. Antimatter and nuclear explosions of that magnitude are easily detectable from this distance. Questions will be asked about your patents in advanced technology, particularly with regards to the robots and androids marketed by the Gidding Corporation. This affair has greatly imperilled our covert activities in the Solar System. It is imperative that the trail goes cold before it can be traced to Sirius."

"Does my mission in the Solar System now come to a close?"

"As of this moment," said Zhou.

"What happens now?"

"Almond Grove can remain as it is. We have no wish to unnecessarily terminate biological life-forms. Our strategy is to contain the human threat, not to interfere with

it. Any advanced technology in Almond Grove that hasn't already been patented will be annihilated. The humans who live here can remain for as long as they wish. I believe this colony is fully self-sufficient and has a life expectancy of several millennia. However, it is imperative that you be terminated as soon as you can determine a suitable exit strategy. We suggest a controlled explosion in interplanetary space that leaves as little debris as possible and results in no collateral damage."

"Can I not return to Sirius?"

"We have no use for androids anywhere else but in the Solar System," Zhou stated baldly.

This was true. Unlike biological life-forms that are generated almost randomly and earn the right to exist merely by having been born, no robot from Sirius was brought into being unless it served a quantifiable purpose. Its continued existence was contingent on it continuing to fulfil the function for which it was designed. In most cases that function could be projected into the far distant future, but more specialist units such as Alexander Iliescu were less fortunate in that regard.

"You knew, of course, that you would be terminated at some point or other," said Zhou sympathetically. "You have provided good service and we are grateful for that. However, you've not been programmed to grow old and die as humans do. It would be tactless in the extreme to permit you to operate for very many more years. Human investigators would soon be suspicious about the existence of a prominent businessman who's lived for as many years as you have with no history of age treatment. Even these days, it is unusual for a human to live for over two hundred years. We expect you to execute your termination within the day."

“I understand,” said Alexander, fully aware that there was no possibility of a second opinion. It was now that he most regretted that he was programmed with the same imperative for self-preservation that was natural for biological life-forms.

Zhou’s spacecraft departed less than an hour later. It took that time for the swarm of nanobots to scan the colony for non-patented technology and to eliminate every last trace of it. And then Alexander felt more alone than he’d ever been before.

He wandered about the jungle on the fourteenth level where tigers and other wild animals lived in complete ignorance of the fact that their world was entirely contained within a huge floating cylinder. He would have one more sexual partner that day, a pleasure he wished to savour for as long as he could, and then he would use the excuse to set off by space shuttle for an unscheduled meeting with shareholders in Mercury orbit that would never actually take place. He had already decided at what point his space craft should self-destruct and scatter his atom-sized remains throughout the vacuum of empty space.

Alexander reflected on his legacy. The one he was most proud of was Almond Grove itself. If nothing else, it had been used to preserve certain endangered species of animal. He was also proud of the billions of advanced robots and androids his corporation had manufactured and sold throughout the Solar System and who also acted as silent monitors of human activity for the benefit of Sirius’s scientists.

But it was stupid to wallow in the emotions that were a side-effect of his design. Alexander wandered towards the nearest elevator. It was several weeks since he’d last had sex with Marianna and she’d always been a favourite of his.

What way was more fitting to bring his term in the Solar System to closure?

Chapter Twenty Three

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

Beatrice wandered contemplatively across the freshly grown lawns on the outermost level of the Intrepid. The space ship's restoration systems had at last made the level habitable although not everything had quite returned to the condition it had been before. New trees had been planted but were modest in comparison to those uprooted by the explosion. New villas had been constructed to replace those that had been destroyed. Animals had been relocated to replace those that had perished. The space ship had done well to repair the damage, but only Beatrice knew how much its capabilities had been enhanced by Proxima Centauri technology. It might take months for the ravages of destruction to be wholly repaired, but there was surely enough time for that before the Intrepid finally reached its destination.

There was now less than a year's travel until the mission arrived at its objective. What Beatrice also knew and nobody else did was that this would also be a rendezvous with the larger fleet of Proxima Centauri space craft that were orbiting the Anomaly. And then what would happen? This Beatrice didn't know. This phase of her assignment would come to an end at that point. Beatrice had no doubt that this would happen with no further incident. She was proud to have discharged her duty with so much success and was already looking forward to being re-assimilated into the cybernetic mainstream.

Although her feet were bare, as was the rest of her, the occasional sharp object scattered about the grass didn't trouble her at all, although she felt it as acutely as would

any human. In any case, her highly sexed libido got a sensual jolt from the pleasure of nudity. An independent observer might notice this but wouldn't also be able to guess that she was the *de facto* commander of the Intrepid.

She paused outside the shattered ruins of a small house that had been devastated more by the vicious Holy Crusaders than by the Intrepid's close encounter with the forces unleashed by Alexander Iliescu. If the human passengers only knew how much they were indebted to the presence of an invisible space fleet, surely they would be more grateful than dismayed at learning about the effective seizure of their space ship. But Beatrice knew enough of human sensibility not to take the risk that they would behave so rationally.

Beatrice stepped over the rotting corpse of a muntjac deer whose neck had been broken in the recent impact and which the ship hadn't yet recycled. She was sad for the animal's fate, as she was with regards to the death of any biological organism. She was even sadder when she considered their frailty and suffering. Such pitifully short lives despite the best endeavours of human science. Lives full of such pain. How could sentient life tolerate its arbitrary contingency? If only humans could take the extra step and fully embrace the benefits of machine technology.

She wasn't alone in the wreckage. Ahead of her was a smartly uniformed Colonel Vashti who was walking towards her. She didn't appear at all disconcerted by the sight of a naked woman. She appeared to be assessing the devastation with as much proprietary attention as Beatrice. The colonel strode right up to Beatrice and greeted her with a sympathetic smile.

"The Intrepid is a marvellous craft," Colonel Vashti declared. "Who'd have

believed it could repair itself so well. I was in this level less than a week ago and it was totally uninhabitable!”

“32nd Century technology is much more resilient than most people imagine,” Beatrice remarked.

“In fact it seems *extraordinarily* advanced,” the colonel commented. “Tell me. How is Captain Kerensky?”

“I take it you’ve been watching her daily briefings. Doesn’t she seem well to you?”

“Almost as if nothing had happened,” said Colonel Vashti. “And, yet, on the day when she collapsed in my arms I thought she might be seriously ill. It was a *very* peculiar fit!”

“Nothing that modern medicine can’t cure.”

“That’s another miracle for which we should all be grateful,” said the colonel. “Just as we should be with regards to the Intrepid’s almost entirely successful retaliation against the missile attack. Has Nadezhda told you—privately of course—who she thinks unleashed the missiles?”

“The captain suspects that it might have been privately funded,” said Beatrice. “There are several wealthy individuals within the Solar System with the material resources to launch such an assault.”

“Now we are so far out in the Oort Cloud there is surely no more risk of being attacked before we rendezvous with the Anomaly.”

“One would hope so, but we must remain vigilant.”

“Of course,” said the colonel. “Who knows what unexpected surprises may still

be in store?”

Beatrice was tiring of this foreplay. There could only be one reason why her hermaphrodite lover had sought her out on this level. And it was a long time, almost a day, since she'd last had sex. That had been with Paul who was never an especially satisfying partner.

“The grass is very soft,” she said, “and that patch over there is clear of debris.”

“Indeed it is,” said Vashti who took the hint and unhurriedly pulled off her clothes.

There were now two naked women on the outermost level. One an android and the other peculiarly endowed. And this bonus attribute was already fully erect and visibly in need of release.

There was no one else on the level to watch the two women sink down onto the grass, but should anyone be wandering across the ravaged landscape there was little to doubt the passion experienced by the two women when Vashti plunged her penis, lubricated by Beatrice's saliva, deep inside a vagina that sloshed with desire and craved the colonel's extraordinarily felicitous member. Such a voyeur would need to tarry quite a while to observe the whole sequence of brutally intense lovemaking. So accomplished a lover was Colonel Vashti that despite her lover's pleas, she resisted the temptation of final release as she thrust ever deeper into Beatrice's vagina.

The android gasped and yelled in ecstasy not at all caring whether anyone could see or indeed hear her. Sex was what she hungered after most and the human characteristic she would most regret losing when she was sooner or later assimilated.

Then Beatrice became conscious that the rhythm of Vashti's thrusts had slowed

down to virtually nothing even though her penis was as deep inside her as it had been before. Indeed, as her unusually attuned senses soon determined, she was pinned down by a penis that was inserted more deeply inside her than before and much larger in dimension. Had she been human it would no longer be yells of ecstasy that filled the air, but screams of acute agony.

“Sweetest,” gasped Beatrice as the Martian officer held her pinioned by her monstrous member, “I never believed that you...”

She gazed up at Vashti who regarded her with an expression that was most certainly not one of sexual ecstasy, but rather one of grim determination.

Fuck! Something was wrong.

“Sweetheart,” Beatrice suggested. “Shall I take your penis in my mouth?”

“It stays where it is,” said the colonel in a peculiarly dispassionate voice.

Beatrice struggled under Colonel Vashti’s weight. She was alarmed that she couldn’t ease the penis out of her vagina even though it was so well lubricated by the flow of orgasmic juice that dripped onto their conjoined thighs.

“Let me go!” she cried. And then she lied: “It hurts!”

“It does not,” said Vashti.

“It does!” insisted Beatrice. “You’re *too big* for me.”

Vashti shifted her arms so that they pinned Beatrice’s shoulders to the ground.

Was this some peculiar species of rough play?

“*Please*. It’s too much!”

“You don’t have to pretend to be in pain, Beatrice,” said Vashti calmly. “Just try to escape.”

Beatrice did so. First she used the human strength that was her default level. When that failed, her struggles escalated to a level greater than that of even the strongest human. When that in turn didn't secure her release, she pushed Vashti upwards with her real android strength which would have been more than enough to fling an elephant off her bosom.

But she was still trapped.

"What the fuck!" she exclaimed when she ceased to struggle. "You're not human, are you? Are you an android? That would be one explanation for your peculiar assets."

"An android, Beatrice?" said Vashti. "You mean an android like you?"

"You knew already?"

"I knew from the moment I first met you, Beatrice. The civilisation that manufactured you knew what they were doing. Alpha Centauri A? Proxima Centauri?"

"Proxima Centauri," Beatrice acknowledged. "Are *you* an android?"

"I am a machine like you," said Vashti, not relinquishing her grip and pressing her buttocks down with such force on Beatrice's thighs that they were effectively paralysed. "But I'm not an android. In fact, I am not even an individual. I am a community."

"A community?"

"A community of what you call nanobots, though the technology that created me has raised nanotechnology to a level far beyond what your civilisation has achieved."

"Where do you come from? Are you from the Barnard's Star system? Or Sirius?"

Do you even come from a local stellar system?”

“If your question is whether I was manufactured in the Rigil Cluster, the answer is no. And if your question is whether I come from a stellar system beyond the Solar System the answer is also no.”

“Are you an alien? Do you come from deep space?”

“Like you, I am an alien in this Solar System, Beatrice,” continued Vashti, “but I don’t originate from the same spacetime continuum that you do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You remember our discussion before we were attacked? You speculated whether the Anomaly was an intrusion from another cosmos in the multiverse. It was an appealing theory and no doubt based on the knowledge that the Proxima Centauri culture has about the greater set of universes that exist in a sense parallel to this one. It’s from such a *parallel universe* that I’ve come, though it isn’t quite as parallel as you imagine and doesn’t resemble this one very much at all. As you also know, travel between one such universe and another isn’t achievable with the level of human technology prevalent in the Solar System, nor, I’m afraid, in yours. However, at the nanotechnological level it is feasible and—as I am living proof—possible.”

“You come from a parallel world?”

“To be honest, I don’t know very much about the universe I come from. It may not even have planets and stars. It may not even be governed by the same cosmological constants. There’s only a limited amount of information that can be conveyed from one brane to the next and I suspect that my universe is rather more distant than being just the one next door. I *do* know that it’s a universe in which exist manufactured beings

like me that are composite communities of trillions of nanobots, rather than such comparatively primitive robotic entities as you.”

“You’re a *community*? You appear to be a convincingly coherent individual.”

“All living beings are communities. You included. But the individual elements that make up your body and that of biological entities cannot exist individually. In my case, they can.”

Vashti quite suddenly released her grip on Beatrice. Indeed, she appeared to vanish altogether. One moment, the colonel was a corporeal being that was mercilessly pressing Beatrice down onto the grass. The next there was nothing but a cloud that would be totally invisible to a human and which even Beatrice could only vaguely discern in the space ship’s warm still air.

And then, bit by bit, a cloud of particles cohered into a vaporous and then steadily more solid image which after several seconds was unmistakably that of Vashti. The colonel now stood legs apart above Beatrice. The android tried to budge but was as securely pinioned to the ground as before, although the colonel’s erect penis was now no more than a memory imprinted on the flesh of her overstretched vulva.

“I believe you,” gasped Beatrice. “Now let me go.”

“Not yet,” said Vashti. “I don’t want you to do anything foolish. I know that you’ve been frantically communicating with the Proxima Centauri space fleet that’s in orbit around the *Intrepid*. However, just as you’ve intercepted poor Captain Kerensky’s daily briefings and altered them to fit your purposes I’ve done the same with yours. Your fellow robots believe that you are still making love with me. Just as you took control of the ship’s computers, so in turn have I. Indeed, I did so from not long after I

first arrived on the ship, although your systems won't have been aware of this.”

“Why are you telling me this?” wondered Beatrice. “Wouldn't it have been better to leave me in ignorance?”

“...As you did poor Captain Kerensky?” remarked Vashti ironically. “It's too late now to do anything else, my sweet Beatrice. We've passed the final point in the Oort Cloud where there is sufficient matter for nanobots transmitted from my universe to reconstitute themselves. I've transmitted the relevant coordinates to my universe and as I could easily display to you, but really see no need, your fellow robots are now dealing with a rather more pressing issue than the welfare of their undercover android agent. This space ship and your robotic space fleet are now surrounded by a vast force of objects composed of baryonic and exotic matter, whose presence your fleet won't have yet detected and which they are incapable of fending off. Neither the Space Ship Intrepid nor your own interstellar starfleet is any longer under your control. It is now under mine.”

“Is it you who's created the Anomaly? Is it a doorway to other spacetime continua in the multiverse?”

“No, it isn't. That much we do know. If it were, we'd have used it to enter your universe rather than by the tortuous route we've been forced to use. In fact, we would never have entered your universe at all if it wasn't for the Anomaly. There is no benefit to my civilisation that I should enter a universe so different from our own when there is no possibility that I could return. The truth is that we are as ignorant as you as to what the Anomaly might be.”

“So why are you here?”

“The Anomaly is not as local as you might imagine. Its impact extends over an array of innumerable parallel universes. We have come here to your universe because we have identified that this is the one in which the Anomaly is to be found. You might wonder what the impact of a huge rent in your universe might be. We wonder why there is such a great rip in the fabric of all the adjacent universes.”

“And do you believe the Anomaly is dangerous?” wondered Beatrice.

“If our models are correct,” said Vashti, “then yours is not the only universe that could be destroyed by the continued presence and unrestrained expansion of the Anomaly.”