

# Return to Andromeda

by Lee Edgar

dedicated to lovers everywhere

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## Other books in this series

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Andromeda Time

## PROLOGUE

The Council of Ten filed into the Grand Palace in silence as yet another purple flash lit up the sky. One by one, the members took their respective positions around the great marble table and were seated. A wisp of dust rose as a piece of beautifully-decorated plaster fell from the ceiling and shattered into tiny fragments when it struck the table. None of the Ten moved or flinched. It was too late for such pointless action. The Finance Minister gently brushed the dust from his papers as the others watched the entrance to the inner chamber. The ground shook again and one or two glanced around nervously as the building seemed to sway with the tremor. As it ceased, the sound of the roaring reduced to a dull throb. The planet was dying.

'Thank you for coming, my friends,' said a newcomer as she stood framed by the blue curtains.

The Ten rose respectfully to their feet and watched as their ruler took up her position at the head of the table.

'Please be seated,' she said pleasantly. 'I apologise for calling you away from your families at a time such as this.'

'Your wish is our command,' said the Agriculture Minister. There was a brief murmur of agreement.

'I wish I could offer you some hope, my friends. However, I can do no more than thank you for all your support during this time of severe crisis.'

'Is it really the end, Your Majesty?' asked the young man at the bottom of the table.

'I fear so, Agar. Durandor has already been devoured by the black hole threatening our planet. We have very little time left.'

'Do we know precisely how long?' he persevered.

The Queen looked at a short man and raised her eyebrow.

'An estimated nine days, Your Majesty,' confirmed the Minister of Science. 'The quakes and storms are expected to increase over that period until our atmosphere is drawn off. The end of all life will then be very

swift.'

'There is no hope, Gwynatha?'

'None, Your Majesty. The only hope of continuing our race is now completely in the hands of the Earthman.'

'Were we right to trust him with our life seeds?' asked the dark-haired woman.

'I believe so, Jannil,' said Queen Lyniera. 'He will do everything he can to see that all will not be in vain.'

'But so much, and entrusted to just one man.'

'We had little choice under the circumstances. It was fortunate he happened to arrive when he did and offered to help us as did the other Terrans who came before him.'

'Perhaps Earthman Duncan will die before he is able to establish our race on his home planet.'

'That is indeed possible. However, I feel he will do all he can. He is carrying our future and knows it.'

'The technology we gave him, will he use it wisely?'

'He must, if he is to survive.' She turned to a grey-haired man. 'Did you send our final signal of greeting?'

'I did, Your Majesty. If Earthman Duncan has survived the return journey to Terra, I calculate that he will have received it this morning.'

The Queen bowed her head in sadness. 'Then we can do no more.'

'We must simply wait for the end?'

'I fear so, my friends. Go to your homes now and spend your last few days with your families. Nothing can save us now.'

## RETURN TO ANDROMEDA

Alan Thompson, Director of the Europa Space Corporation, smiled as he watched the two young women saying goodbye to their father. One of the daughters he had known for almost a year. The other, younger girl, he had only just met for the first time. Both had long, golden hair and each wore pale blue overalls with crimson collars which identified currently-serving mission personnel.

'Take care, both of you,' their father was saying. He was a tall man who looked in his mid fifties and with fair hair turning to grey at the temples. 'I fear your voyage could hold real danger.'

'We have our husbands to protect us,' said Lyn, glancing at the similarly-dressed menfolk. 'They will let no harm befall us.'

He smiled warmly. 'I hope so, my dears.'

The Director coughed. 'Time is running out, Jim.'

'You are right, Alan. The General will waste no time in getting his revenge for what my girls have done to foil his plans for war.'

The Director shook hands with the older sister. 'I shall miss your happy, smiling face around here, Cassi.'

The twenty-year-old woman smiled back with a twinkle in her eye. 'And I you.' She looked around at the transparent walls of the giant Russian-built space station. 'I shall miss Orion as well. Look after her for me.'

'I will.' He took the hand of the younger girl. 'Goodbye, Lyn. One day, you and I will get to know each other better.'

'If my husband lets me come back,' she said, looking up at him with a smile.

'He will. Steve has very strict instructions on the matter.'

With a final wave, the two girls stepped into the airlock, difficult to tell apart in the poor light despite the one-year difference in their ages. The great airlock door slowly closed and the green light above it turned red after a moment.

'Will they make it in time, Jim?' asked the Director as they watched the umbilical tube detach from Wayfarer One. It hung motionless before slowly contracting towards the space station.

Admiral Duncan shook his head. 'I doubt it. It took me thirty-eight years to get back from the Andromeda Spiral in Wayfarer Two. They will be very lucky to complete the journey in time to be of any real help.'

'But the new reactor? The uprated Proton Drive?'

Jim turned to face his superior officer. 'We're still talking ten years, Alan. Andromeda is one hell of a long way away, even at 250,000 times the speed of light.'

'Is such a speed really possible, Jim?'

'Time will tell. It is three times faster than the ship has ever been before.'

Their conversation was disturbed by a smartly-dressed cadet who handed the Director a message. The senior man read it carefully, frowned, and then gave it to Jim Duncan before turning back to the control

centre. He pushed a button on his desk. 'Wayfarer One, this is Orion Base Station. Do you read?'

'Receiving you, Orion,' responded a male voice. 'Go ahead.'

'Steve, this is Alan Thompson. I have just received a signal from Europort Launch Complex. General Phillips has just ordered a shuttle to take off in an attempt to prevent you leaving for Andromeda.'

There was a pause and then: 'How long will it take for the shuttle to get up from Earth?'

The Director looked at Jim Duncan who flashed his open hands twice. 'About twenty minutes at full thrust. I suggest you get away from here as soon as you can.'

'Very well, Mr Director. I'll be in touch.'

'Good luck, Wayfarer.'

'Thanks. We'll need it.'

COMMANDER Stephen Carter switched off the radio and looked around the group of people who were with him on the flight deck of Wayfarer One. 'You all heard that?' When it was clear that they had, he turned to his wife. 'Lyn, how long to critical mass?'

The pilot looked at the screen of the red console in front of her. 'Ten minutes.'

'Very well. Prepare to activate Auxiliary Drive. Let's detach from Orion and get ready to fly.' He looked at the other girl. 'Course ready?'

'Iris confirms trajectory computed,' Cassi said as she glanced at the white screen which was the Interactive Radar Identification System. Known affectionately as Iris, it had been originally developed simply as a highly-sophisticated navigation aid. Since Wayfarer's accidental trip to Andromeda, the computer had been modified and Iris now controlled not only navigation but also all life-support functions of the interstellar space cruiser.

'Release docking clamps,' the Commander said.

'Confirmed clamps off,' said First Officer Hardy and a slight clunk was felt through the ship.

'Activate Auxiliary Drive.'

'Auxiliary Drive activated,' said Lyn. 'Critical Mass in nine minutes.'

'Very good. Prepare for gravity assist.'

'All navigation systems ready, Commander,' confirmed Cassi.

Gradually, the ship began to pull away from Orion docking area which seemed to retreat slowly in the vision monitor until all of the station could be seen. Slowly, Wayfarer One turned until the huge blue and white streaked sphere below came into view. Somewhere down there were enemies intent on destroying them.

'Critical mass in eight minutes,' stated Lyn.

'Activate main drive,' said Steve.

'Confirmed,' said Lyn as she efficiently tapped instructions into the drive computer. 'Critical mass in seven minutes.'

The ship accelerated as it pulled out of orbit and began to fall slowly towards the surface of Terra. In the rear viewer, sunlight glinted off the superstructure of the shrinking space station.

'Critical mass in six minutes.'

'Shuttle now on radar,' announced Cassi. 'Approaching from the west.'

Steve raised one eyebrow. 'Estimated time to contact at present speed?'

'Ten minutes and twenty-two seconds.'

Lyn read her screen. 'Critical mass in five minutes.'

'Shuttle turning to intercept,' said Cassi. 'Estimated time of contact now nine minutes and fifty seconds.'

'Down ten degrees. Let's give them a run for their money.'

Navigation Officer Cassiopeia Hardy tapped keys and Wayfarer dropped her nose and began to pick up speed as they fell towards the Mesospheric Contour.

DENSITY	218
DIAMETER	1270km
SPHERICAL AXIAL ROTATION	23.56m409ls
INCLINATION	- 27
DENSITY	537
ESCAPE VELOCITY	1118m/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	-
SATELLITES (NATURAL)	1
SATELLITES (ARTIFICIAL)	0
DISTANCE	6000000AU

'Critical mass in four minutes,' said Lyn.

Cassi watched the data. 'Shuttle turning to follow.'

The radio suddenly spoke. 'Shuttle Magnum to Wayfarer One. Alter course to resume original synodic trajectory. I repeat, alter course to resume orbit or I will be forced to open fire.'

Cassi frowned at her husband who sat slightly to her left. 'They're going to shoot at us, Mike?'

The ship's First Officer nodded gravely. 'It certainly looks like it.'

'Critical Mass in three minutes.'

'Down five,' said Steve quietly.

'Confirmed down five,' said Cassi as she tapped keys.

The radio spoke again. 'This is your last chance, Wayfarer. We have strict instructions from General Phillips if you do not surrender your ship.'

'Critical Mass in two minutes,' said Lyn.

The Commander surveyed all the information available to him and then spoke to his wife. 'Prepare to activate Proton Drive.'

Lyn nodded. 'Activating on your command.'

Cassi looked up from her screen. 'Iris has identified a secondary object leaving the shuttle.'

'Identify,' said Mike as he watched the vision monitor.

'DIABLOS >' stated Iris.

Mike swallowed. 'Steve, they've fired an photon emission-seeking missile.'

'Critical mass in one minute,' said Lyn.

Steve Carter made up his mind. 'Full left retro.'

Cassi obeyed, tapping keys on the computer. 'Confirmed.'

'Estimated time to impact?'

Cassi consulted the readout. 'Ninety seconds.'

'We'll have the Proton Drive active before the missile hits us,' said Mike Hardy with a smile. 'So we should pull clear by a reasonable margin. No missile can follow us at light speed, not even Diablos.'

'Critical mass in thirty seconds,' said Lyn.

'Time to impact sixty seconds,' added Cassi.

'Right ten.'

'Confirmed right ten.'

'Critical mass achieved,' said Lyn with relief. 'Proton Drive ready.'

'Hold Proton Drive,' said the Commander.

Startled, Lyn spun round in her seat. 'What?'

'I said hold Proton Drive.'

Cassi watched the figures. 'Time to impact twenty seconds.'

'Steve, are you crazy?,' called Mike. 'That's a two-megaton nuclear warhead almost up our blast tubes.'

He smiled a little. 'Trust me, Mike.'

'Time to impact ten seconds,' said Cassi calmly.

'Proton Drive half ahead,' instructed Steve eventually and Lyn stabbed at a key. The ship immediately surged forward.

'Time to impact five seconds. It's still gaining on us.'

'Increase to cruise speed.'

'Confirmed,' said Lyn.

'Time to impact still five seconds,' said Cassi. 'Data confirms missile locked into homing status. Electron emission release indicates warhead active.'

'Maintain present speed and trajectory, girls. Take us right around Terra.'

At ninety kilometres per second, Wayfarer One encircled the globe at a height of five thousand kilometres with a nuclear missile right behind it. The sun rose from behind Luna as the ship ran ahead of its deadly pursuer. Tension built inside Wayfarer One. One tiny mistake now would be fatal and there would be no pieces to be recovered. Gone would be not only the ship and crew but also the hopes of a doomed race. Ten minutes later, they were turning over the Democratic Republic of China.

'Shuttle Magnum on forward vision monitor,' said Mike.

Cassi ran her fingers nimbly over the keys. 'We will be traversing its line of trajectory in three minutes and eighteen seconds.'

'Cassi,' said the Commander thoughtfully. 'Adjust our course to take us tight in behind the shuttle.'

She frowned. 'Actually through its drive emission?'

He nodded. 'Precisely.'

Cassi shrugged and tapped keys. 'Confirmed. Time to trajectory traverse - two minutes.'

'Lyn. Increase thrust by ten percent.'

'Confirmed,' said the pilot.

Commander Carter leant back in his chair. 'Prepare to advance to light speed.'

Cassi whirled round. 'Steve, you can't do that. If we hit light speed now, the missile will lose us and home

in on the shuttle.'

The Commander smiled. 'So it will.'

'But don't you understand? The shuttle doesn't have the power to outrun the missile. It will be destroyed.'

'They fired it, remember?'

'But, nevertheless, it is still murder.'

He leant forward. 'No, Cassi. It's war. They launched that missile at us. All we are doing is returning it to them.'

'But all those men on board...'

'Soldiers sent by the General to arrest us or worse. Please confirm my instructions.'

Cassi wanted to argue but she had made a promise to her father. 'Very well, Commander. Course confirmed. Trajectory traverse in thirty seconds.'

'Hold speed.'

'Confirmed,' said Lyn who was looking as unhappy as her sister but not about to argue with her husband while they had a thermonuclear device right up their tail.

'Trajectory traverse in ten seconds,' said Cassi.

'Prepare for light speed, Lyn.'

'Confirmed.'

'Five seconds.'

'Activate Proton Drive. Take us to half light speed.'

'Confirmed.'

The whine of the drive increased as the ship shot forward, bursting through the heat blast from the ascending shuttle which rapidly retreated in the rear screen. Everyone held their breath until a bright flash lit up the sky behind them. Wayfarer One rocked slightly as the energy wave overtook it but no sound carried through space.

'Target eliminated,' said Cassi sadly. 'All sensors report negative debris.'

The Commander smiled once more. 'Advance to LUM 5, Lyn. Let's get right in close to Sol for a velocity boost.'

Without being asked, Cassi consulted Iris:

DENSITY	81
DIAMETER	132Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	238d
INCLINATION	- 15
DENSITY	1409
ESCAPE VELOCITY	6175km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	-
NUMBER OF PLANETS	10
DISTANCE	0.67AU

She calculated quickly. 'ETA Sol - one minute forty.'

Steve reached forward and touched his Navigation Officer on the shoulder. 'Thank you, Cassi. Everyone strapped in? It's a tight turn round behind Sol.'

Cassi glanced at him quickly, looked around the flight deck and then pressed the tannoy button. 'All crew stand by. Ninety-degree left turn in approximately eighty seconds.'

'Will the others be all right down below?' the First Officer asked with concern.

'Don't worry, Mike. Bob and Juanita have driven with Cassi and Lyn before. They know all about women drivers.'

'Sol looks warm today,' observed Mike. 'I hope she doesn't give off a flare as we're passing.'

'One minute to turn,' said Cassi apparently without emotion, although her feelings of revulsion welled up inside her at the unnecessary destruction of human life.

'Are you all right, Cassi?' whispered her husband.

The Navigation Officer nodded, holding back the tears as she made slight course corrections to take Wayfarer around the back of the sun.

'Thirty seconds to turn,' she managed to get out as the vast fiery monster loomed closer.

Cassi closed her eyes and tried not to imagine the consternation there would have been on board the shuttle when they observed Wayfarer coming at them and then the panic as they noticed it still had the nuclear missile right behind it. They would have had no more than a second or two between the time Wayfarer disappeared and the shuttle's own missile struck, instantly vapourising it and everything within. No time to think, no time to take avoiding action.

'Cassii!' Mike's frantic voice broke through her thoughts and, upon glancing at the screen, realised she had passed the turn point. She pushed keys on the computer and the big ship began to turn.

Suddenly, Iris bleeped. 'DANGER >'

'Identify danger,' she said quickly.

DENSITY	Mercury
DIAMETER	487m
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	58d
INCLINATION	- 3.8°
DENSITY	-
ESCAPE VELOCITY	4.7 km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	0.38g
SATELLITES	0
DISTANCE	0.11 AU
SURFACE IMPACT IN 12 SECONDS >	

'We're out of alignment,' shouted the Commander. 'Concentrate, Cassi.'

'Full ahead,' she instinctively shouted to her sister who obeyed without question, and the whine of the Proton Drive raised to a distant scream as the anti-matter reactor went to maximum output.

'ROLL LEFT,' she typed quickly.

'CONFIRMED >' replied Iris and the massive cruiser responded by twisting upon its own axis so that the centrifugal force of the turn was in a direction so as to prevent them all blacking out. The tiny planet Mercury was a blur as they passed within a few kilometres of its heavily-cratered surface, sending up huge dust clouds as Cassi juggled with the controls to prevent Wayfarer being drawn down towards its surface. Just as quickly as it had come, the danger was past and Wayfarer One was rocketing forward under full power at ten times the speed of light. No-one spoke as the young woman began to punch keys to adjust their course for the next crucial stage in the journey.

'ADVISE TRAJECTORY FOR JUPITER,' she then asked of Iris who responded:

DENSITY	1.4g/cm <sup>3</sup>
DIAMETER	142,800 km
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	9h 55m 30s
INCLINATION	- 0.1°
DENSITY	1.33
ESCAPE VELOCITY	60.2 km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	2.3g
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	16
DISTANCE	5.2 AU
DIRECTION	82° >

Cassi closed her eyes. 'Five minutes and eighteen seconds.'

'What about the asteroids?' asked Mike. 'You're not planning on taking us through them at LUM-10, are you?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Iris will take us under the belt - hence the extra minute.'

Steve Carter unbuckled his belt and stood up. 'Cassi, a word please.'

The young woman opened her eyes, glanced at her husband who shrugged and then did as she had been instructed, following her Commanding Officer out into the corridor.

As soon as the hatch closed with a pressure hiss, Steve turned on her. 'Cassi, I brought you along on this trip because you are the best Navigation Officer in the Space Fleet. If you ever needed to prove it, you just did by your speed of reaction just now.'

'I...,' she began.

'No,' he interrupted. 'We've only got a couple of minutes so, for once in your life, you are going to stand there and hear me out.'

Cassi looked straight into his eyes and nodded.

'During this last year, you have put me through hell with that crash training course of yours. Every time I made a mistake, you came down upon me like a ton of hot bricks and you almost had me thrown off the Wayfarer Programme because I made one or two minor errors. In the end, I trusted you and copied you because it was a field where you knew best. However, when it comes to human nature I think I know best.'

'I...'

'Shut up and listen. Those men on the shuttle were sent to eliminate us. The last thing General Phillips wants right now is a continuation of space exploration, not when it is at the expense of his precious defence programme. He doesn't care how many people get killed in the process as long as he gets his way, you above anyone should know that by now.' He paused and then said in a quieter tone. 'If we had let his men live, what do you think they would have done?'

Cassi shrugged. 'Gone to Orion?'

'Precisely. And when they radioed down to the General and told him the goose had flown, what do you think he would have ordered them to do?'

'Arrest my father?'

'Exactly. At his age and with his aversion to Earth's atmospheric pressure after years in space, how long do you think he will have lasted?'

She looked down at the neoprene-covered deck. 'Not long.'

'No, not long at all. Now, we have given him a temporary lease of life. You have proved to me your worth in space and so has Lyn, but you have to trust me to get something right occasionally.' He smiled. 'After all, I am only human.'

Cassi looked up quickly and her eyes instinctively closed to slits.

'Sorry,' he said defensively. 'Poor choice of words.'

'You're never going to let me forget, are you? You take every little chance to remind me I am not the same as you.'

'Neither is your sister but I was happy to marry her.'

'That's different.'

'Different? How?'

'She has chosen to become your wife and, because of her Andromedan ancestry, she will obey you without question, you know that.'

'Well, Cassiopeia Hardy, perhaps you should take a lesson from her. As long as I am in charge of this mission and you are on my ship, what I say goes, do you understand?'

Cassi opened her mouth to speak but changed her mind and drew back her shoulders. 'Yes, Commander.'

'Furthermore, let's have no more sloppiness. It's not like you. So behave yourself or else when we get to Andromeda, I will leave you there, black hole or no black hole.'

For a moment, Cassi looked at him so coldly that Steve thought she was going to hit him before he remembered that such an action would be virtually impossible for her. Instead, they simply faced each other in silence. Eventually, he held out his hand to her. 'Pax?'

She looked down at it for a long time without moving.

'Come on, Cassi,' he reasoned. 'We've got a long way to go together.'

Slowly, she took it and Steve drew in his breath sharply. He had forgotten her supreme strength and tried desperately not to show his discomfort. Then, without warning, Cassi suddenly grinned, stretched forward and kissed his cheek.

'And what are you two being up to?' called a voice from down the corridor. They both turned to watch the dark-haired woman of about thirty approach them.

'Doctor Carrero,' said Steve defensively.

Cassi smiled warmly and nodded her greeting. 'Juanita.'

The astro-biologist leaned forward conspiratorially. 'Don't a-you worry. Your little secret is-a safe with me.'

Steve blustered. 'Doctor Carrero. It's not what you think.'

'It never is,' she replied, winking at Cassi. 'Is everyone okay after all'a that pitching and rolling?'

Cassi looked down at the floor. 'I'm afraid that was my fault. I was...' She looked up at Steve. '...distracted. It won't happen again.'

Juanita's face looked almost gypsyish as she grinned and held their arms. 'Justa make sure you warn me if we're going to turn cart-wheels again.'

'I will,' said Cassi before moving away. 'I must get back to Iris.' She re-entered the flight deck and took her place in front of Iris. Everyone looked at one other but said nothing as she punched keys.

DENSITY	1.418
DIAMETER	142Mm
SEMI-MAJOR AXIS	950m3s
INCLINATION	- 04
DENSITY	13
ESCAPE VELOCITY	602km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	26g
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	16
DISTANCE	0109AU
DIRECTION	72- >

Without looking at her sister, Cassi said: 'Stand by for second turn. Prepare to increase thrust. Five seconds.'

'Ready.'

'Three. Two. One. Activate Proton Drive.'

'Activated,' said Lyn. 'Velocity increasing as planned.'

'ADVISE TRAJECTORY FOR SATURN,' Cassi typed.

Iris replied:

IDENTITY	Satn
DIAMETER	1195Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	10h3m2s
INCLINATION	- 44
DENSITY	076
ESCAPE VELOCITY	3625km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	1159
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	49
DISTANCE	438088AU
DIRECTION	92 >

There was hardly a hesitation as the ship turned slightly to align for the next planet.

'Turn complete,' said Cassi. 'Speed?'

Lyn looked at the red screen. 'LUM-25.'

'Good.' Cassi calculated once more. 'Third turn and burn in fifty-two seconds precisely.'

'Are you sure?' Mike queried playfully.

Cassi ignored him. 'Don't you start!'

He glanced at Lyn and then grinned broadly. 'I think I'll just take your word for it, my love. Just tell me when we're there.'

'Ten seconds to third turn. Prepare to accelerate once more.'

Lyn touched her fingers to the red keys. 'Ready.'

'Activate Proton Drive. Take us to LUM-100.'

Cassi tapped the odd button as she took Wayfarer in as close as she dare to the deadly rings of Saturn before pulling round behind the planet in a slingshot effect which spun them out at a speed which made the moons of Saturn become blurred.

'IDENTIFY TRAJECTORY FOR XEN,' she typed.

IDENTITY	- Xen
DIAMETER	- 211,768 Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 72h 03m 170s
MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD	- 15d 23h 15m 31.49s
INCLINATION	- 28° 9.6'
DENSITY	- 5.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 80.45 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 17.426
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.09 kg/cm <sup>2</sup>
DISTANCE	- 97.98804 AU >

'Eight minutes,' said Cassi. 'Speed?'

'LUM-100 as instructed.'

The young woman glanced at her sister sharply for a second and then relaxed. 'Thanks, Lyn. I'm being a right bitch, aren't I?'

Mike smiled at them both. 'We're all a bit tense, Cassi. None of us have ever been this fast before.'

'Father has,' said Cassi. 'Though not so soon after launch.' She smiled. 'But then, he didn't know about Xen.'

'Nor did anyone else before he and I confirmed the tenth planet's existence last month,' said Lyn. 'It's a useful boost platform.'

Cassi smiled. 'Provided we don't venture too near. Xen has a huge gravity field - almost equal to Sol.'

'You won't fly us too close then, will you?'

Cassi grinned. 'I'll try not to.'

'Where to after Xen?' asked Mike.

'I'm going to reverse father's return journey from Andromeda with a few course adjustments to gain extra speed.'

'Such as?'

'Well, Iris has got a number of stars listed as axis points before we leave the galaxy completely.'

The screen filled with characters.

Ross	1	361249m12s
di rinooG ahp IA	1	431955m15s
Backlog	1	471113m09s



Acid	1	65d18h00m05s
Capr	4	16d17h38m24s
Ch	9	30d15h21m36s
Shed	15	54d21h07m10s
Marfak	25	91d03h07m17s
Segin	50	182d05h59m47s
Omicrom Cassiopeiae	80	292d01h00m26s
Gamma Cepheus	130	478d03h34m48s
Kappa Cassiopeiae	320	1168d03h11m29s

13M- adæ r dnA 54830221 n31 h10 d0521319

'What are all the figures?' asked Mike as he looked over Cassi's shoulder. 'Miles?'

She smirked. 'You've got a hope. No, the first column of numbers is the distance in light years and the other is the estimated time of travel at our present velocity.'

He peered at the screen. 'You mean it's going to take us over nine million days to reach Andromeda?'

'Twenty-five thousand years? Not exactly. That set of calculations is based on the assumption that we remain at the speed we are going at now for the rest of the journey. But we are accelerating at every contact point. I reckon it will actually take just over a month for the first stage, an open space which will take light itself ten years to cross.'

'Wow!'

'By the time we pass Kappa-Cassiopeiae, we will be dead on schedule. That's where we leave the galaxy proper.'

'How long will it actually take to get to Andromeda?'

'Just hang on,' Cassi said. 'I'll ask Iris.' She typed: 'CALCULATE AVERAGE ACCELERATION FACTOR.'

There was a delay until Iris replied. '182.55922801% >'

Mike smirked. 'That's approximate, I suppose.'

'Iris never approximates anything, Mike. You should know that by now.'

'You mean we almost double our speed at each juncture?'

'That's right - compounded, of course.' Her fingers moved over the keys. 'RECALLIBRATE DESTINATION TIMES ASSUMING GIVEN AVERAGE ACCELERATION FACTOR.'

Iris responded by updating the last column.

Ross 248	10	20d 00h 14m 24s
<del>Alpha Centauri A</del>	12	22d 04h 48m 24s
Beta Kruger	13	22d 19h 11m 57s
Archid	18	24d 10h 33m 36s
Chaph	45	29d 07h 12m 05s
Cih	96	34d 08h 59m 11s
Shedir	150	37d 06h 00m 03s
Marfak	250	40d 05h 02m 24s
Segin	500	44d 06h 28m 47s
Omicrom Cassiopeiae	800	46d 22h 33m 36s
Gamma Cepheus	1300	49d 08h 52m 48s
Kappa Cassiopeiae	3200	54d 10h 34m 56s
<del>Andromeda B1</del>	<del>2080</del>	<del>367d01h13m12s</del>

Mike leant back in his chair. 'Three thousand six hundred days? That's more like it.'

Cassi grinned. 'Feel better now?'

'Yes. Tell me, why did your father name you after a star?'

Cassi laughed. 'I can tell you've spent most of your life earthbound. Cassiopeia is not a star but a constellation sandwiched between the Solar System and the edge of the Galaxy.'

'A star cluster?'

'Far from it. Like most constellations and assumed shapes derived therefrom, they only make sense when seen from the direction of Terra. Even the seven brightest stars which make up the constellation are spread out over billions of kilometres of open space.'

'I don't follow. I was just Orion's Security Marshal until yesterday, don't forget.'

'Look at Iris, Mike. Archid, better known to Earth astronomers as Eta Cassiopeiae, is fairly close in astronomical terms. However, Kappa of the same constellation is 30,052,932,000,000,000 kilometres from Terra.'

'All right then, clever clogs. To rephrase my question, why did your father name you after a constellation? Especially if it would have looked so different while he was inbound?'

'The stars still had the same names, Mike. They had been programmed into Iris before dad left Terra in the first place. Cassiopeia simply presents a very useful string of isolated stars to guide anyone out and back again. Simply go from one to the next and you cannot possibly get lost.'

'And?'

'After I was incubated on board ship, he simply named me after the first major star he sighted as he approached the galaxy - Kappa Cassiopeiae.'

Mike grinned. 'So I really should call you Kappa?'

She looked at him sharply. 'Don't you dare.'

'Queen Cassiopeia,' Mike sighed.

Cassi looked confused. 'I beg your pardon.'

He laughed. 'Of course, you wouldn't know about Greek mythology, would you? Queen Cassiopeia was the beautiful wife of King Cepheus of Ethiopia. She was very vain and claimed she was better-looking than any Nereid sea nymph. Unfortunately, this offended Poseidon who sent an ugly-great sea-monster to ravage the kingdom.'

'Bit of a vindictive so and so, wasn't he?'

'It didn't end there. The local oracle decreed that the only way to save the kingdom was to sacrifice a virgin to Poseidon. So they took their own daughter, Princess Andromeda, and chained her to a sacrificial rock by the seashore where she could be eaten alive by the monster.'

'Ugh!'

'Fortunately for the young beauty, along came Jones in the shape of Perseus who happened by on his way home after slaying Medusa the Gorgon. He saved Andromeda in the nick of time and then whisked her off to the local Registry Office where they got married.'

Cassi didn't look convinced. 'And they all lived happily ever after, I suppose?'

Mike grinned. 'Something like that.'

'Load of nonsense. They are just stars.'

'If you say so, although there is often some grain of truth in these legends somewhere. Talking of stars: why is it we are going out via the Cassiopeia constellation when we really want to go to Andromeda?'

'They are next to each other, so to speak. However, all the stars which make up the constellation of Andromeda are either too close to the Solar System or too small to give us the boost we need. We have to have a continuous chain of isolated stars from here all the way to the edge of the galaxy if we are to reach the necessary speed to get to Andromeda in time. There are very few alignments like it but this is one of them.'

'What happens when we get to the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy?'

'We'll be totally on our own for slightly under ten years.'

'Right out of our own galaxy in fifty-four days, eh?'

Cassi shrugged. 'It gives us time to get everyone to bed. Juanita is preparing the freezers now.'

'Freezers?'

'Suspended animation chambers. They cryogenically reduce bodily functions to virtually nil for the journey. We'll have travelled for ten years but will be no older than when we went to sleep.'

'All of us? No-one to stand guard?'

'There's no point. Iris is the best watchdog we will ever need and she has been programmed to wake the relevant person in case of an emergency.'

'It seems you've thought of everything.'

Cassi looked straight at her husband and nodded. 'Everything. We've had no time to go into detail but some of us could bed down now if they liked. Two could run the ship once we've passed Xen.'

'Only two?'

Cassi nodded. 'Father and I did it coming back last year.'

'Who's last to bed down?'

'Juanita. The long sleep is her department. Steve will make the decision as to the order for the rest of us.'

Mike leant towards her. 'I'm ready for bed now. Coming?'

Cassi winked. 'Let me get us past Xen. Then, we'll have thirty-six days to play around in.'

THE dark tenth planet came and went without them even seeing its vast bulk. So far from the sun and with a surface of dusty rock covered only with a shroud of heavy carbon mist, it could only be seen by instrumentation. Iris alone recognised its passing by giving the signal to fire the Proton Drive once more.

The manoeuvre complete, Lyn stretched and yawned. 'Permission to go and find the boss?'

'Help yourself,' Mike replied. 'Ask him what he wants us to do about rest schedules, would you? It's something we never got chance to arrange with leaving Orion in such a hurry.'

Lyniera nodded and left the flight deck. Mike and Cassi were alone for the first time in days.

'I feel as if I haven't slept for a very long time,' said Cassi.

'You haven't,' said Mike. 'Chasing about all round Titan and Luna, playing cat and mouse with the General's men, you've been hard at it for several days; virtually without rest. Even Andromedans like you and Lyn cannot keep that pace up forever, you know.'

Cassi got to her feet and wandered around, checking the data, while Mike watched her. Eventually, she sat down. 'Be a darling and make me a cup of tea.'

Mike stood up. 'Your wish is my command, my love. Don't go away.'

'Fat chance of that. Go on, I'll hold the fort.'

Mike smiled, kissed her briefly and went towards the galley. As soon as the door closed, Cassi whirled round and faced Iris.

'REQUEST DIRECT CLEARANCE TO MAINFRAME UTILITIES,' she typed quickly.

'INPUT PASSWORD >'

'UTILITY SECURITY CODE CAS1.'

There was a short delay and then, 'READY >'

Cassi pressed CTRL-V and spoke. 'Hello, Iris.'

'GOOD DAY, OFFICER HARDY >' wrote the amber letters upon the screen.

Cassi smiled and then slid over to the red console and placed her fingers upon the keys. She typed, 'ENGAGE INTERFACE WITH I.R.I.S.'

'DRIVES INTERFACED. ALL FUTURE COMMANDS BY VOICE CONTROL VIA I.R.I.S. >'

'EMERGENCY SECURITY OVERRIDE CODE CAS1,' she typed. 'UPON INPUT COMMAND CHARLIE ALPHA SIERRA UNO, COMMIT ALL DRIVE CONTROL AND LIFE SUPPORT FUNCTIONS TO I.R.I.S.'

'CONFIRMED >'

Now, she could control the ship single-handed. She slid back to Iris. 'RELAY TO DRIVE CONSOLE. ALL INPUT BY KEYBOARD UNTIL SECURITY OVERRIDE CHARLIE ALPHA SIERRA UNO.'

'CONFIRMED >'

She slid back to the drive console. 'DISENGAGE INTERFACE WITH I.R.I.S.'

'CONFIRMED >'

Back to Iris. CTRL-K to return to keyboard input. Cassi smiled again. Now she was ready.

CLEAR of Xen, Wayfarer One was switched to automatic pilot for the three-week haul across open space towards the faint, orange-red dot on the screen known to Earth's Astronomers as Ross 248. Flight Engineer Robert Walker made his final calculation through the televisor before turning to join the group who had joined him in the laboratory. Juanita Carrero sat down beside him and smiled as she took his hand in her own.

Steve Carter stood up and coughed to gain attention. When the pleasant murmuring had died down, he began. 'Well, ladies and gentlemen. We are almost at the point of no return. If we were to make a course adjustment at Ross, we could, I believe, swing around and return via Pluto. Otherwise, we are committed.'

'There is no turning back after Ross?' asked the big engineer.

Steve glanced briefly at Cassi who shook her head. 'Iris has calculated that the velocity will be too great by then. We will be travelling at over three hundred times the speed of light. If we try to make a major adjustment to our course at that speed, who knows where we might end up.'

There was silence for a moment before the First Officer spoke up. 'We've got to go on.'

'Mike's-a right,' agreed Juanita. 'We are the only chance those poor people have got.'

'Are we sure we will make it in time?' asked Bob Walker. 'It will be a shame to go through all this for no good reason. Added to that, if all that is left of the Andromeda Spiral is a black hole, what will happen to us?'

Steve looked straight at him. 'I won't beat about the bush, Bob. Wayfarer One will be drawn in to the vortex. Even with the Proton Drive, there will be no chance of escaping the kind of gravity which can bend light itself.'

'Then we don't have long to decide.'

'We have-a already decided,' said Juanita. 'We must-a go on, whatever the risks. That's why we are here.'

Steve looked around the faces. 'Are we all agreed?'

'Shall we vote?' suggested Mike.

Steve smiled at his colleague. 'Why not? All in favour of pressing on, raise your right hand.'

Juanita raised her arm immediately and Mike's followed. The engineer hesitated but, upon receiving a stare from Juanita, raised his also. Steve raised his and then turned to look at Cassi and Lyn.

Cassi shrugged. 'We're biased.'

He smiled and then looked towards an ten-year-old girl in denim shorts and tee-shirt who sat beside her. 'Maggie?'

'Me?'

She looked up at her father who nodded. 'Go ahead. You are one of the team.'

Margaret Hardy beamed broadly at the privilege of being able to vote like a grown-up. The child nodded furiously. 'I want to go and see Cassi's home.'

'Then it's unanimous,' said Steve. 'We go on.'

'I'm in, but how do we know we will be in time to do any good?' asked the engineer.

'Good question, Bob. I think I'll let Cassi answer that one in a few minutes as she seems to be the only one who is really certain. In the meantime, I will set the scene. Tell me, how much do you all know of the original Wayfarer mission?'

'One or two?' asked Mike Hardy.

'Let's start with Wayfarer One, Commander Markham's venture.'

'He went missing in the summer of 2020.'

'Yes. Do you know why?'

'I only know what Cassi has told me. I believe her, of course.'

Steve Carter looked at his sister-in-law. 'So do I, as it happens.'

Cassi smiled proudly in response. How different this was from when she first came to Terra and no-one believed the story her father had told.

'Something to do with breaking light speed, wasn't it?' said the engineer.

'Exactly. Wayfarer One launched as planned and vanished seventeen and a half minutes after launch because it exceeded the speed of light - something scientists considered impossible at the time.'

'Some of them still do,' muttered the First Officer.

Steve smiled. 'Don't be too hard on them, Mike. There's still a Flat-Earth Society, don't forget.'

'What, precisely, did happen to Henry Markham, Steve?'

'It seems he lost control of the ship and it went to Andromeda. I guess Iris must have flipped her lid.'

'It wasn't Iris,' insisted Cassi. 'Since exactly the same thing happened six months later to my father's ship, there has to be another explanation.'

'Would you care to enlighten us, Professor Hardy?'

'Later,' said Cassi with the trace of a smirk on her face. 'Finish the background first.'

'Okay.' He faced the group once more. 'Both ships went to Andromeda, two and a quarter million light years away.'

'No wonder no-one believed the story,' grunted Bob Walker.

Steve smiled. 'I didn't, for one. Henry Markham vanishes. Then Jim Duncan vanishes and, just a month later, he turns up again at Orion Base Station with some fantastic tale about having travelled halfway around the universe. Not only that...' He again looked at Cassi. 'He returns with a nineteen-year-old beauty he claims is his daughter.'

'Time compression,' said the girl in question.

'Had your father really been to Andromeda?' asked Juanita.

Cassi nodded. 'I checked the data-log on Iris and that of Wayfarer One, this ship. Both computers listed a similar sequence of events. It took Commander Markham thirty-seven years to reach Andromeda. Father got there there six months later.'

'And..?'

'When they arrived, they were guided to a planet called Mythos on one of the outer arms of the spiral. The people greeted both crews with peace and friendship. They were made very welcome.'

'Henry Markham didn't return, did he?'

'No. All his crew were in their seventies by the time they got there and the help they could give was minimal.'

'Help?'

'The whole galaxy was rapidly collapsing into a black hole.'

'Why couldn't we see this on Earth?' asked Bob Walker.

'You will, in time.'

'Over two million years of time,' added her husband. 'Visual evidence can only travel at the speed of light and Andromeda is over two million light years from Earth.'

Juanita looked puzzled. 'I believe you, Cassi. Nevertheless, I am-a confused as to how your father can have got there and back in only one month. You say it took him over thirty years?'

'Thirty-seven. And thirty-eight back, allowing for galaxial deceleration.'

'Seventy-five years?'

'Plus the five years on Mythos trying to help them.'

'Good, grief,' said Bob. 'He wears well for his age. I wouldn't have put him at much more than fifty.'

'Jim Duncan was Europa Corporation's youngest ever Fleet Commander,' said Mike. 'He was thirty-one when he left Orion and that's one of the reasons people laughed at him returning with a teenage daughter. There was a certain physical impossibility about the whole thing.'

'Then how...?'

'All the other crew members were too old for the return trip,' answered Cassi. 'They died on Mythos.'

'Old age?'

'Partly. They also gave their bodies for research.'

'What-a kind of research?' asked Juanita suspiciously.

'Embryonic and Andromedan. The Andromedans were very clever and, because of what they learned, they were able to replace father's body with one they manufactured on Mythos.'

'That's why he looked no older when he returned,' said Mike. 'Everyone recognised him instantly even though he was over one hundred years old.'

'He still had the same brain,' said Cassi. 'As far as father is concerned, he is forever young.'

'Forever?'

'Well, as long as his brain lasts. That still ages although his body will last indefinitely.'

'Unless General Phillips gets to him,' said Mike.

Cassi glanced at her husband. 'Don't remind me.'

'Was your father the only one to come back, Cassi?' asked Juanita kindly.

The younger woman got to her feet and paced the floor. 'First of all, they tried to send back a crew of Andromedan Humanoids in Wayfarer One.'

'What happened to them?'

'They died,' replied Mike. 'Cassi and I found the ship wandering aimlessly close to Saturn. They had travelled almost all the way back to Earth before they succumbed to atmospheric pressure. Iris tried to adjust the internal pressure to accustom them ready for Earthfall but something went wrong, I guess.'

'Iris again?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Not Iris. She couldn't make a mistake like that.'

'Then what?'

'I don't know.'

'You mentioned that the Andromedans did some embryonic research. What was that for?'

'If the race was doomed because of the black hole, it was thought their life-form could still be preserved by storing male and female eggs and bringing them to Terra for fertilisation.'

'A master race?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Not at all. The idea was to mix them with complimentary seeds from humans.'

'That's what all the fuss was about with Tara, wasn't it?'

'She was a brave girl,' said Mike. 'In spite of everything said and done to prevent the seeds getting to Earth, she insisted on becoming the first female to be implanted with the Andromedan Seed.'

'They killed her baby,' said Cassi flatly. 'Those bastards killed her baby.'

The feeling in her voice came out so strong that no-one dared to say anything for several minutes. It was Juanita who broke the silence. 'So you and Lyn are the only ones left.'

Cassi nodded. 'Father suspected there might be an attempt to destroy the eggs so he took a risk and used his own stored sperm to fertilise an egg taken from my mother on Andromeda.'

'And you were born on board Wayfarer Two?'

Cassi nodded yet again. 'Incubated in the sister laboratory to this one.'

'I was incubated in this one,' spoke up Lyn. 'Realising that Cassi was the only survivor, Father did the same thing again. He didn't want to have all his eggs in one basket, so to speak.'

'So you are-a both half-Andromedan?' said Juanita. 'That explains quite a lot about your physical attributes.'

'How different are they?' asked the engineer warily, not wishing to cause offense.

'I will not bore you with the technical terminology, Bob, but you just take-a my word that these two are better in every way than their Terran counterparts. Being stronger, fitter and healthier, they could live forever.'

'You're serious, aren't you?'

Juanita nodded and smiled. 'Perfectly.'

'I know you didn't actually see Mythos, Cassi. But how advanced was the galactic decay, do you know?'

'Almost complete, according to Iris. The Andromedans had no more than a few months to live at the most. Father only just got away before the whole galaxy started to implode.'

Bob looked puzzled. 'Then why are we going there now? There will be nothing left.'

'Because of time compression.'

'Time compression?'

Cassi sat down beside the engineer. 'How old are you, Bob?'

He glanced quickly at Juanita before replying. 'Thirty-nine.'

'And is your father still alive?'

Bob nodded. 'He lives in Scotland.'

'And how old do you think he is?'

'Sixty-three as of four months ago.' He grinned. 'We had quite a party down by the loch.'

Cassi shook her head sadly. 'By the time we get back from Andromeda, your father could be younger than you are.'

'What?'

'What do you know of Einstein's Theory of Relativity?'

'Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared.'

Cassi smiled. 'Sometimes.'

'Sometimes?'

'That's why it's called the Theory of Relativity. It's relative.'

'Relative to what?'

'Your speed.'

'What do you mean, precisely? I know about time dilation, of course. When you go very fast, time for the traveller moves at a slower rate than when he's stationary.'

'That's true, up to a point.'

'Up to what point?'

'Up to eighty-nine percent of the speed of light. At that point, a reversal occurs and hours are condensed into seconds, years into minutes. Once you reach the speed of light, time actually stands still. Faster than that, you begin to go backwards, albeit relatively slowly.'

'You mean...?'

'I mean that if we were to go to Andromeda and then immediately return to Terra, we could arrive thirty years before we took off.' She laughed. 'In fact, before this ship was ever built.'

'Nineteen-ninety three,' mused Mike. 'Two years after I was born.'

'Daddy, are you thirty-two years old?' asked an astonished Margaret Hardy.

Mike put his arm around his young daughter. 'That's pretty old, isn't it?'

'It's positively middle-aged,' she said seriously and everyone burst out laughing. For some time, nothing more was said as they decided it was time for a break. Small talk filled the room as the group relaxed for the first time since leaving Orion. Cassi squatted in the corner of the room with her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of tea and watched them all. Her husband was in animated conversation with the dark-haired, always laughing, Doctor Carrero. Although the bio-physicist was an extremely attractive woman, Cassi felt no jealousy; it was not in her nature. And anyway, Juanita was more than a friend. They had been to Titan together and had both barely survived attempts on their lives by General Dwight Phillips.

Her gaze strayed to Mike's daughter by his first marriage as she held on to her father's hand. Maggie was a tall girl for her age and could easily be taken for a twelve-year-old. Being the only child of the Chief Security Marshal at Europoort Launch Complex, Mike's daughter was surprisingly mature for her ten years.

Mike had always been very reluctant to talk about his first wife. All Cassi knew of her was that she had been something very special in computer control systems and, before their marriage, had worked with Mike's mother. How she had died, Mike had never said. All Cassi knew was there had been some kind of an accident and he had lost a wife and a mother in the same terrible instant. Mike had then had to become both father and mother to the small child who had become her step-daughter just a year ago. Maggie was a pretty girl with her father's auburn hair and tanned skin. In a few years, Cassi thought to herself, that young lady is going to turn a lot of heads. For a moment, their eyes met so Cassi waved her fingers briefly and the young child smiled in response.

Cassi's inspection switched to her own sister, virtually her twin in both looks and mannerisms, as she hung onto the arm of her new husband. Lyn's golden hair hung on her shoulders, almost covering her crimson collar with its pilot's wings. As if aware of being watched, Lyn looked at Cassi with her deep blue eyes and an unspoken message of endearment flashed between them. Steve was deep in conversation with Bob Walker, probably over some technical matter, Cassi thought. Bob was frowning but that was not so unusual. Despite being the oldest member of the crew, the ship's engineer was unusually athletic and had shown his strength on several occasions while they were loading stores for the journey.

It was such a contrast being in space. Whilst on Terra, Cassi had noticed that Earth people liked to wear all kinds of clothes. Men wore suits or slacks and jumpers while the women generally wore skirts or dresses - trousers had gone out of fashion a decade ago. Here, on board ship, everyone looked much the same in the pale blue stretch overalls that were smart and yet comfortable. Very little needed to be worn underneath but Cassi always wore her black leotard. She suspected Juanita preferred something more exotic.

'Are you all right?' said the young voice in her ear.

Cassi smiled and held out her arms. 'Just thinking. Want to sit on my knee?'

'Yes, please.'

Cassi got up and sat upon the fixed bench beside the giant electro-telescope which kept Bob busy between repairs and maintenance.

Maggie sat on her lap. 'Do you still like daddy?'

Cassi frowned. 'Of course. What made you ask that?'

'You don't seem to cuddle him as much these days.'

Cassi touched the end of her step-daughter's nose with her long finger. 'You don't miss a thing, do you?'

'Well...?'

'I love your daddy very much, Maggie. It's just that...'

'Yes?'

'We don't seem to get a lot of time alone together these days. There's always something going on, isn't there?'

The child looked thoughtful. 'I guess you're right.'

'And we don't really get the chance to sit down to a romantic candle-lit dinner here on Wayfarer, do we?'

'I suppose not.'

'So don't worry. We're always going to stay family, no matter what happens.'

'Is it right what daddy told me? Are we really going to go to sleep soon? For ten whole years?'

Cassi laughed. 'I'm afraid so. If you don't, by the time we get to Andromeda, you'll be as old as your Auntie Lyn.'

'Lyniera is a strange name, isn't it? Is it foreign?'

'It's Andromedan. My sister was named after our mother.'

'Is she dead?'

Cassi opened her mouth to answer but then remembered that this young girl had lost her own mother at the age of three and hesitated. She looked straight into Maggie's eyes. 'I don't know.'

'When we get there, will we find out?' Excitement had crept into the young girl's voice. Was it the prospect of gaining the grandmother she had been denied so early in life? Cassi smiled though tears were at the back of her eyes. 'I hope so, Maggie. I dearly hope so.'

THE laboratory on board Wayfarer One was not large in comparison with those on Terra. Nevertheless, a lot of work was done there. Bob Walker used it as a workshop and a place to observe the universe they were crossing so rapidly. In addition, it served as a place where injured crew members could be cared for if the need arose.

On the opposite side of the long central corridor which ran the full length of the ship were the accommodation berths along with washing facilities and the like. Below decks, so to speak, were the water and liquid oxygen storage areas and, in a wide area that spanned the total width of the ship above the central living facilities, there was a huge indoor garden where fresh food was grown under artificial light in sealed containers fixed firmly to the bulkheads. Wayfarer One was, in fact, completely self-contained and could support the physical needs of human life almost indefinitely. At the front end of the craft, as would be expected, was the flight deck. The original prototype had allowed for perspex viewing ports but these had been left off the interstellar versions as they proved both unnecessary and potentially inadequate in case of possible collision with the various forms of debris which littered the expanse between the planets. Instead, the titanium nose cone had been treated with a special substance that would resist all but a direct hit from a bulky asteroid. This event, however, was highly unlikely as Iris had been programmed to automatically make minor course adjustments to avoid such potentially damaging obstacles. It was, therefore, with complete confidence that the crew could plan the artificially-induced sleep which would prevent them ageing during the ten-year flight across the sea of emptiness between the galaxies.

For the last time, Doctor Carrero and Mike Hardy checked the functions of the freezers and pronounced them in working order.

'Have you decided the order for bedding down?' Mike asked the Commander.

Steve held up a clipboard. 'It's all here.' He looked at his chronometer. 'I suggest we reconvene in half an hour.'

'Here in the lab?'

He nodded. 'I think so. There's nowhere else big enough for us all to sit comfortably. Inform the others, would you?'

The other man smiled. 'Okay. Drinks?'

'Might as well. May not be many other opportunities.'

ON the dot of ten, Bob was the last to enter the laboratory having checked over the anti-matter reactor while it was shut down between burns. He sat next to Juanita.

Steve faced them all. 'It seems everything is ready for the big sleep. This is the first time this has been done outside simulations so I want to get it right.' He paused. 'Originally, I had planned that we would all stay awake until we left the galaxy entirely but that will not be for almost two months yet.'

'Even at this speed?' queried Juanita.

'I'm afraid so. But we should think ourselves lucky. Thirty years ago, in the early nineteen-nineties, journeys such as that of Pluto Mariner took years to reach the edge of the Solar System. A trip to this nearest rim of our galaxy would have taken over three thousand years even if they had managed to reach the speed of light.'

'Positively mind-boggling, isn't it?'

'It certainly is. We are living in exciting times.'

'How fast will we be going when we are leaving the Milky Way?' asked Juanita.

Steve turned to Cassi and raised one eyebrow.

'A quarter of a million times the speed of light,' pronounced the Navigation Officer.

'That's not possible,' said the Engineer.

'Why not?' said Steve.

The big man shrugged. 'This ship isn't built for that kind of speed.'

'On the contrary,' argued Cassi. 'I spoke on the television to Doctor Bartek who invented the Proton Drive. With the modifications carried out at Orion, there is no reason why we should not do so. The matter/anti-matter reaction can escalate indefinitely as long as a base can be provided to use as a thrust platform. That is why we are following the chain of stars.'

'There has to be a maximum somewhere.'

'Not necessarily. On Terra, you have limitations due to the friction of atmospheric resistance. Out here, there is nothing to slow us down. If we wanted to, we could go even faster.'

Steve frowned. 'How?'

'By using more stars to boost the speed. However, that could cause other problems.'

'What kind of problems?'

'Well, for one thing, navigation would be difficult. The faster we go, the less able we are to adjust our course. If we got it wrong by just one second on the stellar parallax, we would miss Andromeda entirely and be doomed to wander around in space forever.'

'Or until we came to another galaxy to spin off.'

Cassi blinked. 'That could take centuries.'

'What is the other problem?' asked Juanita.

'Slowing down. Iris has calculated that there is sufficient matter on the outer edge of Andromeda to facilitate a gravity brake.'

'A what?'

'We use the gravity of a few of their larger stars to slow us. Don't forget that according to Newton's Law the same amount of energy is needed to stop a moving object as was needed to get the thing going in the first place. Elementary physics.'

'It might be to you,' smirked Juanita. 'I think I will be sticking to biology.'

'Tell me, Cassi,' said Lyn suddenly. 'Have you been able to calculate the precise time-compression co-efficient relative to the graduated velocity profile and whether or not it is proportional to the actual energy release at source?'

Steve's mouth dropped open. 'Throw that one by us one more time.'

Cassi laughed. 'What my sister is asking is whether I have got Iris to work out the relative differential between the time father left Andromeda and when we will arrive there.'

'Whoah! Speak English, please. The rest of us are just ordinary mortals.'

Cassi's eyes went dark for a second until she realised he meant no offense. She stood up. 'Father took over thirty-seven years to reach Andromeda and came back in thirty-eight. A total of seventy-five years. With me so far?'

'We are not complete idiots,' mumbled the Engineer.

'I know,' said Cassi. 'I'm thinking aloud as much as anything.'

Juanita nudged Bob into silence. 'Carry on. I am listening.'

Cassi's soft lips flashed in a quick smile of thanks. 'But by Terran timescale, he was only gone a month.'

'A factor of almost a thousand to one,' calculated Steve quickly.

'It's not a simple as that,' said Lyn. 'According to the data-log on Iris, father was on Mythos for five years. So, not only was time compressed, it actually went backwards fifty-nine months.'

'Is there not some relationship in the figures?' asked Mike. 'Surely there must be some way of calculating the amount of time-reversal to the speed of the journey.'

'If the speed was constant, such a calculation would be possible. What we don't know is precisely how fast the ship accelerated and how long it was at peak velocity.'

'We can work out an average, can't we?'

Cassi smiled. 'I already did that. Or at least, Iris did.'

'And?'

'Wayfarer Two travelled at an average of over sixty-thousand times the speed of light. That's about a quarter of what our average speed will have been when we get to Andromeda.'

'Will the difference in speed make any difference?'

'Most definitely. The co-efficient of time-compression makes that clear. However, I have no way of calculating the proportion factor. When we get back, of course, it should be easy to work out the



relationship.'

'But that will be too late for us.'

Cassi nodded. 'Exactly.'

Bob looked confused again. 'Then how do we know that we are not driving straight into a black hole?'

'For two reasons. Firstly, the planet Mythos was still intact when father left, though time was very short. Assuming the average speed of LUM-66,000 is correct, then during the return journey he must have gone back in time by half of the fifty-nine-month differential. Andromeda time, that is.'

'Twenty-nine and a half months?'

'Yes. But bear in mind that the galactic decay was already well under way. To have any hope of saving the population, we would have to get there well in advance of that final stage.'

Bob nodded. 'Yes, I can see that. So that we have time to save the race.'

'Will we have enough time?' asked Juanita.

'I don't know. Iris has the results of the searches Henry Markham made to find a suitable planet. By consulting these, we should avoid too much duplication of effort.'

'Won't this time-differential business cause problems?' asked Mike naively.

'Possibly,' said Cassi. 'Wayfarer obviously cannot be physically in two places at the same time.'

'But it's not at the same time,' said Lyn. 'We are breaking the normal laws of nature. Who knows what could happen?'

'Like the old adage of the space-ship which departs, goes back in time, and then crashes into itself taking off?' said Mike.

'But didn't take off because it crashed into itself landing?' added Steve.

'It's not a joke,' said Lyn. 'This is a serious problem.'

'Are we going to crash?' asked the wide-eyed Margaret Hardy who spoke up for the first time in what had been hitherto a very adult conversation.

Cassi dropped to her haunches and placed her hands on her step-daughter's shoulders. 'Iris won't let us crash, Maggie. You believe that, don't you?'

The little girl's eyes roved around the sea of faces which didn't seem as convinced as Cassi obviously was. They came back to where they started and locked on for several seconds. Maggie nodded.

Cassi smiled. 'Good girl.'

'What was the other reason why we are so sure your people are still alive?' asked Juanita kindly.

It was Lyniera who answered. 'Because of SID.'

'Sid?'

'System for Instant Data-Transfer,' said Steve. 'I saw it used on the way back from Titan. Tell her about it, Lyn.'

'Whilst the Wayfarers were on Mythos, the Andromedans made some modifications to the software.'

'Are they more advanced than humans?'

'Not really. It's just that Andromedan expertise has developed in a different direction. According to father, they have no concept of radio and were astounded at the sight of a wheel. Contrawise, they have some things that Terrans don't have. Sid is one of them.'

'System for Instant Data-Transfer?'

'Exactly.'

'How does it work?'

'If Wayfarer was now stationary and we decided to send a radio message to Orion, it would take weeks because radio waves are a form of electromagnetic radiation similar to light and are limited to the speed of such light. When the two Irises communicate, however, the data-transfer is instant. Hence the name.'

'How on earth can it be instant?'

Lyn shrugged. 'I don't know. The whole concept goes against all the known laws of science.'

'Only Terran science,' cautioned Cassi. 'Andromedans clearly understood the system and used it to their advantage.'

'But how does that bear on the matter in hand?'

'Because someone used it to send a message to us at Orion.'

'To Iris? But from where? Wayfarer Two was alongside us, don't forget.'

'I know. That's why the message had to have come from Andromeda. They must have the facility of being able to send data to us via SID.'

'This all sounds a bit far-fetched,' said Bob.

'So did space travel a few decades ago,' said Steve. 'Up to the middle of the last century, scientists were very fond of making theories sound like facts. When I was a lad, I remember reading an old astronomical encyclopedia in the local library which stated that Mars had canals. Canals, indeed.'

'Those same books also stated, only a matter of two years ago, that it was definitely not possible to break the speed of light. Yet, here we are, already travelling at hundreds of times that speed. I don't think we can

afford to say "impossible" about anything anymore.'

'What is the message Iris is receiving by this Sid?' asked Juanita.

'Goodbye!'

'Goodbye?'

'Just that. A simple farewell from a race about to be extinguished forever.'

'But not yet dead?'

'Not as of a few days ago.'

'So there is still a chance.'

'A faint one but, yes, there is a chance.'

'Then let us be hoping we are in time.'

DUST rose like a cloud as the turbo-jet helicopter swung in over the gravel courtyard, hovered for a moment whilst the downdraught tore at the trees surrounding the gardens and then dropped the last few feet onto the lawned area in front of the big house. Almost immediately, the note of the engine changed as the noise of the rotors began to die away, thus reinstating the relative peace of this Oxfordshire stately home. Wildfowl once more began to settle onto the surface of the nearby lake and the deer returned to their grazing as two uniformed men stepped onto the grass and held onto their hats as the swishing blades above their heads gradually slowed. One of the men carried a bulging briefcase as the other stepped ahead of him towards the building with determined purpose in his stride.

At the main door, a security officer saluted but the leading man ignored him completely as he swept into the wide oak-panelled hallway. The sound of their boots echoed along the corridor as the two men headed for the closed doors at the far end. With neither warning nor announcement, the doors were pushed open and they were inside. Four faces stared up at them as the men stopped in front of the huge boardroom table and confronted them.

'Good afternoon, General Phillips,' greeted Alan Thompson. 'To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?'

The intruder sneered. 'Cut out the bull-shit, Mr Director. You know why I'm here.'

'I'm afraid...'

The Mission Director was interrupted by a gasp from around the table as the second, younger, man tipped the contents of his briefcase onto the table. The satellite images scattered across the polished surface for all to see.

'This is the evidence I promised to get. Now do you believe me?'

An older man with a greying beard picked up one of the large photographs between his bony fingers and stared at it for a moment before letting his mouth split in a sly grin.

'These,' said Professor Heinrich Akherd as he casually tossed it back onto the untidy pile: 'Prove absolutely nothing.'

'Are you insane?' shouted the General angrily. 'They quite clearly show that the crew of Wayfarer One made an unprovoked attack upon a defenceless Orion shuttle.'

The Professor removed his spectacles. 'They show no such thing. On the contrary, we have reports of your people who have attempted to force a landing upon Orion Base...'

'Which, I will remind you, General, is officially Russian territory,' added the dark-haired woman in her middle years. 'Your actions have almost led to an international incident.'

'Goddamn it, has that Andromedan bitch got you so much under her power that you will believe everything she says?'

'We also have the official videotransmitted report from Commander Carter,' said the Director: 'As well as what I saw myself before returning to Earth.'

'Nevertheless, I insist that action be taken against the crew.'

The Director smiled. 'I'm afraid it's too late for that. They will now be well on their way to Andromeda.'

'You still believe that cock and bull story that Jim Duncan gave you? Dang, you're so gullible.'

'I believe it and so does the rest of the mission team. It is our one chance to make contact with beings from another world, something we have dreamed of for centuries.'

'God save us from do-gooders. Have you not thought of the implications? Just supposing there are survivors and they want to come back here to live. Where will that leave us? Tell me that! They live far longer than we do, don't forget. Why, in just a few years, they will have taken over the whole earth from us.'

'I don't think this is their intention. Why...'

'You don't think? How do you know what these people are like, eh?'

'They are a peace-loving people who will not harm us.'

'Harm? Have you not seen what they have done already? That girl has been in Earth-vicinity for less than a

year and she has you lot eating out of her hand. Not only that, but there has been serious resentment in some circles about just that one of them. Supposing there were hundreds, maybe thousands of them?’

‘There was no resentment,’ said the Director calmly: ‘Until you began your propagandist campaign to smear them as invaders. Cassi and her people just want to live in peace. Commander Carter and his crew have simply gone to see if they can help.’

The General moved closer to them. ‘They are not going to get the chance, my friend. Within the next few days, my colleague here is going to take Wayfarer Two after them and make pretty damn sure they never get there.’

The German scientist looked straight at him. ‘What are you saying, Herr General?’

General Phillips drew himself erect and grinned widely. ‘Major Watson will take a crew of my own selected men and put an end to this nonsense once and for all.’

The Director stood up. ‘Over my dead body.’

The Major moved and an automatic appeared in his hand as if by magic and pointed straight at Alan Thompson’s chest. The General grinned again. ‘That could be arranged.’

There was a shocked silence for a few moments. It was Natasha Ralentov who broke it. ‘How will you catch them?’

‘I will do so, Comrad,’ (he said it like it was an insult) ‘Doctor Bartek here will modify the reactor on Wayfarer Two in the same way he modified Wayfarer One.’ He turned to the balding man at the end of the table. ‘However, he will do it better, is that not so, my dear Hans?’

The inventor of the Proton Drive looked directly at him. ‘Go to hell, General.’

‘Oh, I will, I will. But not before your son.’

‘My son?’ He was suddenly alarmed. ‘What of my son?’

‘Tell him, Major.’

Greg Watson sauntered slowly across the room. ‘Leading-Spaceman William Bartek is helping one of my men to repair a shuttle near to Orion Base. If you do not agree, it is always possible he could meet with an...accident. As Comrad Ralentov’s late husband said just before he ran out of oxygen, “A dangerous place is Outer Space.”’

‘You bastard.’

The General shook his head. ‘Now, now, Doctor. There is a lady present.’

Natasha Ralentov got slowly to her feet and ignored the Major’s gun which had swung in her direction. ‘General Phillips, you are worse than a bastard. You are...’

The sound of the shot filled the room and left a shattered silence as the wine bottle exploded and sent a shower of red wine and broken glass all over her. She winced and slowly raised her hand to her face which was slightly cut.

The Director rushed to her side. ‘My God, Natasha. Are you all right?’

The Russian nodded and then looked at the Major. ‘Why don’t you shoot us all? Go on, pretend you are a man.’

The safety catch snicked back as Greg Watson raised his arm once again and closed one eye to look along the barrel.

‘Major!’ The General’s voice was sharp. ‘Save that for the Andromedan bitch.’

The Major relaxed a little and then grinned. ‘I shall look forward to that with the greatest of pleasure.’

‘You are going to kill them?’ asked the Director.

‘Of course,’ said the General. ‘It will not be difficult. With the Doctor’s help, Wayfarer Two will soon overtake them and the Major will deal with them whilst they are sleeping. It will be quite painless, I assure you.’

TEN minutes later, the General and Major had gone, leaving the others to mull over the situation.

‘What am I to do?’ groaned Doctor Bartek. ‘My son...’

‘You must go ahead and modify the Proton Drive,’ said the Professor quietly.

The Russian stared at him. ‘Are you out of your mind, Heinrich?’

He smiled. ‘Not at all, my dear Natasha. But what choice do we have?’

‘We must fight them.’

‘How? For upward of twenty years, there have been no wars on earth. Only the Security Council now have the power of arms and they have appointed the General as Supreme Commander-in-Chief. He is responsible for the entire security of Earth.’

The Russian was astounded. ‘You agree with him?’

‘I am simply looking at the matter as many others do. He has swayed them into believing that our planet is under threat from an alien race of another planet. For the first time in years, one man has total power and authority.’

‘You mean this is all a means to an end?’

‘Of course. Even the General does not seriously think we are threatened by Cassi’s people. Nevertheless,

while he can make others believe it, he holds great power in his hands.'

'What can we do about it?' said the Director. 'Can we radio a warning to Wayfarer One?'

The Professor shook his head. 'Not possible as their speed will already be many thousands of times the speed of light. No, there has to be another way.'

'But there isn't,' said Dr Bartek. 'If I modify the Proton Drive in Wayfarer Two, the General's men will catch Steve and his crew while they are crossing the void. Unless....?'

'Yes?'

'Unless I can induce some kind of a fault into the system.'

The Professor shook his head. 'They will know at once.'

'How?'

'Iris will tell them,' said the Director. 'She is not programmed to lie.'

'You're right, she isn't,' said the Professor slowly and thoughtfully. 'I wonder...'

'What is it?'

'Perhaps there is a way to deceive the computer.'

The Director frowned. 'But how? I don't understand.'

The Professor made his decision and turned to Dr Bartek. 'Hans, you must do exactly what the General asks of you. First thing in the morning, report to Europoort Space Terminal as instructed and agree to all his terms. He will have you taken by shuttle to Orion where you, Herr Director, will personally authorise Admiral Duncan to allow him aboard Orion with his team.'

'And what then?'

'Hans, you must gain access to the on-board computer on Wayfarer Two. It will not be difficult to convince them that it is essential so as to test the drive, will it?'

'I think I can do that. What next?'

The Professor scribbled several figures onto a piece of paper and then handed it to the confused inventor. 'Tell Iris that this is the date.'

ADMIRAL James Duncan looked up as the young man entered his office on Orion and saluted. He smiled. 'What is it, Corporal?'

'Control have radioed to say that a further shuttle has taken off from Europoort Launch Centre.'

Jim frowned. 'Another shuttle? But there are two up here already and Wayfarer One has been gone for some time. What is General Phillips playing at?'

'I don't know, sir. Perhaps, this time, it is the General himself.'

The Admiral smirked. 'I doubt it. It would be most unlike our Dwight to take such a personal risk. He would rather put others in the firing line.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Are the others still standing off?'

'Yes, Admiral. As long as we keep all the inner airlock doors open, they cannot open the outer doors.'

'Perhaps they intend to take stronger measures.'

The young man held himself erect. 'The men of Orion are right behind you, Admiral. We will fight to the death.'

Jim smiled. 'I don't think that will be necessary, David. However, your loyalty is commendable.' He leaned over his desk. 'What is the shuttle's estimated time of arrival?'

'Eleven hundred hours, Universal Time.'

'Sixteen minutes. Well, we'll soon know what the General is up to, won't we?'

The intercom buzzed. Jim pressed a button. 'Yes?'

'Message from the Orion shuttle, Admiral. Personal.'

'Very well. Patch it through.'

There was a short period of clicking before a familiar voice came out of the speaker. 'Admiral, this is Hans Bartek.'

'Dr Bartek? Are you on the shuttle?'

'Affirmative, Admiral. I have been instructed by the Director to carry out some essential maintenance work on Wayfarer Two. Do I have your permission to dock?'

'How many are on board the shuttle with you?'

'Other than my two assistants, there are only the pilot and navigator, except for one other passenger.'

'A passenger? But who...?'

'All in good time, Admiral. Just believe me when I say none aboard are the General's men.'

Jim paused for a moment. His colleague on Orion looked at him. 'Can he be trusted, Admiral?'

Jim nodded. 'I think so. Nevertheless, take two men and keep an eye on the airlock. Ensure that the Doctor and his colleague are closely guarded until we are sure what is going on.' He pushed a button. 'Doctor Bartek, permission granted for just yourself and your passenger initially. Please be careful as my men are

somewhat edgy at the moment.'

'Understood. Docking in approximately thirteen minutes.'

Everyone on board Orion gathered to the nearest transparent panel and looked out. A hundred metres out, two shuttles hung poised in space close to the long sleek shape of Wayfarer Two. Only cables connected them all to the massive space station and prevented them drifting away. Below, the huge blue sphere of Earth looked so peaceful and, after a while, a pinpoint of light could be seen which gradually grew into a third shuttle. A kilometre away, retro rockets were fired and a flare glowed momentarily as the ship slowed to approach the docking area.

Finally, it bumped gently against the crash rail before an umbilical snaked out and connected the two unmatched craft together. Five minutes later, the red light over the inner airlock door turned green and four suited figures emerged under the watchful eye of Jim Duncan and several armed members of his security team.

The tallest removed his helmet and smiled. 'Thanks for trusting me, Jim. With your permission, my assistants will immediately transfer to Wayfarer Two and commence repairs.'

Jim frowned. 'Repairs? But the broken port was replaced not long after the ship came back from Charon.'

'I'm afraid I have no choice but to make certain modifications to the drive system.'

'But why?' asked the Admiral warily.

'The General has ordered a crew to prepare to depart as soon as possible.' The Scientist explained his predicament briefly as his companion slowly removed the helmet from the suit.

As the faceplate came clear, Jim gasped. 'Natasha. Good heavens, woman. You took a chance coming up here.'

The Russian smiled a little though the lift-off had clearly drained the energy from her. 'I had to come, Jim. It was necessary.'

He took her arm. 'Come into the office and sit down.' As he guided her towards a chair, the inventor following, he spoke over his shoulder. 'Corporal, watch out for the others, would you?'

He saluted. 'Yes, sir.'

The door closed and the three of them were alone. Natasha sat and took the drink she was offered while Dr Bartek climbed stiffly out of his space-suit. Jim smiled. 'Feeling better?'

She nodded. 'A little. I'm afraid I'm getting a bit too old for this sort of thing.'

'Old? Nonsense.'

'I'm outside the regulation age for space-travel, Jim.'

'So am I, but I don't intend to stop yet. Can I get you anything else?'

She shook her head. 'Not for now. I must let my people know I am here.'

Jim frowned once more. 'Your people?'

'I regret to say that as of noon today, the Democratic Republic of Russia will be formally withdrawing from the World Security Council. From that moment, Orion Base Station will cease to be international territory and will revert to being Russian property. I am here as a representative of the Council and to exercise the powers invested in me by its executive members.'

Jim was dumbstruck. 'What does that mean for the rest of us up here?'

'It means you have a choice. Either you must leave Orion immediately and return to Earth in the shuttle or remain here under my authority.'

He gestured to the other shuttles, waiting like patient vultures. 'But what of them?'

Natasha Ralentov got to her feet and went to the window. After staring into space for several seconds, she turned to face them. 'My instructions are that if the General or any of his men should attempt to board this satellite Base Station, it should be interpreted as an act of unprovoked aggression.'

'And...?'

She looked straight at him. 'It will mean war!'

## THE END

General Dwight Phillips looked up from his paperwork as a buzzer sounded on his desk. He pressed a knob. 'Yes?'

'Major Watson is here to see you, sir.'

The General shuffled the papers into a folder. 'Very well, Miss Ogden. Show him in.'

There was a knock and Greg Watson entered, saluted and sat in the chair indicated. 'Hans Bartek has almost finished the modification to the Proton Drive.'

'Can we trust him?'

Greg nodded. 'I think so. He knows we are watching his every move. Besides, the computer will give me a full status report before we are ready to leave.'

'Have we gotten into that goddamn space station yet?'

The Major shook his head. 'Impossible while all the inner airlock doors are open.'

'Then why can't we blast our way in? Surely that's not too difficult, is it?'

'Not at all. One kilo of plastic explosive should do the trick. However, it is likely that some or all of the base personnel will be killed by the instant de-pressurisation.'

The General sighed. 'My heart bleeds for them. For God's sake, they knew what they were getting into when they went up there.'

'But what about the reaction here on Earth?'

'Can't we just say it was a meteor storm or something? No-one will be any the wiser. We need that station for defence purposes.'

'I am reliably informed that Natasha Ralentov is now aboard Orion. There will be uproar if she is killed.'

'Uproar? There will certainly be uproar if I don't get control of that station soon.'

Fearing the wrath of his superior officer, Greg asked: 'What do you want me to do?'

The General sighed. 'Leave it to me. You just concentrate on finding that girl and her crew. I'll deal with Orion.'

'The rumour is that Wayfarer has gone to Andromeda. How far do you want me to chase after them?'

'All the way if you have to. I want them all dead.'

'But if they do get to Andromeda, they are unlikely to return.'

'I can't take that chance. For all I know, they will come back with hundreds of Andromedan refugees - thousands, perhaps.'

'Mmm. I see what you mean.'

'Your orders are very clear, Major. At midday tomorrow, you will leave Orion and follow the plotted course of Wayfarer One. The computer will tell you the precise co-ordinates and trajectory. You just follow them, overtake them and finish them.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And, Major?'

'Yes, General?'

'If you can't carry out this simple task, don't bother to come back.'

WAYFARER Two blasted off from Orion base at 1200 hours, Universal Time, precisely ten days after Wayfarer One. From the viewing area of the space station, Admiral James Duncan watched the departure.

The man beside him apologised. 'I'm sorry, Jim. I had to make the modification.'

Jim Duncan smiled and clapped a hand on the shoulder of the bespectacled astro engineer. 'I know that, Hans. I just hope that the crew of Wayfarer One will realise what is happening and be able to take evasive action.'

'But by the time they catch up with Wayfarer One, its crew will be asleep, won't it?' asked Natasha Ralentov at his other elbow.

'They will. I wish there was some way of waking them and warning them.'

'I think the Professor has something up his sleeve,' said Dr Bartek.

Jim frowned. 'What kind of a something?'

The scientist looked around. 'Is this place bugged?'

Jim looked at Natasha and raised one eyebrow. The Russian laughed. 'Quite probably.'

'Is there anywhere safe?'

Natasha nodded. 'Follow me.'

The trio went along the main passageway and then down three levels in the lift. At the bottom, the floor was not level and they had to walk awkwardly with heads bowed along a narrow access tunnel which was lit only by infra-red light. The temperature rose noticeably as they approached the armoured door at the far end from behind which a low hum emanated.

'This will do,' said Natasha.

Jim looked around. 'We must be right underneath the main reactor bay.'

'We are. Just through that door is the emergency release mechanism for the control rods. If for any reason the fusion block gets out of control and the automatic overrides fail, this is the only way to manually shut it down.'

'Are we safe?' asked Doctor Bartek.

'For up to ten minutes,' said Comrade Ralentov. 'If this place is bugged, any radio waves will be confused by the anti-matter emissions.'

'I understand. A bit like jamming.'

She smiled. 'Something like that.'

Jim turned to the scientist. 'What does Professor Akherd have in mind, Hans?'

'I don't know for certain. He just told me to alter some of the data fed into Iris.'

'What kind of data?'

He shrugged. 'Just the date. I don't understand why.'

'The date?' asked Natasha. 'But surely the crew of Wayfarer Two will notice the error.'

'They would have to,' said Jim thoughtfully. 'They couldn't leave with the date wrong else all the information relating to planetary motion would be incorrect.'

'Perhaps that is what Heinrich is hoping for. Maybe he thinks they will crash into one of the planets because Iris miscalculated.'

Jim shook his head. 'No. The second they set up the reactor for countdown, they will have known the date was wrong and corrected it. They would have to have done so or the drive wouldn't have fired. It did fire so we must assume they put the clock right first.'

A panic struck Hans Bartek at the possible repercussions to his son. 'You mean they will have noticed what I did?'

Natasha smiled. 'They almost certainly will have put it down to a genuine mistake by one of the crew. After all, why would anyone in their right mind want to deliberately change the date on the computer?'

Jim pondered at the possibilities. 'Yes. Why, indeed?'

'They will have corrected it, won't they?'

'They will, I'm afraid.'

'They what was the point?'

Jim stroked his chin. 'I wish I knew.'

MAJOR Gregory Watson was pleased with his new toy. Having corrected the stupid error one of the technicians must have made to the internal clock in Iris, they had launched as planned.

'Which way?' asked the Navigation Officer.

Greg stood behind him. 'Take our maximum velocity profile and overlay onto Wayfarer One's trajectory.'

The man punched keys. 'Do you really mean maximum velocity?'

'You bet. I want this bag of bolts going flat out. I don't intend wasting years wandering around space looking for some bunch of nutters. Let's finish this quickly and get home.'

'Very well, Major.'

COMMANDER Carter decided the order of "freezing" and Mike, still suffering from the results of earlier injuries and an unaccustomed lift-off, was first with Maggie. After setting the electron telescope to take pictures of the retreating galaxy, Bob Walker agreed to be next. It was essential the units be fully tested in space for some time before the last of them was frozen. That left Steve alone with Lyn, Cassi and Juanita. Steve could have gone, too, but he insisted on staying awake with his new wife for as long as feasibly possible and no-one could blame him. Everything relaxed on board ship as there was nothing to do except monitor the state of play and leave the rest to Iris.

On the twenty-first day, they passed Ross 248 dead on schedule. As the fiery bulk not unlike Sol flashed by, Lyn fired up the Proton Drive once more and Wayfarer One leapt to LUM-600 as Cassi set course for the yellowish oval smudge which Iris instantly identified as the close binary, Alpha Groombridge 34.

'Two days,' she announced as Wayfarer responded.

'And then?'

'Fifteen hours to Beta Kruger. We must treat her with respect.'

'Why?' asked Lyn.

'Because she is a flare star and quite unpredictable at times. Though when I came in with father, she was pretty stable.'

Steve turned to face her. 'Possible problems?'

'None Iris can't cope with. Nevertheless, I think I'll stay up and keep an eye on her for a while.'

Steve stretched. 'Well, I'm going to turn in for a few hours. Coming, Lyn?'

The young girl glanced at her older sister as if seeking permission but Cassi simply smiled her approval. Newlyweds should spend time together. She and Mike did two years ago.

'Penny for them,' prompted Juanita after several minutes of silence.

Cassi put her long legs up on the console. 'Fancy a game of squash in the storeroom?'

'With you? No chance. I like exercise but I am no serious competition for an Andromedan.'

'I'll go easy on you. I'll even let you win if you like.'

Juanita jumped to her feet. 'You're on.'

Cassi grinned and pressed a couple of keys before following the astro-biologist out into the corridor, leaving Iris in control. On the way out, she picked up a small calculator and slipped it into her pocket. Juanita saw it, frowned, but made no comment. The habits of Andromedans were all foreign to her. In the storeroom, Juanita switched on the overhead lights and Cassi stepped out of her overalls.

Juanita slowly shook her head. 'Bella Dios, you're beautiful, you know that?'

'Me? I'm just ordinary.'

'Ordinary Andromedan, maybe. I am betting you broke a few hearts on Earth when you married Mike.'

In her tight black leotard and trainers, Cassi leapt up and down on the spot, bouncing a ball with her racket. 'There was no-one else. He saved my life.'

In her shorts and tee-shirt, Juanita watched her carefully. 'You do love him, don't you?'

'Of course. Why do you ask?'

'It's just... You never seem to be together very much.'

Cassi laughed pleasantly as she belted the ball against the wall. 'That's what Maggie said. The problem is, we don't get much time for that, especially when the General is after us.'

'What happened to the Andromeda Seed?' said Juanita as she dived for the returning ball and flipped it back.

'Father is looking after them on Orion. They are safe enough with him.'

'But if the General gets onto the Base Station?'

'The Director has access to Orion, don't forget, and he controls the base personnel. They don't have to let the General on board if they don't want to. Short of a full-scale invasion, father is quite safe as long as he keeps the airlocks closed.'

For several games, nothing more was said as they concentrated on the game in hand. As promised, Cassi let Juanita win and she collapsed onto the makeshift bench, perspiration pouring from her dusky face and arms.

'You are being the death of me,' she puffed as she fought to get her breath back. 'How long can you keep that up?'

Cassi caught the ball and sat down beside her. 'Hours, if necessary. Thanks for the game.'

Juanita laughed as she rubbed a towel over her face. 'You could have beaten me any time you wanted to.'

'I wonder if that's why the General and others like him are so much against us. We mean no harm but must seem like a threat.'

'Could be. Shower?'

Cassi nodded. 'Yes, I think so. Then I must check on Iris.'

Juanita put her hand over Cassi's. 'Relax. We've got hours before the next turn, haven't we?'

Cassi flopped back against the wall. 'I guess so.'

'You are being worried, aren't you?'

'Does it show?'

'I'm afraid so. Come into the shower and tell me about it.'

Together, they stripped off and stood under the warm water while Cassi spoke of things she had never mentioned to anything else. Juanita just listened and, when Cassi had finished, fell silent as they got dressed. At the door, Juanita caught the younger woman's arm. 'Cassi, for the time being don't tell anyone else about this, especially not Steve. I'm sure something can be done about it though I'm not sure what.'

'You are very understanding.'

Juanita shrugged. 'I am almost a doctor.'

'Are you sure I ought to keep quiet about it?'



'Very much sure. It might be upsetting to the others to know they may never be able to return to Earth.'

TENSION built up among the awake crew members as Wayfarer One approached the twin suns of Alpha Groombridge. Even from a light year away, Iris responded to the massive gravitation pull of the immense pair of stars and Cassi adjusted course to take the ship tightly around the larger of the two. Compared with its smaller companion, the larger sun was a dull red and the beginnings of a jet stream between the two could be detected by the naked eye.

'There'll be fireworks here in a few thousand years,' Steve noted as they all watched in the forward scanner. 'Good job neither suns have planets.'

'If they did, and there was life on them, someone would be getting very worried by now,' remarked Cassi quietly.

The surge of gravity was clearly felt in the hour or so leading up to the swingby and the darkness beyond seemed absolute as Cassi punched keys to align for Beta Kruger.

'Fifteen hours, you say?'

'Less. We gained a bit because of the positive alignment of the binary. I calculate twelve hours at LUM-1200.'

'It is odd,' said Juanita. 'Here we are travelling at over one thousand times the speed of light and there is being no sensation of movement at all.'

'And we haven't even reached father's average speed yet. In fact, so far we've gone nowhere.'

'The sky around us is beginning to look different,' observed Steve.

'In three weeks time, when we pass Segin, the galaxy will begin to take shape behind us. By the time we reach Gamma Cepheus, you'll think we're right out on a limb.'

'We'll be in deep space then?'

'Not until we reach Kappa. After that, we will really be on our own. Nothing but black space for ten long years.'

Juanita shivered. 'That is sounding bleak.'

Cassi smiled. 'It is. My favourite memories as a child of Maggie's age were sitting outside with father and...'

'Outside?'

'Of course. It's much better than looking through viewing screens. Everything is so black and there are no stars at all - just galaxies around us like lost islands, some so close you think you can touch them although they are many, many light years away.'

'You are liking space, aren't you?'

Cassi wiggled her shoulders in ecstasy. 'I love it. You want to go outside and take a look?'

'I'm not sure...'

'Come on. There's no danger.'

'What if we are falling off?'

Cassi laughed. 'We can't fall off. And if we do, we will just swim alongside. Anyway, we'll have life-lines.'

'Can I come?' asked Lyn.

Cassi looked questioningly at Steve.

'Go and have your hen party. Just don't ask me to come with you. I prefer it in here where it's warm.'

Juanita spun around. 'It is cold outside?'

'Never less than absolute zero,' said Lyn as she headed for the suit bay. 'Don't worry, the suits are heated.'

'Thirty minutes,' called Steve after them.

'Sixty,' responded his wife.

Steve grinned. 'Forty-five and no more.'

'Done.'

He pointed an accusing finger. 'You will be if you are one minute late.'

She poked her head in the gap as the door closed. 'Bully!'

WAYFARER Two burst free of the Solar System in a matter of hours, the modified Proton Drive pushing its military crew in pursuit of the sister ship. Major Watson made sure his men exercised daily, pushing them to the limit inside and outside the ship. Once they had passed Ross 248, he called for an update.

'It seems,' advised the navigator. 'They have been lucky.'

'Lucky?'

'They have had positive velocity accentures at every swing-by.'

'Just give it to me in simple terms.'

The man drew a deep breath. 'They had a ten-day head start on us. Even with the increased acceleration factor we have, we will still not catch them before they leave the galaxy.'

There was a sigh from one or two of the others. One sharp glance silenced them. 'Are we going flat out?'

'At full speed, Major. We can do nothing more until Alpha Groombridge.'

'No short cuts?'

The navigator shook his head. 'That girl knows the route better than anyone and she is certainly in one hell of a hurry. I can see no alternative than to follow an identical course.'

Greg sighed. 'How far will we be behind them?'

'By the time we leave the galaxy? I calculate just under seven days.'

'Seven days? Then we'll never catch them.'

'Don't forget momentum.'

'How does momentum come into it?'

'Once Wayfarer One leaves Kappa Cassiopeiae in...' He consulted the screen. '...thirty-four days from now, she will be unable to boost her speed any more across the void.'

'And?'

'We will have gained three, perhaps four, days in the meantime.'

'And?' The Major was getting impatient.

The navigator shrugged. 'We shall be travelling faster than they will. I estimate we shall cross both the galaxy and the void in three-thousand, three-hundred and twenty-seven days, give an hour or two. That's three-hundred and nineteen days faster than them.'

'But we don't want to cross the void. We want to catch them, finish them, and then go home.'

'It's not that simple, sir. Once we commit ourselves to the void, we have to go all the way.'

'All the way? To Andromeda?'

'We have no choice. We cannot turn until we get there and swing around a convenient sun. I'm afraid the idea of being able to alter course in deep space at the drop of a hat was only true in the sci-fi movies of the last century.'

'So when do we catch them?'

'Around nine-tenths of the way there.'

'That's cutting it fine, isn't it?'

The navigator shook his head. 'Even allowing for discrepancies, we will still have a year left in which to deal with them before reaching Andromeda.'

'Hmmm! I suppose that will have to be good enough. But nine years...'

'And almost two months,' added the other man. 'Pity we don't have freezers like they do.'

'The cryophysicists didn't have time to fit them. I'm afraid we'll just have to get gracefully old.'

One of the men spoke up. 'You mean I will be ten years older by the time we get home?'

The Major grinned. 'Twenty, counting the return trip.'

'My God, the wife will kill me.'

'It will be worth it. Think of it as saving them from an alien race.'

'If you say so, sir.'

He clapped the man on the back. 'Your children will benefit from what we are doing this day. There's will be a better world.'

JIM Duncan stood by the viewing aperture watching the sunlight glinting off the superstructure of the shuttle craft which were gathering outside. He was joined by a security officer. 'Everything secure?'

The man nodded. 'As can be. You do realise they can break in any time they want?'

'I guess so. Orion was not built as a fortress.'

'Shall I issue weapons, Admiral?'

Jim shook his head. 'No point. This place is fragile enough as it is. One blast in the wrong place and we spring a leak.'

'Should we all get into space suits?'

'It wouldn't do any harm. At least we will be protected against sudden decompression. Not that it will do us much good.'

'What do you mean?'

'We are almost thirty-six thousand kilometres above Terra. If we were to abandon Orion, how do you think we would get down to the surface?'

'We wouldn't!'

'Exactly. I think we are just going to have to wait it out and see what the General intends to do. It's his first move.'

CASSI and Lyn held Juanita's gloved hands firmly as they entered the airlock. As the inner door closed, Cassi lifted a flap on the wall to reveal a tiny screen and keypad. She pressed a button.

'PRESSURISE OR EVACUATE? (P/E) >' said the screen.

'E'

'Cassi, I am scared.'

'You've space-walked before, haven't you?'

'Yes, but that was at Orion where I was near to home.'

'Juanita,' said Cassi as she pulled out a line from her own belt and clipped it to a rung beside the door and

then did the same for the biologist. 'They say the place of greatest danger is on the streets of a city. Compared with here, the inner space around Orion is like your home town of Madrid in the rush hour.'

The green light over the door turned red. Ten seconds later, the outer door opened and Juanita started to breath faster.

'Relax, or you'll hyperventillate. Look up at the illuminated readout projected onto the inside of your visor at the top. What does it say?'

The two girls noticeably heard Juanita swallow over the radio. 'Air pressure one point one five kilogrammes per square centimetre. Air reservoir four hours and seventeen minutes.'

'So what's the problem?'

'I...I...'

'Juanita,' said Lyn suddenly. 'Look at me.'

Cassi stood back and watched as her sister took both the biologist's hands in her own and they faced each other in silence.

'Bounce on your toes,' she heard Lyn say over the radio. 'Bounce until you feel as light as a feather.'

It looked almost comical as Cassi watched the two of them jumping gently off the metal floor of the airlock, with each step getting closer to the yawning black void that was deep space. They stopped right on the edge.

'Better?' the young girl asked.

Juanita nodded. 'A little.'

'Good. Take Cassi's hand, we're going for a walk around the block.'

They didn't jump. They simply stepped onto the edge and then around the hull of the ship. Outside, Wayfarer seemed huge, almost like a planet in itself and, to Juanita, its massive bulk was reassuring.

'It...it is fantastic,' she eventually said. 'Everything is being so clear and...and so very big.'

'It's certainly that,' chuckled Cassi. 'You see that tiny orange pinpoint straight ahead?'

'Ye...e...e.s.'

'That's Beta Kruger. We'll be there in about eight hours.'

'It is looking a long way away.'

'It is. Even now, it is almost seven hundred thousand times as far away as Terra is from Sol.'

'Then why can we see it?'

'Because it is a flare star and, at the moment, it seems to be flaring.'

'Is that bad?'

'Not necessarily. We'll take precautions, that's all.'

'Where is Andromeda?'

Cassi pointed. 'You see that slightly-distorted square of stars just below and to the right?'

'With the bright yellow one at the top left?'

'That is the square of Pegasus. Seen from Terra, it looks an almost perfect square but not all of the four corners are the same distance away. Hence the distortion. Now look at the one you noticed - the one at top left.'

'Yes.'

'That's the red giant, Alpheratz. Like Alpha Groombridge we've already passed, it is a binary - two stars revolving around each other.'

'Is that where we are going next?'

'No. We're heading for Achird. You see the flattish "W" shape just above the square?'

'Yes.'

'Just to the left of the bright star at the bottom right is Achird. That's a yellow and purple long period binary and we'll get there the day after tomorrow.'

'Where do we go from there?'

'The top right of the "W" - Chaph.'

'It is looking very close to the first one.'

Cassi laughed. 'Misleading, isn't it? Chaph is twenty-seven light years further away. We won't get there until next week.'

'And after that?'

'The irregular variable star Tsih in the middle on Thursday. Shedir, bottom right, on Saturday, and Marfac, just to the left, a week on Monday.'

'Is it really that far away? It looks so clear and bright.'

'Marfac is two hundred and thirty six light years away - fifteen million times the distance from Terra to Sol.'

'Bella Dios!'

'That's nothing. The top left of the "W" is Segin. That's twice as far away again. It will be nearly a fortnight before we get there.'

'Everything is being so...so...big.'

'My sentiments precisely,' said Lyn.

'Of course, Lyn,' said Cassi. 'You've never been this far out, have you?'

'No. Father took me to Xen and around Charon and that was it except for a brief trip to Alpha Centauri and back.'

'Will we be out of the galaxy when we get to this Segin, or whatever you said?' asked Juanita.

'Segin? Not on your life. If we kept at this same speed, fast though it might seem, it would take us over six years simply to get there. After that, we'd still be another six years from the edge.'

'This Segin is only half way?'

'Of course. After that, we head for Omicron and then make a detour to that one out on its own over towards Polaris. That's Alrai. We'll be there at the end of the month.'

'And will we be out of the galaxy then?'

'No. Six times further out than Segin is Kappa Cassiopeia, the star I was named after. We won't even see that one properly for a week or so. Not with the naked eye, anyway.'

'And where is Andromeda itself?'

'Trace an imaginary line down the left leg of the "W" towards Alpheratz at the top left of the square of Pegasus.'

'Got it.'

'If you look carefully, about two thirds of the way across that darker patch is a sort of white smudge. See it?'

'No.'

'Just to the right of the very bright one in the middle of that straight line of stars.'

'I can see the straight line.'

'Look at the middle one, the brightest. Now look right and up a bit. Can you see it now?'

'Yes. Oh Madre Maria, I can see it. I can see it.'

'Steady, you'll fall off.'

She turned to face them. 'I thought you are saying we couldn't.'

'Relax,' said Lyn. 'She's kidding.'

Juanita looked around. 'Maggie would love to see all this.'

'She will, later. There's plenty of time yet.'

'But what you said in the shower...'

'It won't affect what happens over the next ten years. The problem doesn't start until we get there.'

'And when we do?'

'Don't ask.'

Juanita couldn't see the expression on Cassi's face for the reflection of light on her bulbous visor and she wondered if the Andromedan had communicated her earlier fears to her sister. Lyn didn't say anything so she assumed she had.

'Can we go back inside now?' she asked instead.

Cassi's helmet nodded. 'Of course. Take my hand.'

Together, the threesome made its way back to the airlock. On the edge of the opening, they paused for a last glimpse. Lyn was the first to comment on the panorama behind them. 'The Milky Way takes on a very definite shape from out here, doesn't it?'

'It does. Even on Orion, the view outward from the northern hemisphere is quite different from that looking inwards, towards the centre. Out here, the difference is far more pronounced.'

'It certainly is.'

'If we could see the invisible light waves as well, the variation would be even clearer.'

'What's at the centre, do we know?'

'There are all kinds of theories. Some even think there is a black hole.'

'A black hole?' said a startled Juanita. 'Like the one at Andromeda?'

'It could be there is one at the centre of every galaxy. One day, I guess someone will have to go and find out.'

'Why can we not see it from our orbiting telescopes?'

'Because of the density of light from the centre. It is so bright that, even at low frequencies, the centre of the galaxy is an unrecognisable blur. We've got a better view from here than they have from Hubble.'

'Could that be why your people didn't see the danger at Andromeda?'

'No, their problem was a very different one. Just like your Milky Way has accompanying Magellan clouds, Andromeda has four accompanying galaxies two of which, M32 and NGC205, are relatively close in.'

'So Andromeda is not alone.'

'That's right. For decades, astronomers have noted that the satellite galaxies appear to be closing in on the mother. A collision was expected thousands of years from now.'

'Is this kind of thing common?'

'Astronomers used to think so. Nowadays, it is generally recognised that the universe is far more orderly

and controlled than was originally believed. Some sceptics at the end of the last century took a lot of convincing but eventually had to accept the facts. Collisions of any kind are extremely rare. In fact, there is no positive evidence there ever has been one.'

'So this impending collision was unexpected.'

'Naturally. In fact, Mike says that Terran astronomers refused to believe the evidence of their own eyes.'

'Is this event what caused the black hole to develop?'

'Partly. According to the data fed into Iris by the Andromedans, what actually happened was that as M32 approached, it sent out ion streams laterally from the centre and seemed to slow itself down.'

'You are making it sound alive.'

'I don't mean to. However, the jet streams produced enormous turbulence and matter began to be drawn off from Andromeda itself. They wouldn't see this from Terra, of course, because of the vast distance.'

'Two million light years.'

'Exactly. At first, only gaseous substances were affected and the effect was that M32 appeared to stop.'

'Was matter still being drawn off?'

'Oh, yes. Only by now, other planetary debris was being sucked away. It was then that Iris recognised the classic characteristics of a black hole developing.'

'And were the Andromedans aware of this?'

'Not at first. Mythos and Durandor are on the outer edge of the rim, a bit further out than Sol is from the centre of the Milky Way.'

'And this rogue galaxy?'

'It would appear to them little bigger than a large star or a planet. It would look so innocent.'

'And what about the matter which is being drawn off?'

'They wouldn't see that either as most of it was in the X-ray frequencies. As soon as Commander Markham arrived, Iris sent out a warning as she could "see" this invisible light.'

'Did the Andromedans believe him?'

'Apparently not, at first. It was only when it was clear that their planet was being pulled out of orbit that they accepted the facts.'

'Sucked into the black hole?'

Cassi's helmet nodded again. 'At first, the evidence was circumstantial - a bad storm here, an earthquake there. Henry programmed everything into Iris and then asked the computer to do an advance simulation. Only then, did they begin to take action.'

'What did they do?'

'First of all, they examined other nearby planets for somewhere to live. The trouble was, most of those would eventually be affected too.'

'The Andromedans had capability for space flight?'

'Very limited. Mythos and Durandor are sister planets both about the size of Mars and not much further apart than Luna is from Terra. Mythans developed a space craft about the middle of the last century and Durandor became the "New World" so to speak. Much the same as when your people crossed the Atlantic to America.'

'The climate was right?'

'Perfect, apparently, which was useful as they lived longer than Terrans. After that, they started to populate a couple of other nearby planets in similar orbits of the same system.'

'Was there nowhere else for them to go?'

'Not in their own system. Commander Markham had the only vessel capable of exploring further afield. It was while he was away that our father arrived at Mythos.'

'I am betting they were surprised.'

'Not half as much as father was to find that Wayfarer One had already been there ahead of him. Unfortunately, there was not a lot he could do as Wayfarer Two was damaged when he crash-landed. By the time it had been repaired, Henry Markham had returned with news that there were no other suitable planets within striking distance which would remain out of range of the black hole.'

'The whole galaxy was not affected then?'

'No-one could tell. At that time, it seemed some huge cataclysm was likely which could not be avoided.'

'Hence the attempt to reach Earth?'

'Yes.'

'But they are not making it?'

'No. I believe the difference in atmospheric pressure killed the Andromedans.'

'But your father got back all right, didn't he?'

'He did because they gave him a new body. He also had Andromedans with him but they died, too. That's why a cross-breed was thought to be the best bet for the continuation of their race.'

'You and Lyn?'

'And the Andromeda Seed eggs on Orion, don't forget.'

'So the Andromedans themselves cannot be living on Earth?'

'Not as they are. Father and the others could just about cope with the increased pressure on Mythos but the Andromedans couldn't handle the lower pressure on Terra.'

'Then everything we are doing really could be for nothing.'

'It could indeed. But we have to try, don't we?'

'Even though we risk our own lives?'

'We do that everyday when we cross the street. Out here, at least we are in some control of our own destinies.'

'Except for the black hole.'

'Yes. Except for the black hole.'

AT fourteen-hundred hours, Universal Time, General Dwight Phillips gave the order to invade Orion Base. Three shuttles closed in immediately and one crew used explosives to breach the main airlock leading to the engineering section. Following instructions from Natasha Ralentov, Jim Duncan offered no physical resistance. One signal was flashed to Terra before the be-suited occupants were rounded up and locked in the cargo hold. Within hours, the Central Council of the Federated Russian States had convened and broken off diplomatic relations with the United States. The armed forces of both sides immediately went on red alert. General Phillips met with his Chiefs of Staff who agreed to support him. At twenty-three hundred hours, nuclear submarine Czanenko Two slipped out of Murmansk harbour under the cover of darkness and headed westward into the Arctic Ocean. Czanenko Three departed Odessa an hour later, heading for the Dardanelles. General Phillips read the reports from the spy satellites and dismissed them as bluff.

An ultimatum was issued at seven o'clock the following morning which was supported by the Democratic Union of China and the Central Arab States who put a complete embargo of oil supplies to the West. At midday, the United Nations Security Council sat in emergency session. Uproar ensued with threats from both sides in the argument. Stalemate was reached. That afternoon, a Russian trawler was attacked off the coast of Norway by a British warship. The aggressor was able to radio a sonar warning only seconds before transmission was cut-off. The European Congress called for an explanation but the Russians failed to respond. NATO forces gathered throughout Europe and the Middle-East despite repeated warnings from the Arab States.

At precisely ten a.m., China launched her first inter-continental ballistic missile from her new base on Hong Kong Island. It was treated as a hoax until, nine-minutes later, the city of Los Angeles was engulfed by a massive explosion in the region of eighty megatons.

The world was stunned. The UN met again and talked, and talked, and talked. Whilst it was still in session, the embarrassed President of the United States gave orders to retaliate. One-hundred and eighteen missiles left their bunkers within a space of three minutes, each containing multiple warheads. Russia, China, Iran and Zimbabwe responded in the most appropriate manner and, within hours, World War Three had begun.

FROM thirty-six thousand kilometres away, the holocaust could be seen as flashes came from all over the surface. The General's men were glued to the viewing windows of Orion Base as they imagined their families being annihilated, not one of them daring to admit that it was their own action which had precipitated the devastating exchange. All transmissions from Earth eventually ceased and the fifty men who had served General Phillips soon realised that they and their prisoners were probably the sole survivors of the human race.

THROUGH the small viewing aperture in their confinement area, Jim Duncan stared down in silence at the flashes which continued to cover the surface of his home planet.

'Why don't they stop?' asked one of his men eventually. 'Surely there is no-one left alive, not after all this time.'

'Automatic programming,' said Hans Bartek. 'The missile launchers will have been set to respond to certain criteria. As long as they are able, they will continue to follow their prescribed routine. There is nothing or no-one to stop them.'

'But it all happened so fast. My God, it's only hours since this all started.'

Jim sighed. 'We've had peace since the nineteen-nineties. I suppose it shows just how fragile a peace it really was. Also, it seems prolonged peace has made us unable to react sensibly when confronted with a potential war situation.'

'Will anything be left, Admiral?'

'Unlikely,' said Jim sadly. 'There has been one hell of a lot of plutonium unleashed over the last few hours.'

Even in the eighties, the world had enough firepower to destroy itself ten times over. Despite a pretense at disarmament, the superpowers obviously had no real intention of losing nuclear capability.'

'What about us? How long do we have?'

Jim looked at Natasha and raised an eyebrow.

She shrugged. 'Air is no problem. The scrubbers will clean and circulate indefinitely. Our problem will be food.' She glanced toward the locked door. 'Especially with all the extra man-power aboard.'

As if in response to her reference, the door hissed open and armed men stepped in.

'I suppose you've seen it?' said the leader of the invaders, more as an accusation than a question.

Jim nodded. 'It seems your boss thought the Russians were bluffing.'

The man pointed his finger accusingly. 'This is all your fault.'

Jim couldn't help smiling. 'And how do you work that out?'

'If you had let us on board when the General asked, nothing would have happened.'

'Are you sure? This is, after all, Russian property, in spite of the state of co-operation over the last few years. General Phillips knew that.'

'I'm going down,' he suddenly said.

Jim looked shocked. 'Down? You mean down to the surface?'

He nodded. 'To make sure.'

'I would strongly advise against such foolish action,' interjected Hans Bartek. 'The strontium-90 will be lethal for some time yet.'

'Also,' said Jim. 'You may not find anywhere safe to land.'

'You will certainly never get back up here,' added Dr Bartek. 'Not without boosters, if there are any left. I'm afraid it will be a one-way trip.'

For the first time, the man looked uncertain but not about to back down. 'Nevertheless, I will go. However, I will follow your suggestion and leave it for a while.'

Natasha Ralentov spoke again. 'You may also find it difficult to find volunteers to accompany you. At least up here they will last six months - a year, perhaps.'

'There will be food on the surface.'

'In cans, maybe, if you dig deep in the rubble, but water supplies could be polluted for decades. In fact, life as we knew it might never be possible again.'

The man thought about that one for a few moments and then departed once more, locking the door after him.

'What about the Wayfarers?' asked Hans when they were alone again. 'Will they be able to help?'

'Unlikely. They will be gone for some time, even supposing they ever get back at all. There is no guarantee, especially with men like Greg Watson around. Unaware of what has happened, he will endeavour to carry out the General's last orders.'

'But will he succeed?'

'I don't know.' Natasha pondered for a moment. 'It's odd, you know.'

Jim frowned. 'Odd?'

'Just a short time ago, the future of the Andromedan race depended upon we humans. Now, it seems, the entire future of the human race may well rest in the hands of a pair of Andromedans.'

AS planned, Beta Kruger came and went without incident as did Achird, Chaph, Tsih, Shedir and Marfac. Ten days later, Cassi and Lyn manoeuvred Wayfarer One around Segin and then Omicron Cassiopeiae. On the forty-eighth day out, almost nineteen hours ahead of schedule, they set course for the last signpost prior to leaving the Milky Way. Already, the galaxy had taken on a definite saucer shape behind them and, with every day that passed, the isolation became more apparent. Five days later, the brilliant globe of Kappa Cassiopeiae loomed ahead as the spaceship flew towards it at over forty billion kilometres per second. Beyond the massive sun, the sky looked an ominous black, virtually without a pinpoint of light.

Juanita shivered as she watched the forward viewer. 'That is looking bleak.'

Steve smiled. 'The place at the end of the universe.'

'Don't remind me. It's frightening to think there is nothing out there for two million light years.'

'Almost one hundred and thirty-nine billion Astronomical Units,' added Lyn.

Cassi closed her eyes and smiled. 'Just over 20,612,736,540,361,600,000 kilometres.'

Steve laughed. 'If you say so.'

Cassi shrugged. 'I don't. Iris does.'

'Ready for the turn?' asked Lyn seriously as the bulk of Kappa gradually filled the whole screen.

'Ready,' said Cassi, placing her fingers on the keys of the computer.

'Status of Proton Drive?' asked Steve.

'Anti-matter reactor at critical,' said Lyn calmly. 'Proton Drive standing by.'

Cassi watched the figures decreasing on her screen. 'Ten seconds.'

'NINE >' said Iris.

'EIGHT >'

'SEVEN >'

'Course computed,' said Cassi.

'SIX >'

'FIVE >'

'Prepare for surge.'

'FOUR >'

'THREE >'

'TWO >'

'ONE >'

'Activate Proton Drive.'

'Activated,' confirmed Lyn. 'Full thrust.'

Despite the speed at which they were already travelling, they nevertheless felt the boost as Wayfarer One flashed through the gravity field of Kappa and burst out into a night that was completely and utterly black. After two hours of maximum burn to break them free, Steve nodded to his wife who shut down the engines.

'ADVISE DRIVE STATUS,' she typed at the red terminal.

'PROTON DRIVE - STANDING BY >'

'MAIN DRIVE - STANDING BY >'

'AUXILIARY DRIVE - STANDING BY >'

'SHUT DOWN REACTOR,' she then typed and the silence became absolute.

Cassi checked and double-checked the bearing of Andromeda and compared it with the heading of Wayfarer while Iris compensated for the relative galactic drift.

Juanita stood up and stretched. 'If it is all right with you, Steve, I will go and check on the sleeping beauties.'

Steve paused in his last-minute instrument readings. 'Very well. The rest of us will be down in a few moments.'

Juanita left and the hatch closed after her with a pressure hiss. Commander Carted looked from one to the other of the Andromedans. 'Well? Are we safe?'

Lyn nodded. 'Drives safe. Reactor shut down and forward shields active.'

'Only the forward shields?'

She smiled. 'Nothing is going to creep up on us from behind, now, is it?'

Cassi took one last glance at Iris's blank screen before facing him. 'All life-support systems functioning correctly.'

He slapped his knees and smiled a little. 'Good. Then let's go to bed.'

They all stood up. Steve looked around the flight deck. Lyn took his arm. Cassi picked up her pocket calculator. Almost reluctantly, the three of them left Iris to do her duty and walked down the passageway. Steve checked the airlock while Cassi closed the door to the suit bay.

'Everything is fine,' greeted the astro-physician at the door of the lab. 'Time for beddy-byes.'

'I could do with it,' said Steve, stretching.

'Wake me in ten years,' said Lyn with a yawn as she climbed into her freezer chamber.

Juanita laughed and closed the lid. 'Don't worry, Iris will.' She pressed buttons and the internal light gradually faded. 'Your turn,' she said to Cassi.

The young woman nodded, kissed Juanita's cheek, unzipped her overalls a little and then lay down. As the lid closed, she held up her hand for a moment and pressed several keys on her calculator before relaxing. Gradually, sleep came as Juanita closed the lid on Steve Carter. With one last look around the still room, Dr Carrero programmed her own freezer and climbed inside. A minute later, the ship was silent. The store bays and passageways were empty, the flight deck clear and nothing was evident that gave any sign of life as the ship went deeper into the galactic void. Nothing, that is, except Iris, whose once-empty screen now boldly displayed four solitary digits which none of them could see: 'CAS-1 >'

ON its fortieth day out, Wayfarer Two passed Segin and the navigator set course for the next star in line, following Wayfarer One's trajectory. Greg Watson sighed. 'How long?'

'To Omicron?' He tapped keys and data filled the screen. 'Just over sixty hours at this speed.'

'Can't we go any faster?'

'I'm cutting it as fine as I dare. Some of these stars are huge. Swing in too close to one and we could be trapped in its orbit for ever, never able to break free. Also, the timing has to be very precise or we'll waste fuel.'

The Major laughed. 'Fuel is the least of our worries. How many more after this Omicron?'

'Before the void? Two. First, we make a detour to Alrai and then...'



'Detour? Did I hear you say detour?'

'Yes, Major.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. They did it.'

The Major leant back, stroking his unshaven chin. 'Did they now? How much of a detour is it?'

The navigator tapped keys again. 'It is just under five-hundred light years from Omicron to Alrai.' More key tapping. 'And almost nineteen-hundred from there to Kappa. The offset trajectory will be around eight degrees on the parallax so... I reckon on an extra distance of two hundred light years.'

'Why don't we take a short cut?'

'Because we will lose Arai's gravity assist to double our speed. Without that, it will take us much longer to reach the void. Too long, in fact, to catch Wayfarer One.'

'Damn!'

'I'm sorry, Major.'

The senior officer rubbed his hand over his face. 'It's all right. I guess I'm just tired. I wish this thing was over.'

'We'll make it, sir. We have to, for mankind's sake.'

Greg smiled. 'So we shall.' He stretched. 'I think I'll turn in. Who's officer of the watch?'

'Bates, sir.'

'Is that lad up to this kind of thing?'

'What do you mean?'

'He seems a little reluctant, that's all. We cannot afford potential mutineers on this trip. If he's not with us all the way, he's no good to us.'

'Don't worry, Major. I'll make sure he toes the line.'

'You do that. Have a straight word with him when you clock him on.'

'Yes, sir. Goodnight, sir.'

NOTHING moved on Wayfarer One as the space cruiser went deeper and deeper into the galactic void. The lights were dimmed, the instruments and drives on stand-by as pure momentum thrust the ship and its occupants towards their eventual destination. On the upper deck, even the growth of fresh food supply was held in abeyance as the faint lights and heat kept alive the plants ready for when they would be needed for sustenance. On the flight deck, only Iris kept a vigilant watch on the progress towards the Andromeda Spiral and made the occasional tiny adjustments to course and internal life-support facilities. Below, the seven crew members slept soundly, totally unaware of the computer's activity and equally oblivious to the devastating events which were taking place thousands of light years behind them.

JIM, Hans and Natasha watched as the two shuttle craft dropped away from Orion, bound for Earth. Released from their confinement after ten days, they had been left with just six guards while the rest had opted for Earthfall, whatever risks it involved.

'Poor sods,' murmured Jim softly. 'They haven't a hope in hell of finding anything left alive.'

'It was their choice,' said Natasha. 'We did warn them.'

'It's only natural for them to go, I suppose. There's nothing for them up here any longer.'

'What about us?'

'The three of us have had a good innings. It's the younger ones I am concerned for now. My only sadness is that I shall not witness the return of my daughters.'

'Couldn't we over-power our guards? There are, after all, more of us than there are of them.'

Jim shrugged. 'What would be the point? I'm not going anywhere, especially not down there.'

Hans glanced out of the window at Earth and shivered. 'Me neither.'

Natasha folded her arms, staring down at the dust-covered planet which had once shone blue and inviting. 'My God, what a waste.'

Jim smiled. 'And here's me thinking you were an atheist, Natasha.'

Her eyes lifted as if to the heavens. 'It is at times like this when one wonders if....'

'There is a God?'

She smiled. 'Precisely. If there was...?'

Jim stood behind her and took her upper arms in his hands. 'God didn't do that, Natasha. It was the selfishness of mankind. It was man who ignored the principles of human decency and caused wars, famines and the squalor which has existed in places for eternity. It wasn't God who chopped down the rain forests, ignoring what nature cried out. That...'

He nodded towards the bleak planet below them. '...is man's doing,

not God's.'

'I know you're right Jim. I suppose it's human nature to try and place the blame on someone else.'

'It's what we've always done. God has often been a convenient scapegoat.'

'I wonder what He thinks of all this, if He exists, that is.'

'I should imagine that He's very disappointed in us. We have betrayed a very important trust.'

She turned towards him. 'Oh, Jim. Is this really the end? After everything man's been through? To have it finish with so much...'

'Futility?'

'Yes, futility. What have we gained out of it?'

'Nothing, as ever. And now it's too late to learn from our error.'

'Must we stay here? Until the end?'

'Either that or die pretty quickly down there.'

'What if we took a shuttle down? How long would we last?'

Jim shrugged. 'Hours, days, perhaps. I would not last long after having been in a reduced pressure environment for many years. It could be that neither of us will survive the G-forces of re-entry.'

'And there's nowhere else?'

Jim laughed. 'There's always Luna Base.'

Natasha frowned. 'Luna Base? What's left there?'

'Not a lot. A handful of technicians manning the telescopes. The mines all closed down long ago when they discovered the ore was of inferior quality.'

'Have we contacted them? Do they know what has happened?'

'I'm not sure. The main plant is on the far side, facing away from the planet. We can only contact them at certain times from here when we are in a relatively good position for transmission.'

'Would we be any better off on the Moon?'

'Not much. They have always relied totally on Earth shuttles for supplies.'

'What if we pooled our resources?'

'It's a European Base. All the Russian ones have been left on automatic.'

'I don't think nationality has much significance right now. Why don't we try and get through to them?'

Jim nodded and then pressed a button on the console. 'Engineering? I need to know when the next transmission window is to Luna Base.'

'Very good, Admiral,' said the voice. 'Hold on.'

None of them spoke until, a few moments later - 'Admiral? The next window for the leading side transmitter is the day after tomorrow at oh-eight-hundred hours. It remains open for almost thirty-six hours. Then we go into shadow for twelve hours and we pick up the trailing side transmitter for another thirty-six hours.'

'And after that?'

'Because of our relationship to the Ionosphere, we lose her for twenty-five days.'

'There's no way of contact during that period?'

'No, sir. Indirect transmissions are...were relayed via the Mount Aigual network.'

'I see. Thank you for the information.'

'Glad to help, Admiral.'

Natasha put her hand on Jim's arm as he released the communicator. 'What have you got in mind, Jim?'

'I'm not sure yet,' he replied thoughtfully. 'But anything is worth considering.'

## ESCAPE FROM THE GALAXY

Fifty days after leaving Orion, Wayfarer Two passed between the innermost planets of Kappa Cassiopeiae

with Proton Drive at full thrust and the crew made their last course alteration possible for nine years. Nothing was said as the speed escalated to maximum and then the drives shut down to enable momentum to do its work. Like Wayfarer One ahead of them, they were committed to the void.

JIM Duncan called the entire crew together, including their guards, and informed them of the situation. Their minds, out of contact with the others and feeling isolated, offered no resistance as he openly outlined his plan to them all. An hour later, the six guards, realising the utter futility of their position, surrendered their weapons and offered their services in behalf of the team.

A bright crescent illuminated the edge of the moon as it rose above the hazy smudge of the stratosphere. Tension grew as, bit-by-bit, it climbed into the dark sky behind them. At eight o'clock in the morning, the communications engineer selected the correct frequency and started his automatic call sign. The response was immediate.

'Luna Base to Orion, hearing you loud and clear. What the hell is going on?'

The engineer looked up and Jim who took the microphone from him. 'Luna Base, this is Admiral Duncan. I need to speak with your boss at once.'

'Very good, Admiral.'

There was but a moment's pause before another voice came. 'Superintendent Jones here, sir. What can you tell us? We seem to have lost contact with good old terra firma.'

Jim looked up at his colleagues, wondering how his news would be received by those on the moon. 'Superintendent. I'm afraid I have bad news, very bad news.'

'Not Cardiff lost again? If I thought...'

'Earth is dead!'

There was a moment's silence and then. 'So that's it. What happened?'

Jim told him.

'What is there to be done?'

'Not a lot. When we've finished, I'll get the technician to flash over our inventory of supplies, etc. Perhaps you would do the same with yours. Then, we have twelve hours to work out a preliminary plan of some sort. Does that sound reasonable?'

'I'll get onto it right away. What are our chances, Admiral?'

'Without food? Very slim. I'm afraid there is nowhere capable of producing food better than Earth was.' He smiled at the memory of the fruits on Mythos. 'At least, nowhere nearby.'

THE interchange was made. Jim Duncan peered down at the computed totals and then sighed. 'It doesn't look good.'

'How long?' asked Natasha.

Jim shrugged. 'Three, four months if we are very careful. Neither Orion nor Luna Base are designed to hold out for extended periods, not with a daily shuttle service available.'

'You're right,' she pondered. 'It doesn't look good at all. Where would we better off, do you think?'

'Well, it's a toss-up between here and Luna. The moon has a better food supply but restricted communications and access should anything develop.'

'What kind of thing?' asked Hans Bartek.

Jim shrugged. 'A miracle, I suppose. We've little else to hope for.'

'What advantages are there to remaining on Orion?'

'We have two shuttles, a transmitter which can reach the edge of the Solar System and unlimited air and water, as long as you don't mind drinking recycled water. As we agreed earlier, food is going to be our main problem.'

'What happened to the spare cryonic chambers? Could they be made serviceable?'

Hans pondered for a moment. 'Here? Or on Luna?'

'Either.'

'There's no reason why not, as long as power can be maintained.'

'We will also need power to keep the Andromeda Seed alive.'

'Why?'

'Why not? We can maintain solar power either here or on Luna. They can live as long as we do.'

'What about,' Natasha inclined her head, 'down there?'

'On Earth? I think I'd rather take my chances in a freezer than die slowly of radiation sickness.'

'Are there enough chambers for the men on Luna?'

'I'm afraid not. In fact, there aren't enough even for all the personnel on Orion. We just have the ten spare

ones which had been earmarked for Wayfarer Two, plus a couple of spares.'

'Not a good choice is it?'

'Just don't ask me to make the decision as to who does what.'

'Do we tell the men on Luna about them?'

'We have to. It's their moral right to know.'

'How would they get here?'

'They couldn't. We would have to go and fetch them.'

'In one of our shuttles?'

'Exactly.'

'Fuel?'

'No problem,' said Hans. 'We can pop about in space almost indefinitely. The only thing we couldn't do unassisted is get back up if we went down to the surface. We'd need solid fuel boosters to achieve escape velocity.'

'No Proton Drive?'

He shook his head. 'Not in the shuttles. The risk of contamination was too great, even with the new anti-matter fusion system. The Titan Series Shuttle was built with extra power but we only finished three. One crashed on Luna and the others are anchored one each to the Wayfarers.'

'Could we go anywhere else in our shuttles?'

'Like where?'

'Mars, for instance. The last I heard, the atmospheric regenerators were still working. What happened to all the experiments for growing vegetation?'

'I don't know. I'll check the computer for details. But remember - Mars gravity may only be thirty-eight percent of Earth's but it would still defeat an unassisted shuttle.' He pondered. 'Unless one could be modified, we'd be stranded there.'

'How long would it take to get there?'

'In a shuttle? Nine months or so.'

'And we only have food for half of that. I guess that rules out Mars.'

'Unless,' said Natasha. 'We could fit freezers into one of the shuttles.'

'Not enough room. They were only designed to operate between Earth, Orion and Luna Base.'

'Hans. Isn't there any way of modifying them?'

The scientist shook his head. 'Jim's right. We have hundreds of billions of ecus worth of equipment, but all specifically designed to keep us here.'

One of the other men stepped forward. 'What about Venus?'

Jim smiled at his ignorance. 'It's healthier down on Earth.'

'How long will the radiation take to clear?'

'That depends on a lot of things. How many warheads were detonated? Of what total size? What was the proportion of ground bursts to air bursts? There are too many imponderables.'

'Years?'

'Not necessarily. If every detonation was an air burst, the limited fallout would settle fairly quickly although existing food and water could be contaminated almost indefinitely. We've never done it before to measure the effects.'

'So it might be possible to return before the food runs out.'

Jim smiled. 'It might. But remember, we only get one shot at it. Also we don't know about the climate. It could have changed considerably.'

'Can't we measure it from here?'

'If the cloud clears, it may be possible. Right now, the sensors can't get an accurate reading on anything.'

'Do you think the others got down safely?'

'Well, we've had all the radio channels open since they left and haven't heard a dickey-bird. It's possible the cloud goes right down to the surface. If so, it may have been impossible to land - in one piece, at least.'

'Good grief. What a shambles.'

Jim turned to the engineer. 'Have you repaired the damaged airlock?'

The man nodded. 'Temporarily, at least. It should hold but I've sealed off that entire section just in case.'

'Good man. Any other problems?'

'No, Admiral. Everything else seems to be functioning in a satisfactory manner.'

Natasha grimaced. 'So at least we can starve to death peacefully.'

WAYFARER Two was virtually silent when not under power. Committed to the void, she was travelling at 275,000 times the speed of light in the direction of the Andromeda Galaxy. Major Watson looked enquiringly at his Navigation Officer. 'Well?'

'According to my calculations, with the seven-day head start she has, Wayfarer One is just over four

thousand light years ahead of us.'

'How long before we catch them?'

The man consulted the computer. 'Eight years, three-hundred and sixty days, nine hours, twenty-one minutes and thirty-four point two seven seconds.'

'Gives us time to get ready,' sneered Greg Watson as he leant back and cracked his fingers. 'You sure there's no way to speed up the process?'

'Going faster is not our main problem,' said the Shuttle Pilot who was not terribly happy about being there in the first place.

The Major turned to him and frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'If Officer Hanratty's calculations are correct, then we are gaining on them at a rate of fifty-eight light years each day. If we weren't, we could never catch them before they cross the void.'

'Go on.'

'Think of it, sir. Fifty-eight light years per day.' William Bates consulted his calculator. 'Over two point four light years an hour.' The implication had still not dawned on the Major so he continued: 'Three-hundred and seventy-eight TRILLION kilometres per minute.' As the penny finally dropped, he concluded his analysis. 'Sir, we shall overtake Wayfarer One at a rate of six trillion kilometres per second.'

'Good God! And we have no way of slowing down when we reach them?'

'Not any more. Not until we reach Andromeda.'

'Then how are we going to board her as we pass?'

The young man smiled. 'With great difficulty.'

Greg Watson leant towards him. 'You just get me there, Bates. Girman and I will find some way to get aboard. Once we have shut down their life-support systems, we can then work out how the hell we are going to get back to Earth.'

THE days turned into weeks as arrangements were made in Earth vicinity. Despite all the obvious dangers, most of the personnel voiced their preference to take a change and try to reach Earth's surface. Luna base was shut down completely as the last man left and all remaining food and supplies were ferried to Orion. It took the total patience of Jim Duncan and his colleagues to prevent a riot as staff fought for places in the two remaining shuttles. He decided to stay put on the space station as did Natasha and Hans. A handful of others, mostly those without families below, also opted to remain on Orion and fit out the cryonic chambers for when the food ran out. The departure of the shuttles was delayed as long as frayed tempers would permit and, on the fifty-eighth day after it all began, they cast off and gently dropped away towards the surface. Seven men and four women were now marooned by choice thirty-five thousand kilometres above the terran equator.

LITTLE moved on the ground as the fires flickered lethargically in the diminishing oxygen. A black shroud hung over everything, blotting out all light from the sun, moon and stars. Of the few living persons left, most were in the final stages of severe radiation sickness as well as fighting for breath. One man, covered in sores, looked up at a light which slowly crossed the sky. He started to struggle to his feet, wheezing as he called to others, pointing at the strange object, hope alive for the first time since the poisonous dust had begun to fall from the sky.

He watched as the flying object seemed to hover for a moment before one of its wings touched the side of a ruined building and, as if in slow motion, spun to the ground, exploding on impact. The whole scene was lit up for a few seconds, illuminating a second craft which appeared almost a mile away. It too was unable to land safely and the ground shuddered for a second time. Darkness gradually returned and the man sighed and sat down again, returning with some lethargy to a bone he had found yesterday amongst the rubble as others around him had only the energy to groan in their continuous agony and utter hopelessness.

FIGURES moved slowly over the outer skin of Wayfarer Two. The occasional flash of a welder was seen as the gigantic shield at the rear of the ship began to take shape. Metal plates scavenged from the interior were passed through the cargo loading door and then built into an odd structure close to the man blast tubes.

'Well?' asked one of the suited figures watching the activity.

'This is going to take some time,' came the reply.

'We've got all the time in the world,' sneered Greg Watson. 'Just make sure you get it right.'

'There is no guarantee this will work,' the engineer said cautiously. 'There is going to be one hell of a bang when we fire all the drives. Get this wrong and shuttle could either be destroyed or simply fly off in any direction.'

The Major grabbed the other man's breathing tube. 'Look, we've got plenty of time and unlimited energy

resources. If you can't get a few simple calculations right, say so now and I'll get one of the others to play with Iris in your place.'

'I'll do my best,' said the other man nervously.

'You had better.'

JIM Duncan smiled as he looked down on the already drowsy form of Natasha Ralentov as she lay in her cryonic chamber alongside the other nine. Of all of them, the Russian had taken the most persuading to rest in suspended animation until the hope of help was realised; no matter how forlorn that hope might be. As for himself, Jim knew that his body, manufactured by the Andromedans to resemble his original one, could last virtually indefinitely - as long as it could be fed at reasonable intervals. At least with only one mouth to feed, Orion could stay operational for some years, barring disasters. The on-board computers took care of everything.

Straightening, his eye caught the insulated metal box in the corner, still plugged into the power supply. For a moment, he was tempted to repeat his action of twenty years ago and fertilise one or more of the Andromedan Seed eggs it contained, so as to produce mixed offspring like Cassi and Lyn. Then he remembered that shortage of food was his main problem already and it would hardly be fair to incubate to life a child he could never hope to feed.

He looked round the room for the last time to check that each cryonic chamber was functioning correctly. Each had a small control panel bearing a green indicator light beside the main switch. A twist of that switch and the lamp would turn red. If the hood was not at once released and the person inside revived, deterioration would begin. Without air supply, breathing would become laboured as lungs were the one part of the anatomy which needed to be kept in motion to ensure life was preserved. Within minutes, the body would be starved of oxygen and the brain would suffer irreversible damage. Without the occupant realising what was happening, life would terminate.

Jim wondered if a twist of his wrist would not be a kindness in itself. What hope did these people have? No more than those who had opted to return to a dead Earth, he reckoned. Nevertheless, he owed it to them all to keep them alive as long as was humanly possible. Perhaps, thousands of years from now, some alien life form would stumble across the space station and find its frozen cargo. Perhaps life on Earth could then begin again long after the radioactivity had dissipated. Perhaps those people would help mankind as he had tried to help the Andromedan race all those years ago. Perhaps was a very uncertain word. With a last look round, he turned off the light and quietly closed the door, almost laughing at his own caution. No-one would have heard if he had slammed the titanium bulkhead. Walking back to the control centre, he thought fleetingly of his daughters. They, too, would be fast asleep and just as vulnerable as the ten he had just left.

DAY by day, week by week, year by year, Wayfarer Two relentlessly gained on its twin. The structure at the rear was completed in under eighteen months and modified several times until nothing more could be achieved until the moment of ignition. It could not be tested - there would be but one opportunity to get it right. The means of boarding Wayfarer One was complete and the computer assured them that they could not fail.

With little to occupy themselves, the crew became restless and Greg Watson continually had them in training to keep fit, although he didn't expect any form of resistance when they entered their quarry. A turn of a few switches and they would be rid of the Andromedan menace forever. A year after that, he would rendezvous with Wayfarer Two, aim Wayfarer One towards the nearest black hole and then head for home. He smiled. The General would reward him handsomely.

ON the three thousand three hundred and nineteenth day out, they were ready. Greg Watson and his colleagues climbed into their space suits for the short journey to the shuttle at the rear of Wayfarer Two.

'Don't use the radio,' he cautioned. 'They are probably all sleeping but they may have programmed their computer to scan for stray signals. I don't want them warned that we are coming.'

He clipped on his helmet and nodded to his companions. 'Okay?'

One of the other men, a veteran space marine, read his lips, checked the others and nodded. The airlock opened and the men entered. The green light turned red and they were outside.

It took ten minutes for them to haul themselves, hand over hand, to the stern of the ship. The huge blast shield they had erected looked out of place but, they knew, offered no resistance in space where there was no atmosphere. Inside the shuttle, they pressurised up and switched the computer guidance system to automatic. Via a cable which would detach on take-off, Iris would control the actual launch timing which was

so crucial.

Greg took off his helmet. 'Ready?'

The shuttle pilot nodded. 'Separation in seventeen minutes and thirty seconds.'

The Major turned to his second in command. 'I don't think you're gonna need that thing, Smithers. They will be fast asleep.'

'Taking no changes, sir,' said the soldier, pumping a round into the chamber of his blaster. 'Marshal Hardy was never a fool.'

'Of course. He got the better of you once, didn't he?'

'It won't happen again, Major. I shoot first this time.' He raised an eyebrow. 'No prisoners?'

The Major nodded. 'No prisoners. No witnesses. We just go in there and kill them outright by turning off the supply to the cryonic chambers. No mess. No blood.' He grinned. 'No life.'

The other man sneered. 'We got a year to waste till we catch up with our ship afterwards. Couldn't we keep the girl to play around with in the meantime? It'll be awful lonely without... entertainment.' His men agreed so he leant close conspiratorially. 'We don't need to tell the General.'

Major Watson stared at him coldly. 'You always were a pervert, Smithers. But this time, I'm taking no chances. No fooling around with the girl however tempting that might be. Just kill them all.'

ALMOST an hour later, there was movement on Wayfarer One: a space-suited human form crept across the deck towards the cryonic chambers; eyes looked down at the girl with the golden hair who lay so peacefully; lips curled in a smile.

A hand reached out to the control panel; fingers hesitated on the main switch for no more than a moment before turning it firmly into the "off" position.

## VOID PIRACY

Jim Duncan ate the last of the food on Orion Base Station. The roll was stale and cheese hard but it was food. The last can of cold beer stood on the table in front of him as he pondered his position. The rest of the crew was sleeping peacefully below. There had been no word from Earth or elsewhere in a very long time. No reply to the automatic radio message sent out constantly in seven languages including morse.

For some reason he couldn't explain, he rinsed the dirty plate under the tap. There didn't seem much point on starting the dishwasher for a single item. He drained the last drop of beer and dropped the empty container into the crusher. It was time.

Checking everything just once more, he left the radio beacon running. It was solar powered and would transmit indefinitely. Turning off the overhead lights, he contemplated his empty chamber, the finality of his actions almost preventing the last step. Eventually, he took a deep breath and climbed inside, punching buttons on the panel as the lid closed over him. It was the end.

LYNIERA Carter opened her eyes. Something was wrong. She didn't know why but the lid of her chamber was open. There was no sound as she slowly sat up and looked round. Then, she heard it - a scratching sound along the main corridor. Carefully, she peeled the monitor sensors from her temples and chest and slipped her long legs to the cold floor. In her leotard, she tiptoed to the open door and peered round the frame. Someone in a space suit was working on the airlock decompression panel.

She frowned. 'What are you doing?'

The other figure couldn't hear because of the suit. Lyn crept up and stood beside the figure.

It jumped back. Hands reached up and removed the helmet. 'Lyn, you startled me.'

'What on earth are you up to?'

'Just checking everything. Iris woke me an hour ago.'

'Iris woke you? But why?'

'I programmed her to wake me first.'

Lyn gave a wry grin. 'Steve won't like that. Are we there yet?'

'No. We're still almost a year away from reaching Andromeda.'

'But why would Iris wake you so early?'

'The clock was wrong.'

Lyn's mouth dropped open. 'The clock was wrong? How could that happen?'

Cassi shrugged. 'I have no idea. I've put it right now.'

'Has Iris recorded any other strange phenomena?'

Cassi nodded again. 'About an hour ago, something went past us - very fast.'

'Another ship?'

'I don't know. Iris just recorded an energy emission.'

'Who on earth could there be out here? And why?'

'I don't know. That's why I'm checking the airlock, just as a precaution.'

The light above the airlock hatch suddenly turned red.

Lyn looked at her sister. 'Why are you decompressing the airlock?'

Cassi frowned. 'I'm not. Someone else is.'

'Someone outside?'

'It has to be. Look, the outer door is opening. Someone is entering.'

'Human?'

Cassi indicated the small round window. 'Take a look.'

Lyn stood on tiptoe and peered inside. She put her hand to her face and giggled. 'They look human enough.'

Do we let them in?'

Cassi stared at her sister in disbelief. 'Not on your life. At least not until I find out where they came from and what they are up to.'

'One of them has a blaster,' Lyn observed.

'Army issue. Just like the one Tara used on Andy.' A memory rushed through her brain: Luna base; three men; three girls; one blaster; death.

'From Wayfarer Two?' asked Lyn with raised eyebrow.

'Probably. The General must have sent men after us.'

'What do we do?'

'I woke you first, just to make sure I wasn't imagining things. Wake Mike and Steve, would you? Just turn the main switch to "off". As long as you open the lids, they should wake naturally.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Wait here and watch them. They can't get in as long as I continue to override the switching mechanism.'

'Won't they get away?'

'They are welcome to try. On the other hand, why should they? They went to a lot of trouble to get here. They must want something we've got. Probably our lives.'

Lyn looked worried. 'I'll be back.'

STEVE Carter stumbled into the corridor, dragged by his wife. Rubbing his eyes, he protested at her urgency until he saw Cassi putting her helmet back on. 'What are you doing?'

'Following them. They've gone back outside.'

'Perhaps that's what they want you to do. There were two of them, you say?'

'We only saw two, didn't we, Lyn?'

'Only two in this airlock.'

Mike joined them. 'What about the loading bay?'

The two men looked briefly at each other. Steve pointed at Cassi. 'Stay here. Do not go outside, do you understand?'

Cassi shrugged. 'You're the boss.'

Mike caught her eye and winked. 'Back in a mo.'

The two men went aft. Cassi looked at her sister. 'Go and check Iris.'

'What are you going to do?' Lyn asked warily.

'I'll stay here and make sure they don't override the switchgear.'

The younger girl backed towards the flight deck. 'Remember what Steve said. Don't go outside. If you do, he'll be hopping mad.'

THROUGH the vision monitor, Lyn could just make out the dark shape moored towards the stern of the ship.

'Identify,' she said to Iris.

'WAYFARER TWO TRANSFER SHUTTLE >' replied the computer screen.

'Activate exterior floodlighting,' she said.

'CONFIRMED >'

The outside area was bathed in brilliant light but Lyn could see no external movement of any kind. The pirates had either returned to the shuttle or were trying to get in somewhere else. A pang of apprehension went through her as she thought of Mike and Steve down in the loading bay. It should have been sealed for flight but she hadn't remembered anyone checking it before they left. There hadn't seemed a need to, and they had left in rather a hurry.



She pressed a button. 'Cassi.'

There was no answer.

'Come on sis, where are you?' She tried again. 'Cassi. Come in, please.'

No reply.

There was a hiss as the door opened behind her and in walked Mike and Steve - followed by Greg Watson.

The man with him pointed his blaster at Lyn and grinned. 'This one, I like.'

'That's the girl the General wants dead,' confirmed his superior officer.

Lyn was about to say that he had got it wrong when she suddenly remembered that these men didn't know about her existence. They had assumed that she was Cassi.

Lust was all over Smithers' face as he approached her. 'This one I just got to have to myself for a while before we finish her.'

'Be careful,' snapped the Major. 'She's dangerous.'

Lyn wasn't sure what Cassi had done to make him so wary but she felt happier when the evil-looking one stopped several feet from her and didn't come closer. She wondered where her sister was and why they hadn't passed her in the corridor. The airlock was on the way up from the loading bay.

A few moments later, two more men came in. One of them spoke. 'The rest are still asleep. Only the four empty chambers.'

Greg frowned. 'Four?' His eyes counted three. 'Who else is awake?'

'Spare chamber,' said Steve quickly, also beginning to wonder where his sister-in-law had gone. 'Admiral Duncan was scheduled to come with us but he stayed behind at the last minute.'

The Major wasn't so sure. He spoke to the two men. 'Check every inch of this ship. If you see anyone, shoot them on sight.'

The marine took out his walkie-talkie. 'Girman. Check the ship out. You work your way forward and we'll come towards you. If you see anyone, kill him.'

Lyn's heart beat double time as the two men left. They were bound to catch Cassi somewhere between them. There were not that many places to hide. She turned to the screen and a movement caught her eye. Carefully, she turned round, her back blocking the screen. Smithers looked at her oddly. He reached forward and jerked her away so that he could see. But there was nothing.

'What was it?' he growled.

When she didn't answer, he grabbed the front of her leotard and almost ripped it off as he jerked her towards him, ramming the short barrel of his blaster hard into her belly. Steve began to rush forward but Greg's automatic stopped him short.

Lyn was bent double in her agony, dry-retching with the pain as Smithers began to twist the material of her leotard in his fist until she was almost choking. 'Tell me, bitch.'

'Better tell him,' said the Major. 'You have probably noticed that Smithers has this thing about hurting women.'

Before she could reply with a suitably caustic remark, the whole ship shuddered. The man let go of Lyn as if she was suddenly red hot and looked around him. 'What the hell was that?'

Greg Watson was staring at the vision monitor. 'Our shuttle. It has gone.'

THE shuttle pilot didn't know what hit him. When the airlock opened, he had assumed it was one of the men returning. But, without warning, a hand had reached round, torn off his belt and jerked him from his seat. In weightlessness, his arms had flailed in defence but his assailant had been far stronger. Before he was able to gather his wits, the suit locker door had slammed on him and he heard the key turn in the lock. Cassi sat at the controls and pushed up switches. She wasn't sure what she was going to do but she did know that the best way to ensure the others stayed alive was to keep the enemy confused. While they weren't sure what was going on, perhaps they would retain her friends as potential hostages. She applied full power to the vertical lift motors and literally shot away from Wayfarer Two.

'I don't know who you are,' said the radio after a minute or so. 'But if you don't get back here pronto. I'll let Smithers loose on the girl.'

Cassi reached out to the radio switch but stopped before touching it. If she replied, they would know she could hear them and would do as they threatened. Lyn might be safer if they weren't sure whether or not she could hear their threats.

Where could she go? Once committed to a course in deep space, little could be done to alter direction. She remember some of the cult sci-fi movies she had seen on Earth and how the film-makers had given viewers the impression that ships could manoeuvre and accelerate without any trouble. In truth, it was not like that at all. Space was huge and very, very empty.

Before losing momentum altogether, Cassi let the shuttle roll right over and fired the lift motors again. Gradually, she slowed and rolled lethargically on a parabolic course back towards Wayfarer One. Quickly, she clipped her helmet back on and dived for the airlock. She slithered through into space just as the shuttle

drifted past the stern blast tubes. With no thought of her own safety, she leapt into empty space.

SMITHERS had his hand around Lyn's throat, his thumb on her windpipe. The girl was remarkably relaxed in the circumstances. She was dressed in nothing but a skimpy leotard with a perverted sex-maniac next to her. If she had felt so inclined, she could easily have broken his arm with one upward sweep of her own. However, the other men were now back from their search and Steve and Mike might have been hurt in any resulting fight.

'What do we do now?' asked the one called Girman.

Smithers hooked his finger into the top of Lyn's leotard. 'We could start by abusing this one until someone talks.'

Greg Watson sighed. 'Smithers, you've got a one-track mind. Go get us some food.'

'What about her?' he said, indicating Lyn.

'She's not going anywhere.' He took the blaster from him and gave it to Girman. 'If she so much as blinks, blow out her guts.'

Girman grinned. This was language he understood. He grabbed the front of her leotard, flicked open a sharp bladed knife and punched a hole in the material. Lyn winced as she felt the point of the blade just touch her skin beneath. He then pushed the end of the blaster through the hole and twisted it so that it knotted on the synthetic material, the barrel now resting against her bare midriff, incapable of being removed. He held up a pointed projectile about three centimetres long by half as wide. 'Ever seen one of these used, kid?'

Lyn hadn't, but had heard about the mess one made of someone's face.

'Designed simply to penetrate a space suit,' he said quietly. 'Low velocity, tiny entry hole.' He grinned. 'Explodes inside.' He leant closer. 'Just one could spread your pretty little belly all over this room.'

The other men laughed. Lyn swallowed. Smithers had been all talk. This man was for real. She made sure she didn't blink.

SMITHERS opened the fridge door and looked inside. This was certainly a well-stocked galley. He selected a large piece of foil-wrapped meat, from which he took a bite before dropping it onto a tray. He added a loaf of bread, some cheese, butter and a bottle of sauce before turning for the door. He stopped when he heard the sound. Frowning, he put down the tray and poked his head into the corridor. He had a fleeting glimpse of a pale blue uniform and golden hair before something very hard hit him full in the face.

'WHERE the hell is Smithers?' Girman said eventually. 'I thought you sent him for food.'

The Major looked at his watch. It had been twenty minutes. He nodded to two of his men. 'Go find him and stop him stuffing himself.'

Mike and Steve watched the men go. If they had been alone with the remaining two, they would have made an attempt to overpower them. However, not only did Greg Watson have his automatic pistol pointed at them, the ever-alert Girman had a weapon which could instantly reduce Lyn to an unrecognisable bloody pulp.

AN hour later, none of the men had returned. Greg Watson shifted nervously on his chair while Girman sat impassive. He was not going to be shaken by anything.

Greg stood up and pressed the tannoy button. 'Smithers, speak to me.'

There was no answer. A look at the vision monitor confirmed that the shuttle was still missing. He switched on all the closed-circuit monitors but everything was silent and still. No movement anywhere. A plate of food on the galley table caught his eye.

He fought to control his voice as he tried again at the tannoy. 'Come in, Smithers, Rolph or Henderson. Reply at once.'

Silence.

'Who's out there?' he asked Steve. 'Who is doing this?'

Steve shrugged. 'Beats me.'

He tried the tannoy again. 'Whoever it is out there, answer me now or I'll have Girman blow a hole in the girl big enough to fly a shuttle through.'

Silence. Unnerving.

'You want for me to go look?' asked Girman quietly.

'No.' Greg checked the action on his gun. 'I'll go. If I'm not back in ten minutes, blow them all away.' He nodded at Lyn. 'Her first.'

Girman smiled slightly and nodded before his cold grey eyes looked straight into Lyn's. 'Ten minutes. On the dot. It will be my pleasure.'

The door closed behind Greg with a slight pressure hiss. The corridor was empty. Cautiously, he made his way down to the wash rooms. Empty. The accommodation units came next. No-one there. At the laboratory, he eased open the door. Three empty cryo units, four still running. He checked the names on the active units - Hardy M, Carrero J, Walker R, Carter L. He was taking no chances. One by one, he turned the units off. In minutes, they would all be dead.

As the lights turned red, the panels beeped urgently, and signs said "Attention, unit failure," he smiled to himself. Four less to worry about. Now, all he had to do was find out why the shuttle pilot had decided to do a bunk and, more urgently, where three of his men had disappeared to.

Going back into the corridor, he made his way down to the galley. The plate of food was still on the side, untouched but for the obvious teeth marks of one big bite. He was about to leave when he saw the tiny spots on the door. They were small and at head height. He touched them - dry - but quite obviously blood. It was then that he heard the movement. Crouching, gun at the ready, he waited for the sound to come again. It had come from the direction of the cold store. Carefully and quietly, hands sweating with concentration, he sidestepped to the room, unclamped the door and gently eased it open. Food hung from racks in sealed translucent containers, clipped together to prevent drifting around when weightless. Nothing moved as he looked around warily, his ears almost hurting with the stark silence.

He whirled round as a sound came, his heart beat racing, until he realised it was the compressor which had automatically cut in. He used a loud and extremely vulgar expletive which got rid of some of the tension before turning for the door. As he did, one of the bundles moved towards him. Instinctively, he turned and opened fire, pumping round after round into the offending package which soon stopped moving and began to drip blood onto the hitherto spotless tiled floor.

His radio erupted. 'What's going on down there?'

Greg straightened. 'I've just shot the bastard.'

'Who is it?'

He took a knife off the rack and began to cut open the package. He stopped and slowly placed the walkie-talkie to his mouth. 'It's Smithers.'

'What's he doing?'

The Major looked into the sightless eyes. 'Nothing now.'

For a long time he stood looking at the racks and how they were suspended. There was full gravity in this part of the ship. Smithers weighed at least fourteen stone. Whoever had knocked him out and then lifted his unconscious form up there had to be as strong as an ox.

He checked the other bundles in case Henderson or Rolph had succumbed to the same giant but they were not there.

'I'm coming back up,' he said into the radio.

The corridor was empty as he strode towards the flight deck, his mind in a whirl as to what to do next. It was as he approached the titanium bulkhead that he heard the sound. What was it?

Carefully, he tried to discern the direction of the sound which he gradually realised was shouting, until he came to the airlock. He looked inside and gaped - Rolph and Henderson were inside in their space suits. He reached up to open the airlock when he realised it was not that easy. The outer door was open. It would be impossible to open the inner door. The men could go outside but they couldn't come in.

'Shut the outer door,' he said into the intercom.

'We can't,' came the reply. 'It's jammed open.'

'Then go round by the loading bay.'

'We can't, the inner door is open.'

Another expletive - shorter and stronger. He gave the men instructions and stormed off towards the loading bay, shouting into the walkie-talkie; 'Girman, give me an extra five minutes, I've found Rolph and Henderson. I'm on my way down to the loading bay to open it for them.'

Hairs rose on the back of his neck. There was no reply.

GIRMAN looked at his watch. Nine minutes had passed since the Major had left.

He grinned at the girl. 'I'll do it, you know.'

Lyn swallowed. 'I know you will. Please make it quick.'

Girman laughed. 'I once watched someone dying for over an hour from a belly wound.'

Lyn closed her eyes and shuddered inside.

There was a hiss as the flight deck door opened.

Girman sighed his disappointment. 'I was beginning to hope you weren't coming back in time.'

There was no reply. The door stood open but no-one entered.

The marine frowned. 'Who's there?'

No answer. From where he was near Iris, he couldn't see out into the corridor and neither could Steve or Mike on the other side of the room.

Girman jabbed Lyn viciously in the stomach. 'Get up.'

Fighting for breath, the young woman got to her feet, unable to straighten properly, and backed towards the door. Girman was taking no chances. Like the Major had said, she would always be the first to go. The long corridor was empty. He tried pushing buttons to close the door but it stayed stubbornly ajar.

'Whoever you are, get the hell in here before I pump one into the girl.'

Silence.

He looked at his watch. Ten minutes was almost up. However, the barrel of his blaster was deliberately knotted into the material of her leotard. When the first explosive round blew her belly out, it might tear free. But if not, the two men would get him. He had to cover all his options so, carefully, he unwound the barrel and, checking the corridor once more, pulled it free so that he could use the blaster on them all if need be.

The radio spoke. 'Girman, give me an extra five minutes, I've found Rolph and Henderson. I'm on my way down to the loading bay to open it for them.'

A broad grin started to creep across the marine's face.

'Good morning,' said another voice quietly.

Girman whirled round and his mouth fell open. Ten feet away down the corridor stood a girl with golden hair, the double of the one in the leotard except for the uniform.

Lyn dropped to her haunches and did a back flip, kicking out with both her feet, catching Girman behind the knees. Falling, he turned and fired but she was a moving target rolling across the floor and the round slammed harmlessly into the rubbish container, spewing dust and shredded paper out in a cloud. This distraction was all Mike needed to hurl the small CO2 fire extinguisher beside him which bounced off Girman's head and knocked him cold.

CASSI hugged her sister briefly before sitting in front of the computer.

'Emergency override Charlie Alpha Sierra Uno,' she said clearly.

'OVERRIDE ACCEPTED >' wrote Iris. 'PROCEED WITH INSTRUCTIONS >'

'Seal all internal exits from loading bay.'

'CONFIRMED > ALL EXITS SEALED >'

'Reduce atmospheric pressure in loading bay by two grammes per square centimetre per second.'

'CONFIRMED > ZERO ATMOSPHERE IN EIGHT MINUTES AND THIRTY SECONDS >'

Steve stood behind her. 'What are you doing?'

'She's killing them,' said Mike.

'Cassi, shouldn't we talk about this?'

She turned towards her commanding officer. 'I left their space suits in the loading bay. They have plenty of time to get into them before the situation becomes critical.'

Mike grinned. 'But not sufficient time to get up to any mischief.'

Cassi turned towards her husband. 'Precisely.'

'ZERO ATMOSPHERE IN EIGHT MINUTES >'

Mike nodded towards the man on the floor. 'What about him?'

'Yes,' said Steve. 'He's a criminal of the lowest kind. He was about to kill Lyn.'

'Not only that,' replied the girl in question, fingering her bare stomach. 'He made a hole in a perfectly good leotard.'

'ZERO ATMOSPHERE IN SEVEN MINUTES >'

'Do you think they are putting on their suits?'

Cassi shrugged in disinterest. 'Take a look on the monitor.'

They did and saw the men almost ready.

'Iris,' said Cassi. 'Open outer door in one minute.'

'Cassi,' said Steve. 'There is still ten pounds per square inch pressure in there. Open the door now and you'll blow them straight out into space.'

She grinned. 'That's the whole idea.'

'ZERO ATMOSPHERE IN SIX MINUTES >'

'But where is their shuttle?'

'Tethered about two hundred metres behind us. They'll make it back there all right.'

'But how will they survive on the shuttle? They won't have enough supplies for the rest of the journey to Andromeda.'

'Oh, I expect they will if they are careful. Greg Watson is too canny not to have covered all his options.'

'Which brings us back to Girman.'

'I suggest we suit him up and pop him in the airlock. The others could always pick him up.'

They were disturbed by the strident decompression alarm from the loading bay and the men only just had chance to clip on their safety lines before the outer door opened and they were sucked out into space. The door closed firmly after them.

'ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE IN LOADING BAY NOW ZERO >'

'Very good, Iris. Repressurise to normal but leave inner door open to prevent re-entry.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'Cancel emergency override Charlie Alpha Sierra Uno. Return operational status to normal.'

'CONFIRMED >'

They bundled Girman into the airlock with space suit and sealed the inner door once more. When he came round, he could find his own way to the shuttle.

'Are the others all right?' Lyn got round to asking when they were back on the flight deck.

Cassi touched her arm gently. 'They're fine. I hid out in your cryo unit while they were looking for me, pretending to be in hibernation. Macho Man turned off all the life support systems but I simply switched them on again when he went looking elsewhere.'

'So, to all intents and purposes, he is a murderer. What about that pervert, Smithers?'

'I think he's dead.'

'You killed him?'

'Not me. I just laid him out with a frying pan. But I heard gunfire later. I suspect the Major shot him in mistake for me.'

'Their shuttle is working okay?'

'It's perfect. They'll find the pilot locked in the suit bay if he hasn't already broken down the door.'

'Will they get away?'

'Where can they go? They are better off staying put until we get close to Andromeda. Then, I suppose, they can transfer back to Wayfarer Two.'

'And we start all over again, I suppose. I can't see them giving up this easily.'

'What if they try to use our shuttle?' asked Mike.

Cassi shook her head. 'I took out the drive relay as a precaution. It's with my suit down by the main drive access hatch.'

'They won't try to get in that way?'

'No. I sealed the hatch and left the inner door open.'

'Then we are safe?'

'Safe isn't the word I would have used but it will do for now.'

'Could they try to ram us or something?' asked Mike.

Cassi smiled at her husband. 'In two hundred metres within a total vacuum they couldn't build up enough momentum to scratch the paint.' She pondered for a moment. 'We'll have to re-think that one, though, when we get close to Andromeda.'

'So what do we do?' asked Lyn, looking at her husband.

'Why ask me?' he said seriously. 'No-one takes any notice of my orders anyhow.'

Cassi threw her arms round Steve's neck. 'I'm a naughty girl, aren't I?'

He blushed at her nearness. 'Perhaps I could forgive you just this once.'

'She did save our lives,' reminded Lyn. Mike was laughing.

'Well, okay, you're forgiven.'

She kissed him briefly on the lips. 'Thanks, captain. Permission to take my husband to bed?'

'I think you'd better before he and I get accused of wife-swapping.'

'What's that?' she asked, genuinely puzzled.

He patted her bottom and grinned. 'Ask Mike later. I'll stick to Lyn for the time being.'

Cassi let go of him and took Mike's hand, leading him towards the sleeping quarters. The last thing they heard was Lyn's wary voice. 'Just what did you mean, "for the time being?"'

## ANDROMEDA

As a precaution, Steve insisted on waking Dr Carrero a few days later so that she could examine Lyn but Juanita pronounced her completely fit for duty as even the bruises had almost paled. As a precaution, she had them all pass through the scanner in the med lab and settled down to process the data while the others returned to the flight deck. In the forward viewer, independent stellar systems could be distinguished with the naked eye and every day the sky seemed different as they approached at high speed. On the tenth day, they looked on the screens and the shuttle had gone. They scanned the whole area but no trace was found of them.

'How could they just disappear like that?' asked Mike.

'Not difficult. They would get some leverage from us at first. However, they won't be able to maintain steerage now. Newton's law of motion will keep them heading in whichever direction they left in.'

'So they are lost and gone forever?'

'Not necessarily. We entered Andromeda's gravity field some days ago. Soon, they will be able to utilise that gravity pull and balance one star against another.'

'And they can keep up this speed?'

'Alone, they would never have got this fast because the shuttles are not fitted with Proton Drive. However, now they have piggy-backed up to speed, they will not slow until some star or other pulls them into an orbit. Then, all they have to do is send out a homing signal and wait for Wayfarer Two to swing by and pick them up.'

Lyn peered into the viewer. 'Andromeda is very big.'

Cassi nodded. 'Almost as big as the Milky Way. The two galaxies are like twins, really.'

'Will it take as long to get into this galaxy as it took for us to get out of our own?'

'No, only a fraction of the time. Coming out, we were building up speed gradually. Now, our only problem will be slowing down.'

'Our only problem?' asked Steve. 'How do you expect to find Mythos?'

'I don't. Iris is the only one of us who has been here before. She will find it.'

'It's like looking for a needle in a haystack,' said Lyn.

'Will Wayfarer Two also know where to look?' asked Mike.

'Their Iris will. I don't know what arrangements they have made to meet up but I doubt if the remaining crew on board will do anything until Major Watson arrives.'

'So we will probably all get there together.'

'Perhaps we should have bumped them off while we had the chance,' pondered Steve.

Lyn turned to face him. 'That would make us as bad as them.'

'They did try to kill us. They would have succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for Cassi.'

'This is getting us nowhere,' said the hero of the hour. 'Why don't we just get on with what we came here to do and forget about them. With a bit of luck, we will never see any of them again.'

Mike kissed the end of her nose. 'That's what we earthlings would call Wishful Thinking. We also have another common element called Murphy's Law.'

'Murphy's Law?'

He nodded. 'If something can go wrong, it will.'

THERE was little to be done but observe as they bore down on the alien galaxy, yet unable to distinguish an acceptable point of entry.

'Do we go back to sleep or stay awake now we're up?' asked Lyn.

Steve looked at Cassi. 'How long have we got?'

Cassi punched keys on Iris. 'Just over two hundred and fifty days before we have to start gravity braking. Another month or so before we reach Mythos. Iris will be able to give us a better ETA as soon as she can get a more accurate bearing and calculate the deceleration factors.'

'So we could bed down again.'

'Yes,' said Juanita, her white coat tails flapping behind her as she seemed to sail onto the flight deck. 'But only some of us.'

Steve frowned. 'What's wrong?'

The biophysicist grinned. 'There is being nothing wrong with you, that is for sure.'

'Then what is the problem?'

She grinned, her dark eyes twinkling. 'Soon, we are going to hear the pitter-patter of humano-andromedae feet.'

'Lyn is pregnant?'

Juanita nodded. 'And Cassi. It seems that a little excitement is being good for the reproductive system.'

Cassi slipped her legs to the deck. 'How can you be so sure, so soon? We've only been awake for a few days.'

Juanita put her arm around Cassi's shoulder. 'In the old days, we are having to wait for ten or twelve weeks before we are being really sure. Now, a scan will show up a live embryo almost as soon as conception takes place.'

'But I don't understand,' interrupted Mike. 'How does that prevent the girls going back into the freezers?'

'Because the units are only being designed to maintain life support of post-natal humans. There is no telling what might happen to an unborn child left to.. to stagnate.. for several months in the womb. Not only could it die, it might well be killing the mother.' She raised her arms in helplessness. 'I am wishing I knew more about it.'

Cassi cuddled the older woman. 'How could you? It has never been done before.'

She looked warily at Cassi. 'You are being happy, aren't you?'

'Juanita. I am happier than you can ever imagine.'  
 'Me, too,' added Lyn. She grinned at Steve. 'We're going to have a baby.'  
 'That's all we need,' he sighed.  
 Lyn's face fell. 'You are not happy about it?'

He shrugged. 'It's just the timing. We are in the middle of nowhere, there is a bunch of homicidal nutters still around somewhere and we are about to undertake a mission which has seemed impossible right from the start.'

A tear appeared in the corner of her eye and slowly trickled down her cheek. Steve saw it and took her in his arms. 'Sorry, love. I'm just trying to be practical. I love you and your baby.' He looked across at Mike, now holding his wife's hand. 'How do you feel about it?'

'We'll manage.' He looked down at Cassi. 'Do you want to go and celebrate?'  
 A cheeky look crossed her face. 'You bet I do.'

AFTER a few weeks, it was decided to wake Bob and Maggie. Bob, so that he could make observations and give the ship the once over before reaching Andromeda, and Maggie so that she would not feel left out if left till last. Day by day, the galaxy seemed to expand before their eyes. Nebulae could be seen near the edge and the satellite galaxies, M32 and NGC205, were clearly visible either side of the mother which lay inclined from top left to bottom right of the viewer screen.

'IDENTIFY MYTHOS,' Cassi typed as they all gathered around her.

```

DENSITY          - Myths
DIAMETER         - 33Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION - 692m33s
MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD - 3210d2m47s
INCLINATION      - 10d
DENSITY          70
ESCAPE VELOCITY  - 46ms⁻¹
SURFACE GRAVITY  2.0
DISTANCE         - 135523101AU>
  
```

She looked puzzled as she stared at the screen.

'Wrong Mythos,' said Lyn quietly. 'When father named the planet he discovered near Xen, he assumed, quite naturally, that the Andromedae Mythos was long dead, devoured by a black hole. His new entry must have overwritten the old one. Try one of the other planets he landed on.'

'Can we see the black hole?' piped up Maggie.

Cassi smiled. 'Iris hasn't located it yet. It was the first thing I asked her to search for as it could have the single biggest effect on our mission.'

'What was the other planet dad mentioned?' prompted Lyn.

'IDENTIFY DURANDOR,' keyed in Cassi.

```

DENSITY          - Durdr
DIAMETER         - 136Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION - 1949m23s
INCLINATION      - 12d
DENSITY          -
ESCAPE VELOCITY  - 131ms⁻¹
SURFACE GRAVITY  3.1
DISTANCE         - 14279671501 >
  
```

5

'How does that compare with Earth?' asked Mike.

'IDENTIFY TERRA,' typed Cassi.

```

DENSITY          - arē
DIAMETER         - 127Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION - 23h56m40.91s
INCLINATION      - 23.44d
DENSITY          - 5517
ESCAPE VELOCITY  - 11.18ms⁻¹
SURFACE GRAVITY  -
DISTANCE         - 1355231123AU>
  
```

'Not too different,' observed Lyn. 'Slightly larger and with correspondingly higher gravity and escape

velocity.'

'How did your father land?' asked Steve. 'If we get down, we'll certainly never get up again.'

'He came down on one of the moons of Mythos. We only have to acquire orbital status and use the shuttle to get down to the moon. I presume the Andromedans had some means of getting up from the planet.'

'They rescued dad so they must have space flight of some kind,' said Cassi.

'Will they be expecting us?'

'I doubt it. They probably haven't sent the message yet. In fact, we could be here before even Henry Markham arrived.'

'So, in effect, we could be changing history.'

'No. We have become that history. If anything is changing as a result of our being here, it is the future.'

'If we are here before either of the original Wayfarer missions, how will you know how to find the Mythian System?'

Cassi grinned sheepishly. 'Therein lies our number one problem. Iris only knows the path Wayfarer took when she arrived last time. Bear in mind also that we got here in less than a third of the time father took so we are approaching from an entirely different angle and at a substantially faster velocity.'

'You said that was our number one problem. There are others?'

'Two others that immediately spring to mind.'

'I think you'd better tell us.'

'I mentioned that we were approaching Andromeda much faster than when dad came.'

'Three times as fast,' said Steve.

'We were.'

He frowned. 'Were?'

'For the last two days, our speed has been increasing rapidly due to the gravitational pull from the galaxy. The velocity escalation appears to be logarithmic rather than linear.'

'Can we have that in English?' said Mike.

'What my sister means,' clarified Lyn. 'Is that we would appear to be accelerating at a rate which makes forward navigation extremely difficult, even for Iris.'

'How many attempts do we get at locating Mythos?'

'One. If we miss, we might have to go quite a way round to get back. Right now, Iris is continually updating her memory and making judgements on the best stars to use as gravity brakes and calculating the direction we will be heading afterwards.'

Mike smirked. 'What we used to call an ongoing situation.'

'Iris will do her best.'

'What was the other problem?' asked Mike.

'The whereabouts of the shuttle containing our "friends".'

'If we are accelerating, surely we must be leaving them behind. They surely can't have passed us, can they?'

'Mike, you should stick to Security.' Steve grinned. 'Even I know that gravity affects objects equally, regardless of their mass. We will both be accelerating at the same rate.'

'We do have one advantage,' said Cassi. 'When it comes to slowing down, we will have the advantage of the Proton Drive. They are definitely not in front of us because they have no way of increasing their speed. So when we begin our gravity brake, they will likely shoot right past us.'

'And hope that Wayfarer Two will be around to pick them up.'

'Wayfarer Two should have already commenced gravity braking. If they haven't, it will already be too late for them.'

'Have we picked up any emissions from them?'

Cassi grinned. 'At this distance? With all that radiation emanating from Andromeda in the background? You've got a hope. Iris is good, but not that good.'

'How about the shuttle? Any news on them?'

'Not a sign.' She frowned. 'I really don't understand it. They appear to have totally vanished.'

'How far have we looked?'

'On either side of us, Iris' sensors can register anything the size of the shuttle within several million kilometres and there is no way the shuttle could have got that far adrift in a void.'

'Behind?'

'More difficult. At our speed, we leave light standing still, so to speak. She is outside our visual range but that isn't very far when it's dark outside and we are talking about something as small as that shuttle. Iris would detect any drive emissions because they would be projected ahead. But if she doesn't fire up her engines, she could actually be quite close.'

It was Mike's turn to frown. 'How close?'

Cassi turned to face him. 'Within a kilometre or so.'



NOTHING was said for a very long time as everyone contemplated the repercussions of the possibility of having those evil men so close at hand. The body of Smithers had been discovered and consigned to the void. Maggie was the only one who seemed happy.

'Cassi, are you really going to have a baby?'

The mother-to-be laughed. 'It's not that unusual, you know. It happens all the time on Earth.'

'But not in space.'

'I was born in space,' Cassi reminded her. 'And so was Lyn.'

'Is daddy happy, too?'

'Why don't you ask him yourself?'

'He looks busy.'

'He's only worried about the possibility of those men coming back. He's all right.'

The young girl looked sideways at her step-mother. 'Are you two friends now?'

Cassi laughed. 'Of course we are. We are happier than we have ever been.'

Maggie grinned. 'You will have to make babies more often, then, won't you?'

'And what are you two so happy about?' said Mike, sauntering over to them.

'Babies,' said Maggie. 'Lots of them.'

'I think it's time we had some sandwiches, don't you?'

Maggie sighed. 'Oh, all right. Do you want some, Cassi?'

Cassi took Mike's hand. 'Just one, please, Maggie.'

'Don't forget you're eating for two,' reminded Mike as his daughter went off to the galley.

'I've got a long way to go yet.'

Mike glanced at the screen. 'Lost?'

Cassi nodded. 'Just a bit.'

'I thought you had everything under control,' he said warily.

'Almost everything. I just wish I knew the names of all these stars up ahead.'

'Doesn't Iris know?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Not entirely. We are coming in at a slightly different angle than father did. Iris would be less confused if she could work out the difference between Universal Time and Andromeda Time.'

'Does it matter?'

'Naturally. What I need to know first of all, is what father might have called these other stars. They are not visible from Earth as individual stellar bodies.'

'Mythos sounds Greek.'

Cassi pondered for a moment. 'That makes sense. He named the Andromedan crew members after letters of the Greek alphabet - Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta.'

'Can Iris pick out any of the stars?'

'I can help her try.' Cassi touched her finger to the screen near the centre. 'Identify.'

'UNKNOWN >' replied Iris.

'See what I mean? I've had this response for hours.'

'At which point would your father have entered the galaxy?'

'I reran the original data log and I estimate it was somewhere - here.' She touched the screen again. 'Identify.'

'UNKNOWN >'

'Trouble?' said a new voice.

'Possibly. I'm trying to find the correct entry point but Iris can't identify the stars ahead.'

'Then I guess we'll have to try somewhere else.'

'But where,' sighed the Navigation Officer. 'There are billions of stars in that galaxy.'

'What could make a difference?' asked Mike calmly, sensing his wife was getting frustrated.

'The rotation of the galaxy for one.'

'Which way?' asked Steve.

'Which way what?'

'Which way is it rotating?'

'Anticlockwise, same as virtually everything else in the universe.'

'The how about looking further to the left? Surely that's where your father would have gone.'

'I tried that but with no response.'

'How about right?'

'No, Mike that's in the past. We..'

'What is it?'

'We are in the past,' exclaimed Cassi with sudden realisation. 'We have arrived before father.'

'Try it then.'

'It would be quicker if I had a name or two. I could then simply ask Iris to find them.'  
 'Cassi and I think Greek names are possible,' clarified Mike. 'Apparently Jim had a thing about Greek.'  
 'Islands?' suggested Steve. 'Try Rhodes.'  
 'LOCATE RHODES,' Cassi typed carefully.  
 'UNKNOWN >'  
 'Rodhos,' said Juanita over their shoulders. 'In Greek, it is being spelled R-O-D-H-O-S.'  
 'LOCATE RODHOS,' Cassi entered.

Iris bleeped and a white cross appeared on the viewing monitor screen. The other screen filled with data.

DENSITY	- Rodhos
DIAMETER	- 10457Mm
SEMI-MAJOR AXIS	- 813d
INCLINATION	2 45
DENSITY	84
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 48765kms1
SURFACE GRAVITY	23
NUMBER OF PLANETS	4
DISTANCE	- 85173972AU >

'Wow!' exclaimed Cassi. 'That's big.'

'And just off to the right,' said Lyn. 'Can we reach it?'

Cassi shrugged. 'With a long lateral burn, we can head close to this smaller one and use its gravity to tuck us round behind Rodhos.'

'Where to after that?'

Cassi looked at Juanita. 'Know any more Greek islands?'

'Samos, Lesbos and Andros?'

Cassi tried them all and Iris found them, one by one. 'Any more?'

Juanita shook her head. 'My brother is having a fleet of sailing boats in Athens. Those are the places he visits. I cannot remember others.'

'Just a minute,' said Mike. 'I'll be back.'

True to his word, he was soon back, carrying a large atlas borrowed from Maggie's library. He opened it to a map of the Aegean. In five minutes, they had identified eleven other stars in a band beyond Rodhos.

Cassi drew on piece of paper so they all could see. 'As I see it, this is what we do. We use Rodhos to swing us round towards Gyaros, passing between Syros and Mykanos.'

'Will that slow us down?'

'No, but it will stop us careering towards the centre. After Gyaros, we let Lesbos pull us out a little and throw us in towards Lymnos.'

Steve frowned. 'Won't that accelerate us again?'

'Not if we keep in a wide arc towards Andros. As you can see from Iris, Andros is even bigger than Rodhos. We can use Andros to swing us towards Tinos. The trick is to keep on the outside of Tinos so that the combined pull of Andros and Tinos slow us right down before we reach Khios. We'll also have the galactic pull behind us. Samos should then pull us round to a concentric orbit towards Skopelos. We should be down to Lum one hundred by the time we reach the Mythian System. If we are still going too fast, we simply run tightly round Skopelos until the momentum has dissipated.'

'Sounds easy,' said a grinning Mike.

Cassi pulled a face. 'You can do it if you like.'

Mike laughed. 'Not on your life. I'll stick to making tea.'

OVER the next few months, the view of the Andromeda Galaxy in the forward screen grew with almost frightening rapidity. They were still many light years from the nearest star but details of various nebulae and star systems could be made out clearly. A long burn had been made on the lateral thrusters and now Rodhos was almost dead ahead. Both girls were already showing the signs of their pregnancy and excitement was growing about all the forthcoming events.

Two days out from Rodhos, Iris bleeped.

Cassi spun round in her seat. 'Identify.'

'UNKNOWN STELLAR OBJECT - DISTANCE 14463900AU >'

'How long have we got?'

'TIME TO IMPACT - 7 MINUTES AND 4 SECONDS >'

Cassi jabbed the Tannoy button. 'Steve, we've got trouble.'

After a few seconds, the intercom spoke. 'What is it, Cassi?'

'Iris had picked up something up front. Something unidentified.'

'Why can't Iris tell us what it is?'  
 'I think it may be in a direct line with Rodhos.'  
 'I'm on my way up.'  
 It was less than one minute before the door hissed open and the Commander burst in. 'Found it yet?'  
 Cassi continued to tap keys. 'Dead ahead. Six minutes away.'  
 'Can we avoid it?'  
 'Difficult, at this speed. But I'll try.'  
 He pressed the Tannoy button. 'All crew stand by for emergency manoeuvres. Crash stations.'  
 'If we hit it at this speed,' Cassi muttered under her breath, 'We won't know a thing about it.'  
 Lyn came in. 'Need my help?'  
 'Too late to fire up the Proton Drive. It takes ten minutes to get to critical mass and we've only got half of that. I'm putting full power to the left retros and hope I can pull her between the two stars. Better belt up.'  
 'Charmed, I'm sure,' said Lyn as she tightened the strap across her lap.  
 'Steve, okay to proceed?'  
 'I'll leave it to you,' he said grimly. 'I know you'll do your best.'  
 Cassi kept her finger on the key as they bore down on the unseen star and, gradually, the nose began to bear to the right.  
 'TIME TO IMPACT - 2 MINUTES AND 19 SECONDS >' said the pessimistic Iris.  
 'I can see it,' said Lyn suddenly. 'It's moving with us.'  
 'It can't be,' said Cassi. 'Virtually all stellar motion is anti-clockwise. We should tuck in behind it.'  
 'This would appear to be the exception.'  
 'Let in the Auxiliary Drive,' said Steve. 'Go right through the chromosphere.'  
 'You want to make toast of us?' grinned Lyn as she reached towards her controls.  
 'Do it, Lyn,' said Cassi quietly. 'It's our only chance.'  
 'But won't speeding up still further pose other problems?'  
 'Yes, but do it. We'll worry about missing Rodhos tomorrow. Let's just miss this one today.'  
 Lyn pushed keys. 'Activating Auxiliary Drive.'  
 As the Drive ignited, the ship shook and a loud clunk was heard right through the hull.  
 Steve looked accusingly at Cassi. 'What the hell was that?'  
 She looked from screen to screen. 'Pass. Everything looks normal.'  
 Iris bleeped.  
 'Identify,' said Cassi quickly.  
 'WAYFARER SHUTTLE >' said the amber characters on the screen.  
 'What've they done? Rammed us?'  
 Cassi reported, 'No hull damage. Shuttle 300 metres behind us.'  
 'Where did they spring from? And why didn't Iris warn us?'  
 'Can I concentrate on one thing at a time?' suggested Cassi. 'I'm trying to prevent us getting fried.'  
 At eighty billion kilometres a second, they didn't even see the rogue star come and go. One second it suddenly became clear in the forward viewer, the next, it was swiftly retreating behind them. Of the shuttle, there was no sign.  
 'Locate shuttle,' said Cassi as she shut down the retros.  
 'UNKNOWN >' replied Iris.  
 'Don't treat me like an idiot, Iris. Please locate that shuttle.'  
 'MESSAGE DOES NOT COMPUTE >'  
 'Where...is...the...shuttle?' she repeated slowly and clearly.  
 'UNKNOWN >'  
 'Problem?' asked Steve.  
 'The shuttle has disappeared again.'  
 'Do a complete sensor scan.'  
 'I did.'  
 'And?'  
 'Nothing.'  
 'Is Iris working okay?'  
 'Hold on, I'll try something else.'  
 She punched keys. 'IDENTIFY RODHOS.'

DENSITY	- Rodhos
DIAMETER	- 1067m
SPHERICAL AXIAL ROTATION	8131
ORBITATION	- 45
DENSITY	-

ESCAPE VELOCITY	48765 kms1
SURFACE GRAVITY	
NUMBER OF PLANETS	
DISTANCE	1347726 AU >

'Well?'

'Iris is working fine.'

Steve stared at his sister-in-law for some time before he spoke again. 'Lyn, fire up the reactor. Let's not get caught out again. Any disagreements, Cassi?'

Cassi stared back. 'An eminently sensible precaution.' She sighed. 'Sorry, should have thought of it myself.'

Steve suddenly grinned. 'Relax. You had no way of knowing. I guess we're all a bit tense. How long to Rodhos?'

Cassi turned to Iris. 'ETA RODHOS?'

'ETA RODHOS 34 HOURS 12 MINUTES 26.67 SECONDS >'

Steve sighed as he relaxed. 'Any theories on that shuttle?'

Cassi shook her head. 'None. It simply appeared and then... disappeared again.'

Steve looked at his wife. 'Lyn?'

'It was when I activated the Auxiliary Drive. That clunk, remember?'

Steve undid his belt and paced for a moment. 'What's the external diameter of the shuttle?'

'Five metres,' said Cassi after consulting Iris.

'And the internal diameter of the blast tubes?'

'Six and a half,' she said quietly without bothering to consult the computer. 'Here, you don't think...?'

'Would the sensors recognise something that close?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Not within the overall perimeter of the ship itself.'

Steve grinned again. 'Put the reactor on line. Let's do a preliminary test of the Proton Drive.'

'ACTIVATE MAIN REACTOR,' typed Lyn.

'REACTOR ACTIVATED > CRITICAL MASS IN TEN MINUTES >'

'Steve,' said Cassi quietly. 'If they are hiding in the blast tubes, we ought to warn them before we blow them out into space.'

'Why?'

'We can't just kill them.'

'Ask Lyn.' He held his finger and thumb close together. 'She came this far from having the contents of her stomach used as interior decoration.'

'Lyn?'

The younger sister shook her head. 'We have to warn them, Steve.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN SEVEN MINUTES >'

'And how would you propose to do it? Go and knock on the door?'

'We could use the radio. It's what it's for.'

Steve nodded towards the console. 'Go ahead. But don't tell them when. Let it come as a surprise.'

Cassi nodded and pressed the button. 'Wayfarer One to shuttle. Come in please.'

The reply was immediate but they seemed surprised. 'What do you want?'

'Could I speak to Greg Watson, please?'

'Speaking,' said another voice.

'CRITICAL MASS IN SEVEN MINUTES >'

'Sorry about the bumpy ride, gentlemen.'

'You didn't call me up to apologise, did you?'

'No, I called to warn you.'

'Warn me?'

'We are about to activate the Proton Drive. I suggest you retreat a little distance away before I do.'

'I don't believe you.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN SIX MINUTES >'

'Please yourself.'

'Why did you warn us?'

'Unlike you, I have never killed anyone and I have no intention of starting now.'

'Girman tells me you've got a twin.'

'You met her earlier.'

'Ah, so that was her. And where were you?'

'Hiding in one of the freezers. I'm afraid I undid your murderous attempt to dispose of the rest of the crew.'

'Oh, well. Better luck next time.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN FIVE MINUTES >'

'There won't be a next time.'

'Wanna bet, kid?'

'You don't know which way we're going. We'll soon lose you.'

'Think so? I bet I know as many Greek islands as you do.'

Cassi turned the radio off and looked at Steve. 'How did he know?'

'SID,' said Lyn quietly. 'They must be in touch with Wayfarer Two.'

'How can that be? They must have shot right past us. Wayfarer Two will be light years ahead of us.'

'Don't ask me how. Wayfarer Two's computer must have copied data from our Iris. For Greg Watson to be in radio contact with them, they must be pretty close.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN FOUR MINUTES >'

'Iris, locate Wayfarer Two.'

'UNKNOWN >'

'Don't tell me she's tucked up our blast tubes, too,' said Steve.

Cassi shook her head. 'No way.'

'Perhaps she went into orbit around Rodhos and is waiting for us?'

'Possibly. But radio waves only travel at the speed of light and we are still over twenty light years from Rodhos.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN THREE MINUTES >'

'Cassi,' interrupted Steve. 'Could they have swung around Rodhos and be heading back towards us?'

'That's possible, I suppose. But that wouldn't have given them much opportunity to slow down.'

'Some closing speed, huh?'

'Could those men have found a way to tap directly into our Iris?' asked Lyn.

'Impossible. They would have to be inside the ship.'

'Unless...?'

'Steve, you don't think one of us...?'

'A traitor? Why not? It won't be the first time.'

'But who are you suggesting? Me? Or Lyn?'

Steve shook his head. 'You are the targets. Even with your sometimes misplaced sense of capital punishment, I can't see either of you sacrificing yourselves when we have come so far.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN TWO MINUTES >'

'I think we can rule out you or Mike, so who does that leave?'

'It can't be Maggie.'

'But that only leaves Bob and Juanita. Surely it isn't either of them.'

Steve pondered for a moment. 'It certainly does seem unlikely.'

'Where are they now?' asked Lyn.

'In the lab. Bob was making observations and taking photos of Andromeda for posterity.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN ONE MINUTE >'

Cassi pressed the radio switch. 'Greg. I'm firing up the Proton Drive in one minute.'

There was no answer.

RODHOS loomed large large in the forward screen and they could almost feel the surge of gravity pulling them towards the massive star.

'Full reverse thrust in three minutes,' said Lyn as Cassi made tiny adjustments to their course.

'Everyone strapped in?' asked Steve.

They were and, by now, the star was all that could be seen ahead.

'Right five,' said Cassi.

'CONFIRMED >'

Great spurts of flame gushed up from the surface of Rodhos as they plunged towards her on a course which would take them round behind it.

Cassi held her breath as she watched the readout and monitor at the same time. 'Iris. Right eighty - now!'

Lateral retros fired to assist gravity to make the turn. Everything beyond the star looked black by contrast to this red giant. The hull seemed to creak and groan as Wayfarer made the turn as tight as Cassi dare to the fiery surface.

'Okay, Lyn,' said Cassi. 'Anytime you're ready.'

Lyn jabbed at the keyboard and everything became weightless as the combination of gravity and Proton Drive slowed them rapidly from LUM-250000 to less than LUM-200000. By skillful strategy they had greatly reduced their forward speed.

'Identify Lesvos,' Cassi said as Lyn cut the Proton Drive.

DIAMETER	- 928Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 62d
INCLINATION	3 29
DENSITY	6.1
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 375km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 69
NUMBER OF PLANETS	- 10
DISTANCE	- 130000AU

'Eighteen days,' said Cassi as the data continued to flow. 'Lesvos should then bring us down to around LUM-150000.'

'And if it doesn't?'

Cassi shrugged. 'Then we shan't stop in time.'

NOTHING was seen of Wayfarer Two nor her shuttle as they passed between Syros and Mykanos and used Gyaros to swing them towards Lesvos. Gradually slowing, they curved round between Lymnos and one of her planets and swung as close as they dare to Andros. Tinos had the biggest effect on their speed because it also meant they had the galactic hub behind them as they steered to pass between Khios and Samos. Six weeks after entering the Andromeda Galaxy, they were down to LUM-800 and Skopelos was behind them.

'Can we see Mythos yet?' asked an excited Maggie as she watched her very pregnant step-mother sorting data from Iris.

'Not yet, my love. Mythos is smaller than Earth and we can only just see their sun.'

'What's their sun called?'

'Let's find out, shall we?'

She touched a pinpoint of light on the screen. 'Identify.'

Cassi frowned at what she saw.

DENSITY	- 11.8
DIAMETER	- 128Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 276d
INCLINATION	4 22
DENSITY	3.1
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 534km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	1.2
NUMBER OF PLANETS	4
DISTANCE	- 12000AU

'Mike,' she called. 'Look at this.'

He came up and stood behind her swivel chair. 'Problem?'

'When we were discussing Greek mythology before we entered the void, was Phineus one of the characters you mentioned?'

'Prince Phineus of Ethiopia? He was Andromeda's brother. Big and black, no doubt.'

'I wonder why father named this sun after him.'

Mike shrugged. 'Running out of names of islands, perhaps.'

'I saw Maggie's atlas. There are hundreds more Greek islands.'

'Perhaps he didn't have Maggie's atlas to refer to.'

Cassi didn't look convinced. 'Hmm.'

'Found Mythos yet?'

'Let's see if Iris can pinpoint it for us.' She moved in front of the white computer. 'Locate Mythos.'

'UNABLE >'

'Please state the reason.'

'DISTANCE TOO FAR >'

'Come on, Iris. We're only half a light year away.'

'INSTRUCTION DOES NOT COMPUTE >'

'And here's me thinking you were intelligent.'

Maggie and Mike laughed.

'Pull up the data,' suggested Mike.

'I can't. It will give us the other Mythos back at the edge of our Solar System.'

'There must be some way of accessing the old data.'

Cassi moved her long fingers. 'IDENTIFY ALL PLANETS OF THE STAR PHINEUS.'

'PYMANE ERUTHA DURANDOR PATMOS >'

They looked at each other. 'Patmos?'

Cassi turned to Maggie. 'Could we borrow your atlas again?'

'Sure. Do you want me to fetch it from my room?'

'Yes, please.'

'What have you got in mind?' asked Mike.

Cassi got to her feet with some difficulty. 'I've heard of this Patmos, but I can't think where and in what context.'

'Holiday island?'

She shook her head. 'I don't think so. I'm more concerned about the whereabouts of Mythos.'

'Could Patmos be another name for Mythos?'

'It's possible. But I can't for the life of me understand why father should have given the same planet two different names.'

Maggie returned with her atlas and Mike looked up the gazetteer. He frowned. 'No mention of Patmos.'

'Try Mythos. It might give us a clue.'

'No Mythos either. Neither of them seem to exist.'

'Have you tried looking at the map? Maybe they are not big enough to be listed in the index.'

'There are hundreds of islands in the Aegean. That could take hours.'

'Can I look?' volunteered Maggie.

Mike smiled at his daughter. 'Of course you can. Here's your atlas back.'

'Maggie,' said Cassi thoughtfully. 'Do you also have an encyclopedia of some kind?'

'Only my school one. It's on CD-ROM.'

'Perhaps you can look them up on your PC for me, could you? Get us a print out, perhaps?'

The eleven-year-old pranced away, feeling very important for a change.

'She's growing up fast,' observed Cassi. 'She's even beginning to look a proper young lady.'

Mike shook his head. 'Don't. The thought of having a near-teenager makes me feel very old.'

Cassi laughed. Steve walked in. 'How long?'

Brought back to earth, so to speak, Cassi sat down and consulted Iris.

'IDENTIFY DURANDOR.'

```
DENSITY          Durandor
DIAMETER         -1388Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION -19h49m23s
INCLINATION      -12.32
DENSITY          - 5 . 7 3
ESCAPE VELOCITY -131km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY -
DISTANCE        U27996715691 >
```

'ETA DURANDOR?' she typed.

'ETA DURANDOR 5.2608h >'

'Just over five hours to Durandor,' explained Cassi.

'Is that the nearest?'

'Hang on, I'll check the others.'

'IDENTIFY PYMANE.'

```
DENSITY          Pymane
DIAMETER         -998Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION -17h32m10s
INCLINATION      -15.32
DENSITY          5
ESCAPE VELOCITY -104km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY -
DISTANCE        -12821AU>
```

'Further away,' said Cassi.

'ETA PYMANE?'

'ETA PYMANE 6.1h >'

'Pymane is slightly smaller,' said Cassi. 'I'll try Erutha.'

'IDENTIFY ERUTHA.'

```
DENSITY          Erutha
DIAMETER         -122Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION -2h53m0s
```

NO. NATION	-21605
DENSITY	46
ESCAPE VELOCITY	-118 m/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	3.1
DISTANCE	-1513 AU

'ETA ERUTHA?'

'ETA ERUTHA 6.4h >'

'Larger and further away.'

'IDENTIFY PATMOS.'

DENSITY	-Patmos
DIAMETER	-62 Km
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	-17h 09m 31s
NO. NATION	-963
DENSITY	84
ESCAPE VELOCITY	-73 m/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	1.2
DISTANCE	-1636 AU

'Miles away,' said Cassi. 'Must be way round the other side of Phineus.'

'So Durandor is the nearest?'

'It is. But is it the best?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, they are all Earth-like. It's just that father landed there or, at least, on one of her moons.'

Steve pointed. 'No mention of moons on the screen.'

'That's very odd. I could have sworn father said that he crashed onto one of the moons of Mythos.' She turned to her husband for support. 'Wasn't that right, Mike?'

'I'm sure you are right. However, we can't find Mythos. Only this Patmos.'

Maggie chose that moment to reappear, complete with atlas and print-out. She passed the paper to Cassi and pointed her finger at one of the maps for her father. Mike looked near her finger. 'Patmos is on the map all right. Just off the coast of Turkey.'

'What did Maggie's encyclopedia say?' asked Lyn.

'I'll read it out,' said Cassi slowly. 'PATMOS - Barren volcanic Greek island in the Icarian Sea. 60km from ancient seaport of Miletus.' She looked up. 'Penal colony.'

'Penal colony? A prison island? Like Alcatraz or Chateau d'If?'

Cassi shrugged. 'I guess so.'

'How about Mythos?'

She looked down then said very slowly. 'MYTHOS - Imaginary home of superhuman beings believed to have existed by pre-literate society. A place where unproven, exaggerated or complex mythical beliefs are invented and spread. A state of severe mental disorder resulting from the deliberate and malicious attempt to corrupt scientific or religious truth.'

'Good grief. Are we talking about the same Mythos?'

'It's the only one listed.'

'But why in heaven's name would your father, a perfectly rational and sensible man, name this planet after the birthplace of nutcases.'

Cassi shrugged. 'I have no idea.'

'Perhaps,' said Steve. 'We had better avoid this place till we can gather more information. Now, what's our best plan of campaign?'

'Sounds like we head for this Durandor,' suggested Mike. 'It's the closest.'

Steve looked at his wife. 'Lyn?'

'In the absence of further information, I have to agree.'

'Cassi?'

She nodded. 'Durandor.'

He looked at the youngster. 'What do you think, Maggie?'

She nodded vigorously. 'I want to meet Cassi's mother.'

Steve straightened. 'Right, then. Durandor, it is.'

'Shall I tell Juanita and Bob?'

Steve started to say yes then hesitated. 'Not yet. Just tell them that we will reach our destination in five hours.'



WAYFARER One went into orbit five thousand kilometres above Durandor, well inside the orbits of the four moons. Landmasses and oceans were clearly visible below them as the monitors scanned the surface for visible features between the cloud formations.

'No artificial satellites,' said Cassi as the data came in. 'Atmosphere similar to Terra.'

'Breathable?'

'Just about. Pressure is slightly greater. Gravity forty-two percent more.'

'What effect will that have on us?'

'We'll have to be careful not to breath to deeply, and we'll get tired more quickly due to the fact that we will weigh almost half as much again as normal.' She smirked at Mike. 'You'll weigh about twenty stone.'

Steve came onto the flight deck. 'It will have to be a royal "we", Cassi. Mike and I will be going down alone.'

'Without Lyn and I?'

'I'm afraid so. Juanita says you are both too close to giving birth to risk either the landing or the increase in gravity.'

'So we just sit here twiddling out thumbs while you have all the fun?'

'Juanita and Bob will stay with you. Maggie, too.'

'But the people down there won't know you.'

'They wouldn't know you, either, don't forget. This is a first for all of us.'

Cassi fell silent. 'On one condition.'

'Tell me.'

'Take a CCTV so that we can keep in touch the whole time.'

'No problem. You'll be able to watch everything we do. Satisfied?'

'And get Bob to set up a camera here so that we can relay pictures down to the monitor on board the shuttle.'

Steve looked at the engineer who had come up with him. 'Okay?'

The tall scot shrugged. 'I'll get on it right away.'

'Happy now?' asked Mike.

'No.' She sighed. 'But satisfied.'

He pulled a metal object from his jacket. 'Here, take this.'

Cassi looked down at his automatic pistol. 'What would I do with that? I couldn't kill anyone, you know that.'

'Nor would I expect you to.' He grinned. 'But you managed to knock Smithers cold, didn't you?'

'That was different. I knew I wouldn't seriously hurt him. Anyway, it was an emergency.'

'You might get another emergency.'

'Bob, you mean? You can't be serious about his being a traitor.'

'Right now, I don't know what to believe. What I do know is that I don't like the idea of my wife being up here undefended. If you don't want to kill them, just shoot them in the leg - disable them till we can get back up to you.'

She turned it over in her hands. 'Mike, I don't know...'

'Think of it as saving our lives. If Greg Watson and his cronies arrive while we are down there, they might just run off with this ship. What would Steve and I do then, eh?'

She smiled a little. 'Okay. I'll keep it handy.'

He leaned over her belly and kissed her. 'Don't produce Junior till I get back.'

'If things get close, Juanita is here to help us.'

Mike turned to his daughter. 'Maggie, you and Juanita are in charge of this flying maternity clinic. Look after your patients.'

The little girl grinned. 'Okay, dad.'

SUITED up and drive relay re-fitted, Mike and Steve said their farewells and dropped away in the shuttle. Everyone else crowded round the viewing screen and watched the descent. Cassi got Iris to regularly scan the whole area for unwelcome visitors but none came near.

'Entering atmosphere now,' came Steve's voice over the radio. 'Heading for the largest visible land mass.'

'Okay, Steve. I have you on the monitor.'

'Dropping to one kilometre.'

'How long will it be taking?' asked Juanita.

'Most part of an hour, I reckon. They won't want to take it too fast until they can recalibrate the on board computer guidance system's benchmarks.'

'It is looking as if they are dropping behind us.'

'It's bound to happen. If we remain at this height and speed, we will be round again in just under four hours.'

'And in the meantime?'

'We will probably lose contact for a while when we are round the other side of the planet.'

'And we will be having no way of knowing what is happening to them?'

'No,' said Cassi. 'And neither will they know what happens to us.'

THE land they approached was flat and green, not unlike the Amazon delta. In the distant background, mountains loomed misty and were pearly grey with what looked like snow atop just like the South American Andes. Steve skillfully brought the shuttle in low, at a speed little in excess of stall limit. The wide river below had nothing in the way of life signs. Twenty minutes later, they crossed the mountains and the sea was wide and blue beneath them. Steve swung round to the north and skimmed the surface just a hundred metres off the coast. There was nothing.

'Shuttle to Wayfarer One. Can you hear us, Cassi?'

'Very faint, Mike. We must be getting close to your radio horizon. Any signs of life?'

'Not a thing. Not even animals or birds.'

'Buildings? Roads?'

'Not a trace.'

'According to father, they had sophisticated dwellings, magneto-motion vehicles and even space travel, though limited in range.'

'Steve says he'll try further up the coast. We must be nearing the equator now.'

'You're getting faint. I'm afraid we'll lose you soon. Do you want me to go geosynchronous?'

'Not necessary. If we get into trouble, we'll land and wait for you to come round again.'

'Okay Mike. Speak to you later. I love you.'

'Message received and understood. Reciprocal feelings of endearment.'

'Just say it if you mean it.'

'Steve says give his love to Lyn.'

'Coward.'

WAYFARER One passed into shadow just after contact was lost. Three of the moons could be clearly seen shining like streetlamps in the black sky. One of them was not unlike Luna with its pock marking craters littering the surface. The second, larger, moon looked smoother and a faint mist was visible over the surface - giving it a somewhat eerie appearance. The third was small and asymmetrical, like Phobos, the innermost moon of Mars.

'Permission to take a rest,' asked Lyn, standing and stretching.

'Excellent idea,' agreed Juanita. 'Be taking the rest when you can. You do not have long to go.' She looked at Cassi. 'You should be going, too.'

Cassi shook her head. 'One of us should stay up. I'll rest in the next black spot.'

'I could always watch things,' said Bob. 'If you want to bed down.'

'I'm too excited to rest. This is a big day for me. Lyn and I have agreed to take it in turns. Perhaps you could rest with Lyn. Juanita can keep me company.'

He shrugged. 'You're the boss.'

'No, I'm not, Bob. It was Steve's suggestion.'

The engineer made to argue but Juanita put her hand on his arm. 'I played squash with her. Even eight months pregnant, she's got enough stamina to beat the stuffing out of both of us.'

Lyn hooked her arm through the engineer's. 'Come and tuck me in, Bob. Coming, Maggie?'

The three left, leaving Cassi alone with Juanita.

'How long before we are being in contact again?'

'I'll try again in an hour. They are going east to west and we are flying over the poles so we should cross about then.'

'You are being upset about not going down?'

'I will be if they find people.'

'You don't think they will?'

'Until we make contact and I ascertain how far in advance of father's arrival we are, I have no way of calculating the exact time difference. The speed we achieved getting here, we could be years ahead, decades perhaps.'

Juanita thought about the lack of population. 'Centuries?'

'It's possible. Iris has been scanning for evidence of the black hole but she hasn't found any trace of its development.'

'You mean it is not here yet?'

'Certainly not in this part of the galaxy. I don't have any data about where it began. All I know is it has something to do with the interaction between Andromeda and one of her satellite galaxies called M32. We saw it as we approached but there was no visible sign of an ion stream building up.'

'How quickly could it happen?'

'According to Terran astronomers, such events take millions of years. However, none of them has been around that long to be certain and their theories about so many other astronomical events have proved to be full of holes.'

'Black holes?'

Cassi laughed. 'Not necessarily. What I want to know is how they can write so many books about something they have never seen or even know for certain exists.'

'But you are believing them.'

'I believe Iris. If she says a black hole will appear tomorrow and devour half this galaxy, I will put on my running shoes.'

STEVE and Mike found no signs of life. They made contact just as Wayfarer One entered the daylight and beamed the photographic data up for Iris to disseminate. They landed near a natural harbour and panned the TV camera around but, other than trees and insects, no trace of life was seen or found. Soil and leaf samples were collected in sterile containers along with one or two of the smaller insects and they got ready to return to orbit. Everything was so like Earth. Even the trees grew in a similar manner. The anomaly was a much larger sun, which was just setting, and always having at least two moons visible in the purple-tinged sky.

'How long do we stay here?' asked Mike after a while.

'Don't you like it?'

'It's paradise. The perfect overflow world.'

'I guess we try one of the others next.'

'Cassi would love to see this. Trouble is, she'd probably want to stay.'

'That's another reason why I didn't want either of them down here. It's too much like the old Adam and Eve scenario.'

'Do you believe all that Bible stuff?'

'I honestly don't know. Unfashionable it might be to believe but, if it is true, Terra must once have been just like this.'

Mike grinned. 'Before the dinosaurs came? Or after they left?'

'Don't start that perpetual debate. How they can make up all these fanciful ideas from a couple of teeth, I'll never know.'

'Cassi says it's belief.'

'Belief?'

'Repeat it to yourself enough times and you come to believe the impossible can happen. That applies within both scientific and religious circles. Believe, and it will come true - at least in your mind.'

'All I believe for certain right now is that no-one is home here. Let's get back upstairs before it gets dark.'

He pressed the speak button. 'Wayfarer One, do you read?'

'Loud and clear, Steve. According to Iris, we will pass over your present position in ten minutes.'

'Can you see us?'

'Negative. Iris just recognises the heat emissions from the drive. That's how we know where you are.'

'Are we the only emissions?'

'Affirmative. We even saw you in the darkness.'

The men looked at each other. 'Darkness? Listen Cassi, when did you see us in the dark?'

'Between our second and third orbits. Just after you reported in the first time.'

'But we haven't been in the darkness. We've made a point of keeping ahead of the shadow.'

'Then who did we see?'

'How far away from our present position?'

'About fifty kilometres east.'

They looked inland towards the already dark mountains in the distance. Along the coast in the direction they had come, long shadows from the rocky reef were now cast across the gently swishing surf. Other than that, nothing moved.

'Cassi, are you sure you only saw one set of emissions?'

'Just a tick. I'll rerun the memory sequence.'

There was just static for a few minutes before her voice came back. 'It's a bit disjointed because of having to make compensation for the difference in trajectory. At 0856 UT, Iris had you just reaching the coast. On the ten o'clock pass, she had you near the mountains and now she has you back on the coast again.'

'But we haven't been in the mountains. We passed them on the way over, while you were on the dark side, but haven't been back there since.'

'Could it be the other shuttle?' whispered Mike.

'Cassi. Get Iris to check the signature of the second emission. Find out if it is identical.'

'Okay, boss. Speak to you soon.'

Mike shivered. 'It's getting cooler.'

Steve nodded. 'If we don't get off soon, it will be too dark to see properly.'

'Do we go looking for this other emission?'

'Not if it's matey and his gang of thugs, we don't. And certainly not at night.'

'Steve,' said the radio. The voice seemed excited. 'The signature is entirely different.'

'It's them,' Steve sighed.

'I'm not sure. Whatever it is has no normal thrusters. It hovers and then jerks. At full magnification, it seems to act just like an insect looking for pollen.'

They looked eastwards again. The mountains were no longer visible and the shape of their craft now looked dark - lit only by the rising moons and a faint luminescence off the sea.

'What do you want to do? We don't have enough fuel to keep going up and down. If we go up now, we may not have enough liquid oxygen to visit all the other planets.'

Steve lifted his arm. 'Cassi, we're staying. How long is the night on Durandor?'

'At your latitude? Just over six hours.'

'Is everything all right up there?'

'Naturally. We're coping magnificently and doing our anti-natal exercises regularly.'

'We're staying down for the night to conserve fuel. We'll overfly the area at first light. Flash down the precise co-ordinates of that emission on your next pass. I'll set the data-log to receive.'

'Okay, Steve. We'll wake you if anything moves. Have a good night. Lyn says "sweet dreams."'

'I hope so, Cassi. I most certainly hope so.'

WHEN the men awoke, the sun was just rising behind the distant mountains. Only the faint buzzing of bee-like insects disturbed the silence as they stepped down from the shuttle for a last look round.

'They must be on the other side of the mountains,' said Mike, studying the data received from Iris. 'Those mountains can't be fifty kilometres away, can they?'

'I always find scenic distances difficult to estimate, even in broad daylight.'

'Well, do we go look-see?'

Mike shrugged. 'It's what we came here for.'

They reported in to Wayfarer, fired up the vertical lift motor to raise them above the trees and then headed east towards the rising sun. Ten minutes later, Steve checked the dials.

'We've come thirty kilometres. That emission Cassi saw must have been right in the mountains.'

'How far?'

'Twenty kilometres, dead ahead, from the info Iris beamed down.'

'Any sign of a landing place?'

'Not from here. Wait till we get closer.'

Another five minutes passed and the mountains were ahead and above. The shuttle was much lower than on its original approach from the east. Then they saw it.

Mike pointed. 'Look!'

'I see it. Going down.'

In a glaciated comb below one of the taller peaks, a lake had formed in the hollow and a long waterfall spilled from its lower end onto a wide ledge. Around the resulting pool was level ground about half a kilometre in either direction before jungle started. On one side of the pool stood a strange-looking craft.

'Well, at least it's not Watson and Co,' said Mike.

'I'm going to put her down on the opposite side of the pool,' said Steve. 'As a precaution.'

Mike pressed keys. 'Cassi, do you read?'

No answer.

'They must be on the dark side. Try later.'

'Shall I switch on the CCTV?'

'You might as well. Even if they can't get visual, the others will be able to watch the replay later.'

Steve circled slowly while Mike filmed the area and zoomed in on the craft. It had spidery legs and a bulbous body covered in what looked like circular spots. In a cloud of dust, the shuttle settled near the edge of the pool and, gradually, the whine of the motors died away.

Steve looked at Mike. 'Well, here we go.'

He climbed down out of the hatch empty-handed and Mike passed down the camera and miniature transmitter. Together, they walked to the edge of the water and looked across. There was no sign of life.

'Perhaps it's an unmanned probe,' suggested Mike.

Steve shook his head. 'Too big for that. It's bigger than our shuttle.'

'How do we get over to them?'

Steve grinned. 'I guess we get our feet wet.'

They were about to step into the shallow water when Steve caught Mike's arm. 'It's moving.'

'What?'

'That vehicle, or whatever it is. It's coming this way.'

True to his word, the spider-like vehicle moved its eight legs with hardly a sound and stepped into the opposite side of the pool. Mike continued to film as it slowly "walked" towards them, its main body slung between the legs and barely swaying at all, the base of it just above the water. Ten metres away, on this edge of the pool, it stopped and the body sank to the ground like a twentieth century Citroen at the end of a run.

Steve watched and Mike filmed as an aperture opened in its side. Nothing else happened. The men looked at each other.

'Perhaps it wants us to go to them,' suggested Mike.

'Did you bring your gun?'

'No, I left it with Cassi. Their danger seemed greater than ours.'

He straightened his overalls. 'Then it looks like we go and make peace.'

The hatch was about the same size as that on the shuttle but all looked dark inside.

Mike filmed on as Steve put his head inside. 'Hello. Anyone at home.'

There was no reply but a sudden sensation of panic swept over both men. They were not afraid. It was as if they were in the company of someone who was terrified out of their minds.

'Did you feel that?' Steve whispered.

'It was when you called out.'

'Did you hear anything?'

'No, just a sensation. Let's back off a little to show them we mean no harm.'

They stepped back and the communicator spoke. 'Steve. Mike. Sit down.'

They looked at each other. 'Cassi, what do you mean?'

'Sit down. They are terrified by sound.'

'How do you know?'

'I can feel it.'

They both looked skyward. 'Up there?'

'We've just come over your horizon and are receiving the pictures clearly. Lyn and I are half-Andromedan. We can feel their fear. Sit down and don't speak unless you have to. Listen to me on earpiece so that my voice doesn't frighten them. I will try and communicate with them and tell them it's okay.'

Steve frowned. 'I thought Jim said they didn't have radio. How can Cassi communicate?'

Their question was answered a few moments later when a figure appeared in the doorway with its hands spread wide in the universal greeting of peace. Steve copied the gesture while Mike pulled out the legs of the tripod and pointed the camera. He then mimicked Steve. The creature, generally humanoid in appearance, stepped towards them with what could only be a smile on its mahogany-coloured face. The garment it wore was long, so precise anatomical details could not be ascertained, even from its distance of two metres.

'Don't speak,' came the voice in Mike's earpiece. 'Just think a greeting. Don't try to make words, just the thoughts.'

Mike grinned and thought pleasant thoughts with all his might, difficult when half of him was still thinking Security Officer.

'Welcome to Durandor,' said the impression in their minds. 'Your mates have explained the reason for your visit here.'

Mike chuckled at the terminology used and got Steve's elbow in his ribs.

'I am Gwynatha, Science Minister of the Phinean System. I welcome you.'

Steve opened his mouth to speak and sensed the fear again as the creature began to back away. He smiled and closed his mouth and thought the words "Steve" and "Mike" instead. The smile returned.

The creature looked at Mike. 'I understand that your mate is very beautiful in form.'

The words "who told you that?" flashed through his mind.

Gwynatha smiled again. 'You did. Every memory you make of her is full of genuine endearment.'

It was difficult thinking pictures instead of speaking words. The creature had a mouth but it was clearly not used for speech. A confused sound came from the Andromedan's mind which Mike took to be in its own language and several other creatures came out of their craft. Two were dressed in a similar manner to Gwynatha but three others were completely different. Their gowns were brilliant white and, despite their dark-coloured skin, their long hair was like gleaming gold.

Mike smiled to himself. 'So that's where Cassi and Lyn get their hair.'

'My crew,' introduced Gwynatha. 'And their mates.'

Steve and Mike were now on their feet and were confused as to whether they should shake hands like good Englishmen, or kiss cheeks like the French. The problem was solved for them by a wave of pleasure which swept over them. Mike gasped for breath. *That beats kissing any day.*

The three "women" then did something which could only be interpreted as laughing.

'I think you've made some good friends,' came the voice in Mike's ear. 'Just be careful not to touch them.'

The females will construe it as a sexual advance and the men will take it as an insult.'

Mike stepped back as a precaution and lowered his arms. They seemed happier at that.

'We are here on an exploration,' said Gwynatha. 'We are looking for other places to live. Do you do the same? Perhaps we might live together here.'

Mike remembered the situation on Earth when such a proposal had been made as well as the animosity it had produced. A pained look came over the Andromedan's face. 'You do not wish to live with us?'

He smiled and tried to think of something appropriate to say. The creature stood stock still as if listening for several minutes while Mike and Steve looked at each other.

Gwynatha smiled. 'The mate Cassiopeia has told me of the situation on Terra. I understand fully. She wishes to give me further information but finds it difficult without being face-to-face. Having established a base camp here, we were about to return to Erutha. We would be delighted if you would follow us in your craft. I understand that you must first return to your larger vessel in orbit?'

Steve nodded, hoping it gave the right impression. Gwynatha and his colleagues did what appeared to be a bow and nimbly entered their vehicle. While Steve and Mike watched open-mouthed, it rose into the air with hardly a sound and hovered about a hundred metres above them, evidently waiting.

'No wonder they were terrified,' said Mike as they clambered aboard the shuttle. 'Our noisy landing must have frightened the wits out of them. It's a good thing we put down so far away.'

Steve flipped switches and then punched co-ordinates into the computer while Mike stowed away the CCTV equipment. 'Cassi, we're on our way up. Can you send out a homing beam?'

'Affirmative. See you in about an hour on our next pass.'

'Everything all right?'

'Yep, all six of us.'

Steve looked at Mike. 'Six?'

'Lyn gave birth during the night. You have a fine baby boy. Mother and baby in best of health thanks to Juanita.'

'Good grief!,' said Steve. 'I'm a dad.'

THE Andromedan craft, which they appropriately nick-named "Spider One", waited patiently while the shuttle docked and the crew transfer was made. Spider One had no visible means of propulsion. However, they had a job to keep up with it as it headed for a reddish coloured planet in the distance. It took less than an hour to reach Erutha and Wayfarer manoeuvred into a geosynchronous orbit above the place indicated by means of a "message" to Cassi. In memory of the situation, and because of his fair skin, Steve and Lyn called their baby Gwyn.

It was obvious before the shuttle left orbit that Erutha was well-populated in contrast with Durandor. Gwynatha's craft waited until the shuttle dropped away from Wayfarer and then led them down towards one of the large islands near the equator. This time, Cassi was really peeved because Lyn insisted on going down along with her baby, cocooned in anti-G material, but Cassi was too big to fit into even the biggest of the space-suits. However, Steve's decision to acquire a geosynchronous status did at least mean that she was able to stay in contact the whole time.

In recognition of their hearing situation, Steve landed the shuttle some way away from their habitation and a smaller version of Spider One "ran" across to pick them up. There appeared to be no cities or large towns. The entire population lived in hamlets spaced out equidistantly over the countryside.

'I wonder what they grow to eat,' murmured Steve as they seemingly whizzed across the ground. 'They don't seem to be cultivating anything.'

'No weeds,' said Lyn, baby at her breast. 'They were eradicated some centuries ago. Now, things just grow in an orderly fashion wherever they are planted.'

'Makes for a cushy life. What about distribution and marketing?'

'No problem. If you've got a product, people come to you.'

'What if the product you want grows on the other side of the planet.'

'You pop over and pick it up.'

'Currency?'

'Bartering.'

'Transport?'

'We're in it.'

Mike looked round the small craft. 'You'd never get a tonne of spuds in here.'

'You wouldn't need to. You just collect what you need for immediate use.'

'That's a lot of travelling around.'

'What else is there to do? If there's no ploughing or weeding, people have lots of spare time. They use it to travel and socialise. That's why they never have wars - they are always talking to each other - they need each other. Because there is no way of stock-piling, there is no greed. Take away the motive for argument and

no-one argues.'

'Who've you been talking to?'

'A lady called Jannil. She is the Minister of Agriculture.'

'She?'

'Why not? Everyone is equal here. Decisions are shared by all, male or female, young or old.'

Steve glanced down at Gwyn. 'Even children?'

'When he is twelve years old, he will have full voting rights.'

'But what will he know about life?'

'Times change. He will offer a fresh perspective. He won't always be right, but his views will be acknowledged. During our trip here, we weren't so different, were we? We let Maggie in on everything and she is only just turned eleven.'

'That's different.'

'How?'

'I don't know. I...'

'Would you prefer that we ignore the young, like some do on Earth?'

'No, of course not. It's just...'

'Yes?'

He grinned. 'You're right.'

'As an Earthman, you don't like that, do you?'

'It's not what I'm used to, that's all.'

'Which is the better way?'

'Your way, I guess.'

Lyn raised her eyebrows. 'Pardon?'

He laughed aloud. 'You suckered me.'

She leant forward and kissed his cheek. 'I did, didn't I?'

Steve looked out the window as the craft settled next to a flat-roofed building. 'Wow! This is beautiful.'

A group of a dozen or so met them at the "farm" and welcomed them to sit on the patio. Lyn translated in whispers and gestures because she understood the mind language quicker than the others. One of the women was fascinated by Gwyn so Lyn placed her baby in her arms and smiled. The woman was clearly overcome by this gesture of peace and what looked like tears were in her royal blue eyes.

'You are most welcome,' said Jannil. 'I was called from Mythos to meet you.'

Steve glanced quickly at Lyn who correctly interpreted his look. 'Mythos does exist then?'

The dark-haired woman touched her head. 'It is here.'

Lyn frowned and touched her own head. 'Here?'

Jannil nodded. 'The place of our ancestors.'

'Is it far?'

She spread her arms. 'It is everywhere.'

'It seems they are talking about a state of mind rather than a physical place,' Steve whispered.

'Is not everything a state of mind, young man?' came the clear message in his mind.

It seemed rude to argue so he just smiled.

'Come,' said Jannil, standing. 'You must eat and then rest.'

Steve moved closer to Lyn as they sat in the shade out of the heat which was slightly above the normal comfort level. 'What did Jannil mean about Mythos being in the mind?'

'I have no idea. There was no meaning behind the statement.'

'Sounds almost religious.'

'I don't think it was intended to be.'

'Can you remember what the encyclopedia said about Mythos?'

'It said Mythos is the imaginary home of superhuman beings believed to have existed by pre-literate society.'

'You got that word for word.'

She grinned. 'I do have what you would call a photographic memory.'

'Is that true of all Andromedans?'

'I think so. But I have not yet seen any reading matter.'

'That's true,' he said thoughtfully. 'And there was no writing on that craft. The only signs were pictures - a bit like Egyptian Hieroglyphics. But then I suppose that most of the early languages on Earth were pictographic in form.' He pondered for a moment. 'What else did the encyclopedia say about Mythos?'

'It said it was a place where unproven, exaggerated or complex mythical beliefs are invented and spread.'

'Yes, and something else.'

The third definition was that it was a state of severe mental disorder resulting from the deliberate and malicious attempt to corrupt scientific or religious truth.'

'Do you think these people are doing that?'

Lyn shook her head. 'I have seen no evidence of it.'

'I'll tell you what I've not seen the evidence of.'

'What's that?'

'Wheels. Have you not noticed that there are no wheels? When your father said they hadn't invented them, I thought he was joking.'

Lyn laughed. 'It's funny how Earthlings have come to rely on something so simple.'

'Their craft here use a strange system. They walk like spiders but the motion inside is amazingly stable - no rocking or tilting. That's quite a feat. And have you noticed how their flying craft move? No rockets or jets, just some kind of anti-gravity system.'

'The two cultures seem to have developed in quite different directions in some areas but similar in others. It's uncanny.'

Lyn looked at her watch. 'Time we contacted Wayfarer.'

Steve picked up the intercom. 'Mike, Cassi, you all right?'

'Perfect,' came Cassi's instant reply. 'Everything okay down there?'

'Sure. Want us to flash you some pictures?'

'Why not?'

He pulled up a stubby aerial and moved a switch. 'Got that?'

'Affirmative. You all right?'

'Of course. Nice people, these Andromedans.'

'I told you so, didn't I? Have you met the Queen yet?'

'No. To date, there has been no mention of her.' Steve pondered for a moment. 'Do you know how far we went back in time?'

'Several years, I estimate from the data Iris has compiled. It is not possible to be more precise than that without more information. We'll have a better idea when we get back to Terra and see how much time has passed there.'

'Then we have plenty of time to prepare for the black hole.'

'There is no sign of any black hole yet. Iris has done a complete spectrographic analysis of the galaxy. M32 seems quite stable and looks as if it will remain so for the foreseeable future.'

'I don't understand.'

'Neither do I, yet. However, Dad was convinced of the black hole's existence and so was Henry Markham who got here first and tried to help them escape.'

'So how do we find out the truth?'

'Not at all from here. We are several thousand light years from M32. To be absolutely certain, we would have to go there and take a look.'

'Several thousand light years? That's one hell of a way just to go and take a look.'

'We don't need to go all the way. Iris is presently calculating the most likely place a vortex could be triggered by an ion stream between the galaxies.'

'How far?'

'Her best guess to date is about two hundred light years. With good luck and a tail wind, I could be there and back in a few days.'

'Cassi. Don't you dare go off and leave us.'

'Why not? You and Lyn are happy down there for a while, aren't you?'

'Cassi, listen to me. Other than Lyn and I, you are the only one who can fly that ship and you are on the verge of giving birth. If anything happens to you, neither Mike nor the others will be able to get back. On top of that, Lyn and I will be stranded here. Just don't go.'

'But...'

'Cassi, I'm warning you. Stay there in orbit.'

There was a pause and then: 'Okay, Steve. Over and out.'

Steve switched off the intercom. 'That sister of yours is going to be the death of us all.'

'Don't be too hard on her,' said Lyn, laughing. 'She's only trying to be helpful.'

'If she disobeys me this time, I'll...'

Lyn put her hand over his mouth. 'Shh! Your frightening everyone.'

'I'm hopping mad,' he said in a stage whisper. 'We're supposed to be a team.'

'Okay, calm down. Let her do her research. It'll keep her occupied until the birth.'

'Do you think she'll find anything?'

'If anyone will, Cassi will. Not only that, she's got Bob to help her with the electron telescope.'

'I'm still not sure about Bob.'

'Mike won't let any harm come to Cassi, that's for sure.'

'What if there turns out to be no black hole?'



'Father wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of bringing back our life seeds unless it was imperative. Something is going to happen, that's for sure, and it looks as if it must happen quite quickly.'

'But what?'

'Mythos,' Lyn whispered.

'What?'

'Mythos. The state of severe mental disorder resulting from the deliberate and malicious attempt to corrupt scientific or religious truth.'

'If that is true and someone, somewhere is trying to corrupt these people, how can we find the truth?'

'I don't know. But I'm working on it.'

AN old man turned up as the sun prepared to set. He arrived in a Spider and greeted them warmly. He was dressed in long white garments which resembled those of an ancient priest and out of respect, Lyn curtsied. He then did something which could only be construed as a laugh. 'We are all equal here, my dear Lyniera.'

'Equal?'

He nodded. 'By judgement of the Wise Ones.'

'The Wise Ones?'

'The Wise Ones of Mythos.'

Lyn touched her head. 'In here?'

He nodded. 'Now you understand.'

'I'm afraid not.'

'I must not explain Mythos. It is forbidden.' He seemed to be afraid and drew back.

Seeing his obvious agitation, Lyn smiled. 'I understand.'

He smiled back. 'I knew you would.'

'What was that all about?' whispered Steve when he had moved away a little to greet others.

Lyn shrugged. 'Don't ask me.'

'Who are these Wise Ones? And how come these people accept our explanation of the time-differential without question. I've got a job believing it myself, and I was there.'

'It must have something to do with Mythos.'

'Don't tell me.' Steve tapped his skull. 'Up here.'

Lyn grinned. 'Something like that.'

CASSI sat, poring over the data, when Mike walked in and placed a cup of tea near her elbow. 'Anything?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing conclusive.'

'Peeved because Steve won't let you run off and check?'

'Partly. Though I can see his point of view.'

He looked round the pile of data print-outs. 'Anything I can do to help?'

'I was just running through father's notes and things to see if there was a clue.'

'Could he have been mistaken?'

'It's always possible, though I don't think so. The other mystery is this Mythos business. Lyn is convinced there is something funny going on.'

As if on cue, the radio buzzed. 'Cassi, are you there?'

'Go ahead, Lyn.'

'I think I know where the information from these Wise Ones is coming from.'

'Where?'

'Patmos.'

'What makes you think so?'

'It's just the way they talk about the place with reverence.'

'We could go and test it out.'

'Not yet. It might be construed as blasphemy or something.'

'Have there been any messages from them?'

'They speak of several. One they described seemed vague, being in picture form, but I got a strong image of the word Apocalypse.'

Cassi looked at Mike. 'Apocalypse?'

Mike shrugged.

'I may be wrong,' continued Lyn. 'It wasn't entirely clear.'

'Okay, Lyn. Leave it with me. I'll see what I can find out.'

Mike looked worried. Cassi frowned. 'What is it?'

'I've heard of Apocalypse. Something to do with a world war, if my memory serves me right.'

Cassi was thoughtful for a moment. 'Call in on Maggie, would you? I want a complete print-out of all the data on Patmos. I think we may be missing some of it.'

Mike smiled. 'I'm on my way.'

'And Mike?'

'Yep?'

'You'd better send for Juanita. I think I'm about to have this baby.'

It was a girl, whom they called Andromeda, after the galaxy. In twentieth-century-speak, Cassi was over the moon and so was Mike. Juanita tucked her up in her cabin with the instantly-sleeping child and Mike rushed off to the radio. Moments later, a knock came on her door.

'Come in.'

'Can a mere engineer offer his congrats?'

Cassi smiled her welcome. 'Of course, Bob. Come on in.'

He eased himself into the chair beside the bed. 'I think it might be confession time.'

'It wasn't you, Bob.'

'What?'

She smiled again. 'It wasn't your fault. You didn't know.'

'But I could have prevented all this trouble we've had.'

She shook her head. 'If it hadn't been you, it may well have been any of us. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine.'

He sat in silence. 'You know all about it, don't you?'

'I've known for a while now but I was slow in realising the implications.'

'I'm sorry.'

'There's been no harm done, but we will just have to be more careful in future.'

'If only I hadn't been so stupid.'

'Bob, you were not to know that the "calculator" I lent you would get stolen by one of them. How they found out that it could be used to communicate direct with our Iris, I guess we'll never know. However, they have and they have used it against us. It is not your fault.'

He passed her a sheet of paper. 'If you've got the time to look at them, I've done those readings you asked me for. There is a definite ion fluctuation close to M32. It hasn't progressed towards Andromeda yet, but these are early days.'

She took them from him. 'Bob, this is good work. It could help us no end.'

'I'm sorry I couldn't get you a better fix.'

'It's near enough. At least it proves my father wasn't barmy. Don't forget we're not only back in time as far as his visit is concerned. By looking at a satellite galaxy a couple of hundred light years away, we are seeing, in effect, what was happening out there a couple of hundred years ago. The vortex could have evolved considerably since then. Without our sophisticated equipment, no-one would have any idea that life in this galaxy was under so much threat.'

'What can we do about it?'

'Not a lot. How do we stop a runaway black hole?'

'At least we are earlier than your father. We have more time to evacuate the people.'

She paused, thinking. 'There has to be another way.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know. That is one hell of a lot of energy on the rampage.'

'Anti-matter?'

'How could we produce anti-matter on that scale?'

'Simple,' said the engineer. 'We do it all the time with our main reactor. Step up quantum production till the chain reaction starts to escalate uncontrollably, reverse the polarity and then blow in liquid oxygen under high pressure.' He grinned. 'When that lot goes up, we could produce a black hole all of our own.'

'And we could do that with Wayfarer's reactor?'

He smiled. 'Not a chance. There are too many safety systems to protect us.'

'Yes, of course,' she said thoughtfully. 'And we'd have to catch the black hole early, wouldn't we?'

'Naturally. The bigger the vortex, the more energy needed to cancel it out. Not only that, the energy would have to be applied in precisely the right place.'

'And that is...?'

'Right in the bottle-neck. Anywhere else and the anti-matter would simply dissipate; it would become too diluted to do any good. In fact, applied at the wrong time or in the wrong place, more harm than good could result. Anti-matter has a voracious appetite.'

'But as long as we got the timing right, dropping it in the neck would be safe?'

'Yes. After all, a black hole is simply a huge matter/anti-matter conversion plant.' He grinned. 'Anyone daft enough to have a go would probably be doing whoever is on the other side a favour, too.'

'Bob, how sure are you about all this?'

He grinned. 'When I was a kid, I watched every episode of Star Trek.'

Cassi laughed. 'So you're an expert because of that?'

'I also got an advanced doctorate in Quantum Mechanics at the Planck Institute in Edinburgh.'

'With Hans Bartek?'

'He was my tutor. After that, I worked with him on the prototype for the Proton Drive.'

She looked straight at him and suddenly went serious. 'Get me the figures.'

'Am I forgiven?'

'If you do this for me, I'll forgive you anything.'

'Anything?'

She laughed. 'Well, almost anything.'

'What do you two find so funny?' came a new voice.

'Quantum Physics,' said Cassi.

'Well,' said Mike. 'Now, I've heard it all.'

'I'm just off,' said Bob, standing. He turned at the door. 'I'll leave it till tomorrow before I drop the Dirac Constant on you.'

'One point oh-five-four-four (plus or minus point oh-oh-oh-three) times ten to the power of minus thirty-four joule seconds? Equal to the Planck Constant divided by two-times pi?'

'My God. You should be teaching me.'

Cassi grinned. 'Elementary physics.'

Mike smirked as he watched Bob leave. 'I think you made his day. What was that all about?'

'Black holes.'

'Oh, is that all? Can Maggie say hello to her new sister?' The little girl stood in the doorway.

'Of course she can.' She passed the baby to Mike. 'Get her to sit down first.'

Mike patted the chair and Maggie sat, all grins, as the baby was placed carefully on her lap.

'Andi's asleep,' she said.

'Yes, and she can stay that way for a while.' Cassi touched her tender right breast carefully. 'I reckon that baby of ours was born with teeth.'

Mike laughed and passed her a print-out. 'Maggie got you this.'

'What is it?'

'More info on Patmos.'

'Great.' She read the few sentences. 'Listen to this. Patmos was indeed a penal colony in the time of the Romans. Someone called St John was imprisoned there because he insisted that Christianity was all about preaching the Gospel and the Romans didn't like being told what to or what not to do.'

'Vindictive bunch of morons.'

'It says that he wrote his gospel on Patmos, as well as several letters of encouragement to other honest believers and...Good Grief!'

'What is it?'

'He also wrote a book called..' she looked up. '...Apocalypse. Lyn mentioned Apocalypse.'

'Yes, something to do with war.'

She threw off her bedclothes. 'I must get up.'

Mike was not quick enough to stop her and she darted nimbly out into the corridor in her nightdress. By the time he had caught up with her, Maggie's encyclopedia was already on line.

'APOCALYPSE,' she typed at the entry page.

It took but a few seconds to find the answer. 'It doesn't mean war at all. Apocalypse comes from the Greek word (Greek again) apokalypsis, meaning an uncovering; a revealing, see Revelation.'

'REVELATION,' she typed.

'THE ACT OF DISCLOSING SOMETHING PREVIOUSLY SECRET OR OBSCURE, ESPECIALLY SOMETHING TRUE.'

'Is that what the Bible book is all about?' asked Cassi. 'Something secret?'

'I understand that it was a series of visions sent to him from heaven.'

'Visions?'

He nodded. 'About the future of Terra.'

'Could these visions be interpreted as having come from people called the Wise Ones?'

'I'm not a theologian, Cassi. But I do know you ought to be in bed.'

She looked up. 'Are you a doctor now?'

'No,' said another voice. 'But I am being the nearest thing to one you are going to get.'

Cassi looked guilty. 'Hello, Juanita.'

'You are going back to bed now? Or am I to be carrying you?'

'She's going back,' said Mike. He looked down at his wife. 'Aren't you?'

Cassi nodded. 'I'm a good girl, I am.'

STEVE and Lyn stayed on Erutha for several more days in the hope of finding further clues as to the identity of the Wise Ones and their connection, if any, with Mythos, Greek Mythology and the ancient penal island of

Patmos.

Eventually, Lyn took the priest aside. 'I would like to go to Patmos.'

The man visibly jumped. 'Patmos? The Wise Ones?'

Lyn nodded. 'I would like to meet them, if it is possible.'

'It is normally forbidden. Only a myself or a ruler of the people may speak with the Wise Ones.'

'Perhaps I should speak with the Queen.'

He frowned. 'Queen? But the Queen is dead.'

Lyn swallowed. 'Dead? Queen Lyniera?'

Confusion covered his face. 'Lyniera? No, our Queen was Seria of Erutha.'

'But when... when did she die?'

He thought for a moment. 'It must be, let me think, two hundred of your years ago.'

'Two hundred years? You have had no ruler for two hundred years?'

'Rulership is a state of mind, my dear lady. The title was never more than an honorary one and the position one more of co-ordination rather than power.'

'But what if there is a dispute?'

'There are no disputes. If a possible crisis arrives, the Wise Ones always send a ruler to help us.'

'And there is no crisis? What of the warning you received?'

'If the danger is imminent, the Wise Ones will send a ruler and we will welcome her. It has been so decreed.'

'Then perhaps I could accompany you, simply as an observer.'

He pondered. 'I feel that will be in order.'

'How long will it take?'

'It takes one day to get there and back.'

'Tomorrow?'

He sighed. 'Very well.'

They left at first light in Spider One and flew for over two hours to a planet where Phineus looked cold and remote. It was very cold and insulated garments had to be worn to protect them as they stepped onto the icy surface. There were no visible buildings, simply a wide expanse of cold desert and a large rock before which they landed and disembarked. The priest pressed something which looked strangely like a remote control device and a cave-mouth opened.

'Is this the place?' asked Lyn.

He nodded and led the way inside. The interior of the large cave was lit by some kind of unseen blue light and the only furniture was a metre cube block dead centre. 'This is where the Wise Ones communicate with us.'

Lyn stepped forward slowly and touched the perfectly smooth surface. 'How do you receive the messages?'

He shrugged. 'They just appear.'

'Appear? On a screen?'

'I do not understand. What is a screen?'

'Never mind. Are the messages stored for future recall?'

He nodded. 'They are all in here.'

'Have there been many?'

'The Wise Ones have educated our people over the centuries. There has been but one message in the last ten years.'

'May I see it?'

'Of course.' He touched an almost-invisible panel on top. Lyn surmised the terminal had to contain circuitry of some kind but its precise form was unclear.

'We have not yet interpreted the last message,' said the priest. 'It was in a different form than is usual.'

The "picture" flashed through Lyn's mind briefly. She frowned. 'It is figures.'

'Figures?'

'A set of numbers.' She wrote them down as they appeared. 'They use them all the time on Terra.'

He frowned as he looked at what Lyn had written. 'What do they mean? We normally see holographic scenes to depict either past or future events.'

'Visions,' said Lyn to herself. 'May I see some of them?'

The priest obliged and Lyn sat through about an hour of scenes which meant nothing to her. After that, there was obviously nothing more to see. Other than that rock, cave and terminal, the planet was deserted.

Upon their return to Erutha, Steve took Lyn aside. 'What did you get out of the Wise Ones?'

'Nothing. There was no-one at home.'

'I don't understand.'

'I do. I think what I saw was a SID terminal.'

'Then where are the Wise Ones?'

'Unencumbered by the normal restrictions of radio waves only travelling at light speed, they could be anywhere.'

'Anywhere?'

She nodded. 'Literally anywhere in the universe.'

'What was the last vision?'

'It wasn't a vision at all. It was a set of numbers.'

'Numbers? But Andromedans don't have numbers.' He paused thoughtfully. 'What were the numbers? Do you know?'

Lyn consulted her note. '04:35 14:10:22.'

'Sounds a bit like a time and date.'

'But he said it was almost ten years ago, soon after we left Orion. But why would the Wise Ones send them a date? Something they couldn't begin to understand?'

'Perhaps it was not meant for them.'

'What do you mean?'

'Didn't Cassi say something about the computer's internal clock being wrong? Wasn't that why she woke a year early?'

'But who would deliberately put our clock wrong? And why? I can't imagine that it was anyone on Wayfarer Two. They would want us still to be asleep.'

'Perhaps it was before they left. Just suppose someone gained access to their Iris just before they departed from Orion? Someone who wanted to send us a warning but couldn't reach us by radio because of the light-speed time differential?'

'Father?'

Steve nodded. 'Or someone else with him. Just think, if we hadn't been woken early, we would all now be dead at the hands of Greg Watson and his cronies.'

She instinctively placed her hand on her belly. 'Don't remind me about that bunch of perverts. I shall be quite happy if I never see any of them again.'

'Ask him about other visions,' said Steve quickly to change the subject.

Lyn moved towards the priest. 'Do you know where the visions come from?'

'I do not know.'

'Have you seen the Wise Ones?'

He shook his head. 'They have not been here for many, many lifetimes. They brought our original parents, Adamhos and Zoe.'

Lyn turned and whispered to Steve. 'What was the name of the first Terran humans?'

'Adam and Eve, according to the Bible and popular tradition.'

Lyn frowned. 'Could you do me a favour?'

'Of course.'

'Call Cassi up. See if there is a connection. Adamhos sounds too much like Adam to be a coincidence but Zoe is nothing like Eve.'

Steve winked at her. 'Call it done.'

THE next day, the priest and two of the ministers were escorted by Spider to Wayfarer One. The Terrans left the noisy shuttle behind and found the lift-off smooth and swift. The two craft came together in under thirty minutes and a docking tube extended to cover the airlock of the huge ship. After having been surprised at all the unusual things on Durandor and Erutha, Steve and Lyn were more than a little amused when the Andromedans found Wayfarer One a gigantic flying monster.

Steve pointed out the various details of the ship to the delegation while Lyn brought up the rear with Gwyn. They were met by Mike and then shown into Cassi's quarters where mother and daughter awaited their arrival with great interest. There were tears in the eyes of Jannil as she was presented with the baby girl.

'She has her father's brown eyes,' Jannil said, glancing at Mike.

'Of course,' said Cassi. 'He is my only mate.'

Juanita came in and Cassi introduced her. 'This is what you would call our healer, Dr Carrero.'

'May I call you Juanita?'

Juanita frowned and then glanced at Cassi who grinned and whispered. 'She read your mind.'

Introductions were made all round as Bob and Maggie came in. The Andromedans were fascinated by the eleven-year-old who insisted in dragging them off to see her personal computer.

'We must talk,' whispered Cassi to Lyn when they had gone. 'I have found the information you requested.'

'And?'

'Guess what? Eve means "life". So does Zoe.'

'More than a coincidence, I would say.'

'You seriously think that both races have a common ancestry? Started by the Wise Ones?'

'Its possible. One of the earliest gods on Terra was called Ahura Mazda. It means All-Wise. The God of the Bible has Wisdom as one of his chief characteristics.'

'Aren't we in danger of getting tied up in religious belief here?'

'Not intentionally. However, most myths and legends have an element of truth in them. If there really is some kind of a Supreme Being or Beings who started life both here and on Terra, we cannot just reject the notion because it is inconvenient for us to believe. If we did that, we'd be as bad as some of the twentieth-century scientists who used to insist that life came about as a result of an accidental big bang, and ignored the accumulating mountain of evidence which contradicted the theory.'

'If there is a God of some sort behind all this, why is he letting the black hole develop? For that matter, why does he let things go wrong on Terra?'

'Perhaps He's allowing time for us humans to prove what we're made of; how we will react to a given set of circumstances.'

'How are these people supposed to react when they find out about the dirty-great black hole that is about to swallow them up?'

Cassi smiled. 'We don't tell them.'

'What? And let them die in ignorance?'

'No. We simply eradicate the danger.'

'Destroy a black hole? Cassi, are you out of your mind?'

'Probably.'

THE Minister of Education was fascinated by Maggie's computer, even though he could not understand the significance of any of the words or figures. He was also overwhelmed by the child's enthusiasm for learning. Even voices, if not too loud, were not now as frightening to the Andromedans as their ears adapted to human sounds. After a while, Cassi came in and stood next to the priest. 'I need your help.'

Maggie did not hear the exchange nor see the smile which touched his lips briefly.

'We will be back soon,' said Cassi to Maggie and led him into the corridor.

'How can I help you?'

'Lyn told me about the last few messages from the Wise Ones,' said Cassi. 'They warn of danger.'

'But a danger we cannot comprehend. I feel I have let down the people.'

'It was of a great darkness which covered the land? Of fire and hailstones and earthquakes?'

The priest turned towards her. 'How did you know?'

Cassi smiled. 'Partly from what my sister told me when she had seen the visions on Patmos.'

'Then it is real.' He looked down with sadness. 'The people are doomed.'

'Not necessarily.'

'We can save them?' The old man gripped Cassi's arm tightly in his bony fingers. 'Tell me how and rulership of the kingdom is yours.'

'I do not want the rulership. I just wish to do what is right for your people - my people.' She smiled. 'Our people.'

'What can we do?'

'We must leave at once.'

He frowned. 'Now?'

Cassi nodded. 'Before the others try to stop us.'

'Where are we going?'

'To Mythos.'

'But Mythos is not real.'

'But it is. You see, it is a matter of viewpoint.'

Cassi picked up her suit and they went through the airlock and across to Spider One.

'Viewpoint?' asked the priest as he seated himself at the controls.

'Patmos is truth. Mythos is lies. Both come from the same source.'

'I do not understand.'

'No. But you will. And if my information is correct, we do not have much time.'

He pushed buttons and released the umbilical. 'What will we find at Patmos?'

'The means to stop the destruction of this system.'

'Then I will do whatever you ask of me.'

Spider One peeled off with amazing acceleration and headed out towards the edge of the Phinean System. Little was said during the two hour flight but both of them were apprehensive as the Andromedan craft landed close to the cave in a cloud of swirling snow and mist.

'How often do the Wise Ones speak?' Cassi had asked on the trip. He had replied that the priest's duties

included a lone pilgrimage to Patmos to check every week - on the day he had called Sabbaton.

'Come,' said Cassi as she turned up her collar to the cold when the door opened. 'We will now learn the truth.'

The old man took her outstretched hand and they made the short crossing to the cave which opened on command.

'It is not the right day,' he had said as they landed.

'No matter. There is nothing to prevent you coming other days, is there?'

'No. But why can we not wait until tomorrow?'

'Because a message will come today.' She looked at her watch. 'In about fifteen minutes.'

'How do you know?'

Cassi smiled. 'Trust me.'

The wait seemed a very long one. Out of the cold, it was pleasant inside with the dull glow from SID lighting every corner of the spotlessly-clean cave. Right on cue, a blue light emanated from the terminal. The priest stood, transfixed, for some time as the images flooded into his mind. His eyes went wide as he turned slowly towards the smiling Cassi.

'It is horrible,' he said finally as the glow abated.

'It is the truth,' replied Cassi. 'The world of Terra is exactly like the images you received.'

'But the wars, the fighting. It must be prevented.'

'It is too late for Terra. But it can be prevented here. That is why I show these visions only to you.'

His mouth dropped open. 'YOU show these images? Did they not come from the Wise Ones?'

Cassi shook her head. 'My sister sent them.'

'But how?'

'The computer on Wayfarer is linked to this terminal. I don't know how, but it was installed when my father visited you...' she smiled. 'In the future.'

'Then...?'

'The Wise Ones must use a similar system.'

'But..' He touched the terminal. 'They are here.'

'I'm afraid not. The Wise Ones are likely a great distance away. It is possible that they may have received the message I asked Lyn to send us.'

'They will be angry.'

Cassi shook her head and smiled. 'I think they will be happy. It has taken me a long time to put a lot of questions together and come up with a viable answer. What happened when my father left Terra? Why was his ship brought to Andromeda? It could have gone anywhere. For some reason, we were all brought here and I now realise why. We were brought here by the Wise Ones to save Andromeda.'

'But how can it be done if the danger is so great?'

'You will see in a moment, if I have estimated the circumstances correctly.'

'What will happen?'

'We will receive another message.'

'Another message? From Lyniera?'

Cassi shook her head again. 'From Mythos.'

'Not from the Wise Ones?' he asked warily.

Cassi laughed. 'The ones I have in mind are not terribly wise. However, now you will see how it is possible to receive misleading information from here. As I said, the truth is Patmos. All lies are Mythos.'

'How do we tell the difference?'

A wry smile touched Cassi's mouth. 'It is not always easy. I only warn you now in case, in the future, others try to contact you. The messages you receive here may not always be true.'

The priest looked horrified. 'Not true?'

'The Wise Ones will always tell the truth but others may not.'

'I don't understand.'

Cassi smiled. 'You will. But you may feel it is best to make your own judgement as to the truthfulness of the vision before you relate the content to your people.'

'But what if I interpret the meaning incorrectly?'

'How many know that the Wise Ones only speak on Sabbaton?'

'Myself and the ministers. It is often some days before the people are informed.'

'Then there you have the answer. If the vision appears on that day, it is likely to have originated with the Wise Ones. If not, it could be from other sources, perhaps unreliable ones.'

'Was your message reliable?'

Cassi nodded. 'It was a true representation of life on Terra. My sister, however, has little experience of Terrans.' She smiled. 'I have lived there. Not all Terrans are evil. It is my hope that they will accept me in time and things will improve.'

'I do hope so, Cassi.'

THEY did not have to wait long. Just before the sun set on the sixth day, the terminal started to glow and a garbled message was received. The priest looked puzzled. Cassi ran for the entrance to the cave.

'Did you get that?' she said into her radio whilst standing in the doorway for better reception.

'Affirmative, Cassi. Do you want the co-ordinates?'

'Go ahead, Lyn. I'm ready.'

A succession of numbers was relayed and Cassi beamed. 'Thanks Lyn. That's great.'

'You're not going to do anything silly, are you? I've had an awful job explaining your absence to Steve and Mike. You are coming back, aren't you?'

Cassi tapped her radio. 'Sorry, Lyn. We've got bad reception. I'll call back later.'

The priest was watching her carefully. 'What is it that you are doing? What was the message about?'

'Triangulation. I knew Greg Watson wouldn't be able to resist getting his oar in once he knew we were around here somewhere.'

He frowned. 'Greg Watson?'

'The one who sent the last message.'

'But I didn't understand it.'

Cassi laughed. 'Good job. It was extremely vulgar.'

'Tell me.'

'He was explaining what he intends to do when he catches me. He gave me details of some of the more obscene perversions they intend to inflict upon the more delicate parts of my anatomy.'

'Are they near here?' He was clearly horrified. 'These other humans?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Far enough away.'

'And do they know where you are?'

'Not until I tell them.'

'Which, of course, you are going to do.'

'How did you guess?'

'Because I am getting to know you. Does danger mean nothing to you?'

'Not when there are lives to save.'

He placed his hands on Cassi's arms. 'Will they really do the things he said?'

Cassi grinned. 'Several times, I expect.'

'Then stay here. Do not send the message which will tell them where you are.'

'It's too late for that. We must act at once to save your people.'

'Please, Cassi. I don't want to lose you now.'

She looked down. 'I'm sorry.'

'How long will they wait for your message?'

'Forever, if necessary. They came two million light years to kill me. They are not likely to go away until they have accomplished that.'

'What will you do?'

'I will send a message back to Lyn on Wayfarer One. When I do, they will be able to triangulate on me. Then, they will come for me.' She looked up at the kindly old man. 'But I will not die alone.'

'If you intend to sacrifice yourself in this way, at least hear the judgement of the Wise ones.'

'How can I do that?'

'Lyn has used the terminal and the men heard the message. The Wise Ones will also have heard and understood. Tomorrow, they will reply. See the vision from the Wise Ones before you go.'

Cassi shook her head sadly. 'It will be too late. My husband and Commander will now know where I am. They will come for me.' She looked down at the spotless floor. 'They will stop me.'

He said nothing.

Cassi looked up. 'I must send the message at once and then go to meet them. Will you help me?'

'How can I help?'

'They must not land. Not here, on Patmos, nor on any of the other planets. The only way to prevent that is for you to take me to them in your space craft.'

The old man smiled. 'We will die together.'

Cassi did not smile. 'I have to do this alone.'

For some time, they just stood there, looking at each other. Cassi finally smiled. 'It is time.'

He nodded and then watched as Cassi sent the message which would bring about her death.

SPIDER One lifted from the surface and accelerated soundlessly through the light atmosphere. Two hours later, they saw Wayfarer Two heading towards them. Instantly, retros fired and the huge space cruiser slowed rapidly as it passed them. The Andromedan craft turned and passed over the superstructure.

'Now remember what I said,' reminded Cassi. 'You must drop me and go. Do not wait around to see if I land'



safely. If you do, they will catch you.'

The old man drew back his shoulders, full of confidence. 'I will outrun them in this ship.'

Cassi shook her head. 'You have not seen the awesome power of the Proton Drive. You might outrun our shuttle but the ship you see below you is capable of reaching your world in less than a second. When you leave, head for the nearest asteroid field and lose them. You will be able to outmanoeuvre them in a confined space but they will easily overtake you in open space.'

'If they catch me, so be it.'

'They will not catch you. They will simply plough right through you without scratching the paint of their ship. It's me they want. You are expendable. All of you are.'

'I will do as you ask. But it will not be easy for me to leave you.'

'I understand. However, I can face them, but not with your death on my conscience.'

The old man smiled. 'Then go. I will convey your farewell to your people for you.'

Cassi smiled. 'Thank you.'

Putting on her helmet, she slipped into the airlock and, as the priest played tag with the ship which seemed to be trying to ram them. Several times, there was a near miss until, as the ships came together on what seemed a certain collision course, she leapt across the gap separating them. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Spider One twist on its own axis and plunge straight for a group of stray asteroids. Wayfarer Two was slower in turning and, by the time it had caught up with the Andromedan craft, it was too close to the asteroid field and had to veer away before it became trapped. Easing into orbit around them, it hovered above the place the craft had disappeared, waiting to dive and snatch it up like a hawk with a sparrow.

Cassi hung onto the superstructure as the light over the airlock turned from green to red. They didn't know she was there so someone had to be coming out of the door to use the shuttle. If they did that, they might well catch the priest as the shuttle was far easier to manoeuvre in a confined space. Two suited figures swam soundlessly out of the opening hatch and one did a sudden double-take as he saw her. Hands grasped her arms and she was pulled firmly into the airlock, their mission to catch a runaway Spider suddenly forgotten.

'So what have we here?' said Greg Watson as the two men pushed her into the flight control room. One of the men jerked off her helmet.

The Major's eyes ran her up and down while a sly smile spread over his face. 'Get her out of that suit.'

Four men "helped" Cassi out of her space suit and, soon, she stood in their midst in her pale blue overalls. The Major smiled. 'So we have you at last.'

He turned to the pilot. 'Lock the ship in this orbit. We've promised this young lady some fun and we can't let her down now, can we?'

Cassi said nothing as Girman stepped closer, the blaster in his hands. She shivered but it was not because of the temperature. So this was how Lyn had felt in the presence of a monster.

Greg saw her reaction of repulsion and smiled. 'Later, Girman. We'll let you play with her later. In the meantime, the rest of us are going to enjoy ourselves.' He turned to a young man in his early twenties. 'Bates, it's time you became a man. Strip her!'

The officer shifted nervously, unable to meet Cassi's gaze. 'I don't know, Major. Perhaps we...'

Greg Watson got slowly to his feet. 'Did you not hear me?'

'Yes, sir. I...'

'If Girman does it, he will likely break her a little in the process. He loves hurting people, especially women. You should hear some of the things he did to some of them on Earth.'

'I'm not sure...'

'Girman. You do it. And please don't damage her too much yet.'

Cassi backed away. She wasn't entirely sure what it was Girman and then the others intended to do to her, but one thing seemed certain from the look of pure lust on his face - it would not only be horrendously painful, it would also be disgustingly obscene.

Before the ugly man could react, Cassi's hand came out of her pocket as she crouched like a cat and panned round, backing towards the left console, Mike's gun in her hand. 'I don't mind if you kill me, but if you think I'm going to let you all abuse me first, think again.'

'You won't kill us,' Greg sneered. 'I know about you lousy Andromedans. You don't have it in you.'

Cassi turned towards him, suddenly not sure herself. It was a mistake. Girman swung round, the barrel of the blaster coming up in a deadly arc. The sound of the report filled the room. The marine's eyes opened wide in surprise as the weapon went spinning from his grasp and he found himself looking down the barrel of a smoking automatic.

Cassi grinned. 'You would doubt my hand-to-eye co-ordination?'

He made to move towards her again but the snick of the hammer being pulled back again sent a shiver down his spine. Cassi sensed movement all around her. She could only cover one at a time so she swung round and pointed the gun at Greg Watson's face. 'If anyone moves, I shoot this way first.'

'Stop!' the Major snapped. He thought quickly. The shot at Girman may have been a lucky accident but

from only six feet away, she couldn't miss him if she fired now.

'Sit down,' Cassi said quietly. 'All of you.'

'What are you going to do?' sneered the Major as they obeyed. 'You can't shoot all of us. And even if you do, it won't save your precious Andromedans.'

'Iris,' said Cassi as if she hadn't heard him. 'Priority override Charlie Alpha Sierra Uno.'

'CONFIRMED >' wrote the screen of the white console.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

'All future commands by this voice pattern. Ignore all others.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'De-activate all keyboard input.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'Interface with drive console.'

'CONFIRMED >'

She waited a few seconds while the crew shifted nervously in anticipation. 'Disable all reactor safety systems.'

'DANGER >'

'Identify.'

'POSSIBLE ESCALATION OF ANTHMATTER PRODUCTION >'

'Please continue.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'Fully retract all reactor control rods.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'You'll overheat the core,' warned the Chief Engineer in alarm. 'It'll start a chain reaction that you won't be able to stop.'

She just looked at him without expression and continued talking to the computer. 'Fully open all liquid oxygen valves. Flood ignition chamber to maximum pressure.'

'CONFIRMED >'

There was now panic in the engineer's eyes. 'Good god, woman. The ship'll go up like a neutron star.'

She smiled. 'That's the whole idea.'

Major Watson started towards her. 'I'm not going to let...'

Cassi fired and he fell to the floor, clutching his shattered knee. She swung round, losing off two more quick shots. One hit the vision monitor VDU which imploded with a loud bang and shot pieces of glass all over the flight deck. Girman flinched as one tore his cheek in passing but he didn't even flinch. The second shot disabled the radio very neatly and the gun was now pointing at him.

'On the floor, soldier. I don't trust you one inch.'

'When the others have finished with you,' he snarled, trying to frighten her into making a mistake. 'I am gonna rip out your guts with my teeth, then slowly break your face into tiny pieces.'

A wide grin slowly spread over Cassi's face. 'I bet you say that to all the girls.'

It was too much. With a bound, he leapt towards her, only to fall in a heap at her feet, clutching his bleeding crotch. Cassi swung round, her gun smoking again. 'Any more heroes?'

No-one volunteered.

'Iris,' said Cassi quietly. 'Activate Proton Drive.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'Course 253.1.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'But that's straight into the Black Hole,' said the navigator.

Cassi nodded without looking at him. 'Advance to LUM-10.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'Terminate production of Quantum Energy. Replace with Anti-Matter.'

'DANGER >'

'Identify.'

'IRREVERSIBLE >'

'Continue.'

'You're mad,' shouted the engineer. 'You'll release enough negative energy to wipe out half the galaxy.'

'Precisely.' She addressed the young man on her right. 'Mr Bates?'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'Put your space-suit on.'

'What?'

'Do it.'

He looked round the other faces. Realising which side his bread was about to be buttered, he slipped out of

the door and ran down the corridor.

'Iris, time to detonation?'

'43 MINS AND 12 SECS >'

'Time to black hole?'

'27 MINS >'

Cassi calculated quickly. Twenty-seven minutes to the lip of the vortex. Say, sixteen minutes to the eye. Ten more to penetrate the force field. Not enough. 'Iris, advance to LUM-15.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'She's only got one bullet left,' whined Greg Watson, still clutching his knee. 'If you all rush her, some of us will still come out of this alive.'

No-one moved.

'If you don't, we'll all die.'

'Don't be stupid,' said the engineer coldly. 'She's on unique voice control. We will be unable to reverse the direction of the reactor escalation if she is dead.'

Cassi pressed the Tannoy button. 'Bates, get into the shuttle and start the motor.'

'You're a load of wimps,' the Major screamed, trying to crawl across the floor towards her.

She instinctively stepped back but, with superhuman effort, Girman rolled over and grabbed her ankle. She nimbly dropped to her haunches and her arm dropped until the end of the barrel rested against his nose. 'Goodbye, Girman.'

In surprise, he let go of her and Cassi leapt over him and jumped out of the door. No-one moved to stop her as she covered them. Slowly, she reached up and pressed the door control. It slid shut. Her arm moved through an arc and her last bullet blew out the door control panel.

Cassi ran down the corridor to the airlock and looked at her watch as she scrambled into her space-suit. Nineteen minutes to the vortex. Would it be enough? She stabbed at the airlock control with her elbow as she clipped on her helmet and pressurised her suit. The red light turned green as the door swung open.

She touched the radio button as the air was pumped out of the airlock. 'Bates, get the shuttle round behind the screen at the back, like they did in the void. But keep clear of the blast tubes.'

'Affirmative, Ma'am.'

'If you run out on me now, Bates, my husband will hunt you down and kill you, you know that, don't you? There is nowhere you will be able to hide.'

'Trust me, Ma'am. I'll be there.'

The outer door burst open when she kicked it, clipping on her safety line in one easy motion and swinging herself out into space. The readout on the inside of her visor read 14 mins as she pulled herself round the huge shield at the back and jumped for the shuttle airlock. She dared to look forward and swallowed. The Black Hole was enormous now, all round them, as Wayfarer Two headed straight towards the whirling funnel-shaped centre.

She opened the airlock. 'Go, Bates. Move into the plasma flow and apply maximum power.'

She was flung against the side of the bulkhead as the shuttle's drive combined with Wayfarer's roaring Proton Drive and they were shot backwards at fifteen times the speed of light. When she rolled into the cabin, Bates was waiting for her and pulled her to her feet. Instinctively her arm came up and the gun stopped just under his chin.

'I was only helping you,' he spluttered, his face sweating with terror.

Cassi pulled the trigger. The click seemed deafening in the confined space and he almost passed out with relief. She grinned. 'I know. Now let's get the hell out of here.'

He jumped back into the pilot's seat. 'I don't think it will be enough.'

'Are we at full thrust?'

'Absolutely. But the shield had deteriorated so we didn't get as much push as they did before. The black hole is still pulling us back.'

'My kingdom for a Proton Drive,' she muttered as she hopped into the other seat. In spite of the boost they had been given, in spite of the shuttle going full speed, they were still losing ground. The black hole was too strong. 'How long?'

'Three minutes to the edge of the vortex. Twelve minutes before we get vapourised when Wayfarer goes awol.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I tried.'

He reached out and touched her hand. 'Thanks for having faith in me.'

She smiled. 'That'll be your epitaph.'

'May I kiss you just before we die?'

She jerked her hand away. 'Not on your life. I'm a happily married woman.'

'Is that your epitaph?'

They both laughed. There seemed little point in worrying about their imminent demise. They could feel the

black hole's gravity tugging at them as the clock wound down towards zero. The shuttle began to turn as it rolled towards the edge of the vortex.

She grasped his hand tightly. 'What's your first name, Bates?'

'Billy, Ma'am. Billy Bates.' How unkind some parents are.

'Goodbye, Billy. And, yes, you can kiss me if you like.'

As he leaned towards her for a last tiny nibble of stolen fruit, the shuttle keeled over and tilted with a frightening lurch. 'This is it, Billy. You'd better hurry.'

'Show a leg.'

Cassi frowned. 'What?'

Billy jumped back. 'It wasn't me, honest.'

'It's what you're supposed to do if you want a lift,' said the radio.

Cassi's heart-rate doubled. 'Mike?'

'Hold tight, people, this is gonna be close.'

They felt the shuttle turn in the grip of Wayfarer One's docking clamps and then accelerate smoothly in a parabolic curve across the face of the vortex. She grabbed Billy's arm. 'Put your helmet on.'

Quickly, she clipped on her own and dived into the airlock, pulling her companion with her. The airlock de-pressurised, and she pushed him out and rolled out after him, grabbing his suit and pushing him towards Wayfarer's airlock. They both swung inside. 'Steve?'

'Here, Cassi.'

'How are we doing?'

'It's going to be touch and go. Even the Proton Drive is struggling. This gravity even bends light.'

'You can dump the shuttle, we're in your airlock.'

'Will do. Jettisoning shuttle now.'

Mike met them as they stepped out of the inner door and Cassi pulled off her helmet, shaking her golden tresses. She threw her arms round her husband and he lifted her feet off the deck.

'I suppose this means I don't get my kiss,' said the grinning Billy behind her.

WAYFARER One was just over the lip of the vortex when Wayfarer Two exploded with the power of a billion twentieth-century hydrogen bombs. The viewing screen lit up as all barionic matter was instantly vapourised and the shock wave washed towards them.

'Everybody down,' yelled Steve at the top of his voice.

Cassi reacted instinctively and fell backwards, pulling the two men into the suit locker after her. As they hit the pile of discarded suits, Wayfarer shook as though she had collided head-on with Mars. The creaking was incredible as the ship twisted and turned, rolling over and over, as wave after wave of dissipating energy swept over them. It was almost ten minutes before they stabilised and all fell silent.

Cassi looked up and Steve was standing over her. 'I thought I'd seen the last of you.'

She grinned as she shook off the suits and got to her feet. 'Wishful thinking, boss.'

He took her upper arms in his hands. 'It was the shuttle which did it. It's mass was slowing us down.'

'Are we safe?' asked Mike, dusting himself off.

'I think so. The energy of the explosion seems to have negated the power of the vortex. There'll probably be one hell of a meteor storm as a result of what we've done but that's a small price to pay.'

A groan made them turn. Cassi dropped to her knees. 'Billy?'

'I can't move.'

'Are you hurt?'

'My neck hurts and I can't feel my legs.'

'I think he must have landed awkwardly,' said Mike. 'I'll get Juanita.'

'Lie still,' said Cassi, padding the suits round Billy so that he wouldn't roll about. 'We're going to get help.'

'It wasn't your fault,' he said quietly. 'I tripped on the coaming.'

'But if I hadn't pulled you...'

He smiled. 'If you hadn't pulled me in here, I would be spread all over the airlock door. You saved my life.'

'You saved mine, Billy.'

'So we're quits. Do I get my kiss now?'

She touched his forehead. 'It might not be good for the blood-pressure.'

'Who gives a toss? You are the only person who has ever treated me like a real human. You are the only girl who has looked at me, seen me as a man.'

'Billy. If I kiss you, will you shut up?'

He grinned. 'For a while.'

Their lips touched briefly and she pulled back, realising he was no longer moving. A tear started in the

corner of her eye and she felt Mike's hand on her shoulder. 'Damn it, Billy. Don't you go and leave me now.'  
There was no reply.

NO-ONE had seen Cassi cry before. It was not certain whether it was because Billy Bates had dropped into a kind of coma or simply with relief at the lack of imminent danger. Juanita cushioned the young soldier as best she could but declared that his only chance of survival was in a proper hospital. Their limited X-Ray scans had proved inconclusive as to the extent of the damage he had sustained to his neck, so he had been packed comfortably into one of the cryo units and frozen for the trip home to Terra. Juanita's best guess was that he would survive, but about his future mobility, she could not begin to make predictions. If he survived the trip, he would at least be able to stand as witness against the murderous attempts by Major Watson and his crew and the fact that the whole affair had been carried out because of direct orders from General Dwight Phillips.

Cassi's reunion with Lyn brought tears to almost everyone's eyes and grown men looked the other way to hide their embarrassment. Just after dawn, two sisters and the priest lifted off in Spider One towards Patmos. It was Sabbaton.

It was growing dark when the Andromedan craft returned. Steve and Mike were waiting with the ministers who had gathered. Bob was watching ship while Juanita and Maggie were busy baby-sitting. The priest was clearly ecstatic but, for some reason, both girls seemed strangely subdued.

'What happened?' whispered Mike to Cassi as Lyn hugged Steve.

'There was a message from the Wise Ones.'

'It was what you expected, wasn't it?'

'I expected a message. But not this one.'

Mike frowned. 'It wasn't a good message?'

She looked up into his eyes. 'It is the very best message this people could ever hope to receive.'

'Then what is the problem?'

'Either Lyn or I must stay here.'

'Stay here? On Erutha?'

'The Wise Ones have spoken.'

'But why?'

'To be Queen of Andromeda.'

'I see,' he said thoughtfully. 'Is that what you want?'

She touched his face. 'I want to be with you.'

'And what if I want to leave? Return to Earth?'

'Then I will go with you, you know that.'

'Even if it means leaving all...' he gestured; 'This, behind?'

'Of course.' She grinned cheekily. 'Anyway, I think Lyn has set her heart on staying. She has never seen Terra properly. She does not appreciate its good points like I do.'

'I wonder what Steve will think of it.'

Cassi looked across at her sister and brother-in-law who were deep in conversation. 'She is discussing it with him now.'

'He doesn't look very upset.'

She looked down. 'I think he likes it here.'

He held her close. 'I'm not surprised. It is very like my idea of paradise.'

'I know.'

'There is something else, isn't there?'

She nodded. 'But nothing I won't get used to... given time.'

He smiled. 'Tell me.'

'Don't you understand? Everything has changed because of the difference in time scales. Somehow time has overlapped itself. Father will still arrive and take home the Andromeda Seed. I am yet to be born. Think about it. Lyn is not my sister at all.' She looked up into his eyes. 'She is going to be my mother.'

ARRANGEMENTS were made to leave now that the danger had been eradicated and some of the mysteries solved. The time-shift problems were difficult to come to terms with, particularly where events and people's lives interlaced. But then, relativity continua have always had the universe's top cosmologists confused.

'Steve has agreed to stay,' Lyn cheerfully informed Cassi. 'They tell me that there is a Grand Palace on the other side of the planet and it has been kept ready for the return of a Queen to Mythos.'

'It sounds strange to hear you use that term.'

'We will continue to use it as a reminder that we must not believe everything that we are told. The Wise Ones will always speak the truth, but other unscrupulous persons may try to deceive us.'

'Greg Watson and his crew are dead. They are unable to harm you.'

'Who knows, Cassi? In time, Terrans may yet come here again. Not soon, perhaps. But, eventually we will all become one people - as the Wise Ones originally intended.'

'You will make a good Queen, Lyn.'

'I'll certainly try. But the first thing I intend to do is gather all the ministers together into one united body so that the best good can be achieved. I think I will call it the "Council of Ten."

'Sounds good to me.' Cassi suddenly hugged her sister. 'I'll miss you.'

Lyn smiled. 'No, you won't. You have a loving family to look after. Anyway, there is always SID. You and I can communicate whenever we want to.'

'I think we had better keep that as our little secret for the time being in case it is misused.'

Lyn laughed. 'Good idea.' Her face became serious. 'Must you leave so soon?'

'I'm afraid so. Father will be worried and eager to know what has happened.'

'What about the timing for the journey home? How will you avoid further complications?'

'Iris has given me her best guess. If we average about a fifth of the speed we came here at, we should get home a short time after we departed. I don't want to risk incurring further time-compression problems by returning before we left.'

'Will father still arrive here? In the original order of things, he did leave before we did.'

Cassi pondered for a moment on her previous conversation with Mike. 'I don't know,' she eventually replied. 'He came in Wayfarer Two and there is nothing left of that now.' She sighed. 'We have altered so many things by coming here. At one stage I genuinely thought we would never be going back again, but perhaps things will even themselves out one day and you and I will suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke - as if we never existed at all.'

Lyn looked thoughtful. 'You could be right.' She frowned. 'But if we didn't come here, how could father take my life seeds to Terra? It's all very confusing.'

Cassi laughed. 'I know it is. But at least we have stopped the black hole so these people are safe. Perhaps now that we've done our good deed, we are no longer needed. Or maybe the Wise Ones have some means of balancing the whole thing up. After all, there are very few who understand what has happened. The Wise Ones arranged all this so I'm sure that if they want to they can manipulate affairs so that we can survive.'

'Does it matter?'

'Not to me. I'm happy just to have done my part.'

'You've got an awful long journey home if you keep the speed down like you said.'

Cassi nodded. 'Fifty years. But we will sleep all the way and won't know a thing about it.'

A wry smile touched Lyn's face. 'General Phillips won't be terribly happy to see you back. He thinks he's seen the last of you.'

'No, but with Billy as prosecution witness, at least his warlike activities will be terminated. When we show the pictures we have taken here to the people of Terra, it may be they will revise their opinion of Andromedans.'

Queen Lyniera laughed. 'Perhaps they will make you Queen, too.'

'I doubt it. At least, not for a very long time.'

They hugged again. 'Give my love to father.'

'When I get back, you can speak to him yourself via SID.'

Queen Lyniera smiled. 'As his daughter? Or as the mother of his child?'

## EPILOGUE

DUST rose like a cloud as the turbo-jet helicopter swung in over the gravel courtyard, hovered for a moment whilst the downdraught tore at the trees surrounding the gardens and then dropped the last few feet onto the lawned area in front of the big house. Almost immediately, the note of the engine changed as the noise of the rotors began to die away, thus reinstating the relative peace of this Oxfordshire stately home. Wildfowl once more began to settle onto the surface of the nearby lake and the deer returned to their grazing as two uniformed men stepped onto the grass and held onto their hats as the swishing blades above their heads gradually slowed. One of the men carried a bulging briefcase as the other stepped ahead of him towards the building with determined purpose in his stride.

At the main door, a security officer saluted but the leading man ignored him completely as he swept into the wide oak-panelled hallway. The sound of their boots echoed along the corridor as the two men headed for the closed doors at the far end. With neither warning nor announcement, the doors were pushed open and they were inside. Four faces stared up at them as the men stopped in front of the huge boardroom table and confronted them.

'Good afternoon, General Phillips,' greeted Alan Thompson. 'To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?'

The intruder sneered. 'Cut out the bull-shit, Mr Director. You know why I'm here.'

'I'm afraid...'

The Mission Director was interrupted by a gasp from around the table as the second, younger, man tipped the contents of the briefcase onto the table. The satellite images scattered across the polished surface for all to see.

'This is the evidence I promised to get. Now do you believe me?'

An older man with a greying beard picked up one of the large photographs between his bony fingers and stared at it for a moment before letting his mouth split in a sly grin.

'These,' said Professor Heinrich Akherd as he casually tossed it back onto the untidy pile: 'Prove absolutely nothing.'

'Are you insane?' shouted the General angrily. 'They quite clearly show that the crew of Wayfarer One made an unprovoked attack upon a defenceless Orion shuttle.'

The Professor removed his spectacles. 'They show no such thing. On the contrary, we have reports of your people who have attempted to force a landing upon Orion Base...'

'Which, I will remind you, General, is officially Russian territory,' added the dark-haired woman in her middle years. 'Your actions have almost led to an international incident.'

'Goddamn it, has that Andromedan bitch got you so much under her power that you will believe everything she says?'

'We also have the official videotransmitted report from Commander Carter,' said the Director: 'As well as what I saw myself before returning to Earth.'

'Nevertheless, I insist that action be taken against the crew.'

The Director smiled. 'I'm afraid it's too late for that. They will now be well on their way to Andromeda.'

'You still believe that cock and bull story that Jim Duncan gave you? Dang, you're all so gullible.'

'I believe it and so does the rest of the mission team. It is our one chance to make contact with beings from another world, something we have dreamed of for centuries.'

'God save us from do-gooders. Have you not thought of the implications? Just supposing there are survivors and they want to come back here to live, where will that leave us? Tell me that! They live far longer than we do, don't forget. Why, in just a few years, they will have taken over the whole earth from us.'

'I don't think this is their intention. Why...'

'You don't think? How do you know what these people are like, eh?'

'They are a peace-loving people who will not harm us.'

'Harm? Have you not seen what they have done already? That girl has been in Earth-vicinity for less than a year and she has you lot eating out of her hand. Not only that, but there has been serious resentment in some circles about just one of them. Supposing there were hundreds, maybe thousands of them?'

'There was no resentment,' said the Director calmly: 'Until you began your propaganda campaign to smear them as invaders. Cassi and her people just want to live in peace. Commander Carter and his crew have simply gone to see if they can help.'

The General moved closer to them. 'They are not going to get the chance, my friend. Within the next few days, Greg here is going to take Wayfarer Two after them and make pretty damn sure they never get there.'

The German scientist looked straight at him. 'What are you saying, Herr General?'

General Phillips drew himself erect and grinned widely. 'Major Watson will take a crew of my own selected men and put an end to this nonsense once and for all.'

The Director stood up. 'Over my dead body.'

The Major moved and an automatic appeared in his hand as if by magic and pointed straight at Alan

Thompson's chest. The General grinned again. 'That could be arranged.'

There was a shocked silence for a few moments. It was Natasha Ralentov who broke it. 'How will you catch them?'

'We will catch them, Comrad,' (he said it like it was an insult) 'Because Doctor Bartek here will modify the reactor on Wayfarer Two in the same way he modified Wayfarer One.' He turned to the balding man at the end of the table. 'However, he will do it better, is that not so, my dear Hans?'

The inventor of the Proton Drive looked directly at him. 'Go to hell, General.'

'Oh, I will, I will. But not before your son.'

'My son?' He was suddenly alarmed. 'What of my son?'

'Tell him, Major.'

Greg Watson sauntered slowly across the room. 'Leading-Spaceman William Bartek is helping one of my men to repair a shuttle near to Orion Base. If you do not agree, it is always possible he could meet with an...accident. As Comrad Ralentov's late husband said just before he ran out of oxygen, "A dangerous place is Outer Space."'

'You bastard.'

The General shook his head. 'Now, now, Doctor. There is a lady present.'

Natasha Ralentov got slowly to her feet and ignored the Major's gun which had swung in her direction. 'General Phillips, you are worse than a bastard. You are...'

The sound of the shot filled the room and left a shattered silence as Greg Watson's eyes opened wide before he slowly pitched forward onto the table before sliding, almost gracefully, to the floor. General Phillips instinctively reached for his own revolver but was halted by the pressure of a high-calibre gun barrel against the side of his neck.

'I once watched an old American cult detective movie,' said the newcomer. 'The hero said "Make my day."' He took off the safety catch. 'Please, General Phillips, pull out your gun. Make my day.'

The General turned a little and his eyes opened wide in surprise. 'But you're....you're....'

Marshal Mike Hardy lifted one eyebrow. 'Half way to Andromeda? General, you are way behind the times. We have been there and come back.'

'To Andromeda?' he gasped.

Mike nodded. 'Of course.'

'But..' he spluttered as he saw the others for the first time, being greeted warmly by members of the Directorate.

'General Dwight Phillips,' said Mike eventually. 'I am placing you under arrest.'

The senior officer drew back his shoulders. 'On what charge?'

'The murder of the human race.'

A stunned silence came over the room.

'What do you mean?' asked the Director.

Cassi presented her baby to the beaming Natasha Ralentov and then turned to him. 'We'll show you the computer log from Orion later, Alan. It is very enlightening. This man...' She indicated the General. '..is directly responsible for the deaths of millions of people.'

The Professor, at last realising the significance of what had happened, grinned wickedly. 'Or he would have been - given time.'

Cassi smiled at the ageing genius. 'Precisely.'

'But...' flustered the General, pointing his finger accusingly at Mike. 'He...he's just killed my aide.'

'Greg?' Cassi glanced down at the man on the floor and smiled. 'I'm afraid not, General. You see, Major Watson died fifty years ago.'



Other Books by the author:

Queen of the Persians  
Albion Gold  
The Curse of King Arthur's Brood  
The Revenge of King Arthur's Brood  
The Return of King Arthur's Brood  
Plot  
Plot to War  
Plot for a King  
The DeBosvile Chronicles  
Mountain of Blood  
Requiem for a Princess  
Checkmate for Princess  
Aftermath of a Princess  
Escape Unto Death  
The Andromeda Burn  
The Andromeda Seed  
The Andromeda Trial

**Tour Guides by Alan Bryant**

Towns & Villages of the Lake District & Cumbria  
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Towns & Villages of Lancashire  
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**Other Books by Regentlane**

Two Wheels on a Tin Road  
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Murder Most 'Orrid  
Northern Murders and Manslaughters  
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